

It is long past noon and we have been riding full pelt under a hot sun. My buttocks are aching and the insides of my knees chafe painfully against the horse's sweaty flanks. We stopped only once to eat and drink and to water the horses, but soon Loric was urging me to mount again. He seems anxious, although whenever I look over my shoulder, there is no-one following.

We are on a track through beech woods now and I fix my eyes on Loric's tow-coloured hair, trying not to fall behind. The shade here is welcome and Eadwin's servant has slackened his pace a little. Since coming under the trees, we have encountered no-one, travelling either way. The woods begin to thin out and passing in and out of sight between the pale new leaves, I catch sight of a chapel ahead. Loric pulls on his reins, and the mare slows to a trot. Soon I have caught up with him.

'Why are you stopping?'

'Flamstead is a little further on, Mistress. But Alfwen's anchorhold is here, up against the church.'

I stare at the chapel. It is no more than that - an English church, built of timber, no great size. How can the recluse live here? We walk the horses on and now I see that there is a small lean-to structure built up against the chancel on the far side. It is surely only big enough for one room. The door is hidden behind tall fence pales that enclose an outside yard. Tarded palling has been stretched across the pales to provide some shelter for the yard.

Loric calls out to let the recluse know of our arrival and now a servant in a rough tunic emerges through a low opening in the fence. As she stands upright, I see that one side of her face is completely disfigured; a purple-red scar billows across her cheek. I turn away in distaste to find Loric waiting to help me dismount.

'Greetings, Alfwen,' I hear him say.

*Alfwen?* This is the venerable anchoress? I look at her more closely. She is small but wiry and strong, a woman perhaps of my mother's age. She hurries towards me, smiling, but her face only looks more monstrous, with one half of her mouth pulled down by the scar.

'You are right welcome, Theodora.' Her accent tells me that she is from the north country.

She says no more but makes a cradle with her arms so that Loric can remount his mare. She hands him the reins of my horse. Suddenly I am frightened.

'Don't go yet.'

But he is already turning his mare's head back towards the track. He waves to us in farewell.