

Chapter 1

There was no warning of the catastrophe. There were no omens. Nothing appeared to be amiss. Life in the high Valley of the Ice People in fact was austere and hard for Silje, Tengel and the children – but they shared a simple happiness. As often as they could, they spent time together doing ordinary things. The children particularly liked to join Tengel when he went fishing on one of the lakes and today the oars of the boat, in which they all sat, creaked regularly in their rowlocks each time they broke the surface of the calm water. Seated in the stern, the children were chattering incessantly, their shrill voices carrying across the mountain lake. Sol sounded matter-of-fact, as usual; Dag was calm and slightly aloof; while Liv’s piping fairy-tale tones were mostly drowned out by the other two.

Silje sat in the middle, watching Tengel at the oars; his unflinching gaze was on the children – he was always concerned that some harm might befall them. But they were responsible – unfettered but disciplined – and Silje knew that he really didn’t need to watch them quite so closely, though she understood his concerns. Here was a man who had once resigned himself to an empty, lonely

existence, but who now had four people depending on him, respectful and giving him the love that he had only imagined in his most secret of dreams. She was so proud of them all – her little family.

Her husband Tengel – the feared outcast whom she had met five years ago – only she knew that his frightening, faintly demonic exterior concealed an unbelievably fine human being. As for the children, her heart warmed just thinking about them. Sol, always cheerful and lively, presented them with a dilemma, tainted as she was by the blood of Tengel the Evil One and the threat of tragedy. Dag was a blond intelligent dreamer and Liv, the youngest, imitated the older ones in everything. Liv takes after me in so many ways, thought Silje. The same chestnut-brown, wavy hair – although maybe with a hint more copper than mine – the same shy, expressive eyes and the ready smile. She shares my imagination as well, seeing trolls everywhere, breathing life into shadows and everyday things, communing with trees. Oh, sweet child, thought Silje, if you continue in my footsteps your life will be rich and varied, but you may be too kind and generous-spirited to cope with all the heartache it will bring.

She was reluctant to turn around and look at the children. It always distressed her to see how poorly dressed they were now. Sol's dress had burst all its seams. Dag wore a jacket and trousers made from one of Silje's worn-out skirts, every stitch a testament to her lack of skill with needle and thread. Liv's dark heavy woollen dress, conjured from a pair of Tengel's old trousers, was an utterly worthless garment which had been openly ridiculed by neighbours' wives. The very thought of it made Silje cringe with shame.

They had set out their only fishing net carefully in a favourite spot and were now returning towards the shore.

Much to their delight, the children had been allowed to come along, because the weather on this early summer's evening was so mild.

As they rowed, Silje's eyes searched the mountains surrounding the Valley of the Ice People. They were thrillingly bathed in burnished gold by the setting sun and her gaze eventually came to rest on a fissure between two peaks. 'You know, Tengel,' she said musingly, 'I've often wondered if there's a way through the mountains up there.'

He rested on his the oars and looked upwards. 'Yes, there is, and a few of us *have* managed to find a route. I don't recommend it though. It brings you out onto the glacier on the other side. From there it's a hair-raising journey down to more pleasant countryside.'

'So you've really been right through yourself?'

'Yes, once, a long time ago. I swore never to do it again.'

The boat touched ground, and the children jostled to be first ashore.

'Be careful!' warned Tengel.

No other words were needed and they all did precisely as they were told. He had instilled unbelievable discipline in them – but it was a discipline that reflected only love and kindness. The children hung on his every word and were always careful to obey. It was not difficult to see that they worshipped him – but only Silje knew how much.

Each of them took something to carry up the hill to the cottage. The children had learned long ago that, to survive in this wilderness, everyone had a part to play. Liv grew tired, so Tengel lifted her up on his shoulders. Sol and Dag walked on either side of Silje.

Sol looked thoughtful. Her lively face, framed by dark curls, was uncharacteristically serious. ‘Why do I call you Silje, when Dag and Liv call you Mother?’ she asked.

Silje took her hand. ‘It’s a long story. You’ve always called me Silje.’

Both children looked up at her expectantly. ‘The other children called Dag and me “bastards” today,’ said Sol, her eyes wide and questioning. ‘What does it mean?’

Silje felt a chill run down her spine. ‘Did they? They had no right to say that.’

She stopped walking. ‘All right!’ she decided, ‘I think you’re both old enough to hear the truth. You’re seven, Sol, and Dag is nearly five, but I don’t think Liv will understand because she’s only three.’

She called Tengel’s name and he stopped and turned. They had reached their own land now, crossing the meadow beneath the cottage and outbuildings.

‘The children were called bastards today!’ she said quietly. ‘What?!’

‘You heard me. They want to know the truth,’ she replied. Silje was indignant, but at the same time eager to tell them. ‘You take Liv home, and I’ll tell the whole story. They’re old enough now, don’t you think?’

Tengel hesitated, looking at them thoughtfully. ‘Yes, I believe it’s for the best. I’ll come back and join you after I’ve put this little girl to bed. Come on Liv, You’re so sleepy you can hardly keep your eyes open.’

They sat down beside the stream on some old logs where their pails of milk were placed to cool. In the background the water bubbled and gurgled softly as Silje began her story

and the children sat very still, eager to hear her every word.

‘First I must tell you that I am not your real mother, Sol, nor yours, Dag. But I am Liv’s mother – I hope that doesn’t sadden you.’ She paused, her expression anxious. ‘I’ve tried hard to see that you wouldn’t miss having your real mothers and I’ve always loved you both so much – every bit as much as I’ve loved little Liv. Father feels exactly the same.’

At first the children sat dumbstruck, then in a plaintive voice Sol asked, ‘So Tengel isn’t our father, then?’

‘No. He’s Liv’s father. You, Sol, have always called him “Tengel”.’

‘But I don’t,’ Dag butted in. ‘I say “Father”.’

‘That’s because you were much younger when we took you in. Sol was older.’

This wasn’t going very well, thought Silje, struggling to find the right words. It was becoming too complicated for comfort for her, but she made one more effort to explain. ‘The thing is, we wanted you to be our children more than anything ...’

Sol interrupted her. ‘So who is our real mother?’ she asked, her voice uncertain. ‘Did you just take us away because you wanted us?’

It was so typical of Sol to see right through her fumbled explanation and get to the very heart of the matter, thought Silje, sighing. Although she was only seven, her mind was already much sharper than was normal for that age.

‘Of course not, dearest,’ replied Silje at last. ‘Anyway, you had different mothers.’ Despite finding this very difficult, Silje knew without any doubt that she was doing the right thing and she decided to persevere gently. ‘Sol – your mother was Tengel’s sister, so that makes him your uncle and Liv your first cousin.’

Sol sat motionless, staring into the distance.

‘Where is she now, then?’

‘Your mother, do you mean? In heaven, Sol. She’s dead. She died from something called the plague, a terrible sickness. It took your father too, and your little sister called Leonarda. Of course, you can’t remember any of it, because you were only two when I found you. You were all alone, and so was I. So it wasn’t just you who needed me – I needed you as well. Angelica was the name your mother gave you.’

Sol stared at her intensely, and then her face lit up. She had always been proud of her name, Sol Angelica, and now she was pleased to know why she had been given the second part of it.

Silje tried to think, but her mind wandered as she looked at the girl’s dress. Far too short in the sleeves, it would not last much longer. The cloth had almost worn through in places and she had absolutely nothing from which to make a new one. Shaking off the thought, she dragged her mind back to the problem in hand.

‘Your mother was very beautiful, Sol. Very, very beautiful. Her hair was jet black and wavy, just like yours, and she had lovely dark eyes.’ The child said nothing, but her eyes were brimming with tears. ‘Your eyes are lighter though,’ added Silje hastily. ‘More of a green or yellowish colour – almost like Tengel’s.’

The sign that you are of the chosen ones, a descendant of the original Ice People, thought Silje bitterly. Oh, my dear children, what will become of you all?

‘What about *my* mother, then?’ asked Dag. ‘And my father?’ He sounded slightly reproachful, as if Silje and Tengel had deprived him of something.

This was more difficult. It would be impossible to tell him his mother had abandoned him in the forest to die.

‘Your mother,’ she began with a little smile, then waited

as Tengel walked soundlessly towards them across the meadow that was already damp with the evening dew. He sat down with them and Dag clambered into his arms at once, as if needing to reassure himself that he really did have a father.

‘Your mother, Dag, was a fine lady,’ continued Silje. ‘A noblewoman – a baroness. We don’t know her name or even if she’s still alive – and we don’t know where she lives. We only know that something very bad happened to her and she lost you. I don’t know how it happened, only that I found you.’

The two children leaned forward, desperate to hear more. She would have to go on.

‘It was a strange night, children. It was bitterly cold and bonfires lit up the sky over Trondheim. I had lost my whole family in the plague and was alone in the world. I was hungry, tired and homeless. Then I found you, Sol, beside the dead body of your mother. I took you with me, because I liked you and wanted to help you. You didn’t want to leave your mother, but you would have died as well, if you had stayed. So you see why I had to take you with me, don’t you?’

Sol nodded solemnly.

‘Which farm is called Trondheim?’ inquired Dag.

‘Trondheim isn’t a farm,’ said Silje. ‘It’s a big town – beyond.’

‘Beyond what?’

‘These mountains.’

The boy looked at her, frowning. ‘Is there anything beyond the mountains?’

Silje and Tengel looked at each other in dismay. Here was something they’d overlooked.

‘All the great wide world is there,’ said Tengel carefully,

troubled by the direction of the conversation. ‘But we’ll save that for another day. Now let’s listen to Silje.’

The cry of a waterfowl, probably a diver, echoed across the lake as mist rose along the water’s edge. No one was paying heed to the time, however, on this wonderful, glorious summer evening.

Silje glanced anxiously at Tengel. What was troubling him this evening? For the last few days he’d been so distant. He seemed to be listening for something. What was causing that anxious look in his eyes? She knew her husband well, and understood his ability to sense disharmony in the ley lines of the natural world around him. There seemed to be something that was just beyond his grasp and understanding, and it frightened her a little. She looked away from him.

‘Then, Sol,’ she continued, ‘as you and I were walking along, we found Dag. He was all alone, just like us, but he was so very much younger.’ Silje dared not say *how* young he was – that his umbilical cord was still in place! He must never know of his mother’s unspeakable wrongdoing. ‘In fact it was you who heard him crying, Sol. It’s thanks to you that Dag is alive today.’

The children gazed at each other enquiringly, weighing up what they had just been told. Gently, slowly, their hands inched closer until they touched – then their fingers entwined.

It was most often Dag and Liv who kept each other company, Silje reflected. Sol was far too volatile, too mysterious to spend much time with the younger ones. Nevertheless, there was never any doubt that they were all devoted to each other, not least because the harsh conditions here in the wilderness had helped to create a bond of trust between them.

‘So all three of us continued walking – well not Dag, of course; I carried him – and we had no idea where we would go or where we might find food, warmth or shelter. Then, suddenly Tengel appeared. None of us had ever met him before.’

A cold shiver went through her as she remembered the events of that night: meeting Tengel for the first time, the gallows, the executioner, the soldiers, the stench from the funeral pyre. She sat upright, straightening her shoulders as if trying to shake off the memory.

‘Tengel took care of us,’ she said softly, her voice full of tenderness. ‘He gave us everything we needed and we’ve all stayed together ever since – just like a little family.’

Tengel smiled wistfully. He said nothing of his own loneliness, which had been far more wretched than theirs. For a while Silje and the children had suffered loneliness brought about by circumstances and the need to survive, but his had been like a deep wound that never healed. Being so different from other humans, he was constantly aware of how everyone shied away from him. Even now it distressed him to think about that first encounter with Silje and Sol – the way they had both recoiled from his mystifying frightening appearance.

It had been so difficult for him to forget that meeting. The memory of Silje’s vulnerable innocent eyes had haunted his loneliness, drawing him to her. Had he wanted to preserve her virtue, only later to defile her himself, he wondered suddenly? No, he was being unfair to himself! He really *had* wanted to protect her, to be selfless and benevolent. His resolve crumbled, at long last, only when he came to realise, to his complete astonishment, that she was deeply attracted to him.

Oh, what a marvellous time that had been, filled equally

with yearning and pain, apprehension and desire, as each of them struggled to understand the other's feelings. All the while he knew fate had decreed that he should resist the attractions of women – yet how could he ever have resisted Silje?

Through his abstraction, Silje's voice came to him again. So swiftly had his thoughts come and gone, that he had missed nothing of what she said.

'Then Liv was born. You remember that, don't you Sol?'

'Yes. When you were sick.'

'That's right.' Silje paused, then said, 'If you like, you can call us Mother and Father, Sol. We feel as though we are your real kin, and we would be too, if it were possible.'

The seven year old thought about this for a while. 'I suppose I could,' she said, nodding wisely, 'but I don't think it would feel right, because I'm used to calling you Silje and Tengel.'

'I understand – and what's more we have always treated each other as friends – sharing things. You know that you have always been a great help to me, don't you?'

Spontaneously, Sol climbed onto Silje's lap and hugged her tight. Silje smiled at Tengel and the smile seemed to celebrate wordlessly the realisation that they had both been jointly accepted as parents.

Dag looked serious, almost brooding, but his long, thin face was so typically aristocratic that it lent an almost comical air to his expression. 'Did my mother come looking for me?' he asked dejectedly.

This was a difficult question.

'No one can say,' answered Tengel quietly. 'All we know is that you had a noble crest embroidered on your clothes. And that is why we believe you may be a baron or some such. We *tried* to find your mother, Dag, but I don't think she's alive any more.'

‘Did she die from the plague?’

‘Very likely. Which would explain why she lost you. And your father is certainly dead.’

It seemed best to Tengel to tell him that. All the evidence suggested that Dag’s mother had not been wed and that he was the result of a short-lived encounter. In any event, right or wrong, Dag appeared to be relaxed about this explanation.

‘My real mother and father are dead,’ he said sombrely.

‘So are mine,’ said Sol, managing to shed a tear – but this was for no other reason than that she enjoyed the melodrama.

‘I hope you’ll both want to stay with us. You will, won’t you?’ asked Silje quietly, feeling more than just a little anxious.

Both children nodded solemnly.

‘Other children’s parents are always quarrelling,’ said Dag in his ponderous, precocious way, ‘as if they didn’t like each other. You two never quarrel. You seem to resc... reps...’

‘Respect each other?’ Tengel finished the word for him. ‘Yes, of that you may be certain.’

His loving gaze met Silje’s and, without exchanging any further words, she knew that he could see the passion in her eyes.

Silje stayed up late that evening. After lighting one of their precious resin torches, she took out her diary – the one given to her by Benedikt the Painter so many years before. There were few pages left to write on and she knew she had faint hope of finding another up in these mountains.

She began the entry: *Todae we tolde the childrin about ther heritag ...* and as always, her spelling was hopeless.

When she had finished writing, she snuffed out the flame of the torch and went out into the yard. The summer solstice was approaching and the valley was bathed in the magical shimmering light found only on a Nordic summer evening. The mist from the lake had spread across the meadows, where it fluttered like dancing elves, and a diver's shrill calls might easily have been mistaken for the cries of water nymphs or the souls of lost children. The breeze gently stirred the grass and made unseen eddies around her feet, sighing occasionally as it found its way into the nooks and crannies of the old buildings. In her mind Silje imagined it was the sound of small mischievous trolls or some other supernatural creatures. At that moment an old sway-backed horse plodded along beyond the dry-stone wall, making his way back to his own farm. Could it be that he too was enchanted?

It's almost unbearably beautiful here, she mused, remembering what she had written in her diary. And yet I hate it so much – the feeling of being shut in! I love Tengel and I love my family, but with all my heart I wish that we could leave the Valley of the Ice People. I have nothing in common with these narrow-minded people. They call our children bastards and Tengel a sorcerer, a devil, a wizard and much more besides, although he's never done them any harm – on the contrary – for he never resorts to using the powers I know he possesses. Yet still he remains an outcast in the eyes of many of his kinsmen. There are some that accept us, however, and I thank God for them!

Our best friend Eldrid, Tengel's cousin, is leaving the valley. Her husband wants to make a home in the outside world, hoping that people have forgotten his association with the rebels. If only we could go with them! I feel life here is draining our spirit. We know nothing of events beyond the

mountains and, because of the hunger and sickness we have suffered here, we could send no one to help Benedikt and his people. I'd really like to see the King just once in my life, as well. But then he never comes to Norway!

I find my own language becoming poorer and more akin to the Ice People's. We've tried to tutor Sol and Dag, but not only are we reaching the limits of our skills, we are slowly losing what we ourselves have learned. I know Tengel also longs to leave, because he has told me so many times, but he will not put our lives, or the children's lives, in jeopardy. We would be seized at once if we ventured out of the valley and my loved ones would be condemned to be tortured and broken on the rack. Tengel and Sol can never conceal their faces and their kinship with the first Tengel, the evil spirit of the Ice People.

Thinking these thoughts, Silje let out a long woeful sigh. The winters! How she hated and feared the winters. Everything froze, including the food in their pantry, and they lived with the constant worry that their supplies would run out. Last winter's shortage of food haunted Silje like a nightmare – the bewildered look in the children's eyes when they went to bed at night, no less hungry than when they had woken up in the morning; the loaf of bread she had decorated for Christmas – it had been their only food that day.

When she thought of how many more such winters there might be in the years ahead, she felt her chest tighten as she was overcome with anxiety. The urge to run away, anywhere, to leave it all behind and not have to worry any longer, began to take hold. All she wanted was for her nearest and dearest to be safe and well.

She paused and took a few deep breaths to stop herself from suffocating. Whenever the children showed the

slightest sign of any illness, she was almost beside herself fearing that they might die. Yet she dared not let anyone see how much it troubled her. The spring thaw, when at last it came, echoed with the awful lament of the melting ice breaking up, while the evenings made her feel despondent and she ached and longed for ...

Tengel's gentle touch on her shoulder startled her. 'I saw your bed was empty,' he said quietly. 'What thoughts bring you out here, all alone?'

'Oh ... nothing important,' she replied evasively.

'I know what it is, you don't need to tell me. You long to leave the valley, don't you?'

'Tengel, you mustn't think that I've ever had any regrets.'

'Of course I don't think that. I know you have been happy here.'

'Yes, very happy!' she assured him.

'But now, like me, I think you're growing restless, hampered by the way of life here.'

Silje waved her hand fretfully. 'If we had not been *forced* to stay here I would love this valley with all my heart,' she said fervently. 'Life would be perfect if we just spent the summers here. But I resent not being able to choose. It makes me so irritable. I think I both love and hate the place at the same time, Tengel.'

'Yes, I know that feeling well. When I was away I longed to be here, but as soon as I returned I wanted to be gone again. But now it's ...' He broke off and fell silent.

Silje looked at him tenderly. 'You're worried. I've seen it in you for many days. I thought it was strange that you did not want to keep any of Eldrid's livestock here, despite their offer to let us have them. It made me think – and hope. Can't you tell me what's wrong, Tengel?'

The night wind ruffled his black hair. 'I don't know,' he

replied slowly, 'I really don't know what it is. Have you listened to the mournful wailing of the wind? Do you not hear the terror of the grass as it rustles or the houses groaning?'

'You know I don't hear those things,' she smiled. 'But Sol feels something. She's so fretful and she often has that faraway look in her eyes.'

'Yes, I sense great peril all around. It haunts me and torments me. If only I knew where it was coming from.'

Choosing her words carefully, Silje said, 'I think you decided to *let* Eldrid take all the animals with her, so some of them would be waiting for us away from the valley.'

'Perhaps,' he said absentmindedly. 'I can't remember what I was thinking of, although maybe I did say to her husband that *if* we were to follow them ...'

'Oh, Tengel!'

He shook his head in another sudden gesture of indecision, then continued uneasily. 'Well, the people who are moving into their old cottage will let us have all the milk we want, so we really don't need any livestock now.'

'Yes, they are good people, I suppose, but I don't think I like their children.'

'What do you mean?' he asked quickly.

'Well, they join in with the others in the valley to scorn our little ones,' said Silje with hurt in her voice. 'They call them terrible names, as you heard this evening. What's more, their parents won't let them play with Sol and Dag and Liv. It grieves me so, Tengel.'

Through gritted teeth he said, 'They're scared of Sol, aren't they? Oh, I well remember that happening to me as a child! Always left out and feared by everyone.'

'Sol is dangerous,' Silje whispered. 'Do you remember what she did when the neighbours' daughter kicked Liv?'

Tengel shuddered.

‘Don’t talk about it. She has awful powers within her.’

‘She made a doll that looked like the girl and held it over the fire. The girl burned herself on hot coals that very same day and suffered horribly.’

‘Until I managed to make the doll harmless,’ added Tengel grimly.

‘Yes, but what made her think of doing such a thing?’

Tengel took a deep breath. ‘Do you want to know what I’ve found out?’

‘What is it? You’re scaring me.’

‘You know how Sol often disappears? And we used to think she was out playing. Do you know where she was?’

Silje shook her head.

‘With old Hanna!’

‘Oh no,’ said Silje in a hushed voice, looking horrified. Then she nodded slowly. ‘It’s true Hanna has always been fond of Sol – and Liv too, since she helped to bring her into the world. Whenever we go and take food for her and Grimar she always calls them “my girls”. She doesn’t seem to care so much for Dag.’

‘I’m glad that the girls have always meant so much to Hanna,’ said Tengel nodding. ‘But it scares me as well. I don’t like to think of Sol going there alone.’

‘Do you believe that the old witch is ... tutoring Sol?’

‘I fear she might be. She knows that Sol has powers, of that there can be no doubt.’

‘Oh, but that is awful!’

Silje was standing with her back against the wall of the cottage. Tengel leaned forward and caressed her shoulders. ‘Dearest Silje, what fate have I brought upon you?’

‘Now, you stop talking like that. No one has brought me as much happiness as you. When I’m away from you, even for an hour, I grow sick just yearning for you.’

‘You were no more than sixteen summers when I took you for my own. Now you are twenty-one and have toiled with us all these years. Yet still I know that your destiny lies elsewhere – not in the boredom and hard work found in a lowly cottage.’

‘I hope you don’t think I’ve been grumbling too much. I know my skills as a housewife are still poor. The children grow out of their clothes and shoes so fast that it pains me not to be able to find them new ones. I dislike housework so much that I grow tired at the very thought of it, Tengel. You know that. To be able to weave cloth, but not sew it properly into clothes for the children, depresses me. Anyway it won’t matter. Since the winter killed off all the sheep in the valley, there will be no wool to weave. They mock Sol horribly for wearing that old coat I patched up last year – and often I have forgotten to wash the clothes ... Oh, I’m sorry for grumbling again – I didn’t mean to.’

His tender smile displayed limitless understanding, but also helplessness. He pressed his lips against her hair. ‘Do you think I don’t understand you? That I don’t know how much you long to create things or paint pictures? Or that you write in your book at night when we are all in bed?’

‘You know about my book?’ she asked, aghast.

‘Oh yes. I know where you keep it hidden as well – but I’d never allow myself to read it. You must let no one else know of it! A young woman writing in a book – now that’s truly the work of Satan. They’d have you burned at the stake in the blinking of an eye.’

‘There is so much evil in the world! I forget how this valley preserves us from it,’ she said in surprise, as though this was a revelation. ‘I really wouldn’t have minded if you’d read it,’ she continued hurriedly. ‘I was looking through it the other night and every page was filled with love for you and all my family.’

‘You like to write, don’t you?’

‘Oh, yes! It gives me room to breathe. What’s more, when I read what I have written, I am surprised by how well composed it all is.’

‘I’m not surprised at all. You speak very well, unlike the other people here in the valley. Now you’re making me curious. I’d love to look at it.’

She giggled, embarrassed yet pleased and encouraged by what he had said. ‘Oh, I’m sure all the spelling is horribly wrong,’ she replied. ‘I never learned to spell properly – I just write down the words the way they sound ... Tengel! What are you doing?’

His hands had started to move down across her body and, with a soft chuckle, he pressed her harder against the wall. Still heady at the thought he might decide that they should leave, Silje made no attempt to stop his advances. Surrendering to the moment she relaxed gently against him.

As he leaned closer, his cheek brushed her forehead. Tengel was always clean-shaven. She knew this was because he was well aware of being sixteen years older than she was and did not want to look older than his years. A beard would do too much to emphasise the difference in their ages.

‘We really ought to have kept an eye on Benedikt and his farm as well,’ she continued, deciding to press home her advantage now that she sensed his attitude about travelling was changing. ‘I worry about them a lot.’

‘Yes, yes I know,’ mumbled Tengel absently. ‘If only I could decide what to do for the best – to take all of us away from here, or to stay. You know that beyond those mountains there is nowhere for us to live.’

The touch of his fingertips excited her skin; his caresses, light and sensitive, were creating small tremors all through her. Her body began to respond as the sensations grew and

converged in one specific part of her. How was it that her passion never diminished for this man, who in the eyes of others appeared so frightening? It was not simply the fact that, as a man, nature had endowed him so well – she could not have known that when they first met. No, it was almost enough just to look at him, for an urgent craving to sweep through her, leaving her weak and completely at his mercy. Indeed at that moment she realised she was having great difficulty concentrating on her train of thought!

‘But what about Benedikt?’ she asked breathlessly, ‘couldn’t he find us somewhere to stay?’

‘We don’t even know if he’s still alive – and that horrible Abelone woman will give us short shrift. No, Silje – I have thought many times that we ought to leave here, but the risk is still one I dare not take.’

Silje’s voice was becoming muffled with her mounting passion. ‘But another winter like this last one – I don’t think I could stand it.’

‘Yes, I know. That’s what I have been thinking about.’ Suddenly his lips were everywhere – on her forehead, her temples, and she closed her eyes ecstatically.

‘What are we doing?’ she giggled, finding it hard to catch her breath. ‘We are a sensible old couple and we’ve been married for years! Still, it’s quite exciting to be out here in the open.’

She eased herself up onto the low wall surrounding the cottage and pulled up her skirts. Instantly he grasped her hips, his hands hot and probing, supporting her. His kiss was deep and seemed to last forever.

‘This isn’t like you, Silje,’ he whispered breathlessly in her ear, surprised at her unexpected enthusiasm. ‘These past few years you’ve been so – well, so hesitant.’

‘Maybe I have,’ she agreed, surprised that he hadn’t

already guessed what lay behind her eager passion. Her hands caressed his body until finally she guided him to her, gasping with expectation as she did so. ‘I didn’t mean to be, but I was frightened.’

Tengel’s movements were unhurried and gentle. ‘I know. You were afraid of being with child again, it goes without saying. I too felt that same fear a hundred-fold.’

‘The memory of Liv’s birth is the worst horror in my life,’ she whispered. ‘I didn’t want to go through it again.’

‘I understand,’ he muttered. ‘But we’ve been very careful – and it’s worked.’

‘Hmmm,’ she murmured, and the sound could have meant anything or nothing.

As she pressed her moist lips against his throat, Tengel’s memories of the first passionate year with her were rekindled. He pushed her harder up against the wall and lifted her legs, wrapping them around his waist.

With an embarrassed laugh, Silje whispered, ‘Your spear has pierced me – pinned me to the wall – a sacrifice to my unbounded passion.’

‘Oh, such language!’ he grinned, but she could see that he was aroused and pleased by it.

Silje closed her eyes again, unable to speak, and a soft, languorous smile spread across her face. Tengel looked down at her and saw she was ready for him. She had not succumbed to her desires so completely for a long time and he began to wonder what had caused this. Then in another moment he could wonder no longer because the dark timbers of the cottage walls seemed suddenly clouded in a magical mist and a familiar, exquisite dizziness took rough hold of him. An unbearable urgency began to rage within him, mounting in a long, slow gradual crescendo before finally leaving him spent and helpless.

‘Oh Silje,’ he whispered. ‘Silje, Silje – my beloved little

flower. How is it that one so delicate, so frail can hold such fascination? It must surely be a form of magic.'

Some time later, Eldrid left the valley. Without any ceremony she and her husband set off down the tunnel beneath the glacier, taking with them all their chattels and leading a train of livestock, bound for an uncertain future in a hostile world.

Silje sobbed after they had gone, and later that evening, she asked Tengel, 'Why didn't you want to keep any of their livestock? They're ours by right anyway. Tell me the real reason!'

The children were playing outside and Tengel was sitting quietly mending the fishing net while Silje cleared the supper table. Lifting his head, he sighed, 'You know you don't like hearing me talk of such things.'

'But this time I want you to.'

'Oh, as you wish, you obstinate girl. I felt that – hindrance again.'

'Hindrance? Oh, I see. Something within you made you resist when Eldrid offered to leave you some of the animals.'

'Yes. I've never felt it so strongly as I did then. So I let them go.'

'Yet still you don't want to leave the valley?'

'Even if I did, I would first have to go on my own and carefully search out a place where we could live. But there *is* nowhere, my dearest. The descendants of Tengel the Evil One are hunted everywhere. Oh, everything seems so hopeless!'

'I know how you feel,' said Silje quietly.

She stole a glance at him. Could he really know nothing? Had he not suspected or sensed her condition? With all her heart, she hoped not.

She felt so afraid – afraid for her life – but more than that, she was afraid Tengel would find out. After the awful, difficult birth of Liv he had vowed, ‘Never again! Never – never! If it happens again, Silje, I’ll kill the unborn within you, quickly and painlessly with one of my potions. Next time it will do no good to pray for the child!’

There was no denying that she had carefully and anxiously examined her food for signs that he had sprinkled a powder over it, but he obviously suspected nothing. Not even when they made love outside in the yard had he realised why she had thrown caution to the wind, despite being surprised by her apparent wantonness.

Of course she knew it was mad to try to nurture this new life inside her! She knew there was a chance it might turn out to be a monster, a half-human descendent of the first Tengel – a mutation like Hanna or Grimar – or worse still, the woman down by the lake. Silje had only seen her once when Eldrid had wanted some eggs and cheese taken down to the woman. When Silje left the lakeside dwelling she had been almost numb with terror, knowing that something so primitive, so unspeakable could exist. An aura of absolute evil had surrounded the woman. Although she was no longer alive, the experience had made Silje realise just how little Tengel and Sol had been tainted by their evil heritage, even though most people, apart from herself, regarded Tengel as hideous and terrifying.

There was also one more uncertainty. Silje would probably not live through another childbirth, and this fear was uppermost in Tengel’s mind. Thankfully Hanna’s intervention had saved her the first time, but should she try to give birth to one of those ‘beasts’ – one with Tengel’s abnormally broad, angular shoulders – it would be impossible for her to survive. Tengel’s own mother had bled

to death bringing him into the world, although Sol's mother had survived, possibly because her daughter was of a more delicate build. Yet Sol too carried the unmistakable signs of the heritage that lived within her. The awful power of witchcraft and her face, with those cat-like eyes, immediately betrayed her ancestry. This was the seven-year-old girl that Silje was thinking of taking back to Trøndelag, where the Ice People were ruthlessly hunted down!

Eldrid would be all right. Her features looked normal and she was not one of the chosen, despite being a direct descendent of Tengel the Evil. Liv bore none of the signs either. But what did Silje know about the child now forming itself inside her? It had been growing for almost four months. Concealing her pregnancy from Tengel had been difficult, but luckily she hadn't suffered such dreadful early bouts of sickness this time. At the moment it was relatively easy to dissemble and disguise its presence, although soon, very soon it would start to show.

Then two days later they received a visit that was both unexpected and disturbing. A man who had hardly ever set foot beyond the boundary of his own farmstead and who had never visited them before came to see them. Nothing was said or done in advance to herald his visit. Yet his arrival, when he appeared, filled Silje with an immediate and dreadful foreboding. What on earth, she wondered, could this mean?