# Spellbound

## Margit Sandemo

## Published by Tagman Press

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

# *Chapter 1*

ONE evening in the late autumn of 1581, as an icy mist played with the blood-red reflection of fire in the sky above Trondheim, two young women made their way along the town's streets, each unaware of the other.

Not quite seventeen, Silje was a girl whose deep eyes showed an indifference to the world around her, mirroring the loneliness and hunger she felt inside. She hugged herself to keep out the cold, thrusting her hands beneath her clothes, most of which seemed to be made from old sacking. Strips of hide were bound round her worn-out shoes and her attractive hazelnut hair was covered with a woollen shawl, which doubled as a blanket whenever she found a safe place to sleep.

She stepped cautiously around a corpse lying in the narrow alley. Just one more victim of the plague, she told herself. This plague – she could no longer remember how many outbreaks there had been during the last century – had taken her whole family just two or three weeks ago, leaving her alone and forced to scavenge for food.

Her father had been a blacksmith on a large farm to the south of Trondheim, but when he and her mother, brother

and sister had died, Silje had been driven out of the wooden cabin where they had lived. What use would a young girl be in a blacksmith's forge?

In truth, Silje had been relieved to move away from the farm. She had left behind a secret, buried deep in her heart, that she had never shared with a soul. To the south-west lay the strange and eerie mountains she called the 'Land of Shadows' or the 'Land of Evening'. Throughout her childhood their brooding mass had always frightened her, yet also held her spellbound. They were so far away as to be barely visible but, when the brightness of the evening sun lit up the jagged peaks, it gave them a strange ethereal clarity that stirred the girl's lively imagination.

She would gaze at the mountains for ages, in fear and fascination. Then finally she would see 'them', the nameless creatures that lived there. They rose up from the valleys between the peaks, gliding slowly through the air, searching, closer and closer to her home until their evil eyes found her. Whenever this happened, Silje would run and hide.

Except that they did have a name. People on the farm always spoke of the distant mountains in hushed voices and it was probably their words that had first frightened her and excited her imagination.

'You must never go up there,' they would say. 'There is nothing but witchcraft and evil there. The Ice People are not human! They are the spawn of cold and darkness, and woe betide the person who goes too close to their lair!'

The Ice People? Yes, that was what they were called – but Silje was the only person who had seen them riding on the air. She had never known what these creatures were. Not trolls. Oh no, they were not trolls. Nor were they wraiths. They could not be called devils either. Were they some sort of supernatural marvel perhaps, or spirits from

beyond the grave? She had once heard their landlord call one of the horses a 'demon'. This was a new word to her ears, but she felt it was a suitable name for 'them'. The strength of her fantasies about the Land of Shadows was such that she would often dream about it while in a restless and troubled sleep. It was only natural that she should turn her back to those haunting mountains as she left the farm.

A primitive instinct had led her to Trondheim, where she would find people – hoping for help now that she was alone and in need. She soon came to realise, though, that none of the townspeople welcomed strangers into their homes, and especially now, at a time when the plague followed in the footsteps of those who travelled the land. What better place for the sickness to spread unchecked than in these overcrowded houses, fighting for space in dirty narrow streets?

It had taken her a whole day to find a way to get through the town gates. When she had noticed some families returning from work to their homes in the town, she followed them and, walking on the far side of one of the wagons, slipped unnoticed past the guards. Once inside, however, she had not found help. Nothing, that is, but a few stale crusts of bread thrown to her now and then from a window, and barely enough to keep her from the grave.

From the marketplace by the cathedral could be heard the sounds of drunkenness and brawling. Once, foolishly, she had gone there, drawn by the promise of the company of others like herself. It hadn't taken her long to understand that this was no place for an attractive young girl. Seeing the mob had been a shock, and although she tried to put it out of her mind, she couldn't quite forget the experience.

After several days of walking, her feet ached constantly. The long road to Trondheim had exhausted all her energy

– and with no comfort to be found there, she felt the consuming pain of hopelessness clawing at her insides.

Rats squealed in the doorway she had begun to walk towards, hoping to find a place to sleep for a few hours, so she turned away and continued on her hopeless wandering. Without thinking, she was being drawn towards the glow of the fire across the hill outside the town. Fire meant warmth. It also meant burning corpses – for three days and three nights a huge funeral pyre had been alight. Just beside it stood the scaffold.

She hurriedly mumbled a prayer, 'Lord Jesus, keep me from the evil of these lost souls! Give me courage and strength, so that with Thy grace I can rest there safely a while! I desperately need warmth, lest I should perish.'

With dread filling her innocent heart and her gaze fixed on the rising haze of warmth, Silje stumbled on towards the western gates.

****

In the meantime Charlotte Meiden, a young noblewoman, had taken to the street on a secret errand of her own. In disgust, she felt her silken shoes sinking into the filthy waste underfoot. Ice had blocked the gutter that ran down the middle of the street, causing this disgusting mess to remain where it lay. Anxious not to lose her footing, she cradled a tightly wrapped bundle in her arms.

Charlotte had stealthily slipped away from her father's imposing residence and was now making her way towards the town gates, quietly humming a slow dance-tune, a pavane, to keep herself from thinking about what was wrapped in the bundle. Progress was painfully slow. Her lips were white and beads of sweat shone on her forehead and upper lip. Her hair clung to her temples.

That she had been able to keep her condition hidden for all these hateful anxious months was still a mystery to her. However, she had always been small and slender, and nothing had really shown. The style of dress she wore had helped, with corsets and flowing crinolines, and a surcoat draped from her shoulders, covering everything. Of course, she had dressed herself, always pulling her corset painfully tight. No one, least of all her chambermaid, had suspected anything.

She had hated the life that grew within her with a fierce intensity – it was the unwanted result of a liaison with a most handsome Dane from the court of King Frederick. It was only later that she learned he was married. One evening of blind passion and this torment had been her punishment, whilst he moved on quite casually to make new conquests.

She had tried every means to rid herself of this intruder in her life – strong potions, hot baths, even jumping from balustrades. Why, she had gone as far as visiting the churchyard one Thursday night last summer and there had performed rites so secret and hideous that she had now banished them from her memory. It was no use. The spiteful being inside her body had clung on to life with the persistence of a devil.

How afraid she had been these last months – and was still. Strangely however, at that very moment she no longer felt the same burning hatred towards the unwanted creature. Instead something else began to stir in her heart – a warm glow, great sorrow and an unexpected longing. No, she couldn't allow herself to think such thoughts. Just walk, walk quickly and avoid the few people out on a night such as this.

It was so cold. Poor thing. No, no!

She caught a glimpse of a young girl, scarcely more than a child, coming down a side street, and slipped quickly into a doorway. The girl, Silje, passed by without noticing her.

'She looks so alone,' Charlotte thought with a sudden pang of heartfelt compassion that she could not allow herself to feel. She must not give way to sympathy. She must not be weak. Above all, she must hurry. She needed to be back in the town before the gates were closed at nine o'clock. The gatekeeper didn't frighten her and, if he should ask, she could account for herself. The cloak she had thrown around her shoulders belonged to one of the servants. No one would recognise the elegant mistress, Charlotte Meiden, dressed like this.

At last she reached the gates, and as expected, the gatekeeper stopped her. She held out the bundle for a moment.

'Just one more dead. I'm going out to …' she muttered.

The man waved her through without a second glance.

She saw the forest in front of her now, the jagged tops of the pines in silhouette against the glow from the fire. Bright moonlight shone over the frozen evening landscape, making it easy to find the way. If only she hadn't been so exhausted. She was in pain now, more afraid, and from time to time she felt a warm stickiness soak into the towel she had used to staunch the bleeding.

The child had been born in the hayloft above the stables. She had bitten hard on a piece of wood to stop herself from crying out and had done her best with the cord. Afterwards, exhausted from her ordeal, she had lain for a long time before, without looking at it, she had bundled the baby up and risen unsteadily to her feet. In her mind, it seemed, she needed nothing to do with this child. She had smothered its weak and pitiful cries with the blanket. It was

still alive – she felt it move now and then. Thank goodness it hadn't cried out as she passed the gates.

She was certain she had removed all trace of the event in the hayloft. If only she could be rid of this shameful burden and return home unnoticed. Then she would be free, finally free of all the worry.

She had come far enough into the woods. Over there, she thought, beneath the tall pine tree, a long way from the path. Charlotte Meiden's hands shook as she laid the bundle down on the bare frozen ground. Her chest tightened and tears welled up as she tucked a woollen blanket and a shawl around the small spark of life, and placed a little pot of milk she had brought with her beside the baby's cheek. Deep down, of course, she knew it could never drink the milk, but she could not bring herself to acknowledge that.

She hesitated for a moment, as an overwhelming feeling of loss and despair raced within her, until finally she staggered off, her frozen footsteps taking her back towards the town.

****

Inside the walls, Silje kept on walking, grateful for the moonlight that cast its pale aura over the streets and alleyways, making it easier for her to avoid the bay windows and other strange features on the buildings as she passed. Step by step, one foot followed the other – half asleep, she kept going. If she allowed herself to think, she would feel the cold, the hunger, the utter weariness and the certainty that she had nowhere to go and no future.

Someone was sobbing nearby.

She stopped. She was at the entrance of a narrow alleyway, making her way towards the western gates.

It was dark in the alley; the moonlight did not reach beyond its entrance. The crying came from a yard at the back, where a door stood half open. It was the sound of a child – the heart-rending sobs tore through her. Hesitantly Silje drew closer and stepped inside. Moonlight filled the small open space, which was surrounded by low houses. A little girl, perhaps two years old, was kneeling beside a dead woman. The child was pulling and shaking her mother, trying to wake her up.

Although Silje was little more than a child herself, her young heart was touched by the plight of the infant, but the sight of the woman's corpse held her back. The tortured face and the froth around her mouth were clear signs that the plague had struck again.

Tröndelag, as this part of the country was called, had been overwhelmed by a pestilence, which in reality consisted of two different illnesses. Plague was the common name for all sicknesses, but this virulent illness had come from Denmark. Sometimes known as the 'Spanish wheeze', it was a catarrh that caused fever, headaches and pains in the chest. At the same time, another type of plague had been brought from Sweden, this kind causing boils and open sores, pains in the side and headaches that eventually led to madness. Silje knew the symptoms – she had seen them all too often.

As yet, the child had not caught sight of her. Silje was so exhausted that she could not think quickly, but she knew that she alone among her own family had survived. She had been wandering through the town, amongst its dead and dying, for a long time now without becoming infected and so did not fear for herself. But what of the little girl? She had a slim chance of escaping the sickness and were she to stay here, alone with her dead mother, she would have no chance at all.

Silje moved forward and knelt beside the child, who turned a tearful face towards her. She was quite stocky, but beautiful, with dark curly hair, dark eyes and small strong hands.

'Your mother is dead,' Silje said softly, 'she can't talk to you any more. You need to come with me.'

The girl's lips trembled, but surprise had served to stop her tears.

Silje rose to her feet and pushed in turn at each of the doors that opened onto the yard. All three were locked. The dead woman probably hadn't lived here; she had perhaps just decided this dark alley was a fitting place to die. Silje knew from experience that it was pointless to knock – people would not open their doors.

With a few swift movements she tore a strip of cloth from the hem of her tattered skirt. She knotted it deftly to make a rag doll and placed it in the dead woman's hand, to stop her returning from beyond the grave to look for her daughter. Then she said a silent prayer for the poor woman's soul.

'Come along,' she said firmly to the little girl. 'We must leave now.'

The child did not want to go. She clung to her mother's cape – it was pretty and didn't seem too worn. The girl was also well-dressed; nothing extravagant, but simple and well made. The girl's mother had once been a real beauty, but now her black unseeing eyes stared at the moon.

It would never have crossed Silje's mind to take the dead woman's cape to protect her own frozen body from the cold. The thought of stealing from a corpse repelled her, especially one who had fallen victim to the plague.

'Come,' she said again, feeling helpless as she faced the tired child's quiet sobbing. Gently, she opened the child's

hands and took her in her arms. ‘We must try to find you some food.’

She had, of course, no idea where to find any, but the word ‘food’ worked its magic on the child, who resigned herself and, letting out a final tearful shaking sigh, allowed herself to be carried out of the yard. She cast a last agonising glance back at her mother that was full of grief and heartache – Silje would never forget that look.

The child wept silently as Silje carried her through the streets, along the last stretch towards the gates. She had obviously been crying for so long that she was now too tired to be able to resist. Silje had another worry. Suddenly she was responsible for another human being, a child who would probably be dead from the plague in a few days, but until that happened, Silje had to make sure she didn’t go hungry.

They were close to the town gates now and, between the houses, she caught occasional glimpses of the glow from the funeral pyres. It had been bitterly cold of late, making the frozen ground too hard for graves to be dug, so the dead were consigned to the flames. There was a large mass grave that she – but no! She could not allow herself to contemplate such anguish now.

She saw a woman leaning against the wall of a building, looking as if she would faint at any moment. Hesitantly Silje approached her.

‘Can I help you?’ she asked timidly.

The woman turned and looked at her with anguished eyes. She seemed to be a young lady of noble bearing, but her features were deathly white and beads of perspiration were running down her face.

As Charlotte Meiden’s eyes focused on Silje, she forced herself upright and started to walk away.

‘Nobody can help me,’ she mumbled as she disappeared down a side street.

Silje watched her go, but did not follow.

‘The plague again,’ she told herself. ‘There is nothing I can do.’

Finally she reached the gates. Although they would remain open for a while, Silje knew she would not return to the town. There was no relief to be found there, not for her or the child, of that she was certain. She would have to try and find shelter in a barn in the countryside – or in some other place.

‘What if we should meet a wild animal?’ she wondered, not that wild animals could be any worse than the brutes to be found around the marketplace in the town – those drunken debauched wretches who pestered her whenever she came near their ‘territory’. They showed complete indifference to the plague, perhaps because they knew that they would soon be beyond help and were trying to experience all the pleasures of this life before leaving it.

The guard at the gate asked where she was going so late in the evening, but he was less interested in those leaving than in those who were coming in. She told him that they had been turned out for showing signs of sickness. He understood at once and, with a wave of his hand, sent them on their way. He would not worry that they might carry the sickness to others. Oh no, not at all! Just as long as it left his town.

Silje walked faster. The warm glow of the flames urged her on – what would she do if the fire died out before she reached it? First she had to find a way through the pine forest that lay between the town and the scaffold.

Once before, when she had first arrived in Trondheim, she had lost her way and stumbled upon that awful place

– she had turned and left as fast as she was able, away from the disgusting stench and in fear of the horrors she had seen there. Now, her desperate need for warmth was making her go back. Just stretching her icy hands towards the flames, turning her back to the fire, feeling the heat through her clothes, warming a body that had known only cold for so many days and nights. It would be a dream come true.

The forest – she stopped at its edge, just beyond the reach of the trees. Like many others who lived in open farmland, she had always been afraid of the forest. It held too many secrets in its shadows.

The girl was becoming too heavy for her tired arms and she put her down.

'Can you walk by yourself?' she asked. 'I'll carry you again in a little while.'

The child didn't answer, but, still sobbing quietly to herself, did as she was asked.

The shadows were very dark amongst the pine trees. Silje's eyes had grown accustomed to the night, but she still could not see what lay between them. She felt she could detect furtive beings with burning eyes hidden in the undergrowth.

She tried to think more clearly once again.

'The darkness is never completely black,' She told herself. 'It has many shades, darker and lighter, mixing into greys.'

The child was frightened too. Fear had quelled her tears and she pressed herself tightly, ever so tightly, against Silje with a soft moan. Silje's mouth felt dry. She tried to swallow, but her fear remained. They had to keep going step by step, and she fixed her eyes on the glow of the fires from the far side of the woods. It helped, but she did not

dare turn around, for she could feel shapeless creatures of the unknown tugging at her heels!

When they were about halfway through the trees, she felt her pulse racing and then the blood drained from her face. She was breathless. Then, for the second time that evening, she heard a child cry. To hear that sound again was more than she could bear. Her heart was pounding madly. It was a baby crying in the woods.

Again came the pitiful sounds of the infant. It could only mean one thing – it must be a *myling*. Silje was terrified at the thought. *Mylings* were the spirits of unwanted children, born out of wedlock and left to die without baptism. She had heard so many stories about them and always dreaded the thought that she might meet one. She knew she was in mortal danger – a *myling* would haunt anyone who passed its secret resting-place. Yes, she had heard all the tales of the fate of those who passed too close to such a grave. They told of an infant child as tall as a house, screaming horribly, that followed the poor passers-by, its footsteps shaking the earth, finally clawing at their backs and dragging them into the ground. She also knew a being like this could transform itself – into a black dog, or a child's corpse with its throat torn out, into ravens or reptiles, each one as evil as the other.

Silje was petrified. Her feet would not move, no matter how much she prayed that they would, so that she could run away from that awful place. The little girl, however, still clinging close to her, reacted differently. She muttered something Silje didn't understand. Just one word – a name perhaps? It sounded like 'Nadda' or something similar. Could she have had a little brother or sister who had recently died? That was quite possible.

The girl began tugging at her hand, willing her towards

the cries coming from among the trees, only a short distance from the path that Silje had hoped they were following. Silje held back; she desperately wanted to get away. Again the child repeated the word, her voice choked with tears.

'But it is too dangerous,' Silje protested. 'We must leave, quickly – quickly!'

But how *could* they run away? Would they have a giant *myling* snapping at their heels? Oh no! That would be even worse.

Suddenly, a thought came to her. The souls of the dead children cried out to be baptised and yearned to be reunited with their mothers. How did one bring peace to a *myling*? Did one read the sacraments for them? She was not a priest, but wait! There was an old verse, a liturgy, if only she could remember it. It was something like, 'I christen thee …' Then she thought it better to say all the prayers she knew.

Taking a deep breath, she began reciting every supplication she had ever learnt, Protestant mixed with Catholic, half-remembered fragments from childhood and lessons taught by the priest. Her steps uncertain, and ready to run at the slightest sign of danger, she drew nearer to the *myling*. It was quiet now. The prayers had worked!

Feeling more confident, she walked a little faster, while trying to think of suitable words for a rite of baptism. The girl was pulling her along, to make her hurry. As they picked their way forward, Silje, in a loud but unsteady voice, said, 'I have found thee in the darkness of night. Therefore I baptise thee Dag, if thou art a boy. Thou wast left to die, I know not when. Therefore I baptise thee Liv, if thou art a girl.'

Did that sound so foolish? Would it be acceptable as a rite of baptism? Just to be sure, she added, 'In the name of

Jesus Christ. Amen,' although she knew full well that she had no right to utter such sacred words. Only the priests were allowed to do that.

Was it dangerous to call a *myling* 'Liv'? Perhaps it would become mortal again and rise up with awesome might. No, better not think of such things. She had done her best and could only pray it would be enough.

The girl seemed determined to find the *myling*, which made Silje even more certain that she once had a younger brother or sister. The girl would not be stopped; Silje had no choice but to follow.

It ought to be here somewhere. Bending forwards, she started to search in the deep shadows beneath the tree, her heart still pounding and her stiff and frozen fingers trembling.

Should a human touch a *myling*? What would it feel like? Would there be anything to touch? Perhaps nothing remained but the dry, brittle bones? Or would it be slimy and horrible? Would she suddenly find something taking hold of her wrist in a vice-like grip? She drew back her hand with an involuntary intake of breath – it was all she could do to stop herself from running away.

The child must have discovered something. She was talking excitedly, but incoherently, and then Silje heard a scratching sound like bits of broken wood rubbing together. Again she stretched out her hand, searching blindly in the darkness. Her fingers touched something – something round with a handle. It felt like a wooden pot with a lid. No danger there, she thought, and carried on searching. A piece of cloth – a small bundle – warmer than the frozen earth on which it lay. As she touched it, the weak cries started again. Plucking up all her courage. Silje gently felt inside the shawl. She touched warm skin. It *was* a baby

– and alive. It was not a *myling*, but some poor abandoned child left to its fate.

'Thank you,' she whispered to the little girl. 'Tonight you saved the life of this baby.'

The girl's hands were clutching eagerly at the blanket.

'Nadda,' she said again.

Silje did not have the heart to stop her, even though she was probably carrying the plague. Then she remembered the pot. She picked it up and shook it, splashing some of its contents. Silje stuck her finger into the liquid – it was not yet frozen – and tasted it. Milk! Oh, Dear Lord – it was milk!

For one awful moment she held the pot to her lips, quite ready to drain every last drop. The girl and the infant? She mustn't forget them and she knew that, if she took even the tiniest sip, she would be unable to stop. The girl first – she must have a third. She listened to the deep delighted gulps as the child drank.

It was not easy to take the drink from her, but she had no choice. The girl fought to keep it with a fury that Silje found frightening. To calm her, Silje whispered, 'Nadda must drink, too.'

Anyway the milk seemed to have taken the edge off the girl's hunger – it had not needed much to fill that small belly.

She turned her thoughts to the infant. The babe was wrapped in several layers of blanket, inside which she could make out a gown that reflected a grey sheen in the dark. Silje pulled up a corner and twisted it into a point, dipped it into the milk and put it into the infant's mouth – but it would not drink.

Silje knew very little about newborn babies; did not understand that they were seldom hungry during their first

day of life. Nor did she know that they would not all have a strong instinct to suckle. She began to feel helpless and desperate. No matter how she tried, the infant refused the milk. Finally she gave up. They had to move on and she would not be able to carry the pot as well as the children – she only had two arms. Feeling guilty, she drank the remaining milk, although it left a bitter taste, because she knew she had taken the infant's share.

She rose to her feet, cradling the baby, took the girl by the hand and suddenly let out a loud uncontrollable laugh. What on earth was she doing? 'The blind leading the blind,' she told herself. How could *she* possibly help these children?

The milk had eased their hunger and given both Silje and the girl renewed strength. Her fear of the forest had begun to release its grip on her and not far away she could clearly see the glow of firelight.

At the edge of the woods she stopped, her eyes taking in the dreadful sight that lay before her: a huge funeral pyre spewing clouds of stinking smoke in her direction. The gallows, a black silhouette against the flames, stood surrounded by the implements of torture – evidence of the extent of the cruelty the human mind can conceive when the opportunity to inflict pain on others presents itself.

To one side stood the pillory, with a small forge nearby to provide red-hot tongs and swords when called for; there were also huge, vile-looking hooks for piercing the skin of the condemned, on which they would be left to hang. Silje knew there would be thumbscrews, vices and many other grotesque instruments of satanic torture, and shuddered at the thought.

Standing out from the rest, however, was the rack on which the bodies of the unfortunate victims were broken and ...

‘Oh no!’ she groaned quietly. ‘No, no!’

She could see men moving around the scaffold and between the contraptions. She caught sight of the executioner, his black hood covering his severed ears, and his assistant, the most despised and hated man in all of Trondheim, fussing officiously around him while the bailiff’s soldiers swarmed about. Some of them were restraining a man. He was young, with wavy blond hair, and his hands were tied behind his back. They were forcing him towards the rack.

‘No! Please don’t do it,’ she whispered.

Silhouetted by the fires, the young man looked so handsome. Her heart sank and her blood ran cold as she thought of the torment he was about to endure.

The group of men stood beside the rack and other equipment with which every bone in his body would be crushed. The executioner – headsman or hangman, it didn’t matter what he was called – paced around with heavy determined steps, carrying a large broad-bladed axe in one hand. So the prisoner was to suffer torture before being beheaded.

Silje wanted it all to stop. She had not known many young men in her life, but she knew that this one was special. Who could he be, she wondered? Was he a thief? Surely not, for there were far too many soldiers for that. He must be someone of considerable importance.

All thoughts of the young man stopped suddenly and she started in fear, as a deep voice from the forest behind her asked, ‘What are you doing here, woman?’

Silje and the little girl both spun round, the child letting out a shriek. Silje just managed to stop herself from doing the same.

There, among the trees, was the tall shape of a figure who

looked part human and part animal. With considerable relief, she saw it was a man wrapped in a wolf-skin cloak, the shaggy hood resembling the head of an animal. Yet, his shoulders were strange and broad, like those of a bear. Narrow eyes gleamed at her from a face filled with drama, exquisite yet sinister, white teeth reflecting a wolf-like grin. The firelight shone on his features at one moment and the next he was in darkness. He stood motionless.

'Just wanted to warm ourselves at the fire, master,' she answered, her voice trembling.

'Are these your children?' His voice was deep and strong.

'Mine? Oh no, I am but sixteen years, master,' she replied with a nervous smile and shaking from the cold. 'I found both this very night. They are foundlings.'

He let his eyes rest thoughtfully on her for a long time – fearfully Silje lowered her gaze. The little girl was also afraid and hid herself in Silje's skirts.

'You saved them, did you?' Then he asked, 'Do you want to save another life this night?'

The burning eyes made her anxious and uncertain.

'One more life? I don't know – I don't understand.'

'Hunger and worry show on your face,' he said. 'You can pass for someone two or three years older. Perhaps you can save my brother's life. Will you help?'

She wondered briefly how it was that two brothers could look so different. The handsome blond-haired boy below and this creature, with his dark lank hair hanging over his eyes.

'I do not wish to see him die,' she said hesitantly. 'But how can I save him?'

'I cannot do it alone,' he said. 'There are too many of them, and besides, they are looking for me. They would arrest me and that would be of no help to him. But you …'

From his pocket he took a small scroll of parchment.

'Here! Take this message; it bears the royal seal. Tell them you are his wife and that these are his children. You live hereabouts and his name is Niels Stierne. He is the King's Messenger. And what is your name?'

'Silje'

With a look of irritation, he said, 'Cecilie, you foolish girl! You can't have a peasant girl's name like Silje. You are a countess, remember that. Now, you must slip this message into his clothes unnoticed and then pretend to find it.'

This was a daring idea, she thought.

'How can I pass for a countess?' she asked. 'Nobody will believe me.'

'Have you not looked at the child you are carrying?' he snapped from among the shadows.

Startled, she looked away.

'No, but ...'

As the fire began to burn more brightly, it lit up the area where they stood and she could clearly see about her. The infant was wrapped in a shawl of the finest wool, beautifully woven, with shining threads of gold, the like of which Silje had never seen. The thicker blanket beneath had a brocade pattern – French lilies, she thought it was called – and finally there was a shining white lace and linen sheet, the one she had dipped in the milk.

The man stepped forward to where they were, still hidden by the pines. Instinctively she backed away. He had an aura of prehistoric heathen timelessness about him; a mystical animal attraction, mixed with an irresistible air of authority.

'The infant has blood on its face,' he said, wiping it away with a corner of the blanket. 'It is newborn. Are you sure it is not yours?'

Silje felt affronted.

‘I am an honourable girl, my lord!’

His mouth started to smile, but then he turned his eyes towards the scaffold below. The men were not yet ready to begin their evil work – a priest was still trying to persuade this brother to confess his sins.

‘Where did you find the infant?’

‘In the forest, here, left to die.’

He raised his black eyebrows.

‘Was the girl with her?’

‘No, no, I found her in the town, beside the body of her dead mother.’

‘The plague?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

His eyes turned to the children and he said slowly, ‘Truly, you have courage.’

‘I do not fear this plague. It has been my companion for many days. It strikes those around me, but I have not suffered.’

What could have been taken for a smile crossed his face.

‘Neither have I,’ he paused. ‘So will you go down there?’

She hesitated and he said, ‘Having the children with you will keep you safe. They will not dare take a mother with her children. But wait – they must have names.’

‘Oh, I don’t know if the babe is a girl or boy. But I christened it Dag or Liv. I believed it was a *myling* calling to me.’

‘I understand. What about the girl?’

She paused, thinking, and then said, ‘They are both children of the night. I found them amidst death and darkness. I think I want to call her Sol.’

Those strange eyes, like long shining chinks in his face, fell upon her again, ‘Your young head holds thoughts wiser than most. Will you go down there?’

The compliment made Silje blush and she felt a warm glow inside.

'I cannot deny that I am afraid, master.'

'You shall not go without reward.'

Silje shook her head. 'Money will not help me, but …'

'Yes?' he prompted.

The needs of the children emboldened her. Looking straight at him she said, 'No one will give shelter to wandering strangers in these times. The children depend on me and I am frozen to the bone. If you could just find us food, lodgings and warmth, I shall risk my life for the young count.'

The light from the fire had died down again, leaving the man's face in shadow once more. He thought for a moment.

'I will arrange it,' he promised.

'Good, then I shall go. But what about my clothes? No countess would be seen wearing these rags.'

'I've already thought of that,' he said. 'Take this.'

From beneath the wolf-skin, he pulled a cloak of deep blue velvet. While it had only covered him to the waist, it reached easily to Silje's feet. She pushed her hands through the slits.

'There! It will hide the worst, but keep it tight about you. And take those rags off your shoes.'

Silje did as he said, then asked, 'What about the way I speak?'

'Yes,' he said slowly, 'that did surprise me. You do not speak like a peasant. Perhaps you will sound like a countess. Just do your best!'

She took a deep breath. 'Wish me luck, master.'

He gave a grim nod of his head.

Silje closed her eyes for a moment, took a few deep breaths and considered what she was about to do. With a

firm grip on the girl's hand and cradling the infant, she started downwards towards the place where they were now about to bind the young man to the rack.

She could sense the piecing gaze of the wolf-man on her back, almost burning through her clothes.

This is a very strange night, she thought. But this was just the beginning!