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Opening Extract from...

A Sister's Crusade

Written by Ann Turner

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ANN TURNER

A Sister's Crusade



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This book is dedicated to Eleanor Hibbert (1906-1993),
who wrote under the pseudonym of Jean Plaidy. It was her historical
romance books that inspired me to pick up a pen and begin writing.

Author's Note

In 1978, the BBC showed the series 'The Devil's Crown', the story of the three Angevin kings, Henry II, Richard I (Lionheart), and the infamous John. Being fascinated in history, and an avid viewer of historical dramas (to get my historical fix), I enjoyed every episode of this tremendous series, and it remained in the back of my mind for many years.

It sparked in me an idea for a story of a young woman who lived in this traumatic, violent time, travelling to the Holy Land and having adventures along the way. At that time, I frequently wrote short stories for my own amusement, and so the embryonic story you are now about to read came into being.

By the way, the entire series of: 'The Devil's Crown' is now able to be viewed on YouTube. I know this as I have re-watched the entire series again, having forgotten how like both a staged play, and a living tapestry it looks.

It made me a fan of the actor, Brian Cox, and I still enjoy watching his television appearances to this day.

There will be readers of my novel who may wish to suggest that I am being historically inaccurate when I write about the wearing of the cross of Saint George during the 3rd crusade.

Saint George officially became the patron saint of England in the 14th century, under the reign of King Edward III, great, great, great nephew of King Richard I. However, the red cross on a white background that is recognised as the symbol and flag of Saint George, was first adopted by the Christian soldiers as their patron saint about the year 1098 at the Battle of Antioch during the 1st crusade. It is written that King Richard I put his soldiers under the protection of this saint, by having them wear the Cross of Saint George, thus the familiar image of the crusader in the

white tabard with the red cross emblazoned on his chest is the one we all recognise today.

I would like to thank Alan Beasley, and his contacts for his help in promoting my novel.

There are also two people I would especially like to thank for their support: Tracey and Chris, who I shamefully forgot to mention once before. These lovely ladies listened to my constant grumblings when I felt the world was against me while I sweated blood as I wrote, and encouraged me on.

I feel humbled to know that Tracey has been inspired by my writing to put pen to paper (metaphorically) herself and now writes.

I have read some of her work, and it is looking good. Don't give up, Tracey.

1

December. Cold, icy-cold, with a bitter wind blasting in from the north to penetrate and chill a man to the very marrow in his bone. Meagre fires in mean hearths barely gave out enough heat to warm the room, though smoke filled the lungs and stung the eyes before swirling upwards towards the hole in the roof and freedom in the cold air.

Every year for as long as the people of the village could remember, life had been hard. Scarcely anything changed from day to day, from season to season, from year to year. They worked the fields and tended the livestock for Lord Oswyn, an unappeasable master to serve. Resistance to his rule was not permitted. Dissent or lawbreaking was swiftly and cruelly dealt with. Once the taxes were paid, the villagers were allowed to remain in their hovels, and retain barely enough food to stave off hunger, though the lord and his wife lived in opulent comfort at Romhill.

Lord Oswyn was frequently seen patrolling his lands, astride his tall hunter. He would scarcely regard his serfs as they bowed low, never looking directly into his face – such familiarity was not permitted, as they were not worthy of his attention – though occasionally he would stop and demand information as to how the crops were growing in the fertile soil this season, how many of his cows and oxen were in calf, whether the harvest would be a good one or whether grain would be a higher price this season.

Now, just a few days before Christmas, the weather had turned bitter. The skies were leaden grey and heavy. Occasionally a cold sun would glimpse from gaps in the clouds, yet there was no warmth to cheer weary, aching bodies. Snow flurries eddied and swirled around the villagers, chilling them through their

roughly woven, patched and repaired home-weave. Their hands, chapped, red and numb from the cold, could barely grip the hoes they stabbed into the frozen ground. However, despite the conditions, the constant hunger and the miserable homes they wearily trudged back to at sundown, their spirits were unusually good. The crops of wheat and rye had been good this season, and enough was harvested for the making of bread. The surplus would be sold to bring a healthy revenue to the estate.

Usually, Oswyn retained the profits, but this year – with his wife finally pregnant after years of barrenness and with the inclusion of the crops – in a sudden and unexpected mood of generosity, he had presented the villagers with a pair of oxen to make ploughing the fields a little easier. This had made their Christmas more cheerful; they were poor and could barely afford the cost of owning livestock to help work the fertile fields, so the village ownership of two of these beasts was an occasion for celebration. Some began to sing Christmas songs and others joined in. It was only a few days before they would all jostle into the small church, decorated with holly, ivy and fragrant pinecones, to celebrate the birth of Jesus and listen to the padre preach. In a partitioned booth, Oswyn and his fragile wife, Petronella, would sit, apart and aloof.

Petronella, the daughter of a Saxon lord, was distant to the villagers as they were not of her own kind. She had not been raised to regard such inferior beings, considering they were far below from herself and her husband. It distressed her little to see the starving children of the village, or to see women in the same condition as her still working hard, not given the luxury of the cosseting she enjoyed. Similarly to her, the man she had married lacked empathy. He regarded the native Saxons as a lower class, as had every Norman, since the invasion of Duke William the Bastard and his crowning as king of this cold, foggy island off the coast of Europe. Their marriage had been for the advantage of the Redfearn family, to continue to integrate into the Saxon aristocracy, to breed out Saxon blood and replace it with Norman blood. This had been so since the Conquest, and continued on.

Petronella's health had frequently given cause for concern. She had been blighted with a weak constitution throughout her

life and frequently suffered from maladies. She was never seen riding out with her husband and her delicate health had raised doubts that she would ever produce an heir for her lord. The services at the church were the only times Petronella would be seen, always looking frail and haunted. The peasants were not overly concerned about their lady's health; she never attempted to connect with them and their harsh lives, and so they regarded her with disinterest. They did not want her pity at their plight. Only the young, raggedy children of the village, not yet blighted by the insolence of the vast canyon of their lowly position to the lady of the manor, would smile and shyly wave at her. They would be reprimanded by their parents, and frowned upon by their passionless lord.

Some of the peasants had been fortunate and were employed at Romhill to serve their master and mistress. But though they had the shelter of Romhill as their home, their lives were hard and they were never given permission to leave the grand house. They were completely lost to their previous lives and were at the mercy of Lord Oswyn and the disdain of Lady Petronella.

Into the humble, desperate life of the village, Esma, the only child of Aelrid and Heresuid, was born. She was a spirited girl who resented the fact that she had been born into a life of servitude. She wanted to discover the world outside her village, to explore and go to strange new lands, but she was also realistic enough to know that these would all stay dreams. She was a girl and this meant that her life was already mapped out: a marriage to one of the young men of this village or the neighbouring one; her first married night would be spent with Lord Oswyn at Romhill; and then back to her husband where she would be expected to work at his side, care for their home, prepare meals from the meagre rations, while giving him child after child before, in all probability, death in childbirth.

Esma knew her father was disappointed that she had not been a boy. Male children were more useful than females and he had frequently beaten her in a drunken state, before turning his rage on Heresuid for her failure to give him a son. This treatment at her father's hand only hardened Esma to the harshness of her life. She resented the fact that but for the accident of birth, Lady

Petronella lived a life of comfort and luxury, never having to sleep on a straw mattress alive with fleas and lice, or wear patched-up clothes. She would never watch the calluses and chilblains ruin her hands, or know the stabbing pain of an empty stomach as there would always be enough food to fill her belly. Life was unfair to a girl born so low.

Frustrated, Esma stabbed the hoe once again into the frozen soil. There was no use in feeling sorry for herself; she should accept that her life would progress in the same way as all the other young women of the village – the ninnies that they were – but she was different and she knew it. There was more to life than this and she felt inside that she would be singled out for something big – but what? However, she was always just as curious when the ninnies gathered around a new bride the morning after her wedding, in order to hear about that first night at Romhill. The description would always be the same, yet they all wanted to hear the experience again and again.

Firstly, after celebrating the marriage with family and friends, the bride would wait for Lord Oswyn to arrive on his horse. The new husband could do nothing but watch helplessly as Oswyn would swing the bride up behind him and ride back to Romhill with few words spoken to anyone. She would be taken to a large room dominated by the biggest bed and goose feather mattress the girl had ever seen. This had given rise to the bed being named 'the goose bed' by those who had occupied it. In the room there was also a long table laden with food. Oswyn would give the bride a cup of wine that made her giddy with its potency. He would then sit in a large chair and order the young woman to strip while he sat silently watching her. Once she was naked, he would stand and instruct her to undress him, making sure she lingered at the removal of his hose. This would always cause the girl to blush with embarrassment. He wanted to see this reaction from her, wanting her to see he was ready for the procedure to come. Then he would pick the girl up in his arms and carry her to the goose bed, lay her upon it, pin her down and exact his *droit du seigneur* with only grunts of exertion as he took the girl's maidenhood.

Once the task was completed, Oswyn would depart. The

young woman would be allowed to spend the remainder of the night in the bed, to eat and drink from the table in the morning before a groom arrived to return her to the village, her expectant husband and questioning from the young women.

When this happened to her, Esma was determined to enjoy the one night of luxury before her monotonous life with her husband commenced. There was not much for her to look forward to, so that one night, how unpleasant it was, would be the highlight of a tedious life.

She heard the sound of hooves pounding on the hard earth and knew it was Lord Oswyn riding by on some important business. The men bowed, calling their greetings, and women curtsied, but none looked directly at him. Esma, feeling rebellious, continued working the soil. What interest would Oswyn have in a girl like her? Why should she show deference to him?

He passed by, but today he slowed his horse to a walk. One girl had ignored him – it was most disrespectful of her. These creatures were the sediment of society and not worth consideration, yet he was aware of her indifference to him. It was *his* right to show impassivity, not the other way.

He turned in the saddle and looked at her. He recalled she had ignored him once before and he had dismissed this dissent, as she must be weak in the brain and not know any different. On this second look, Oswyn decided the girl was a bit on the scrawny side – that would be due to the lack of food – but there was also something other that caught his attention and his loins stirred. With Petronella finally pregnant, he needed stimulus and usually he would amuse himself with his current mistress or one of the young maids in Romhill. This, however, was something different; she did not look as if she were feeble minded.

Seeing her, he wanted gratification now. He could not wait until he rode to his mistress's home, or returned to Romhill to hoist up the skirts of a kitchen maid and get into her. He had selected this tatterdemalion – or had she unwittingly selected him? – and for this enchantment and allure, she would oblige him. Oswyn turned his horse and walked back, his eyes not leaving her. He imagined her looking up at him, enticingly, slowly, daringly, and brushing a wayward strand of hair from her face as

a deliberate act of provocation. Esma glanced up at him – not enticing, but certainly provocative. *Charming*, Oswyn thought. He leaned forward in the saddle, not breaking eye contact.

'Your name, girl?' he asked.

'Esma,' she replied, brazenly looking back at him.

Aelrid saw his daughter appearing to detain the lord and he hurried over in a panic.

'What d'you think you are doing, daughter?' he asked, alarmed.

Oswyn raised a gloved hand to silence him, his eyes still not leaving Esma's face. 'You have a fine looking daughter,' he said and Aelrid beamed with a false pride at the compliment.

'I do, sir. She is a good and dutiful daughter that any father would be proud of,' he proudly boasted.

Esma shot him a look, but was somehow not surprised at his lie. Heresuid had now joined her husband, curious to know why they were speaking to Lord Oswyn, while others in the field had also looked up and were following the conversation. Their lord never engaged in talk with anyone other than the village elders.

'Esma, you will come with me.' He held out his hand, ready to lift her to the back of his horse.

She shook her head. 'Thank you, sir, but no thank you, sir,' she answered, plainly. Aelrid was shocked at his daughter's refusal to their lord and master, and stared open-mouthed at her.

'What do you mean by that? Lord Oswyn wants you to accompany him and you refuse?'

'Yes, why should I?' she replied boldly, still holding his gaze.

Cursing, Aelrid boxed his daughter's ears, but Oswyn smiled at her spirit and wanted her body more. 'You will obey our lord with his demand,' Aelrid prompted sharply. Heresuid nodded agreement with her husband, though she was concerned what this would mean for her daughter. Oswyn had a lecherous reputation and was renowned for plucking women from the village for his amusement.

'No, father, I shall not be treated like the cow to be mated by a stud bull,' Esma hotly answered, as red spots of anger flared on her cheeks.

Oswyn was amused at this. He had not thought of himself as a stud bull looking to cover the cow, but it sounded appropriate.

In her objection, she was suggesting she would not to be as docile or receptive as a cow. This behaviour promised much from her; she would prove a match for him.

'He speaks wisely, Esma. Do as I demand or I shall see that your worthless livestock is slaughtered in front of you and that shithole you call home is burnt to the ground with all three of you inside,' Oswyn threatened. Esma remained unmoved by the warning. Her face set in a scowl, her eyes still focused on him.

'She will come willingly with you, my lord,' Aelrid said quickly and pushed his daughter towards the horse, ignoring her protest. Oswyn held out his hand again.

'But father—' she began. Her ears were boxed again. Knowing now she could not argue her way out of this encounter, Esma indignantly slung her hoe down, tutting her displeasure loudly, to accept Oswyn's hand and he pulled her up behind him. Without a further word, and with Esma holding his belt, he wheeled his horse around and rode at a trot towards the stables close to Romhill.

Heresuid helplessly watched her daughter being taken away. 'You know what will happen to her,' she said to her husband.

Aelrid shrugged his shoulders and returned to his work. 'Would have happened on her wedding night anyway,' he muttered, impassively.

Heresuid sighed, unhappily, looking in the direction where her daughter was being taken,. 'It would have been more suitable if there had been a husband waiting on her return.'

At the stables, Oswyn dismounted and threw the reins to a groom that had come running out of the building. He turned and lifted Esma down. Holding her arm to prevent any escape, he kicked open the doors of the stables, startling the other grooms and their lads with his entry. Ignoring their hasty greeting, he pulled her to a set of ladders that led to the hayloft above the stalls.

'Up there,' he said.

In an attempt to delay the inevitable, Esma slowly climbed the rungs one at a time. Oswyn followed while trying to look up her skirt, in the hope of catching a tantalising glimpse of that warm secret place he was aching to invade.

Once in the hayloft, Esma stood with her hands clasped in front of her, waiting. Oswyn looked at her. That spirit he had seen in the field appeared to have deserted her now.

'Lay down and pull up your skirt,' he ordered.

Obediently, Esma did as she was told. Pulling off his gloves and throwing them aside, Oswyn sighed with frustration; he had wanted her to argue, to defend and fight for her honour, to bite and scratch. He would have grappled with her, overpowered her, thrown her onto the straw and had her – all of that would have made the attack on the defenceless girl more satisfying. He had never walked away from a potential conquest. He would still have her even if it would not prove to be the thrill he had expected.

Oswyn dropped to his knees between Esma's legs. He leant forward and unlaced the front of her dress, releasing her breasts. He clamped his mouth over one and sucked hard as a leech attached to a sick man's arm. Her body stiffened to the touch of his tongue on her nipple. His hands moved up her thighs, under her skirt, until he discovered that soft firm flesh and felt her flinch. He pulled back a little to rest on his heels, grinning with complacency at her face, pale and afraid.

'Warm, moist and, as yet, unsullied,' he remarked under his breath, moving his fingers about, teasingly, tantalisingly, hoping for a reaction from the girl – an invitation for him to continue. Again, she lay inanimate.

'My lord, I am not worthy of your attention. I beg you, please, not to continue. Let me go,' she implored.

The pleading went unheeded, and loosening his hose, he felt the rush of desire fill his body. He was primed, ready to proceed and he pushed down hard onto her, into her, hearing a small yelp of hurt from the girl and felt a shiver ripple through her body. Finally she was showing some emotion, but still not enough, so he pushed forward with brutal force and she cried out aloud. He clamped his hand over her mouth to stifle her shouts for help, but no one would dare to stop him having his moment's victory.

Below, the grooms and lads waited uncomfortably for their lord to take what was undoubtedly his by right. They were unable not to hear, forced to listen to the barbarism from the platform. The fathers among them thanked God it was not their daughters

who were being forced to submit to the indignity of the assault above them.

Once completed, Oswyn got to his feet and regarded the pathetic girl before him. He was quickly losing interest in her. He had satisfied his lust and she was no use to him now.

'What shall I do, my lord?' Esma asked, her voice shaking with overwhelming feeling.

'Whatever you always do. Do you think it concerns me?' he replied coldly, retrieving his gloves before going to the ladder and climbing down without a second look at her. He strode out, pulling his gloves on, while the stablemen with enforced deference bid him farewell and compliments of the season to him and his lady.

Esma remained hidden for a while longer, tidying her skirts and pulling her fingers through her hair to smooth out the tangles and remove the brittle stalks of hay. She felt unable to go down the ladder, to face the men below – afraid that they could take advantage of her in this distressed state. But knowing Lord Oswyn would have left the stables by now and that she could not remain here for the rest of her life, she finally descended the ladder, attempting not to notice the pain and soreness throbbing through her. One of the grooms came forward with a tankard of ale.

'Here, girl, drink this and tarry a while,' he suggested.

Esma stepped back, gasping in terror, in fear that he would continue her nightmare. Instead, he placed the tankard on a bale of hay and backed away slowly. Seeing the kindness in his wrinkled face and the gentleness in his old eyes, she sat on the bale. He was no danger to her. Another, younger, man handed her some bread and cheese on a battered old plate, which she snatched away from his outstretched hand and ate quietly. She avoided looking at any of the grooms or lads, keeping her eyes fixed on the food resting in her lap. The old man attempted to talk gently to her, to sooth her, but Esma would not be encouraged to speak. Eventually, and with hesitant thanks for their kindness, she departed the stable and walked slowly back to the field.

Heresuid saw her daughter returning and nudged her husband, who glanced up. There was no talk of what had

occurred. No one asked whether Oswyn had hurt her; no one spoke of the bloodstains drying on her skirt, or her eyes that were red from tears. Neither parent could look their daughter in the eye. Stiffly, for she was still hurting, Esma picked up the hoe that lay where she had thrown it and returned to her work, prodding the hard soil half heartedly. It was as if nothing had happened, but her maidenhood had been robbed from her – stolen for a cruel man's lust. Life would go on as usual for everyone else, but for Esma, nothing would ever be the same again.

'Sorry,' Heresuid whispered to her daughter.

The daughter's mouth drew into a hard and bitter line, keeping her gaze fixed on the unyielding soil. It was too late to be sorry now.

The church doors were flung open and the padre stood in the porch, sheltering from the swirling snow that was blowing around the small building. He greeted the villagers as they filed in silently. Several of the men spoke to him as they led their families to the benches to sit and wait for the lord and lady to arrive. The Christmas Day service would only begin once they had arrived and were seated on padded chairs in their private stall, separated from the congregation by an elaborate screen.

And so, Lord Oswyn entered with his pregnant wife on his arm. He stared forward as they slowly walked up the aisle, aware of the respectful silence of the villagers. He had demanded his delicate wife accompany him to the service, even though this pregnancy had made her ill from its beginning. This long-awaited child had to be a son, though Petronella had repeatedly assured her cold husband that it was God who would decide upon the gender. It was because of this that she now turned her sad eyes to the gold crucifix standing solidly on the altar and mouthed a silent prayer for this child to be male.

From her position toward the rear of the church, Esma watched sullenly as her lord passed by. He had forgotten the incident in the stable, but she had been unable to get the hideous images from her mind. Nightly, she relived the pain as he had forced her into submission, and then left her without guilt. She wanted to stand up and shout to Lady Petronella that her husband

was a callous rapist, but knew it was likely that his frail wife was aware of his adulterous activities and it would not be a surprise. By her side, Heresuid felt her daughter shudder with hatred and put a hand on her arm, whispering in her ear not to speak out of line in God's house. Esma bit her lower lip and glowered at Oswyn, wishing him ill will and desiring his destruction. These were inappropriate thoughts to have in the house of God, and how this could be achieved, she had no idea.

2

In the early months of the new year, Esma began to feel unwell in the mornings and had to run behind her home to vomit. She felt lethargic and it took great effort to rise from her crude bed to begin the day, before the dash to wretch her heart out. Her body felt strange and she could not understand these curious sensations inside her. It was Heresuid who first suggested the cause of this malady, but Esma refused to believe it was true. Her mother calculated that the assault had happened just before Christmas and now, in the new year, there could be only one reason behind the sickness.

She was pregnant with Lord Oswyn's child. Esma was horrified to contemplate this revelation. Why should it be her that this had happened to? She was not married, so could not insist the child was her husband's; nor could she say it was Oswyn's by the act of *jus prima noctis.* She had been an unwilling participant in the event that had created the life that was beginning to grow deep inside of her. She would be shamed and her family would be shamed. Esma would be turned out of the village to fend for herself as a pregnant single woman and, if she survived childbirth, would have to care for her child alone.

'Your father need not know yet,' Heresuid told her daughter. 'We will hide your growing belly while we decide what is to be done. This is my grandchild you carry. It is innocent of the sin of its father and I shall do what I can to assist you now.'

Esma threw her arms around her mother's neck and hugged her tightly. This was not what she had expected from her. Heresuid had been a dutiful wife; she had always obeyed her husband, agreeing with every demand he made – even siding with him when Esma had been defiant and had had to bear the

relentless beatings of his fists raining down on her. She had never been the loving mother outwardly and now her true, caring nature was coming through.

'Your father may have wanted a son instead of a daughter, but I have always been proud of you and the spirit in you. I have loved you since the day you were born. You have inherited that spirit from me, as I stood up to my own father and was beaten for it, too. I have steered your father round to my way without him realising for all our married life.'

Esma felt humbled by the admission. 'But I cannot stay here once the baby is born. Father would never permit it,' she said.

Heresuid smiled slyly. 'It will take some cunning, but we will find a way for you to have your child. Then, we shall decide what is to become of both of you.'

Esma was intrigued as to how her mother would defy and deceive her father. This new and defiant side to her mother was a joy to see.

Over the months as Spring blossomed in the trees and hedgerows, Esma's belly expanded and she had to wear looser clothes. She still worked the fields and helped her mother with the household chores and baking, not wanting to be a burden to her, or give her father any idea of what was going on inside her body. The child was growing fast and, when they could, Esma and Heresuid would watch her belly and sometimes see a small ripple as the baby moved inside its mother.

In the sixth month of the year, news reached the village that Lady Petronella had given birth to a daughter and that both had survived. Esma would whisper secretly to her belly, saying that the baby's half sister had been born and that their lives would be so different. The newborn girl would want for nothing, but this baby would have nothing.

The planned celebration for the infant's birth was quickly altered. Oswyn was bitterly disappointed in both his wife and his new daughter. He cursed his bad fortune and questioned God on what had he done to be denied the son he craved. The baptism of his daughter was quickly held at the local church, with very little ceremony.

The news of the birth at Romhill gave Aelrid an excuse to excess with the ale. He sat at the table, a large jug in front of him, and poured overflowing cups for himself. He swallowed the strong liquid greedily, and then became abusive to his wife and daughter as the ale took its effect on him. The two women sat as far from him as they could in the small room, accustomed to the foul language spewing from his lips. When he was like this, the beatings soon followed. It was a regular pattern, but this time Esma was afraid for her unborn child. Heresuid had already positioned herself closer to Aelrid, preferring to take the beatings for her pregnant daughter.

'So, what will become of this new sprog up at Romhill?' Aelrid asked, rhetorically. 'Spoilt and pampered while we starve. Though at least now I can say that Oswyn is like me and can't produce a son! Ha! He won't get any sons out of that stick of willow – just like me. Esma, get here!' Scared, Esma glanced at her mother, who now came and stood close to him.

'We are fortunate with a beautiful daughter in Esma,' Heresuid began. 'You must look for a husband for her soon. She needs to be married and give you grandsons.'

'Be silent!' he shouted, lashing out and knocking Heresuid aside. 'I said, come here!'

Hesitantly, Esma walked around the table to stand in front of her father. Heresuid slowly got to her feet, wiping a smear of blood from the side of her mouth. Aelrid snatched at Esma's wrist and pulled her closer to him. 'Do you realise how useless you are to me, girl? What can you bring to me? If I marry you off, it will cost me to send you to a husband, so don't get any fancy ideas about marriage. You will live and die here as a spinster.'

As Aelrid pulled her closer again, he noticed that her body was looking unusually large. 'Getting fat, are you? I must be feeding you too well.' He put his hands on his daughter's stomach and felt its firmness, suddenly realising what was causing the swelling. Speechless, he looked into her face.

'Father, I can explain everything,' Esma began quickly, but was silenced by a painful slap across her face.

'When did this happen? Who was horny enough to poke you?' he asked. 'You cheap whore!'

'It's not what you imagine,' Heresuid added, standing by her daughter. A disbelieving expression appeared on Aelrid's face as he looked between the two women.

'No? Do you think this is an immaculate conception then? And I am to be the grandfather of the second Christ?' He lashed out towards his wife and she stepped back to avoid the slap to her face. He turned his attention back to Esma and, with a closed fist, struck her in the belly, causing her to drop to the ground and cry out in pain.

Heresuid scrambled to her side, gathering Esma in her arms. 'What in God's name do you think you are doing, Aelrid? You could have killed her and the child!' she shouted at her unrepentant husband.

'Done us all a favour,' he growled back, fumbling for the tankard. He looked towards his daughter, his face now red with rage and ale. 'When did you get the chance to slip away to get humped? Who done it and how many times have you spread your legs and shown him your pudenda for him?' He leaned forward over the two women, once again closing his fist in readiness to strike. Esma cowered back in her mother's arms.

'It was Lord Oswyn who done this, Father. Remember at Christmas when he took me away.' she sobbed.

Aelrid thought back and waved his hand in dismissal. 'I'll not have his bastard in my house. I cannot feed another mouth. What were you planning to do after it is here?'

Esma moved in her mother's arms and looked at her. She had put her trust in Heresuid, who had promised to resolve the problem of the baby. 'I… I am not sure,' she answered, hesitantly.

Aelrid prodded her several times with a thick finger. 'I'll tell you what you will do, my girl, you will pack your belongings and go away. I never want to see you again – bringing disgrace to my good name! Who will have you now? You are spoilt goods; nobody wants a pranged cast-off.' Aelrid said, coldly.

Heresuid was alarmed. 'Husband, do not be so hasty in your decision. We can resolve this without throwing our daughter out. We need her in the fields, as it will soon be harvest time. How can you and I gather it all on our own? She is a strong girl. Let her stay until the infant is born and then *you* can decide what we will

do.' She emphasised it would be his decision, but both she and her daughter knew she would carefully talk her husband around to a more sensible solution. Having sat down again, he looked at them over the tankard, swallowing the ale and pondering his wife's words.

'You can stay until it is born and the harvest is in, then you and your bastard go,' he conceded.

Esma relaxed; she was safe for now. 'Thank you, Father, you are too kind.' She was quickly learning to pander to his vanity.

'No special treatment, my girl. You have to work as hard as the others. That thing means nothing to me, so I don't want to hear you complain that you are tired or need more food. You will get no more than you get now,' said Aelrid, and then he picked up the cup of ale and downed it in one swallow. Picking up the jug, he pushed his chair back and stood up. 'I'm going out on business.' He pushed past the two women, and then went through the doorway and out into early evening air.

'He's off to visit his whore,' Heresuid muttered, bitterly. 'Strange how men can do as they please, but us women have to act as saints in the world, whores in the marriage bed, turn blind eyes, pretend all is well, accept our husbands for what they are, obey them or suffer the consequences. He treats the dog better than me.'

Esma put an arm over her mother's shoulders. 'Then come with me when I leave, after the baby is born. I'll need you so much then. We will manage without men.'

Heresuid smiled sadly and shook her head.

'I am his chattel, tied to him; my place is by his side and I shall stay. Had you found a husband, you would have gone to him and I would have stayed here. Everything will work out for the best, Esma – believe me, it will.' She laid her hands on her daughter's belly. 'Did you feel anything unusual after he hit you?'

'I think I'm all right. My belly hurts, but I don't think he has harmed us,' Esma answered. She felt sore, and hoped the words she had spoken to calm her mother were true.

'Then get you to bed. I shall wait for Aelrid's return. I do not want him disturbing you,' insisted Heresuid.

Gratefully, Esma retired to her small bed and drew the ragged

curtain across for privacy. She whispered comforting words to her unborn baby, telling the child to be strong and to stay safe inside her womb.

In the early hours of the following morning, Aelrid stumbled back into his home, kicking out at the dog, who was warming itself by the embers of the fire, and shouted for his wife to attend to him. Esma pulled the rough bed sheet over her head as she heard her parents arguing, followed by the noise of her father violently beating her mother and then, after a pause, the vile sound of him forcing himself on her. Esma, still hidden, cried quietly to herself. Sadly, these events happened at regular intervals throughout her life. If this is what being married would be like, she would take her chances with her baby in the woods. Better an impoverished beggar than a beaten and humiliated wife.

When Esma rose from her bed the following morning, Heresuid was standing by the cooking pot, already preparing the potage for their meal when they arrived home from the fields. Her eye was swollen from the beating, there was bruising on her face and arms, and her hands shook as she handled the vegetables, yet she greeted her daughter with forced brightness. Esma silently sat at the table and helped herself to a piece of bread, cheese and a small cup of ale.

'Your father left early. He said he had business to finish off and would go straight to the fields,' Heresuid said, coming over to the table as she wiped her hand on her skirt.

'Did he say what it was?' asked Esma.

Heresuid shook her head. 'He did not speak much when he got home last night.' She paused and bit her lower lip to stop it quivering. Sniffed loudly, she quickly brushed a strand of hair from her face and forced her voice to be calm. 'He only said we would find out later. Come along, daughter, we can't keep him waiting. We must get to the fields. We don't want to give him an excuse to repeat last night.'

Silently, the two women walked with others to the fields. Aelrid was already there, talking with another man. They were laughing, then they glanced briefly at Esma and shook hands. The other man walked to his allotted area of the field. Aelrid,

now in a good mood, so different from the previous night, bowled over. Grinning at his wife, he turned and began the daily toil. Heresuid was worried by this good humour; it could only lead to trouble. It usually did.

It was a fine summer's day and the hot sun beat down on the workers as they bent over their tools, weeding the crops, watering and tending to them so as to be sure the harvest would be a good one. If the crop was sufficient, Lord Oswyn would permit them to keep the surplus for themselves, so it was important to ensure the crops grew tall and strong. Esma was finding bending over more difficult as her pregnancy advanced. She wanted to stop briefly, to rest for a moment, but she knew her father would be watching her, waiting to find a fault, displeased if she faltered at any time. She would not give him the satisfaction of beating either her or her mother, so she stretched her tired body before continuing.

Lord Oswyn came riding by and everyone greeted him obediently. Aelrid bowed low, giving no indication of the hatred he felt to the man on the horse – the father of his daughter's illegitimate child. Oswyn did not notice the family bowing and failed to see that Esma was pregnant. He had forgotten her quickly and she was no importance to him. He passed by; there were more important things to occupy his mind than the dreary drudgery of their daily lives.

Esma watched him after he had passed by. Her heart was also filled with hatred for him, for the ruining of her life. She had been nothing to him and she was still nothing – a moment's gratification, that was all. The consequence that was her unborn baby did not matter. How many more were spread around the village or the local countryside? *Too many*, Esma assumed.

The workers in the field stopped at midday to eat, rest and talk together under the shade of nearby trees. Aelrid hurried to another group of men, before returning to Heresuid and Esma with a man of similar age to him. He was short and thickset, with black, unruly, unkempt hair, and dark stubble on his weather-beaten and leathery face. His clothes were untidy and dirty; the sleeves of his shirt were too long and his stout fingers, with dirty and broken nails, protruded from the threadbare cuffs. Above

his dark and beady eyes, his brows were thick – so bushy, in fact, that they were almost solely one. Esma immediately felt a stirring of mistrust as they approached. Her father was smiling broadly. Heresuid greeted the other man politely. He sat himself close to Esma and studied her intently, making her feel uncomfortable.

'This is the widower, Garrett,' announced Aelrid. 'His wife died recently and he needs a new one to look after his six children. He is willing to take our daughter, her bastard as well, in marriage.'

'She's young and has proved her fertility, so she'll give me more children,' Garrett approved. Heresuid looked dismayed at the prospect of her daughter being married to this man, who was known as a wife beater and much more violent than Aelrid. Gossip had spread through the village that his wife had died by his hand.

'Husband—' she began.

Aelrid shot her a warning look and she fell silent. 'There is no need for doubt. He shall marry Esma once the banns are read. She'll be his before the brat is born.'

'I assure you that I will take your daughter and not ask for a dowry. You are doing me the favour of giving me a new wife and my children will now have a mother,' said Garrett, pleased with the circumstances that would bring him a fresh young woman to abuse and debase.

Esma shook her head. 'Father, I do not want marriage to this man. He is old and ugly.'

At first, the two men looked shocked, then Garrett grew angry with her. 'Your father told me you lured Lord Oswyn into your bed to seduce him and now you must pay the consequences for your sluttish behaviour. Be grateful I shall have you. What decent man would look twice at a trollop like you?' he warned.

Esma's mouth dropped open in astonishment. 'I did not lure him; he took me away and forced me,' she argued.

'That's what they all say,' Garrett replied, coolly. 'I'm off to see the priest tonight to arrange the reading of the banns. In a month's time, Esma, you'll be mine. Like it or not, you will be my wife and you will obey my command. No slinking off in the middle of the night to mate with men. I'll get you pregnant as

soon as this brat is clear of your body.' He put a sweaty hand on her swollen belly and dug his fingers in, before getting to his feet. After speaking again with Aelrid, he returned to the other men of the village to announce his forthcoming marriage.

Esma was desolate and could not concentrate on her work in the fields. Her vision was blurred with tears and her heart was aching with the awful thought of her life with Garrett as his punch bag and brood mare. This was not how she had dreamed her life would unfold. She had always known that a marriage would be arranged for her, but she had hoped her future husband would be nearer her own age. Then, the thought struck her: on her wedding night, would Lord Oswyn want to take her to the goose bed and have her? This thought would have been laughable had it not been so tragic. It was because he had taken her in the first place that she was facing this life sentence with Garrett! Even the unborn child must have sensed its mother's distress as it had become still, as if to hide away from the only life it would know.

She had to get away and escape before the marriage could be performed, but where could she go? Later when Aelrid was in drink induced sleep, Esma would talk in secret with her mother and they would come up with a plan.

That evening, once Aelrid was sprawled in his chair snoring from the intake of ale, Heresuid and Esma went to the small paddock adjacent to their home. Here, their cow, sheep and pig were kept during the day and, before herding them in to keep them safe from the dangers of the night, they would be able to talk in secret.

'Mother, I cannot marry that man,' Esma whispered, urgently.

Heresuid nodded as she slapped the bony hindquarters of their cow. Her daughter, meanwhile, ushered the other two animals towards the open door. 'I agree. I knew his late wife and she was always a sorry sight. He treated her badly, and beat her black and blue even when she was carrying. I fear death was a welcome release. I shall not let that happen to you. I've been thinking since last night and I may have a solution. You might not like it, but it could be the only way to stop the marriage.'

Heresuid tethered the three animals in a corner and drew her daughter close to whisper the plan in her ear. She was right;

Esma did not like the idea, but it was more palatable than a life with Garrett. 'We must choose our timing exactly. No rushing into this or things may go against us. If Aelrid and Garrett learn of it, both our lives would not be worth living.'

'When, mother?'

'I shall decide the best moment, but be ready at short notice. Once this begins, there will be no going back.' Heresuid smiled at her daughter and touched her swollen body. 'If it all works, your child could grow up in safety. What mother could ask for more?'

'Or grandmother,' added Esma and held her mother in her arms. All of this had made the young woman realise how strong and clever her mother truly was. She was even prepared to put up with a violent and abusive husband to ensure her daughter did not suffer the same fate as herself.

The next weeks passed by excruciatingly slowly for Esma. There had been no effect to her health or her baby's health after her father had punched her. Heresuid kept reminding her daughter to be ready to act on a moment's notice. At the church, the banns were being read and it would only be a short time before the wedding could occur.

Every evening, Garrett visited Aelrid and they had sat supping ale and laughing at the future of the impatient bridegroom. He would call Esma to him and insist she sat on his lap. He would then pull her mouth open to inspect her teeth and push her hair aside to look in her ears, as though she was a brood mare he was buying. He would grope her body with no regard for her child. He would remind her of what would be expected of her as his wife. His six children ranged in age from two to twelve years and were an unruly, feral lot. Esma would have her work cut out caring for them in between giving him more children and looking after every demand of her husband.

Heresuid would sit serenely in the background, darning clothes by candlelight and listening to Garrett's torturous boasts of how he would beat his wife when she spoke or acted out of line. The two men agreed that the only way to keep a wife under control was to beat her senseless, to dominate her in the bed and

to keep her pregnant. He sympathised with Aelrid that he had only produced one child and that it was a girl, as a man needed many offspring to help in the fields. To this, Aelrid would lament that God was punishing him for some crime to which he was innocent and they both agreed it was Heresuid's fault for the lack of children in the house. Still, Heresuid sat calmly darning – her sot of a husband had no idea she was preparing her daughter's escape. He could beat her and abuse her, but he could not stop her thinking. Tonight, she would help Esma take her first steps to a new life – a life that was safe.

It was late when Garrett finally stumbled home. It was now the opportune moment. Heresuid shook her daughter awake.

'Esma, get your belongings together. We'll do it once your father is in a drunken sleep,' she whispered.

The young woman pulled a hemp bag, which was packed with clothes and the few possessions she owned, from under her bed. She sat on the bed and waited as instructed. Her heart was beating fast with anticipation and her nerves were on edge. The baby had been lively earlier and now it was still, as if it was holding its breath.

Heresuid poured a large jug of ale and placed it in front of Aelrid. He snorted awake and looked at the jug, then at her. She poured the ale into the cup and handed it to her husband, smiling benignly. She replenished the cup and sat opposite him, gazing adoringly at him.

'Aelrid, I was listening to you and Garrett earlier and you are right. You do know best about how to look after a woman and how to keep her safe,' she said, sweetly. Aelrid grunted. 'I am just an ignorant and stupid woman, what do I know?' She crossed to the shelves and fetched cheese and bread for her husband, cutting large portions for him and refilling the cup again. 'Esma will be little use once the baby is born. She is best given to Garrett, who will give you the next best thing to a son – a grandson.'

'Finally, you see sense,' Aelrid answered through a mouthful of food. He swallowed another cup of ale, belched loudly and began to sway in his seat. He called his wife over and, as she stood by his side, he ran his hand up under her skirt, his fingers

pinching, and buried his face in her breasts. 'Get you up on this table and I will show you what Garrett will do to Esma every night of their marriage.' His voice was muffled, his face still in her breasts.

'One more cup of ale, husband,' Heresuid insisted, pushing the cup into his hand. The strong liquid went down his throat in one gulp and, obediently, Heresuid sat on the table in front of him. She pulled her dress from her shoulders and hoisted her skirt up; her legs open, ready. Aelrid shakily stood and pulled down his hose, pushing himself forward. His sloppy lips sucked on her neck; one hand on the table steadying himself, the other squeezing at her breast. Then, he began swaying violently. Heresuid pulled back. Her plan was working! She felt behind her for the empty jug, grabbed it and clouted her husband across the head. He crashed to the floor and lay unconscious, drooling and snoring. Quickly, she jumped down.

'Esma, quick! Before he wakes up,' she called.

Esma, holding her hemp bag close to her body, edged cautiously around her unconscious father and, together, she and her mother hurried out into the night.

The evening air was still and warm, and clouds scurried across the sky, giving the moon the appearance of racing along with them. The two women went as fast as they could through the village and along the dusty track towards the local convent. Once there, they stood looking through the iron gates at the building that stood in the centre of cultivated vegetable and herb gardens. Esma looked pathetically at her mother.

'What now? We cannot get to the door,' she observed with disappointment.

Heresuid had not thought of this and she had to think quickly. 'I shall not take you back. This has already begun and you will not return,' she replied, determined. 'All I can suggest is that we stay hidden until the morning. The sisters have to wake early for their prayers, so when they leave to go to their chapel, we shall gain their attention.'

'What about father? He will wake and find you gone.'

Heresuid made an impatient gesture. 'Let me worry about him.' She led her daughter into the shade of the trees around

the perimeter and pulled her down to the cold ground. 'We will remain here. Come close, let me hold you near to keep you warm.' She embraced Esma and they huddled together, cold and hungry, to wait for the sound of the bell tolling.

The two women spoke little during the long night hours, as there was little to converse about. Occasionally they would speak when Esma felt a small movement, but otherwise they remained silent, listening to the sounds and the movements of the night.

Eventually, the sound of a solitary bell broke the night air. Heresuid was quickly on her feet and stood again at the gate, her hands gripping the iron bars. She looked expectantly at the door, waiting for it to open to see the procession of sisters file their way towards the small chapel that was adjacent to the main building. Esma came and stood by her side and they both watched in silence.

For the next hour, there was no movement. She imagined that the nuns had entered the chapel through a connecting door inside the building and that they would have to either continue to wait for the sisters to commence their daily work, or be forced to return to the village and face the wrath of her father. For this, Aelrid would hasten his daughter's wedding to Garrett and she would be lost to the world.

Just as Esma felt ready to admit defeat and that her mother's plan had failed, they saw the oak doors slowly open and the Abbess appeared, leading the sisters in order of seniority.

Heresuid shouted out aloud, calling to the filing nuns. The Abbess and her sisters looked towards the gate at the two women, who were both rattling the iron gates, waving their arms and demanding attention. The Abbess then beckoned a young nun from the back of the column, spoke to her and signalled to her to approach the gate.

'Do you know what time it is?' the young nun hissed angrily.

Heresuid smiled at her. 'Sister, can you let us in? I have a woman here in need of great help.'

'Can it not wait until later this morning? We are going to Lauds,' came the tetchy reply.

'Sister, please let us in. We are not robbers or bandits. The woman here is with child and is escaping danger.'

The nun muttered something unholy and returned to the Abbess to explain why these women were waiting. They exchanged words and the young nun came back. In her hand she held a heavy iron key and turned the lock, pulling the gate open. With just enough room, Heresuid and Esma slipped in and waited while the nun locked the gate. She turned to look at them both, waiting for further explanation for this intrusion at such an ungodly hour.

'This young woman is my daughter and she is in fear of her life from my husband. I am helping her to run away. We could not think of anywhere else to go at night.'

'A wife and daughter must obey their master; he is the one who controls their lives. Did not God tell us to love our enemies?' the sister preached insolently. Heresuid did not need this condescending attitude from such a young woman and glared angrily in return. The young nun crumbled under the hard look. 'Follow me. The Abbess will know what to do.' She led them towards the Abbess and the curious nuns.

Heresuid dropped to her knees before the Abbess and kissed the hem of her habit. 'Good mother, we throw ourselves on your mercy,' she said.

The Abbess looked down at Heresuid's bowed head and then at Esma, noting her pregnancy – which was now so advanced it was impossible to hide.

'Come to the chapel with us to pray and then I will take you to the refractory, where we shall talk,' she said, lifting Heresuid to her feet. She led the way to the chapel, the young nun hurrying back to her lowly position at the rear of the column of sisters.

Considering it was summer, the chapel felt cold to Esma as she prayed alongside the sisters. She slid a glance at her mother who was praying intently, with her eyes squeezed shut and her hands pressed tightly together. The service was long and enduring, but eventually the prayers, chanting and singing of psalms came to an end, and the nuns filed silently from the chapel. Heresuid and Esma following reverently behind.

Once they were seated at either end of a long wooden table, Heresuid explained the whole story to the Abbess.

'A woman is the maidservant to the man. Whether we agree to

it or not, she must obey his demands without question.' replied the Abbess, solemnly.

'But Esma has done nothing wrong. Lord Oswyn is the one who committed the sin, so why should my daughter be the one to suffer? All I ask is that she stays here until the child is born, then I shall remove the child and find a loving family to adopt it. Esma will remain here to take Holy Orders and join your community.'

The Abbess looked concerned. 'The sisters come here because they have been called to serve God. They come because they desire to leave worldly goods behind and to take vows of poverty and chastity. But this young woman would be here to hide?'

'Esma is my daughter and I love her so much that I am prepared to give her to God and never see her again. I would rather this than her be married to a man who may kill her. We have talked about this and can see no other way to keep her safe,' entreated Heresuid, passionately.

'What have you to say in all this, child?' the Abbess asked, turning to Esma.

She looked blankly between her mother and the Abbess. 'I think I am ready to give up everything to protect the life of my child. It is not the baby's fault that this has happened and I want to give it a chance at life,' Esma repeated the words her mother had instructed her to say.

The Abbess looked shrewdly at her, knowing that a life locked away from the world was not the young woman's desire. She knew these words had been chosen for her to say, but she admired the mother's determination to protect her daughter.

'You would know if God had called you,' the Abbess began, tucking her hands in the sleeves of her habit. 'You may remain here until your time arrives and then we shall all decide what will happen to you. I can see you do not desire the cloistered life here. Our regime is strict and you would be expected to adhere to the rules while you stay. You will pray forgiveness for your sin and a safe deliverance of the infant.'

'She would,' Heresuid said quickly, but the Abbess withdrew a hand from a sleeve and held it up to silence her.

'Let the child speak for herself, please.'

'It is either this or marriage to a man who has killed his wife. I choose here,' said Esma, quietly. The Abbess smiled with satisfaction.

'Then say farewell to your mother and you will be shown to the cell that will be your own.' She looked at Heresuid. 'You can come to visit as Esma is our guest. The sisters shall look after her.' The Abbess stood up and moved aside to allow Heresuid and Esma a moment together.

'I shall try to come to see you when I can,' Heresuid whispered, stroking her daughter's hair. 'Be brave, be strong. You know this is the only solution.'

'I am afraid, mother,' Esma admitted, shakily. 'I do not want to be a nun, I want more than this. I want a life in the world.'

Heresuid took her daughter by the arms and gently shook her. What can you expect now? Marriage to Garrett or banishment from the village? How long do you think you or your baby would survive? This *is* the only solution.' She kissed her daughter's forehead. 'I must get back before your father wakes up. If he is awake, I shall tell him you ran away during the night and I have spent this time searching for you, but do not know where you have gone.'

She turned, leading Esma to the Abbess, and offered her daughter's hand to the older woman. 'Thank you,' she said and, after a final kiss on her daughter's cheek, was led away by a waiting nun.

The Abbess regarded the young woman, who was watching hopelessly as her mother disappeared through a door. 'When is your child due?'

'September. Not long now,' replied Esma.

'While you are here, you will be regarded as a lay sister and you will help the other sisters with light work to earn your keep. For now, sister Angelina will conduct you to your cell and, later in the morning, you will meet the other sisters.'

'Follow me,' said sister Angelina, who led Esma away from the refectory along dark corridors, up a stone flight of steps and past closed doors until they came to a halt. The nun pushed the door open and stepped in. 'You shall sleep here.'

Esma passed her into the small, cold room. The nun gave her an impassive glance back and closed the door behind her. She sat in her dimly lit cell on a straw mattress and looked around the small space. There was an old table on which stood an ewer and bowl for washing. A crucifix hung on the wall directly opposite her bed. A small barred window let in the morning light, and the candle the nun had left for her dipped and gutted in its holder on the table. Esma felt afraid; it was the first time she had spent any time on her own, always having her parents in their bed close by. Even if they had kept her awake with their arguing or her father beating her mother, Esma had never been alone. She lay down on the mattress, which was not comfortable or soft. She had not expected it to be otherwise – it was exactly the same as the straw mattress at home.

She wondered what her father was saying – or doing – to her mother now that her absence must have been discovered. And what would Garrett have to say about his absconding bride? Maybe she would have to spend the rest of her life locked up here in the convent as a nun after all, but at least she would be safe within the ivy-covered walls.

Even so, this was not the life Esma would have chosen. She had never desired a life of meditation and prayer; she wanted excitement and love. Turning her face to the wall, Esma sighed and shut her eyes, attempting now to sleep. Later, things may look brighter. She felt a small movement inside of her stomach – at least her baby was safe here. The next trial they would both have to endure would be the birth.

Sleep was not to be a luxury, however, and soon after sister Angelina pushed open the door and looked in.

'Come along now, you're not exempt from our daily routine. Get up and follow me,' she called. Esma sat up rubbing her eyes, while the sister stood impatiently waiting. She poured the cold water into the bowl and splashed the sleep from her face.

'Come along!' Angelina again urged, now irritated, and Esma followed her along the corridors to the refectory where the other nuns were gathering silently. Esma was assigned a

place at the table and the simple breakfast was eaten, again in silence. She kept looking around, unfamiliar with the strict regime, alone and afraid.

Later in the morning, she sat in the Abbess's study while her duties were read out to her. In the mornings, she was to help in the herb garden; in the afternoons, she would assist in the weaving of material, and the evenings would be spent studying her bible. In between all of these, there were the prayers. Esma was expected to cease whatever she was doing and follow the sisters into the chapel to pray. She was given a habit to wear. Once the baby was born and taken from her, she would also be expected to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. The outside world would be lost to her forever.

Occasionally, there would be visitors to the convent – travellers looking for respite from journeys. They would be welcomed by the sisters, who gave them food and a bed for the night before they continued on their way. Esma wanted to speak to these travellers, to find out snippets of news from the outside world. She was not permitted to have contact with the visitors and was instead sent on tedious errands to keep her away from them.