

him to be betrothed to a child, and himself only fourteen years old."

Elenor was not mollified. "Bullies don't change. I wake up every day hoping that Thomas never comes back from Crusade." Her lower jaw stuck out as she looked away, across the valley.

"Elenor," said Father Gregory gently, "you are betrothed—promised. There are duties that go beyond what we each want for ourselves."

"It was our fathers who wanted Thornham joined with Ramsay again. Not Thomas. Not me. It was a conspiracy of papas."

Father Gregory closed his eyes to better find a reply. Elenor had been sold, but what good would it do to remind her of it? More precisely, her wardship had been bought by Robert of Thornham, Thomas' father. Robert was a hard man, and ambitious, and when Guerrard of Ramsay was dying, unable to raise the yearly scutage due to their overlord, Robert had paid the tax for Ramsay, thereby extending his lordship over Ramsay's lands. Robert had procured a run-down but respected castle, the title of Ramsay, and Elenor for daughter-in-law. A smart move, in which Elenor had no say and which left her no recourse.

The mildness of Gregory's voice did not betray the anger he felt. "It is the responsibility of parents to arrange good marriages for their children. Noble

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marriages must benefit all of the villagers and peasants who depend on the lord. Ramsay's farmers need Thornham's mills. Thornham's villeins need Ramsay's fields, and Ramsay castle's strong walls in case of attack. Look how the lands join. . . ." He waved a hand over the rolling hills, furrowed now, the village and hedges, the wattle-and-daub houses that straggled along the road leading to Thornham Manor, a few hours' walk away, where Robert of Thornham—Robert of Ramsay now—still lived with his bailiff. "It was all Ramsay once; it is all Ramsay again. You and Thomas are each the last of your line."

"I *know*." Elenor was quiet for a minute, aware of her rudeness, but then she burst out, "I love my life! It's not my fault I'm the last of the Ramsays. Even if Thomas has changed, I don't want to have his children. I will die, like my mother did. . . ."

Father Gregory was appalled to see tears fill her eyes and roll down her cheeks. So many fears for one small, generally cheerful child. And each was real and well-founded: Elenor was too small to bear children easily. Rumor had it that the Crusaders were returning, Thornham's Thomas among them. If he should claim his bride, young as she was, it was more than likely that she would die in childbirth as her mother had.

What could he do? Sir Robert had arranged

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