

began to read about the properties of dragonbone. Dragonbone is black because of its high iron content, the book told him. It is strong as steel, yet lighter and far more flexible, and of course utterly impervious to fire. Dragonbone bows are greatly prized by the Dothraki, and small wonder. An archer so armed can outrange any wooden bow.

Tyrion had a morbid fascination with dragons. When he had first come to King's Landing for his sister's wedding to Robert Baratheon, he had made it a point to seek out the dragon skulls that had hung on the walls of Targaryen's throne room. King Robert had replaced them with banners and tapestries, but Tyrion had persisted until he found the skulls in the dank cellar where they had been stored.

He had expected to find them impressive, perhaps even frightening. He had not thought to find them beautiful. Yet they were. As black as onyx, polished smooth, so the bone seemed to shimmer in the light of his torch. They liked the fire, he sensed. He'd thrust the torch into the mouth of one of the larger skulls and made the shadows leap and dance on the wall behind him. The teeth were long, curving knives of black diamond. The flame of the torch was nothing to them; they had bathed in the heat of far greater fires. When he had moved away, Tyrion could have sworn that the beast's empty eye sockets had watched him go.

There were nineteen skulls. The oldest was more than three thousand years old; the youngest a mere century and a half. The most recent were also the smallest; a matched pair no bigger than mastiffs skulls, and oddly misshapen, all that remained of the last two hatchlings born on Dragonstone. They were the last of the Targaryen dragons, perhaps the last dragons anywhere, and they had not lived very long.

From there the skulls ranged upward in size to the three great monsters of song and story, the dragons that Aegon Targaryen and his sisters had unleashed on the Seven Kingdoms of old. The singers had given them the names of gods: Balerion, Meraxes, Vhagar. Tyrion had stood between their gaping jaws, wordless and awed. You could have ridden a horse down Vhagar's gullet, although you would not have ridden it out again. Meraxes was even bigger. And the greatest of them, Balerion, the Black Dread, could have swallowed an aurochs whole, or even one of the hairy mammoths said to roam the cold wastes beyond the Port of Ibben.

Tyrion stood in that dank cellar for a long time, staring at Balerion's huge, empty-eyed skull until his torch burned low, trying to grasp the size of the living animal, to imagine how it must have looked when it spread its great black wings and swept across the skies, breathing fire.

His own remote ancestor, King Loren of the Rock, had tried to stand against the fire when he joined with King Mern of the Reach to oppose the Targaryen conquest. That was close on three hundred years ago, when the Seven Kingdoms were kingdoms, and not mere provinces of a greater realm. Between them, the Two Kings had six hundred banners flying, five thousand mounted knights, and ten times as many freeriders and men-at-arms. Aegon Dragonlord had perhaps a fifth that number, the chroniclers said, and most of those were conscripts from the ranks of the last king he had slain, their loyalties uncertain.

The hosts met on the broad plains of the Reach, amidst golden fields of wheat ripe for harvest. When the Two Kings charged, the Targaryen army shivered and shattered and began to run. For