

Chapter 1

The wind wailed and moaned through the treetops of the dense pine forest, seeming to imitate the rhythmic chanting of monks performing a solemn liturgy of sorrow and anguish in a giant cathedral. As they bowed unwillingly before the wind, the branches of the pines were twisting and screaming in protest. Overhead, the pale autumn moon appeared only fleetingly between ragged clouds that were chasing each other in a wild frenzy across the heavens.

Sol laughed aloud as she ran beneath the trees. The fury of the weather was arousing all the deepest passions in her, making her feel alive and exhilarated. She was a woman now – as free and unfettered as the storm that tore at the trees above her. Clutched very tightly to her chest, she carried a small bundle of Hanna's possessions. Tengel had given them to her earlier that same day, before she had taken farewell of him and the rest of the family at their home, Linden Allée. This act symbolised for her a very important fact – her time had come at last!

Her younger brother Are had agreed to provide an escort for her along the road to the harbour at Oslo, where a ship lay ready to sail for Denmark. They had ridden

together about half the distance, when Sol suddenly insisted on taking a shortcut alone through the trees. Despite his reluctance, Are had agreed to this and rode on, leading her horse and carrying her small trunk. Because he wanted to be sure that she got safely aboard the ship, he had resolved to meet her on the other side of the forest.

Charlotte Meiden had arranged Sol's trip to Denmark. She was to be the companion to an older noblewoman, who was frightened of making such a long sea journey on her own. The family had decided that Sol would be right for this role, because she had conducted herself so impeccably these past five years. Now, however, recognising that she was becoming restless and was eager to be gone, they felt unable to hold her back any longer.

Yes, she had behaved well – but only because she wanted to be allowed to devote herself to her beloved craft when she reached adulthood. How difficult it had been at times, too! There had been occasions when people had been unkind or insulting to those she loved and her fingers had tingled with the desire to do something.

On one occasion she had made a doll to represent a snooty highborn lady who made disparaging comments about Charlotte. Sol had managed to get a strand of the woman's hair and sew it into the doll. Just as she was about to pierce its 'heart' with a needle, she came to her senses, remembering that she had made Tengel a solemn faithful promise never to do such things. So she had destroyed the doll, allowing herself to feel virtuous – but she still felt a little fretful afterwards, wondering whether or not she still had the power.

In general Tengel was very pleased with her work among the sick and they had come to rely on her almost as much as on him. There had been one or two cases where her

methods of healing had been a mite drastic perhaps, but she had been careful and no one had noticed! Neither had she killed anybody whom she thought should be spared a life of martyrdom to sickness and pain. Except perhaps a couple of times, she thought with regret. But they were merely trifles and couldn't really count against her. She had only acted that way to make sure her powers didn't completely stagnate. Now, at long last, her time of doing penance was over.

She had not wanted to ride through the forest. She needed to feel the wind against her face and the earth under her feet, in the knowledge that all this was hers. She wanted to listen to the storm as it engulfed her and to laugh at the moon.

'I'm free, Hanna,' she whispered. 'I'm free, and now our time begins.'

Her own plans for the journey to Denmark were markedly different from those of the family. With her schemes in mind, she had made some enquiries and been told that the authorities did indeed eagerly hunt down and capture witches almost continually in Denmark. However, most often these were just normal women with no knowledge of the black arts, whom spiteful neighbours had branded as witches. But Sol knew where the real witches and wizards were to be found. Hanna had once spoken the name of the place with deep reverence. That was where she wanted to go – that was where she *would* go!

Unsurprisingly, because of the vigour with which they were persecuted, true witches were now few in number. But those who had managed to survive were real enough. She was one of them, one of those few – together with Tengel. But Tengel had always been unwilling to practice the true craft, wasting his powers instead on 'good deeds'. How did he do it? She still found it difficult to understand. Five years

of goodness and decency had been more than enough for her!

Sol stopped running suddenly. It was time to take stock of the precious objects she had been deprived of for so long. Laughing with gleeful anticipation, she opened the bundle she had been grasping so tightly to her chest. There was the skull of a child found buried under the floor of a barn one hundred years go, neither blessed with baptism nor burial; the finger of a hanged criminal; the heart of a black dog; earth from a graveyard; snakes tongues – and yes, there it was, the most prized of them all – the mandrake – an heirloom discovered in the lands of the Mediterranean long, long ago and plucked out of the earth beneath a gallows tree, where a murderer had spilled his seed at the moment of death. That was the place where the mandrake had grown and where the root, which so closely resembled a human form, had screamed so piercingly when pulled from the earth. As a result, the master sorcerer – who had performed the deed on a Thursday night under a full moon – had been driven insane.

That was the story as Hanna had told it to her and she knew she must take the utmost care of the mandrake – it was priceless. Sol felt the weight of the grotesque dried root in her hand. It was big – longer than her hand – and there were marks where someone had cut small pieces from the ends of the root. Could it have been her much feared ancestor, Tengel the Evil One, who had done this? It was said that the root had been handed down from him. Sol felt certain that the pieces would have been used in secret potions. She knew the power that mandrake possessed and how it could be used in so many ways – in a love potion or perhaps to destroy an enemy or even to create wealth for its keeper.

A thin leather strap was tied round it. She gave a satisfied nod. Now that it was hers she could use it for its true purpose! She untangled the strap and hung the mandrake around her neck, tucking it out of sight. It felt heavy and rough against the skin between her breasts, almost as if it was forming itself to her body. She shuddered; it seemed to be alive. But she would get used to it. Now the most powerful amulet of all, the greatest known talisman of good fortune, protected her. She felt safe in the world – and for her this was a solemn occasion.

Dag was already in Copenhagen. He had been studying law at the university there for a year and a half, and intended to find a good occupation for himself when he returned to Norway. The family trusted him to look after Sol, hoping that some good might come out of the trip – an offer of employment perhaps or useful new social contacts. By social contacts Silje, always the romantic one, had naturally thought first and foremost of a suitable marriage. Dag could introduce her to the right sort of people at Court and in the finest circles of society, because many of his academic friends were nobles or highly born. Nowadays he mixed with distinguished company and the plan was that she would stay with him for one month, before returning home.

Sol grinned as she hurried on through the screaming wind-torn forest. It would, of course, be comforting to have her foster brother at hand, but as far as she was concerned the ‘right circles’ would be those she chose for herself! Even so, she reflected, one should not discount the Court altogether – there might be a few handsome fellows there.

Sol had remained chaste and modest since the time, at the age of fourteen, when she had seduced the stable lad, Klaus. Now she felt quite ready to have another adventure

of that kind. After all, the episode with Klaus had been somewhat unsatisfying and had been nothing more than a conquest for its own sake. She realised full well that there were many more exciting emotions to explore in a relationship between a man and a woman. As these thoughts tumbled through her mind, she ran her hands down the curves of her body, knowing how beautiful she was. A great many people had told her so, and countless men had also reached out with their lustful hands to grasp at her – even those lying in their sick beds.

Poor Hanna, she thought, with a sudden pang of regret. She had never had Sol's opportunities. She had been ugly, so hideous in fact that folk turned their backs on her. She had been lonely as well, shut away in a little mountain valley. Sol on the other hand had her whole life and the whole world at her feet – and she intended to use all her talents to their full.

Everyone at home had been sad when she left, but they also understood that she needed to have the freedom to spread her wings or she would be stifled by her surroundings. In truth, she knew that her fractious and impatient behaviour during the last six months had been painful for them all. Tengel and Silje had hugged her so tightly as they said farewell and little sister Liv had had tears in her eyes. Charlotte Meiden had come to see her off and to send good wishes to Dag – but at last, to her great relief, she and Are had ridden off down the avenue of linden trees, Silje's beloved allée.

There was a gap in the trees lining the allée, where one had withered and died. It was the Dowager Baroness's tree and Tengel had chopped it down after the old lady passed away. Her body now lay buried in the cemetery at Gråstensholm and Tengel had planted a new sapling in

place of the old tree. Sol remembered when he had done it and also Silje's unusual outburst of anger, which had followed the event.

'You are not to enchant any more trees, Tengel,' she said, shaking visibly. 'I cannot cope with watching them all the time.'

'They have helped me many times,' he replied defensively. 'You know that, through them, I have been able to discover hidden sicknesses in you all.'

'Yes, I know. But it terrifies me so! As soon as I see a yellow leaf lying on the ground I fall into a fit of panic.'

'As you wish,' Tengel had said. 'I promise I won't put a hex on any more trees. Besides, we have no new family members to dedicate trees to.'

'No, but all four of our children are growing up, so we may expect grandchildren in a few years.'

'All right!' Tengel had smiled at her with loving eyes and given her his word that all the new trees from then on would just be ordinary trees.

Remembering these things, Sol slowed her pace a little. She had reached a clearing in the forest and was approaching a small cluster of cottages. The smell of salt in the air also told her that she was getting closer to the fjord. Far in the distance she saw the smoke from many houses. There, beyond the Akershus fortress, lies Oslo, she said to herself.

Dawn was just breaking and the glow of the moon was beginning to fade, as a curtain of light grew brighter and stronger along the horizon. After walking through the forest darkness for so long, the new grey light appeared to Sol to shimmer above the sleeping village, and the deep silence of the surrounding fields contrasted sharply with the deafening roar of the wind that had filled her ears among the trees.

She walked quietly past the low-roofed cottages, where no signs of life were yet to be seen. Only the wind whistling over the grass, the far off noises of the forest and the sound of cattle rustling in the straw of an unseen barn broke the silence. When she reached a lane leading up to a church, she stopped, brushing aside the locks of long black hair that the wind was blowing across her face.

She stood for a while without moving, looking about; then she turned slowly several times, taking in every detail of the silent scene. She saw the stocks, the whipping pole and the place alongside the churchyard wall where a vast number of stones lay on the ground, silently proclaiming that many people had been stoned to death there. A little further away stood the block, the place of execution where the condemned would bow their heads one last time to await the fall of an axe. An empty gallows could be seen some way off, but still close enough to be visible to the entire congregation.

These were the things her eyes could see; but, as she stood there, Sol realised she could also sense much more. Facing the wind to keep it from blowing her hair into her face, she was surprised by how much she could really feel – anguish and the fear of death from all those who had ended their days here; shame swirling like an invisible mist round the stocks; the sorrow and sadness of relatives; the curiosity of the crowds, mixed with bloodlust and a drooling desire to witness ultimate spectacles.

Sol had no fear of the dead. Once, when she was very young, she had laughed aloud at a hanged corpse twisting slowly on a gallows. Silje had believed it was just childish innocence, but it was not that at all. The black of night, darkness and death made up Sol's world. Her name, which meant 'the sun', had been given to her by Silje to protect

her – but it had not helped in the least. The moon, not the sun, was the light she truly followed.

Sol had been truly afraid only once in her life – when Tengel had turned his rage upon her. On that occasion, she had killed a worthless wretch of a verger, who was intent on harming her family. Her love and respect for Tengel remained boundless, but it was because she had been anxious not to be the victim of his rage again that she had kept her composure for so long. That aside, nothing else on earth could frighten her.

Behind Sol, in the shadowy pine forest and unseen by her, the pale fluttering phosphorescent flame of a will-o'-the-wisp chased eerily back and forth among the trees. Flaring and diminishing in turns, the little-understood rural phenomenon cast its strange mysterious glow in all directions. Then abruptly it extinguished itself, as the dawn light grew stronger.

It was the year 1599, Sol was just twenty years old and her real life was about to begin.

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As expected, Are stood waiting on the other side of the forest. He was Tengel's only son, with the callow features of a thirteen-year-old, wide cheekbones and coal-black hair. While Tengel and Silje's other three children and foster children were creations of beauty, one could not rightly say this of Are. To make up for this, he did have a natural aura of invincibility that Sol considered was worth far more in the long term.

He accompanied her to the ship and made sure she and

the old noblewoman were properly settled on board. The old lady said she was pleasantly surprised to have such a 'beautiful and well brought up young lady' for an escort. Sol in her turn responded with her 'be nice to old ladies' manner. Her voice became soft and reverent and her demeanour showed nothing but respect.

They stood on deck for a long time, waving to Are, who waited on the quayside waving back at them. The ship weighed anchor and eased away from the quay. The adventure had begun.

The crossing to Denmark was quite arduous and unpleasant, as the ship was buffeted by heavy seas, first from one side then the other. Sol had prepared a potion to prevent seasickness, for which the old lady was very grateful. She boasted bravely to Sol that, indeed, they seemed to be the only passengers who were not suffering from the discomfort of that unpleasant malady.

If Sol, however, had been hoping for her first small adventure during the voyage, she was to be sadly disappointed. Most of the male passengers hung over the rail or lay curled up in some cubby-hole, while the crew was a collection of grumpy fat old matelots with no appeal at all. Of course, the voyage in itself was unbelievably exciting for a young woman eager for new experiences. She took every opportunity to go out on deck and whenever the waves crashed over the bows, showering her with water, she would scream with joy. As the ship dived down headlong between giant waves, she let out an ecstatic yell and when it pulled itself up again, heavy and awash with salt water, she cheered from the bottom of her heart. At last she understood how dreary life at Linden Allée had been all these years.

A carriage was waiting for the old lady when they docked in Copenhagen and once she had settled her

comfortably inside it, Sol had discharged her responsibilities. The lady had been so pleased with her onboard companion that she presented Sol with a small purse that jingled with the sound of coins. Making a conscious effort to stop herself from counting it there and then, Sol curtsayed and waved a cheery farewell as the carriage drew away.

She was not going to be left to her fate, however, because Dag was already there on the quayside waiting for her. On catching sight of him, she ran full tilt and threw herself into his arms. ‘Dag! My, how handsome you’ve become – and you’ve grown too, little brother!’

She pushed him away from her to arm’s length and looked him up and down. He now had the face of a grown man. Although his nose was still long and straight, and his face narrow, all his features had become better proportioned and more in balance. His metal-grey eyes were defined by thick brown eyebrows, which contrasted with his blond hair. The elegant clothes he wore were the height of fashion. Gone was the everyday padded doublet with a patterned front, high neck and cuffs and there was no sign of the baggy breeches he had always worn at home.

Now that Dag was living in Copenhagen, he had adopted the ways of the city. He sported a hat with a wide brim, one side held up with a clasp and a long sweeping feather. His shirt collar was wide, turned down and had long points. Trousers and jacket were more close-fitting than she had been used to seeing on him at home, showing off his manliness to advantage. Finally, he wore black and tan boots that she found really impressive. Oh, how handsome, so very handsome he was!

Almost before she had completed her inspection of Dag, her womanly eye started to take note of the few ladies she

saw on the quayside. ‘Is this the way all people dress here?’ she exclaimed. ‘I must look so old fashioned! I’m going to find somewhere to hide, Dag.’

He chuckled – their admiration was mutual, despite her simple older Norwegian garb. ‘There is no need for that, I’m sure. My, this is going to be difficult!’

‘What is?’

‘Keeping all the admirers away from you.’

‘Why would you want to keep them away?’ laughed Sol.

Dag took this as a joke – but it wasn’t.

‘We can walk to my lodgings; it’s not very far. Let me take your trunk – I don’t think it’s too heavy – and your bundle too.’

‘No, I’ll carry that.’

Dag gave her a questioning look, but didn’t insist. ‘So tell me, how are things at home?’ he asked eagerly, as they left the harbour and began walking along a busy street.

Sol found it nearly impossible to take her eyes off all the extraordinary and wonderful new things that surrounded her, with folk swarming everywhere and even animals in the street. There were the cries of moneylenders and pungent smells of fish, tar, oil, smoke and waste, as well as the aromas of fruit and vegetables. Although she had travelled to Akershus and Oslo with Tengel a few times, this was different in every way. This was the great wide world she longed for!

‘At home? All is well. They all send their best, especially Charlotte, of course. I have brought letters, lots of letters – and money.’

‘That’s wonderful,’ murmured Dag.

‘And Are wondered if you could get him one of those modern Snaphaunce muskets.’ She broke off again, gazing around excitedly. ‘Oh Dag! This is all so exciting! Look at

that house – it’s so big!’ She chattered on and on, bubbling over with eagerness to see everything.

‘I expect Mama Charlotte is feeling alone now?’ said Dag thoughtfully.

‘Yes, and she is impatient for you to complete your studies and come home. But she and Silje spend a lot of time together.’

‘And the others. What of them?’

‘Tengel works hard with the sick – but he tries to do no more than a few days each week. It is not easy when people still come just to feel his healing touch. Some have travelled a very long way – and he has never been able to refuse anyone. We had a horrible outbreak of plague last winter and he forbade the sick to come to our home, not wanting us to be infected, but, to Tengel’s dismay, they still came like swarms of flies. The Ice People, though, are strong folk, as you know and we all survived, except for your poor Grand-mama, the Dowager Baroness, who could not fight off the sickness.’

‘Yes, I know – and I still miss her terribly.’

‘As do I,’ said Sol quietly. ‘She was a fine old lady. Tengel was downhearted at the time because they were very close. Yet it is strange that time does not seem to show on Tengel.’

‘You remember Hanna?’ said Dag. ‘She lived to a great age.’

‘Do I remember Hanna?’ she asked, with a note of pain in her voice. She punched him and swore at him jokingly in her peasant Norwegian dialect. ‘I’m telling you little brother that I too will be an ancient! I shall outlive all of you!’

‘That’s as maybe,’ said Dag, suddenly ill at ease. ‘And Silje, how are things with her?’

‘Silje is the same as ever. Happy and confident, as long as she has her Tengel. She paints and does so many other

things – she is perhaps a little more matronly than she was, but it suits her. Oh, yes! I haven't told you yet – Liv has found a suitor.'

Dag stopped dead on the crest of the road, causing a horse and cart to brake sharply behind them. Then they stepped smartly to one side, between a cooper's forge and a coppersmith's workshop.

'What did you say?' he exclaimed. 'Liv has a suitor? But, good God, she is just a child!'

'Sixteen, nearly seventeen. And more gentle and sweet than you would believe. Silje was not any older when she fell for Tengel's charms.'

Dag was no longer listening; his face was rigid.

'My little sister has a suitor. What sort of man is he, may I ask?'

'Don't get so angry! Well, what can I say? His name is Laurents and he is from a good family, though not of noble birth – but then Liv herself is a commoner. His parents were very wealthy merchants. The father is dead and Laurents is carrying on the business.'

'And do you like him?'

Sol shrugged her shoulders. 'He's not really my sort,' she answered evasively.

They carried on walking, but Dag was silent for a long time. He put great faith in Sol's opinion about people – nobody was as perceptive as her, in his experience.

'And Liv? What does she say?' He broke off, raising his voice. 'Sol! Don't lift your skirts so high! It's not that filthy here!'

'Well, Liv doesn't speak much about it, so in truth I can't say how she feels.' Sol paused and looked carefully at Dag. 'But we have heard that *you* are to be wed! Will it be soon?'

'I? Who has told you this?'

‘Charlotte. We understand it is a certain Mistress Trolle.’

‘Has Mama said this? And to Liv as well?’

‘To all of us – she was overjoyed.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ laughed Dag, but with a hint of irritation. ‘I mentioned in one or two letters that she is among my circle of friends and that she is a sweet and pleasant girl. Yes, I was interested, but she was not the one and only for me. I haven’t seen her in weeks! Mother is such a matchmaker!’

He seemed disinclined to say more, so Sol just nodded and they walked in silence for a while.

‘Are is a very good lad,’ she added after an interval. ‘He is so self-assured and friendly, with both feet on the ground; not like the rest of us at all. He will do well.’

‘I’m sure he will. You cannot imagine how much I miss them all. But what about you, Sol? Have you found an admirer?’

‘Me?’ She laughed as they turned down a genteel-looking side street. ‘No! Where would I find an admirer?’

‘Don’t hide your light under a bushel, Sol! I’m sure you already have many admirers.’

She suddenly became more serious. ‘That may be so, but I do not pay them any heed – though it frightens me sometimes, Dag, because I don’t seem to be able to fall in love with anyone.’

He looked at her thoughtfully, mulling over what she had just said.

‘You just haven’t found the right man for you yet,’ he said gently. ‘And anyway, I know how fond you can be of people.’

‘Oh of my closest family, yes! But, for me, Tengel overshadows all other men. Not that I am in love with him. Of course I’m not – that would be sick! But, you see, he is my

ideal. Nobody can measure up to him. I compare all young men to him and they all fall hopelessly short of the mark.'

'Of course they do! There is only one Tengel.'

'Yes, and that is what makes it so confusing.'

Dag pondered this. 'One might say something about how you could be looking for a father figure because you never knew your own father. But I sense that would not be true. You are not seeking a man with Tengel's virtues, Sol, but one with his power and demonic ways!'

'In truth I think it is as you say,' she replied, crestfallen.

'But let me tell you one thing, dear friend,' Dag continued quietly. 'The power Tengel has does not come from within himself. He draws his strength from Silje!'

Sol was quiet for some time; then she said, 'Yes, but her strength depends on her having his love.'

'That is also true.'

'Then neither one is complete without the other.'

'No. We have been very fortunate you and I, to have grown up in such a home. Anyhow, here we are! This door here.'

'My, what a fine house,' said Sol admiring the timber-framed walls of the house and a fan-shaped decoration painted in blue and gold above the door.

'Yes and the people I live with are decent folk. You shall have your own room while you are here. Unfortunately you have arrived at a difficult time. They have just lost their little son.'

'Is he dead?'

'No, as I said, he is lost. He disappeared three days ago.'

'Oh! That's terrible,' said Sol. 'Worse than anything else.'

'Not knowing? Yes it is. The poor mother is almost insane with worry. They dragged the river near here, but found nothing. Now they believe that someone stole the child. There is no trace of him.'

They had entered the house and could not discuss the matter further. The master and mistress rose from their chairs in the parlour and came to greet them. Dag had not exaggerated – the young mother's hands were shaking visibly and her face bore the traces of too many tears.

In a solemn voice, Dag introduced them to Sol. 'May I present my foster sister, Sol Angelica – and these are my good hosts, the Count and Countess Strahlenhelm.'

Sol made a low curtsy. 'Your sister is delightful,' said the Count, taking her hand. 'Henriette, have you ever seen such lovely eyes? I declare I have never seen eyes with such a colour. Amber!'

His wife could do no more than nod in their direction and offer a wan smile.

Sol was secretly admiring her clothing. She wore a ruff as big as a mill wheel, a pearl-embroidered bonnet and, beneath her brocade skirts she must have been wearing an enormous farthingale, because her hips were so wide she could comfortably rest her arms on them.

The Count said, 'Perhaps Dag, you will show young Sol to her room. We shall have a simple meal shortly, but you must excuse my wife, she will retire. She cannot cope with too much at the moment.'

'Of course, I quite understand,' answered Sol quietly. As she spoke a violent unfamiliar feeling came over her. There was an invisible presence that disturbed her intensely and made her feel restless.

The Countess left the room, covering her face with a handkerchief. Sol waited until she had gone, then turned to the Count.

'The room can wait. I think, perhaps, I can help you to find your child.'

'Sol!' exclaimed Dag, with a warning glance.

His host raised his hand, bidding him to be silent. ‘What do you mean by that, young lady?’

‘I know that I should say nothing, Dag, but you must understand that this is urgent!’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked the Count. ‘Do you know something?’

Dag intervened. ‘This can be very dangerous for my sister. I have no doubt that she can help – but she could pay for it with her life. Everything depends on your discretion.’

‘Explain yourself!’

‘You have already noticed my sister’s eyes, Count Strahlenhelm. She has been blessed with them for a purpose. When Sol says that it is urgent, it means that she senses that the child still lives – for now. That Sol waited until your wife left the room was because she knows that your wife would not be able to stay silent.’

The Count looked blankly from one to the other.

‘My child’s life means everything to me.’

‘Will you swear never to speak of that which you will witness here?’ asked Sol, fretful and bursting with impatience. ‘And never denounce me?’

‘I so swear.’

‘Good. Now give me something belonging to the child – a piece of clothing worn lately will do, so long as it has not been washed since he wore it. But remember: I cannot promise to find him – I can only try. It may just indicate his whereabouts.’

The tall distinguished man let out a deep sigh. ‘I beg you, Mistress Sol. For even the merest suggestion, I will thank you on bended knee.’

‘And I can trust you to be discreet?’

‘I understand well what may happen to you should the authorities get word of your – abilities. In fact my wife had

already expressed a wish for us to use the services of a so-called ‘wise woman’, but we knew of none and did not dare enquire. I urge you, let my gratitude stand guarantee for my silence!’

‘And if I should not succeed?’

‘Then you will have my gratitude for trying. But what if my wife or one of the servants should find out about your involvement?’

Sol felt inside the fold of her skirts. ‘Give your wife this sleeping draught at once. It is not strong. Mix it with something for her to drink. You must order your servants not to disturb us.’

The Count gave Dag a curious look. ‘You have kept this to yourself, Dag.’

Dag winced. ‘These are not the sorts of talents that one speaks of in company, Your Grace.’

‘No, no, quite right.’

He hurried from the room, carrying the powder in his hand.

‘You shouldn’t have done that, Sol,’ muttered Dag.

‘Should I not?’

He sighed. ‘Well, perhaps. Should you prevail, then you will have earned his friendship for life. He is a powerful man, Sol. More powerful than you know.’

‘Really? Who is he, then?’

‘A judge – one of the highest in the Danish judiciary.’

‘Oh dear!’ said Sol, putting her hand to her mouth. ‘So I seem to have got myself into a fine muddle.’

‘Indeed. It’s hardly surprising that he knows of no wise women, because he has been sending them to their deaths. That is why I implored you to say nothing.’

‘But Dag, I could not stay silent. I could sense that the child lives and suffers. The feeling is everywhere in

this room. It cried out to me from every inch of this house.'

'Then, for all our sakes,' said Dag, with a note of worry in his voice, 'let us hope you find the boy.'