

would all still be in the Garden of Eden. Do you think that women are wicked?"

Father Gregory pulled up a stalk of grass and chewed on it.

"Everybody I've ever talked to feels wicked some of the time."

"In the confessional . . ."

Father Gregory nodded. "All these people . . ."

A rare grin crept across his face. He stretched one hand toward the field where the revelers snored.

"Those people invite good and chase meanness by enjoying their bodies and getting drunk." He pointed toward Friar Paul's procession, dispersing now in front of the castle. "Those over yonder, whom you so rudely call Doomsdayers, try to chase the evil in themselves with the scourge, and starve out the devil with fasting, so that God will come into them."

Elenor studied Father Gregory. "You love them all?"

"Yes," he said.

"Though they hate each other?"

"Sometimes they do."

"But are the men just as bad as the women?"

"Just as bad." His eyes twinkled under bushy brows. "Probably worse." He wiped the garden dirt off his hands and onto his robe. "Let's leave tomorrow's worries to tomorrow. Thomas isn't

‡ 18 ‡

home. Soon you will be fourteen, and you are every day growing taller and stronger. I need to hear the confessions of our brothers and sisters in the hay, who will soon be crawling this way. You go to the kitchen and help prepare a good meal for our brothers and sisters of the hills." He fixed her with a stern, pale stare, his eyebrows curling wildly in the morning light.

"Our brothers and sisters," Elenor repeated.

"They have been fasting and praying all night, Ellie, and not just for themselves. For us all, and for the new century."

Elenor listened quietly, her head slightly tilted, sizing up the intent of his words.

"Don't call them Doomsdayers, Ellie. They would rather be called Penitents."

"Yes, Father," said Elenor. "I'll go help Carla make porridge for the Penitents."

"Do that."

She smiled suddenly and dropped him a curtsy.

She ran from the churchyard, heading for the castle kitchen.

‡ 19 ‡