

breath steamed before him like a banner. He shoved his hands into his armpits and walked faster, praying that Morrec had remembered to warm his bed with hot bricks from the fire.

Behind the King's Tower, the Wall glimmered in the light of the moon, immense and mysterious. Tyrion stopped for a moment to look up at it. His legs ached of cold and haste.

Suddenly a strange madness took hold of him, a yearning to look once more off the end of the world. It would be his last chance, he thought; tomorrow he would ride south, and he could not imagine why he would ever want to return to this frozen desolation. The King's Tower was before him, with its promise of warmth and a soft bed, yet Tyrion found himself walking past it, toward the vast pale palisade of the Wall.

A wooden stair ascended the south face, anchored on huge roughhewn beams sunk deep into the ice and frozen in place. Back and forth it switched, clawing its way upward as crooked as a bolt of lightning. The black brothers assured him that it was much stronger than it looked, but Tyrion's legs were cramping too badly for him to even contemplate the ascent. He went instead to the iron cage beside the well, clambered inside, and yanked hard on the bell rope, three quick pulls.

He had to wait what seemed an eternity, standing there inside the bars with the Wall to his back. Long enough for Tyrion to begin to wonder why he was doing this. He had just about decided to forget his sudden whim and go to bed when the cage gave a jerk and began to ascend.

He moved upward slowly, by fits and starts at first, then more smoothly. The ground fell away beneath him, the cage swung, and Tyrion wrapped his hands around the iron bars. He could feel the cold of the metal even through his gloves. Morrec had a fire burning in his room, he noted with approval, but the Lord Commander's tower was dark. The Old Bear had more sense than he did, it seemed.

Then he was above the towers, still inching his way upward. Castle Black lay below him, etched in moonlight. You could see how stark and empty it was from up here; windowless keeps, crumbling walls, courtyards choked with broken stone. Farther off, he could see the lights of Mole's Town, the little village half a league south along the kingsroad, and here and there the bright glitter of moonlight on water where icy streams descended from the mountain heights to cut across the plains. The rest of the world was a bleak emptiness of windswept hills and rocky fields spotted with snow.

Finally a thick voice behind him said, "Seven hells, it's the dwarf," and the cage jerked to a sudden stop and hung there, swinging slowly back and forth, the ropes creaking.

"Bring him in, damn it." There was a grunt and a loud groaning of wood as the cage slid sideways and then the Wall was beneath him. Tyrion waited until the swinging had stopped before he pushed open the cage door and hopped down onto the ice. A heavy figure in black was leaning on the winch, while a second held the cage with a gloved hand. Their faces were muffled in woolen scarves so only their eyes showed, and they were plump with layers of wool and leather, black on black. "And what will you be wanting, this time of night?" the one by the winch asked.

"A last look."