

The men exchanged sour glances. "Look all you want," the other one said. "Just have a care you don't fall off, little man. The Old Bear would have our hides." A small wooden shack stood under the great crane, and Tyrion saw the dull glow of a brazier and felt a brief gust of warmth when the winch men opened the door and went back inside. And then he was alone.

It was bitingly cold up here, and the wind pulled at his clothes like an insistent lover. The top of the Wall was wider than the kingsroad often was, so Tyrion had no fear of falling, although the footing was slicker than he would have liked. The brothers spread crushed stone across the walkways, but the weight of countless footsteps would melt the Wall beneath, so the ice would seem to grow around the gravel, swallowing it, until the path was bare again and it was time to crush more stone.

Still, it was nothing that Tyrion could not manage. He looked off to the east and west, at the Wall stretching before him, a vast white road with no beginning and no end and a dark abyss on either side. West, he decided, for no special reason, and he began to walk that way, following the pathway nearest the north edge, where the gravel looked freshest.

His bare cheeks were ruddy with the cold, and his legs complained more loudly with every step, but Tyrion ignored them. The wind swirled around him, gravel crunched beneath his boots, while ahead the white ribbon followed the lines of the hills, rising higher and higher, until it was lost beyond the western horizon. He passed a massive catapult, as tall as a city wall, its base sunk deep into the Wall. The throwing arm had been taken off for repairs and then forgotten; it lay there like a broken toy, half-embedded in the ice.

On the far side of the catapult, a muffled voice called out a challenge. "Who goes there? Halt!"

Tyrion stopped. "If I halt too long I'll freeze in place, Jon," he said as a shaggy pale shape slid toward him silently and sniffed at his furs. "Hello, Ghost."

Jon Snow moved closer. He looked bigger and heavier in his layers of fur and leather, the hood of his cloak pulled down over his face. "Lannister," he said, yanking loose the scarf to uncover his mouth. "This is the last place I would have expected to see you." He carried a heavy spear tipped in iron, taller than he was, and a sword hung at his side in a leather sheath. Across his chest was a gleaming black warhorn, banded with silver.

"This is the last place I would have expected to be seen," Tyrion admitted. "I was captured by a whim. If I touch Ghost, will he chew my hand off?"

"Not with me here," Jon promised.

Tyrion scratched the white wolf behind the ears. The red eyes watched him impassively. The beast came up as high as his chest now. Another year, and Tyrion had the gloomy feeling he'd be looking up at him. "What are you doing up here tonight?" he asked. "Besides freezing your manhood off..."

"I have drawn night guard," Jon said. "Again. Ser Alliser has kindly arranged for the watch commander to take a special interest in me. He seems to think that if they keep me awake half the night, I'll fall asleep during morning drill. So far I have disappointed him."

Tyrion grinned. "And has Ghost learned to juggle yet?"