



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 went past. Sam paid him no mind. I'll just lie down in the snow and close my eyes. It wouldn't be so bad, dying here. He couldn't possibly be colder, and after a little while he wouldn't be able to feel the snow on his lower back or the terrible pain in his shoulders, no more than Hundreds had died on the Fist, they had died all around him, and more had died after, he'd seen them. Shivering, Sam refused to move on the tree and eased himself down in the snow. It was cold and wet, but he could scarcely feel it through all his clothing, and he stared upward at the pale white sky as snowflakes drifted down upon his stomach and his chest and his eyelids. The snow will come me like a thick white blanket. It will be warm under the snow, and if they speak of me they'll have to say I died a man of the Night's Watch. I did. I did my duty. No one can say I forswore 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, he'd told them all what a big coward he was. But Maester Aemon was very old and blind besides, so they had to send Sam to tend to the ravens. The Lord Commander had given him his orders when they made their camp on the Fist. "You're no fighter. We both know that, boy. If it happens that we're attacked, don't go trying to prove otherwise. You'll just get in the way. You're to send a message. And don't come running to ask what the letter should say. Write it out yourself, and send one bird to Castle Black and another to the Shadow Tower. Old Bear pointed a gloved finger right in Sam's face. "I don't care if you're so scared you foul your breeches, and I don't care if a thousand wildlings are coming over the walls howling for your blood, you get those birds off, or I swear I'll hunt you through all seven hells and make you damn sorry that you didn't." And Mormont's own raven had bobbed its head up and down and croaked, "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

Sam was sorry; sorry he hadn't been braver, or stronger, or good with swords, that he hadn't been a better son to his father and a better

brother to Ocklen and the girls. He was sorry to die too, but better than to live on the Fist, good men and true, not squeaking fat boys like him. At least he would not have the Old Bear hunting him through the snow. I got the birds off. I did that right, at least. He had written the messages ahead of time, short messages and simple, telling of an attack on the Fist of the First Men, and then he had tucked them away safe in his parchment pouch, hoping he would never need to send them.

When the horns blew, Sam had been sleeping. He thought he was dreaming there at first, but when he opened his eyes snow was falling on the camp and the black brothers were all grabbing bows and spears and running toward the ringwall. Chett was the only one nearby, Maester Aemon's old steward with the face full of boils and the big white scar on his neck. Sam had never seen so much fear on a man's face as he saw on Chett'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.

His fingers had been so stiff and clumsy in the gloves, and he was shaking from fear and cold, but he found the parchment pouch and dug out the messages he'd written. The ravens were shrieking furiously, and when he opened the Castle Black cage one of them flew right in his face. Two more escaped before Sam could catch one, and when he did it pecked him through his glove, drawing blood. Yet somehow he held on long enough to attach the little roll of parchment. The warhorn had fallen silent by then, but the Fist rang with shouts of commands and the clatter of steel. "Fly!" Sam called as he tossed the raven into the air.

The birds in the Shadow Tower cage were screaming and fluttering about so madly that he was afraid to open the door, but he made himself do it anyway. This time he caught the first raven that tried to escape. A moment later, it was clawing its way up through the falling snow, bearing a message. Sam was shaking with clumsy, frightened fingers. His duty done, he donned his hooded cloak and buckling on his