



but his stiff legs would not support him. The mail was too heavy, he was too fat besides, and too weak, and too tired.

"Back on your feet, Piggy," someone growled as he was pulled up. Sam paid him no mind. "I'll just be down in the snow and cold, and after a little while he wouldn't be able to get up. He couldn't feel his feet. I won't be the first to die, they said. I'm not. Hundreds had died on the Fist, they had died all around him. More had died after, he'd seen them. Shivering, Sam reached up and on the tree and eased himself down in the snow. It was cold and he knew, but he could scarcely feel it through all his clothing. He stared upward at the pale white sky as snowflakes drifted down upon his stomach and his chest and his eyelids. The snow will cover me like a thick white blanket. It will be warm under the snow, and I did. I did. I did my duty. No one can say I forsook myself. I'm fat and I'm weak and I'm craven, but I did my duty.

The ravens had been his responsibility. That was why they had brought him along. He hadn't wanted to go, he'd told them so. Told them all what a big coward he was. But Maester Aemon was old and blind besides, so they had to send Sam. The Lord Commander had given him their camp on the Fist. "You'll just stay there. If it happens that you'll just

Sam was sorry to die too, but better than being a coward. He was a good man and true, not squeezing fat boys' eyes. He had written short messages and simple, telling the messages ahead of time, short messages and simple, telling them to attack on the Fist of the First Men, and then he had tucked them away in his parchment pouch, hoping he would never need to use them.

When the horns blew, Sam had been sleeping. He thought he was alone at first, but when he opened his eyes snow was falling all around him and the black brothers were all grabbing bows and spears and running toward the ringwall. Chert was the only one nearby, and Maester Aemon's old steward with the face full of boils and the big nose on his cheek. Sam had never seen so much fear on a man's face as he saw on Chert's when that third blast came moaning through the trees. "Help me get the birds off," he pleaded, but the other steward had turned and run off, dagger in hand. He has the dogs to care for, Sam remembered. Probably, the Lord Commander had given him some orders as well.

Sam had been so stiff and clumsy in the gloves, and he was cold, but he found the parchment pouch and the ravens were shrieking furiously. One of them flew



