

Thomas

It was Billy the scullion's turn to do the marketing in Peterborough, and he nearly killed himself running home to Ramsay with the news he heard there. The Crusaders had landed. Their ship had docked in Dover, and they were headed home. Thirteen men from the county came on foot, six on horseback. Thomas of Thornham led them, looking, rumor had it, like a hero.

The castle kitchen was thrown open to the village and fires burned all night. Morning found Elenor chopping garlic and onions with Helen. Tears streamed down her face and she shrugged her shoulder to wipe them away with her upper sleeve, not wanting to touch her garlic-drenched hands to her eyes. Carla was up to her elbows in flour, kneading dough with Maude and Elise, yelling at Billy to bring in more wood.

Almost all of the women who filled the kitchen had men who had gone out eight years ago. Some

‡ 20 ‡

had taken other men since. Some, as Elenor thought about it now, had borne several children since their husbands had left. Helen and Elise, Elenor's boon companions, had grown up in a village where men were few and women had learned to do men's work. Elise had become the village cobbler. Helen looked after the pigs and helped Carla with the butchering.

Billy, just twelve, red in the face as he sat in front of the fire turning the spit to cook the roast, bore the brunt of the women's apprehension.

"So you're not going to be the only man around here, Billy! You're going to have to start brushing your hair!"

"Stand back, folks. No telling what varmints will crawl out."

"Be sure to warn us first, Billy-o."

The conversation drifted to jokes about weddings and beddings, the laughter nervous. One of the women urged Elenor to leave the kitchen. "Wash the dough off your elbows and get ready to receive that big handsome knight of yours."

Elenor's skin crawled, and Carla said, "Stay with us awhile, Ellie. There'll be time enough for dressing up if they slept last night in Norwich, as Billy says."

"And if Billy has made up the whole thing—"

"Just to get us to prepare him a feast..."

‡ 21 ‡