

The last thing Elenor wanted to do was to leave the warm, busy kitchen and go up to the solar, which she had once shared with her parents.

She had loved it there when she was little. Back then the castle had been gaudy with banners and tapestries, loud with shouts and music and the clatter of hooves. But her mother had died trying to give birth to a sister, her father had died of illness, and now the solar was just a big empty room, waiting for something to happen. It was hers, but she had no idea how to fill it.

Since her sixth year, Elenor's family had been all of Ramsay. Ramsay's peasants welcomed her at their fires and in their yards. Only a very few old people singled her out by calling her "Lady." It made Elenor feel lonely when they did.

When Carla finally told her to go on up and change clothes, she took Elise with her to the solar. They found some of Elenor's mother's dresses in a chest, some they'd used for play costumes. They shook them out, trying to smooth the velvet. Elenor stepped into a long dress and hitched it over a belt so that it would clear the floor. The dress had a musky smell and made her nose run. Since she had no mirror except a beaten brass plate in which her face swam dimly, she had to rely on Elise's word that she looked "like a *real* lady."

Dogs barked in the courtyard. Children shouted, shrill with excitement, and Father Gregory's voice called up the stairs to the solar. Elenor came down reluctantly and stood by him at the top of the courtyard steps. Her face was clammy cold. She stretched her neck, trying to feel tall and independent. Her neck felt as thin and vulnerable as a martyr's.

Women crowded out from the kitchen, waving aprons. Chickens squawked; horses whinnied. Elenor clutched her elbows and bit her lip. The men clattered into the courtyard.

They were ragged, but they rode or walked as if on parade. They were, Elenor saw, as anxious as the women. Not sure if they wanted their adventure to be over; not sure of their welcome after so many miles.

Seeing their discomfort broke Elenor from her misery. She ran down the stairs and called out the words Father Gregory had told her she should say.

"Welcome, men of Ramsay and Thornham, and welcome, Lord Thomas. Billy and the boys will see to the horses. There's bathing as always in the river, and feasting on the green when you are ready."

Father Gregory smiled at the way the words were shouted, like Olly-Olly-in-Come-Free, above the noise of the courtyard. He wanted to cheer for