

"Out, sparrows! No more cringing round the fire," said Carla, shooing them from the castle kitchen. "Find us some greens. A barley cake for the one that brings in most!"

The children fanned out in search of the dandelion and crécy greens that dotted the brookside in dark clumps. Elenor dumped one muddy apronful after another on Carla's table and ran out for more.

Hedges flowered between the fields. Elenor gathered wildflowers, weaving them into garlands, and watched as farmers plowed open the earth and planted oats on the ridges. Then, with the village women and the other children, she was allowed to fill her apron with beans, take a furrow, and plant a long, careful row, tamping the cold dirt with her bare feet.

When Father Gregory rang the bell for lauds, the sun was already coming up, and farmers left their warm beds, threw open shutters, fed dogs, milked cows, and headed for the fields. When he rang tierce, people in the fields were sweaty, thirsting for a drink of milk or beer. When vespers sounded the time to trudge home, the sun still shone, obliquely painting the furrows of earth dark red, the hedge shadows copper, and the sheep pink. At night Elenor, settled by the kitchen hearth,

‡ 10 ‡

sketched lambs in charcoal, overpainting them with beet juice.

Even times every day, Father Gregory rang the bells of Ramsay church, which served Ramsay castle and village and the far-flung manor of Thornham as well. On the morning of Easter of the year 1300, the dawning of the new year and the new century, he rang them longer and louder than he ever had before. His shoulders ached and his callused hands blistered, but still he pulled and pulled on the heavy ropes. Sometimes the weight of the swinging bells lifted him off the ground, sandals flapping, and he felt like shouting. The world had not ended! Life had never smelled so green, so new, so fine. All his people were alive. Half had gone to the hills with Friar Paul, sick with dread of Judgment Day. The other half had chased their fear by carousing around a bonfire, and this morning lay dead drunk among the haystacks, beaten and disheveled, while the ashes of the bonfire smoked forlornly. Gregory had watched the revelry from the churchyard above, hearing just enough to make him grateful for darkness and distance. Bad enough that he should have to spend this beautiful morning in the confessional.

Flying on the bell rope, Gregory felt a tugging

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