

Warriors

Edited by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois

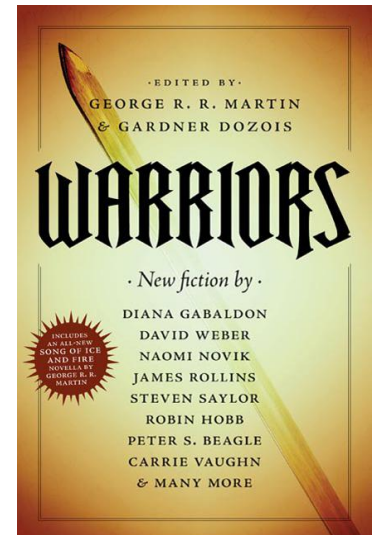
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Excerpted from *Warriors* by George R. R. Martin and Gardner Dozois.

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The King of Norway

I

Conn Corbansson had fought for Sweyn Tjugas when Sweyn was just an outlaw rebelling against his father, King Harald Bluetooth, and the prince had promised him a war with England when he became King of Denmark. Now that Sweyn actually wore the crown, he had let the English king buy his peace with a ship full of silver. Conn took this very ill.

“England is the greatest prize. You swore this to me.”

Sweyn pulled furiously at his long forked mustaches. His eyes glittered. “I have not forgotten. And the time will come. Meanwhile, there is Hakon the Jarl, up in Norway. I cannot turn my back on him.”

“So you called in the Jomsvikings instead of fighting him yourself,” Conn said. “I see being King has made you womanish as well as pursefond.”

He turned on his heel before Sweyn could speak, and walked off down the boardwalk toward the King’s great hall. His cousin Raef, who went everywhere with him, followed at his side. Sweyn bellowed after them, but neither of them paid heed.

Conn said, “How can I believe anything he says ever again?”

Raef said, “Who would you rather fight for?”

“I don’t know,” Conn said. “But I will find out.”

That night in his great hall at Helsingor, Sweyn had a feasting, and there came many of his own hirdmen, including Conn and Raef, but also the chiefs of the Jomsvikings, Sigvaldi Haraldsson and Bui the Stout. Raef sat down at the low table, since with Conn he was now on the King's sour side.

Conn sat beside him, his black curly hair and beard a wild mane around his head. His gaze went continually to the Jomsvikings at the table across the way. Raef knew his curiosity; they had heard much of the great company of the Jomsvikings, of their fortress in the east, and their skill at war, which they gave to whoever would pay them enough. They weren't actually supposed to have chiefs, but to hold all in common as free men, and Raef wondered if Sigvaldi here and the barrel-shaped Bui were messengers more than chiefs. They wore no fancy clothes, such as Sweyn's red coats of silk and fur, and their beards and hair hung shaggy and long. Sigvaldi was a big man, square shouldered, with curling yellow hair that flowed into his beard.

Beside him, Conn said, "I like their looks. They are hard men, and proud."

Raef said nothing, being slower to judgment. Across the way, Sigvaldi had seen Conn watching, indeed, and lifted a cup to him, and Conn drank with him. It was the strong beer, thick as bear piss, and the slaves were carrying around ewers of it to refill any cup that went even half-empty. Raef reached out and turned his empty cup upside down.

When they were finished with the meat and settling in to drink, Sweyn stood up and lifted his cup, and called on Thor and Odin and gave honor to them. The men all shouted and drank, but Sweyn was not finished.

"In their honor also, it's our Danish custom to offer vows, which are most sacred now—" He held out his cup to be filled again. "And here in the names of those most high, I swear one day to make myself King of England!"

The men all through the hall gave up a roar of excitement; across the field of waving arms and cheering faces, Raef saw Sweyn turn and glare at Conn. "Who else offers such a vow as this?"

The uproar faded a moment, and Sigvaldi lurched to his feet. "When the war for England comes, let it be, but we are here for the sake of Hakon the Jarl, in Norway, who is an oathbreaker and a turncoat."

Voices rose, calling Hakon the Jarl every sort of evil thing, traitor and thief and liar. And the slaves went around and filled the cups. Steeped in drink, red-faced Sigvaldi held his cup high so that all would look. When the hall was hushed, he shouted, "Therefore I vow here before the high gods to lead the Jomsvikings against Hakon, wherever he hides! And I will not give up until he is beaten."

There was a great yell from all there, and they drank. The hall was crowded with men now, those sitting at the tables, many of them Jomsvikings, and many others standing behind them who were Sweyn's house carls and crews.

“A mighty vow,” Sweyn called. “An honor to the gods Hakon has betrayed. The rest of you—will you follow your chief in this?” His eyes shot an oblique glance at Conn, down at the lower table. “Which of you will join the Jomsvikings?”

At this, Dane and Jomsviking alike began shouting out oaths and vows against Hakon, while the slaves with the jugs plied their work.

Then Conn rose.

Raef held his breath, alarmed at this, and around the hall, the other men hushed.

Conn held out his cup.

“I swear I will sail with you, Sigvaldi, and call out Hakon face- to- face, and not come back until I am the King of Norway.” He raised his cup toward Sweyn and tilted it to his mouth.

There was a brief hush at this, as everybody saw it was an insult, or a challenge, but then they erupted again in another great roaring and stamping all through the hall, and more outpourings of vows. Raef, who had touched nothing since the first cup, marked that up there at the high seat, Sweyn’s glinting eyes were fixed on Conn and his mouth wound tight with rage. Raef thought they had all probably gotten more than they wished for in this oath-taking at Helsingor.

The next morning Conn woke, sprawled on his bench in the hall, and went out into the yard to piss. His head pounded and his mouth tasted evil. He could not remember much of the night before. When he turned away from the fence, Sigvaldi the Jomsviking chief was walking up to him, beaming all across his face.

“Well,” he boomed out, “maybe we promised some mighty doings, last night, with those vows, hah? But I’m glad you’re with us, boy. We’ll see if you’ll make a Jomsviking.” He put out his hand to Conn, who shook it, having nothing else to do. Sigvaldi went on, “Meet at the Limsfjord at the full moon, and we’ll go raiding in Norway, and draw Hakon to us. Then we’ll find out how well you fight.”

He tramped away across the yard, where more of the Jomsvikings were coming out into the sun. Raef stood by the door into the hall.

Conn went over by him.

“What did I swear to?”

His cousin’s long homely face was expressionless. “You said you would sail with them and challenge Hakon the Jarl face- to- face, and not return to Denmark until you were King of Norway.”

Conn gave a yelp, amazed, and said, “What a fool I am in beer! That’s something great to do, though, isn’t it.”

Raef said, "I'd say that."

"Well, then," Conn said, "let's get started."

II

So they sailed north to raid in Norway, around the Vik, where the riches were. Sometimes the whole fleet raided a village together, and sometimes they went out in parties and attacked farmsteads along the fjord, driving the people out and then ransacking their holdings. Whatever anybody found of gold went into a great chest, which Bui the Stout guarded like a dragon. All else they ate or drank, or packed off to the Jomsberg. Several ships went heavy-laden to the Jomsberg, but there was no sign of Hakon the Jarl.

They turned north, following the passageways between the islands and the coast, raiding as they went. Every day the sun stayed longer in the sky, and the nights barely darkened enough to let a man sleep an hour. Around them, above thin green seaside meadows, the land rose in curtains of rock, snow-cloaked. They stood far out to sea to weather the cloud-shrouded wind-blasted cape at Stad, and then rowed on, still north but now easterly, attacking whatever they found in the fjords. They were within a few good days' rowing now of the long waterway that led to the Trondelag, and still Hakon offered them no opposition.

III

Conn's muscles hurt; all day he had been rowing against the fierce north wind, and he stood on the beach and stretched the ache out of his arms. The sun was a great fat orange blob floating just above the western horizon. The sky burned with its fiery glow, the few low streaks of cloud gilt-edged. The dark sea rolled up against the pebble shore, broke, and withdrew in a long seething growl. Out past the ships, sixty of them, drawn up onto the beach like resting monsters, he caught a glimpse of a shark.

The coppery light of the long sundown made the campfires that covered the beach almost invisible. Over every pit a haunch turned, strips of meat and fish hung dripping on tripods and spits, their fats exploding in the coals below, and a man stood by in the hot glow with a cup, putting out burns with a douse of beer. Conn saw Sigvaldi Haraldsson up on the beach and went to him.

The chief of the Jomsvikings sat on a big log, his feet out in front of him, watching some lesser men turn his spit. Bui the Stout sat next to him, the Jomsvikings' treasure chest at his feet. As Conn came up, they raised their faces toward him. They were passing a cup between them, and Sigvaldi with a bellowed greeting held it out to him.

Conn drank. The beer tasted muddy. "Hakon has to come after us soon."

Sigvaldi gave a harsh crackle of a laugh, clapping his hands on his knees. "I told you, lad, he won't willingly fight us. We will have to go all the way up to the Trondelag to drag him out of his hole."

Bui laughed. "By then we will have beggared him anyway." He kicked the chest at his feet.

"Yes," Sigvaldi said, and reached out and slapped Conn's arm companionably. "We've taken great boot, and we'll feast again to night as we do every night. This is the life of a Jomsviking, boy."

Conn blurted, "I came to throw down Hakon the Jarl, not to stick a few burghers for their gold chains."

Bui threw his head back at that. "There's a bit of Hakon in every link."

Sigvaldi gave another laugh at that. "Conn, heed me. You need to match this green eagerness with a cold wit. Before we can get to any real fighting, we have to run Hakon to ground like the rabbit he is. Meanwhile, we can feast on these villages."

Bui was still staring at Conn, unfriendly. "You know, your ship isn't bringing me much gold." He pushed at the treasure chest. "Maybe you ought to think about that more."

Conn said, "I'm not a Jomsviking," and turned and walked away. He did not say, I am not Sweyn Tjugas's hirdman anymore either.

He went back down the shore, past the ships, going toward his own fire. His crew had camped at the end of the beach, where the sandy bank cut the wind. The sundown cast a pink veil over the sea, which the waves broke in lines of light and dark. The wind sang among the ships, as if the dragons spoke to one another in their secret voices. Beyond, to the east, against the red- and- purple sky, the gaunt mountains of the coast seemed like sheer walls of rock, capped with the rosy glisten of a glacier.

He went in among his crew, clustered around the fire, cooking cow parts and drinking beer; they greeted him in a chorus. His cousin Raef was off by the foot of the sandy slope, sitting beside the wounded man, who lay stretched out flat on the ground.

Conn squatted down on his heels by the fire. He took the beer horn out of the hand of the man next to him, who was Finn, the youngest of them. "Go ask Aslak to come drink with me."

Finn got up and trotted off, a short, thin boy who had been pushing a plow two summers before. Conn drank what was left in the horn, which was better beer than Sigvaldi's. Since he had found out that after every raid any gold or silver they took went into Bui's chest, he shifted his interest to looting the best food and drink.

Opposite him, pop-eyed Gorm grinned at him over a half-burnt chunk of meat.

"Any word?"

Conn said, "Nothing." He looked around again at Raef, off in the gloom with the dying man, but then Aslak came up.

Conn got to his feet; Aslak was a captain, like him, and although he was a Jomsviking, he and Conn got on well. Also, he was from the Trondelag. They shook hands and sat, and Conn waited until Aslak had taken a long pull of the drinking horn.

Aslak smacked his lips. "That's the best of the sacred stuff I've tasted since the oath-taking at Helsingor."

Conn growled. He did not like being reminded of that. He said, "You're from here, aren't you? What's this coast?"

"Same as we've been sailing," Aslak said. "All inlets and bays and islands. Lots of wind. Lots of rock. And poor, these people, poor as an old .eld. Bui won't be happy here."

Conn laughed. "Bui isn't happy with me anyway."

Aslak saluted him with the horn. "You steal the wrong kind of gold, Conn."

Conn gave him back the salute and drank. "Sigvaldi thinks Hakon is too afraid to come after us, no matter how we harry his people."

Aslak grunted. The other men by the .re were watching them both intently. "That's wrong. Sigvaldi's making a bad mistake if he really believes that. Hakon's a devil of a .ghter." Aslak wiped foam off his beard with one hand. "Hakon's kindred goes back to the Frost Giants, to gods older than Odin. That's why he didn't come south when we sacked Tonsberg, or come out to meet us below Stad. His power is in the North. And so now we are going North, and I doubt we'll be too much longer waiting."

"Let it happen," Conn said, and spat between his .ngers. He nodded toward the .re. "Drink another horn, Aslak. Gorm, save me some of that meat." He got up and went in toward the bank, to where Raef sat beside the dying man.

This was Ketil, one of their rowers, no older than Conn himself. Their whole crew were boys who had joined off their farms when they .rst took their ship Seabird. After two years' sailing with Conn and Raef, none of them was green anymore, what ever Sigvaldi thought.

That day they had stormed a village on an inlet; some of the people had fought back, for a few moments, and one had bashed in the side of Ketil's head with a stick. He was still alive, and they had brought him here to keep him safe while he died. Raef was sitting there beside him, his back to the sandbank and his long legs drawn up to his chest. Conn sank down on his heels.

"Is he—?"

Raef shook his head. His pale hair hung lank to his shoulders. "Less and less."

Conn sat there thinking about the fight in the village, and he said, "These are Hakon's people. Why does he not defend them?" He put out one hand toward Ketil, but he did not touch him.

Raef shrugged. "Because we want him to."

"Then what will he do?"

"What we don't want," Raef said. "Here comes Bui."

The keg-shaped Jomsviking had sauntered up the beach toward the Seabird's crew, and now seeing them apart from it, veered toward them.

"Hail, King of Norway!" he called, and snickered.

Conn stood up. "Let the Fates hear you. What is it?"

"Sigvaldi commands you. Just you. Right now. For a council."

Conn turned and glanced at Raef. "Are you coming?"

"Sigvaldi says you only," Bui said with a sniff.

"I'm staying here with Ketil," Raef said, and Conn went off without him.

IV

When he first sailed with the Jomsvikings, Conn had expected their council to be a great shouting and arguing and talking of everybody, but now he knew better; there was plenty of food and beer, but in the end, Sigvaldi stood in front of them and said what would happen, and they nodded. They were supposed to be free men, but they did as they were told. There was much about the Jomsvikings he liked better in the idea than in the actual practice.

Sigvaldi said, "We have word now that Hakon is just inside the bay, over there. Where that big island is."

A roar went up from the gathered captains. Bui stood.

"How many ships?"

"Not many," Sigvaldi said. "Six. Eight. He's waiting for his fleet to gather, that's clear. But we're going to catch him before they come." He swept his gaze around them all. "We'll leave before dawn. I'll take the left, with Bui. Aslak, you take the right, with Sigurd Cape, and Havard." His teeth shone. Conn felt a sudden shiver of excitement. Sigvaldi turned and fixed his gaze on him.

"And since you're so wild to get him, Conn Corbansson, you go first, in the middle."

In the short, bright night, they buried Ketil. The rest of Seabird's crew laid him on his back at the foot of the sand bank, with his sword beside him and a little meat and beer for the last journey. Then each brought a stone from the beach.

Finn said, "Better to die like this than behind a plow, like an ox." He put his stone by Ketil's feet.

"Better still, in the battle tomorrow," Gorm said, at Ketil's head. He turned his wide eyes on Conn; he always looked a little pop-eyed. "How many ships does Hakon have?"

Conn said, "Sigvaldi says only a few. But I don't trust Sigvaldi anymore."

"Tomorrow," said Grim, "when we catch Hakon—"

Somebody else laughed; Rugr said, "If we catch him—"

"That will be a deed that will ring around the world."

Conn stooped and laid his stone down by Ketil's shoulder, moving other stones to it. "Whatever we do tomorrow, we do it together."

"We take Ketil with us." Raef bent and put his stone by Ketil's hip.

"If we beat Hakon—" Odd laid his stone by Ketil's knee. Now the shape of stones was closed around the dead man, a ship to carry him on. "They will tell the story until the end of the world."

"The end of the world."

They stood then a moment silent, their eyes on Ketil, and then they brought the sand bank down to cover him. They all turned and looked at one another. They clasped each other's hands and laughed, sharp and uneasy and wild, their eyes shining. "Together," they said. "All together."

Then they went off to get ready, to see to their weapons, to sleep, if they could, so they could sail before dawn. Conn and Raef fetched extra water and food and stowed it on the ship, where she lay on the beach.

The others were lying down by the fire. Conn sat down beside his cousin on the sand beside the round breast of their ship. He thought he would never sleep. In his mind he thought about every fight and battle he had ever been in, but everything seemed like a blur suddenly.

It would all be different, anyway; it always was.

After a while, he said to Raef, "Are you ready?"

"I guess so," Raef said. His voice was tight as a plucked wire. "No. This feels bad to me. He put us first, out in front of everybody?"

"Yes," Conn said. "We have the chance to take Hakon ourselves, alone."

"Or be taken ourselves. He's trying to kill us," Raef said.

Conn nudged him with his elbow. "You think too much. When it starts, you won't have time to think." He yawned, leaning against the ship's side, suddenly exhausted. "Just follow me," he said, and shut his eyes finally, and slept.

Conn dreamt.

He was in a great battle, around him the clash of axes and shields, the horns blaring, a boat rocking under him, arms and hair and twisted faces packed around him. He could not tell his enemies from his friends. The heaving and screaming and struggle around him were like something trying to devour him, and in a frenzy he hacked around him with his sword to make himself room to stand. The blood sprayed over him, so he tasted it on his lips.

Then the clash of blades on shields became thunder rolling, and lightning flashed so bright, he was blinded. When he could see again, he was alone, fighting alone, a tiny man against a towering storm, not even on a ship anymore. The clouds rose hundreds of feet above him, billowing black and gray, and the lightning shot forth its arrows at him, the rain itself felt like showers of stones, and the gusts of the thunder battered him.

The wind streamed out the cloud's long hair; in the billows he saw eyes, a mouth with teeth like boulders, a monstrous woman's shape of fog and mist. High above him, she stretched out her arm toward him, and from each fingertip the lightning blazed. He could not move, bound where he was, and the lightning bolts came straight at him and blasted him into pieces, so that where he had been, there was nothing.

He woke up on the ground beside the ship. The dream gripped him; he was surprised to find himself whole. He got to his feet and walked down the shore, toward the sunrise.

On the far edge of the purple sky, a hot red glow was spreading, and the air glimmered. He stood on the pebble beach, and the dream went on in his head, stronger than the day around him.

In a moment, Raef came up beside him. Conn told him the dream and, even in the dim light, saw his cousin turn pale.

"Is it true, do you think?" Conn asked.

"All dreams are true, somehow."

The crew was gathering by Seabird, and the sun was about to rise. "Fate takes us," Conn said, "and all there is for us to do is meet us well. Simple enough. Come on, let's get going."

V

They rowed out into the swelling sunlight, rounding the top end of the island and turning southeast toward the opening of the bay. The sea was high and rolling. Seabird flew over the water like a hunting hawk; without Ketil, Conn was rowing his oar, the first bench on the steerboard side.