

a few moments, the chroniclers wrote, the conquest was at an end... but only for those few moments, before Aegon Targaryen and his sisters joined the battle.

It was the only time that Vhagar, Meraxes, and Balerion were all unleashed at once. The singers called it the Field of Fire.

Near four thousand men had burned that day, among them King Mern of the Reach. King Loren had escaped, and lived long enough to surrender, pledge his fealty to the Targaryens, and beget a son, for which Tyrion was duly grateful.

“Why do you read so much?”

Tyrion looked up at the sound of the voice. Jon Snow was standing a few feet away, regarding him curiously. He closed the book on a finger and said, “Look at me and tell me what you see.” The boy looked at him suspiciously. “Is this some kind of trick? I see you. Tyrion Lannister.”

Tyrion sighed. “You are remarkably polite for a bastard, Snow. What you see is a dwarf. You are what, twelve?”

“Fourteen,” the boy said.

“Fourteen, and you’re taller than I will ever be. My legs are short and twisted, and I walk with difficulty. I require a special saddle to keep from falling off my horse. A saddle of my own design, you may be interested to know. It was either that or ride a pony. My arms are strong enough, but again, too short. I will never make a swordsman. Had I been born a peasant, they might have left me out to die, or sold me to some slaver’s grotesquerie. Alas, I was born a Lannister of Casterly Rock, and the grotesqueries are all the poorer. Things are expected of me. My father was the Hand of the King for twenty years. My brother later killed that very same king, as it turns out, but life is full of these little ironies. My sister married the new king and my repulsive nephew will be king after him. I must do my part for the honor of my House, wouldn’t you agree? Yet how? Well, my legs may be too small for my body, but my head is too large, although I prefer to think it is just large enough for my mind. I have a realistic grasp of my own strengths and weaknesses. My mind is my weapon. My brother has his sword, King Robert has his warhammer, and I have my mind... and a mind needs books as a sword needs a whetstone, if it is to keep its edge.” Tyrion tapped the leather cover of the book. “That’s why I read so much, Jon Snow.”

The boy absorbed that all in silence. He had the Stark face if not the name: long, solemn, guarded, a face that gave nothing away. Whoever his mother had been, she had left little of herself in her son. “What are you reading about?” he asked.

“Dragons,” Tyrion told him.

“What good is that? There are no more dragons,” the boy said with the easy certainty of youth.

“So they say,” Tyrion replied. “Sad, isn’t it? When I was your age, used to dream of having a dragon of my own.”

“You did?” the boy said suspiciously. Perhaps he thought Tyrion was making fun of him.

“Oh, yes. Even a stunted, twisted, ugly little boy can look down over the world when he’s seated on a dragon’s back.” Tyrion pushed the bearskin aside and climbed to his feet. “I used to start fires in the bowels of Casterly Rock and stare at the flames for hours, pretending they were