

Brother Luca, Pil Svendsdatter, Valdemar Halk of Slien, Arnfred Halk of Slien, Baron Harald Agger of Agerskov, Prior Ivar of Antvorskov, Brother Rijkaard and Aiperos are © Joan Jacobsen, 2008.

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Chapter IV

It looked at the broken body in front of It, and smiled. This one was still alive ... although not by much. That was alright. 'Not by much' was still something, and It wanted more entertainment before It continued. The fur on the ground was breathing shallowly and with every sign of extreme agony. That probably had something to do with the remains of a horse, which had crushed the fur's lower body.

A few more minutes, and It would witness the fur die, but It wasn't in the mood to allow that to happen.

Not yet. Pain was entirely too much fun to witness. Particularly pain this horrible.

It smiled and reached down, brushing hair out of the fur's face.

"You are dying," It said. Stating the obvious could be useful to make a point, after all.

The fur didn't answer. Blood flecked his lips and seeped down his neck.

"Who ... ah ... " the dying fur tried to wheeze. Not very successfully, either.

It looked disapprovingly at the dying creature. Admittedly, the fur in front of It was a strong, youthful canid, but It didn't like being addressed as 'who'.

"I think the word you are looking for ... is 'What'. Not 'Who'."

"Then ... wh ..." the dying canid tried before more blood bubbled past his swollen, pale lips. He couldn't complete the question. He was choking on his own life's blood and even thinking about speaking made the pain even worse.

Shaking Its head, It sighed in disappointment. "I'm an Angel of the Lord since you must know. Look ... wings! Big, white wings. They really should be all you need to make that out for yourself."

The canid looked terrified and confused at the same time. "I'm ... you ... a ... punish ..."

"No you idiot, I'm not punishing you. What for? For some ridiculous sin you may or may not have committed? I'm having *fun*. With a lower form of life, as it is. Just like you eat a roast chicken or a fish without thinking of anything but your own enjoyment and filling your stomach, regardless of what the chicken or fish might have felt, I am enjoying your pain without caring how it might feel for you. The only difference between you and a chicken is that I'm having this conversation with you, whereas you wouldn't be talking to your dinner," It said in exasperation. Why was this so difficult for this canid to understand? It was perfectly simple, and It made no attempt at hiding Its agenda. Why should It? Would a fur think twice before killing a fly?

Hardly.

It grinned and sat down. "The only question is," It went on, "whether to start with you or the remains of your horse."

The canid on the ground tried to speak, but his throat was full of blood. He should be choking. Drowning. Dying. But he wasn't. He lingered in life ... and all he wanted to do was to die and escape this.

###

"Baron Harald, the first rider has returned."

Harald turned around and nodded. He was dressed in his finest. It was a clear day, pleasantly cool without getting chilly and with a certain crispness to the air. The water in the wide moat had been covered in mist when he got up, but by now that had dissipated. Nyborg castle was abuzz with activity already, and the surrounding city was coming to life as well.

It was Sunday.

Baron Harald had been on his way to church when interrupted by the guard, calling out to him.

He nodded. His Grace was due to arrive the following day, and while the fox was not keen on missing church just before meeting with one of the most powerful representatives

of Holy Mother Church in the entire country, he was also keenly aware of his responsibilities to Her Majesty, and to the realm as such. Finding out what had happened to the King was of paramount importance, and he knew that in the event the assassin still hadn't made it past the borders, there was no time to lose.

Turning around, he headed towards the guard with a questioning expression on his face. The guard stood up straight and pointed across the courtyard to the stables. "Over there, M'lord," he said.

"How long has it been since he arrived?"

"Oh, not long. Just before the monks started chanting in the chapel," the guard explained.

Harald nodded again and thanked the guard for his vigilance, before crossing the courtyard towards the stable. Mass would have to wait for certain. He could always go to one of the smaller masses at the chapel later ... if there was time. That was no given, however. There was work to be done. If the first rider was back, then more would likely arrive in short order. Those who had gone the farthest wouldn't be back for several more days, but he had sent out quite a few, and more arrivals were no doubt imminent. He flicked his long, burgundy cape over his shoulder and stepped over a log of wood before weaving between a few barrels of salted herring. He looked down himself and sighed at the outfit he was wearing. It always felt wrong not being in armor. He'd spent so much of his life fighting that he felt naked without the familiar weight of at least *some* armor distributed around his body. Besides, current fashions made him look like a complete idiot.

The sound of horses whinnying escaped the stables, as well as the voices of a couple of very agitated furs. From the sound of it, they were trying to put shoes on a charger, and the beast wasn't cooperating.

Harald grinned to himself. A good warhorse had plenty of spirit and wouldn't quietly stand by when someone tried to bend its leg up to shoe it. It could be quite entertaining watching an inexperienced blacksmith trying to cope with that. Conversely, it was equally impressive when a skilled blacksmith with years of experience would just walk up to such a horse, glare at it, grab the leg and shoe the stubborn thing and get away with it.

It was all about supremacy. Harald's own favorite warhorse was a monster to put shoes on, but nonetheless, the blacksmith at the Baron's own estate always got away with it without too much hassle. If anyone else tried it, they'd be kicked all over the place.

"You there," he called out and pointed into the stables, his finger settling on a young feline. "How many chargers have you shod before?"

"A fair few, your Lordship ... but this damnable beast just won't stand still!"

"A fair few, you say?"

The feline nodded. "I was at last year's Grand Tournament, but I swear I've never seen a horse this obstinate before. I fear he might eat me if I went around his front!"

Harald chuckled. "Ah yes, the famous, flesh eating horses of the Danish knighthood. I've heard horrifying tales of those. I hear even the moors dread them," he said and entered the stables.

The feline fell silent. The irony in the noble's voice was unmistakable and there was no excuse for a blacksmith to have this much trouble with such a simple task. Finally he sighed and nodded.

"I'll figure it out, M'lord," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Do that," Harald said without looking his way, continuing further down the line of horses. There was a figure seated on a stool further down the line. One of his riders.

He might not have any answers, but Harald still found himself hoping.

"Milord!" the rider said and jumped to his feet upon seeing the fox. "I'm sorry, I thought you were attending Mass or I would have come straight to see you."

The fox shook his head disarmingly, gesturing for the canid in front of him to relax. "I was on my way there when a guard told me you had come back already. This is more important than attending Mass. I can do that later. What news do you bring, if any?"

"Not good, I fear, Milord. The news of the King's death has struck His Majesty's subjects with fear and worry," the canid answered.

Harald shrugged. "That is as it should be. For the King to die is a grave blow to the Realm. But what of the assassin. Has anyone seen or heard anything?"

"I thought I wouldn't find anything useful, M'lord. No one had seen anything in any of the villages I passed. It wasn't until I reached the belt and looked across it that I came upon a fur with something interesting to tell. A young male bear who made a living ferrying furs back and forth had something to tell."

The baron nodded for the rider to go on. The news would probably not be what he wanted to hear, but that was probably unavoidable. The news he wanted was that the assassin hadn't escaped, but if a ferry-fur had any information to offer, it was unlikely to be that a suspicious fur came to chat, then left going back inland.

The canid rider searched for a word for a moment, before nodding to himself as he decided on a way of explaining. "The fur in question said he lived at the Herring Fields across the belt, Milord. He said he made a living going back and forth with anyone who needed passage and he said he had taken across a cloaked fur who had paid him in gold. This fur hadn't said a word the entire trip, he had been very sullen and he had been armed. The ferry-fur said he had been quite nervous, but he had thought his passenger was a noble, except he wore no heraldry."

"That doesn't say much. It could have been anyone."

"Yes Milord, but the bear also said that once they had crossed, the passenger insisted that the bear swear to him never to tell anyone that he had sailed across."

Harald raised an eyebrow. "Why did he break this oath then?"

The rider shrugged. "Firstly, because he thought it was all a bit too strange and secondly ... and more importantly ... your Lordship had given me enough money to pay for the information."

Harald looked vaguely disgusted but nodded. "Fair enough. It's not much to go by though, and besides, you said this bear lived at the Herring Fields?"

"Yes Milord."

"Do you know what happened there some years ago?"

The rider shook his head. He was a fur from a simple background and while he was reliable, Harald wasn't surprised that the canid didn't know the recent history of the Realm in that kind of detail.

"When Her Majesty's most Blessed Father, the late King Valdemar, of whom the angels no doubt sing, was crowned, he ruled barely a sliver of the Realm. The rest had been pawned off to German nobles. His Majesty received a very large dowry when he married, and he used that to buy back some of the pawned off areas. The rest he either conquered or bought back over the next years. These things you do know, right?"

"Of course, Milord. King Valdemar was sent by God, any Dane will swear on that!" the rider said and nodded, enthusiastically.

It pleased Harald to see that kind of fervor. He too was convinced that the old King had been sent by providence, but he wasn't always sure if commoners knew that. Clearly this one did, though. There was more to tell though.

"Some of the nobility, however, thought they were better off with their German rulers, where there hadn't been a king for them to answer to. It was disgraceful, but some of them rebelled. Amongst them, the Lord of Hald,"

"What? The Bugge-family? They are good, loyal furs though, aren't they Milord?"

"They are *now*," Harald went on, otherwise ignoring the interruption, "He and several other rebellious nobles were summoned by the King to parlay, and they were guaranteed safe conduct. They came and listened but nothing came of the talks, and they left again. Shortly thereafter, only a day or two after their safe conduct expired, they were murdered while waiting for a ferry-fur to take them across the small belt. The surviving rebels accused His Majesty, but he swore an oath before twelve good nobles that he was innocent, and so he was. Three fisherfurs from the Herring Fields were found to be guilty of the deed soon after."

"I had no idea, Milord," the rider said and nodded slowly, "I take it those murderers were executed?"

"No, that was considered too mild a punishment for causing His Majesty to be accused of such a vile deed, and besides, the furs they had killed had been rebels. But they were still nobles, so instead the fisherfurs were fined forty nine shillings a year for as long as they lived, to be paid in full. And once they died, anyone living in their houses for all eternity had to pay the same fine. Their families still pay it, every year."

The rider blinked. "Forty nine shillings? Good God, that's a lot of money," he said.

Harald shrugged. It wasn't a lot of money to a noble, but to commoners, it was a fortune, and that was the entire idea. In his opinion, it was a most fitting and just punishment, and at least the wretches had been allowed to escape with their lives. Between them, they could come up with the money for the fine every year but they would be impoverished for life, and their families would never escape the debt of their horrible deed, either.

"So you see, anyone claiming to live at the Herring Fields can't really be trusted," Harald explained.

The rider nodded and sighed. "I'm sorry, Milord. I wouldn't have paid him for his information had I known of this."

"You didn't know. I don't hold it against you," Harald said and shrugged. "Anyway, get a meal and some fresh clothes."

With that, he turned and left the stables.

###

Walking wasn't comfortable, but Valdemar was determined not to remain bedridden any longer. His legs felt quite unsteady beneath him but he had gotten up and staggered around the warden's home, getting used to his own weight. The warden's daughter, Pil, hadn't returned yet, something which clearly caused her parents a lot of concern, and Valdemar couldn't help but share in it. These furs had helped him in a most unselfish manner and he was grateful to them. Obviously it was their duty to do so, seeing as he was the son of the Lord of Slien ... in fact, for all he knew, he was the Lord of Slien ... but he was not stupid either. Many furs would have left him to his own devices, but Pil had brought him to safety and her family had nursed him back to some semblance of strength.

He wanted to repay them for their kindness somehow. But first he had to stop the world from spinning. For the third time, he staggered to the door and stuck his head out, throwing up. It was just dry heaving by now, but it was terribly uncomfortable anyway. At least it felt like his stomach stopped churning. His head was throbbing, but it wasn't as bad as it had been when he first woke up. Maybe some fresh air would do him good. Stepping outside, over the small puddle of vomit he had created next to the door, he looked at his surroundings.

It wasn't hard to figure out where he was. There were trees here. Enough trees to be called a forest. That meant he was at the very limit of his father's lands ... possibly his lands. Through the forest, it would take most of a day to get back to Slien. It wasn't even that his family owned a lot of land. It could be walked across in two hours, but walking from one end to the other would take over a day. As much because of difficult terrain and bad roads as anything else. This wooded area had been included in the Slien demesne specifically because Slien was an inlet and because Valdemar's family had earned its position by fighting pirates. A steady supply of timber for fishing boats and small ships was needed.

The warden's home sat in a small clearing. There was no well visible, but if memory served Valdemar correctly ... which he wasn't sure it did, given the state of his head ... there was a small lake or pond nearby. It was reasonable to assume there would be a small stream as well, and that would supply the family with fresh water.

A couple of racks for drying fish and meat was placed on the opposite side of the clearing. Valdemar couldn't help wonder how useful those were, considering the amount of carnivorous wildlife in the forest, but the warden no doubt knew best. He probably had some trick up his sleeve to keep pillaging pests at bay.

One no doubt learned a thing or two while living in a place such as this.

He took a few steps. There were still a lot of dead locusts on the ground, but many of them were already gone. Picked up and eaten by birds who, if they had been capable thereof, would no doubt have crossed their wings and given thanks to providence for such an ample feast. For his part, Valdemar just tried to ignore the disgusting crunching sounds whenever he stepped on some of the dead insects.

Walking was easier now. He felt like his legs were finding some of their old strength again and he could move more easily. He was slightly cold, though. He was wearing a loincloth and a clean tunic in thin wool which really belonged to the warden, but nothing else. The warden's wife had taken his own clothes to wash them, and he hadn't gotten them back yet.

He looked at the small house. It was solidly built, with eight solid oak pillars forming the supports. Four on either side of the house. The walls were made up of whickerwork, tightly woven from ground to roof, then covered in thick clay which had dried up nice and hard. It was a solid little house, with a roof made of birch and oak shavings, long since gone green with moss, It would keep the family cool in hot summers and reasonably warm in cold winters, especially with a good, solid hearth-fire.

Houses had been built like that for as long as there had been furs living at Slien as far as Valdemar knew. Sometimes he wondered if such houses weren't more comfortable than the stone keep he had grown up in, especially at winter. His own home had been impossible to keep warm at winter, at least.

"Ahh, so you're up already?" Pil's voice asked behind him.

Valdemar nearly jumped out of his loincloth. He hadn't heard the vixen arrive. Her footfall had been completely undetectable.

"Blessed Virgin, you startled me..." he said and tried to catch his breath. "Yes, yes I'm up and able to walk as you can see. How have you been? Your parents have been dreadfully worried about you."

Pil nodded. "They should be. Valdemar, I...I don't know how to say this except to say it outright..." she answered, looking uncomfortable.

Valdemar noticed she addressed him by his name. He liked that. Pil's parents still only called him 'young Sir' or some similar honorific. Still, the look on Pil's face gave him pause and he didn't smile. Instead, he simply nodded for her to go on.

Although she wasn't quite sure how to explain what she had seen to Valdemar, Pil knew he would want to know everything. The problem as she saw it was that she hadn't understood what she had seen when she looked down into the collapsed central keep. She didn't know what to make of it. She had seen something, admittedly, but it made no sense, and she was still trying to figure out what it was. There was no reason to worry the noble in front of her until she knew more, at least.

"There is nothing there but ruins and corpses. I looked everywhere. Inside the houses in the village, by the boats, in the keep itself. I think some furs from the village did survive. I think they tried to make a run for it and some of them may have made it, but most are dead. The keep is just ... it's just *gone*," she explained. It wasn't a lie. It just wasn't the whole truth either.

Valdemar nodded and hung his head. Despite being drowsy and not fully with it because of his injuries, he had heard what the warden and his family had said over the last few days, and he understood that Pil was telling the truth. He didn't want it to be the truth, but it was no less so for that.

"My family?" he asked, quietly. "Did you see any of them?"

Pil felt moved to sympathy. Valdemar was hurting, and not just physically. In all likelihood, he had lost everything except his name and a claim to a title that was now almost certainly worthless. He had no money with which to maintain even his own livelihood, let alone a keep full of furs, and in any case ... the keep was gone.

She shook her head. "I wouldn't know even if I did. I think the only fur I would recognize would be your father, and I didn't see him. But Valdemar ... it looked like someone had placed the central keep on a plate of ice and put a candle under it. There was a huge hole in the ground. It had just fallen in on itself. Not two stones stood on top

each other. Unless your family wasn't inside the keep, I think ... I think they are all gone."

When Valdemar had been told to forget his dream of crusading, he had gone to get drunk. He had wanted to weep then but had suppressed it, despite being drunk. Now, he found it a lot harder to fight back his tears, but he still tried. Crying in front of a female was not acceptable. Crying wasn't acceptable at all. His father had taught him that, and now that his family was almost certainly dead, he was keenly aware of what he had been taught. Aware of his responsibility to honor his father and mother.

He hadn't always been very attentive to what his father had tried to teach him, but that would change now! He would honor his family by remembering what he had been taught. And he would rebuild his father's keep. Stronger and better. How he would do it, he didn't know, but he knew he would somehow.

The first thing he had to do was get in touch with his Liege Lord, the Baron of Aggerskov. Maybe he would know what to do. Perhaps he would be willing to help. After all, Slien was officially part of his greater demesne and Valdemar was not to blame for what had happened, and Baron Harald had a reputation for being a fair and just fur.

A hard fur, too ... but fair and just nonetheless.

But how Valdemar was to get in touch with a fur who, in all likelihood, was in Nyborg at the King's court was a problem the young noble couldn't quite see a solution to at the moment.

Pil reached out, tentatively putting a paw on Valdemar's shoulder. She knew that touching a noble was going well beyond her social standing, but Valdemar looked desperate and lost, and while she had initially not thought highly of the drunk youth she had hauled onto a cart to bring to safety, she couldn't help feel bad for him now. He stood there, in a loincloth and one of her father's woolen tunics, and that was it, and as such, he looked like any other fur in need of help. How could she not feel moved by his loss?

How could she not be moved by her own family's loss?

If the Lord of Slien was dead, her father was no longer the warden unless the new Lord confirmed it. Her father was old and a younger fur would be more effective. Valdemar was their only hope, and he looked like he had no hope for himself at the moment.

He didn't protest against the paw on his shoulder, at least. Pil took that as a good sign.

"I don't know how I can help you but ... I'll try," she offered, gently. "It's my family's future on the line as well in any case."

Valdemar nodded, clearing his throat. He swallowed repeatedly and forced himself to stand up straight. He looked at the clearing again with fresh eyes and sighed. The house that had sheltered him while he was ill was no different than a few moments earlier, but it *looked* different to him now. The whickerwork and clay walls constituted his fortress now. The stack of wooden logs against the wall all his earthly goods ... perhaps coupled with whatever dried meat the local wildlife hadn't run off with from the racks. And if he claimed these things as his, he would take everything from the very furs who had saved his life. He'd be worse than a thief then. He'd have forsaken his honor as well. So all his worldly goods rightfully belonged to someone else, which in turn made him no better than a beggar with a title.

Suddenly, he envied the warden and his family their small comforts and their cozy little home. Not a hateful, nagging kind of envy, but a sort of longing he had never known before. It was terribly uncomfortable and he looked back to Pil.

"I must get in contact with my Liege. He is the only fur who can help me now, short of the King himself. And there's really no chance I'd ever get to talk to the king face to face, especially now that I'm nothing but a pauper. But perhaps the Agger-family up at Agerskov will help me. They have always been good furs and my family has never failed to answer a summons. I got knighted by the Baron himself."

"It's a long walk to Agerskov though..."

"I know. But unless you have a horse running around in the woods somewhere ..."

Pil nodded. She could see Valdemar's point. "Tell you what we'll do. You take another couple of days to recover your strength. It won't do you any good to set out to meet the Baron only to fall over from exhaustion every few dozen steps. In the meantime, I'll see about getting us some provisions and I'll make sure my parents have food in the house as well. Then I'll help you get there. We'll go by the village and the keep so you can see for yourself if you'd like.

Valdemar smiled a little. "Brother Rijkaard was a kindly old soul, you know. He tended the chapel at the keep. And even he would have used some very harsh language about your way of dressing and the fact that you hunt for your family," he started and immediately made a calming paw-gesture to show Pil he wasn't finished.

"Go on," she said, somewhat testily.

Valdemar shrugged. "When I woke up and saw you, I thought you were either mad or a heretic. But you're not. Your family has to make do and there are no sons to help out. I can't ask you to leave your family here to help me get to Agerskov, and I certainly can't ask you to risk getting in trouble the first time a priest sees you. But I am deeply, deeply grateful for your offer to help me."

Pil felt her ire drain out of her.

"You're welcome. I didn't mean to get angry," she said and smiled reassuringly, "But as for me running a risk ... Valdemar, my family is lost if you lose your rights and privileges. A new Warden might arrive if a new Lord is installed at Slien, and what would happen to us then? I need to come with you. I need to help you ... for my parents' sake."

Valdemar understood her point well enough, and deep down, he knew she would be helpful. But getting to Agerskov wasn't going to be easy.

"The first thing we should do," he said after a moment of contemplation, "...is to go via the village. I need to see if I can't find some clothes at least. And I need to see for myself what has happened. I need to be able to explain it and describe it to the Baron, in my own words."

Pil nodded. The young noble had a valid point. Turning up at the Baron's keep, wearing a loincloth and an old woolen tunic was unlikely to get Valdemar an audience. And he would, undoubtedly, need to explain the situation as he had perceived it, not as she had.

"Then I suggest we leave tomorrow morning if you feel strong enough. You're still weakened, so we should probably expect to spend a full day reaching the keep. It took that long for me to bring you here even though I used the roads."

Valdemar agreed and he scratched his neck while nodding. "You know the lay of the land better than me, so I have no doubt you're right."

Pil smiled and reached out, patting Valdemar's shoulder gently. "Then I suggest you get as much rest as possible before then. I'll get some provisions for us and I'll find some of my father's clothes for you to wear. Good thing you're about the same size."

Valdemar smiled. He could have drowned, face down in a puddle of mud, ignobly passing on in a drunken stupor, and instead providence had led him here. His home was gone. His family had been slain. A great injustice had been done ...

... and he was *alive*. Alive to seek revenge, to get *even*.

God had spared him for that purpose, of that Valdemar had no doubt whatsoever. And he would rain down his anger on his foe like an avenging, heavenly fire.

He had been prevented from going on an armed pilgrimage. His father had forbidden it, and at the time, he had not understood it. He had been hurt and upset, even offended, that his father would deny him such a chance of salvation. That had been a severe blow, but it had made him leave the keep to get drunk and the tavern, and that had saved his life. So clearly, his father's denial of his request had been Godly and good.

Pil waited while Valdemar thought things over. Finally, he nodded to himself, as if some great, internal debate had come to conclusion. Then he turned and without another word, he went back inside. Pil waited for him to close the door, before hanging her head. Valdemar was a decent fur, and he had a good heart, but all her family's hopes for the future rested on his shoulders, and frankly, as he had stood there, dressed in that old tunic and little else, he hadn't been a figure to inspire much confidence.

She looked up. She had to find some food for the journey. They could restock in the village, even if it would feel ghoulish to invade the homes of dead furs to take food from their stocks and larders. There was little choice though. Maybe they could find a horse there too. There hadn't been any when she had gone the first time, but they had probably been scared away. By now, some of them would probably have returned.

Not only would a horse make the load they had to carry lighter, but Valdemar would look more stately if he arrived at the Baron's estate mounted, rather than walking.

All in all, there were too many 'ifs' to take into consideration, though.

But what choice did she have?

###

"Baron Harald Agger!" a voice called out.

Harald turned around. It was early evening and he was tired. He had attended a later mass, and the priest had been the earthly embodiment of boredom and lack of enthusiasm. It had been the least inspired mass the Baron could remember attending in recent years and he had struggled to stay awake. Not always successfully either. During the Eucharist, he had nodded off and only the timely intervention of a squire next to him, nudging him in the ribs, had prevented an embarrassing scene from developing.

Just sometimes, Harald wondered what good the Church was. God surely couldn't find much joy or enthusiasm in it at least, and while there were good furs in the service of

Holy Mother Church, there were a lot of bad seeds as well. Furs who at best paid lip service to ANY of the ten commandments.

There were ferocious warriors in the Church as well, such as the Prior of Antvorskov and his knights, but Harald still disapproved of the concept of armed monks. It seemed a dangerous mixture of the earthly trinity, which clearly stated that there were to be three classes in the world. Those who worked, those who prayed and those who fought. Those who fought were the nobles, those who prayed were priests and everyone else made up those who worked. It was a simple system, and because of its simplicity Harald held no doubt that it was divinely instituted. Furs were stupid, and couldn't understand complex plans anyway, so why would God, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, burden simple souls with concepts they had no chance of understanding anyway?

The Knights Hospitaller and the Teutonic Order both mixed those who prayed with those who fought and it irked Harald enormously. Even though he had to admit the Antvorskov brethren were a convenient asset in this particular situation.

He shook his head to clear these thoughts from his mind and he looked to see who had called out to him. An elderly badger, dressed simply like a servant would be, came ambling towards him. Harald noted that the old male had a pronounced limp and a dead eye. Clearly, this oldtimer had seen his share of battles in his time.

"What?" the fox asked, stopping and waiting for the servant to catch up.

"Beggin' yer Most Gracious Honor's pard'n, but 'is Grace is inna great hall an' mightily peevish tha' Yer Most Gracious Honor's not there with 'is Grace, if'n yer Most Gracious Honor catches me meanin, Yer Most Gracious Honor," the old fur said and bowed so deep Harald found himself worrying if he'd fall over on his face.

"How long has he been waiting?" Harald asked, turning to face the servant fully.

The old badger stayed bent over at the middle. "Long enough t'get mightily peevish, Yer Most Gracious Honor. 'is Grace 'ad 'is Grace's dinner while waitin', Yer Most Gracious Honor, an' 'is Grace di'nt like it much, neither. An' den a rider came back ... all sweaty an' smelly, Yer Most Gracious Honor. One o'dem riders Yer Most Gracious Honor sent out. 'E'd ridden 'is 'orse t'death, Sah. Poor thing fell over an' refused t'get up. Frothin' an' all, Yer Most Gracious Honor. An' dat rider looked like 'e'd been lookin' sum'thin' evil inna face, Yer Most Gracious Honor. I got'im some warm ale. Dey're both waitin' fer Yer Most Gracious Honor inna great hall!"

Harald nodded while his brain digested the coarse language of the servant. Then he straightened his jerkin and removed his cape from around his shoulders, before heading inside. He couldn't very well keep the Bishop of Roskilde waiting after summoning him. Frowning, he headed towards the Queen's chambers. The news of the second rider arriving was dire indeed. If his horse had been wrecked by the ride, it meant he had come a good distance and at breakneck speed.

He wondered what could have happened as he ascended first one, then a second staircase, finding himself outside the Queen's private chamber. Two guards barred his way, but they moved aside once they saw who he was. Knocking at the door, Harald waited patiently. Her Majesty was in, otherwise the guards would not be present.

"Enter," a voice said from beyond the door. It was muffled by the thick oak, but Harald would recognize Her Majesty's voice anywhere.

He pushed the door open and entered, kneeling the second he was inside the door, bowing his head respectfully.

"Your Majesty, the Bishop of Roskilde has arrived and is waiting in the great hall. I wasn't sure if anyone had informed you of this yet, but I thought it best to make sure."

The Queen, dressed somberly in black and seated by a large oak table with stacks of parchment in front of her, didn't look up or towards the fox who had just entered. Instead, she dipped her quill in the ink-pot again and continued writing for almost a minute before she finally answered.

"I am aware of His Grace's arrival. One of the guards came to report it. However, since His Grace has not yet seen fit to introduce his arrival to his Queen, I shall remain here and wait for him to remember his manners and his obligations," she said.

Baron Harald couldn't contain a grin, but he kept his head bowed. For a Church dignitary of such influence and power as the Bishop of Roskilde to come and present himself to a femme would be seen as a slap in the face by the entire Church. Nonetheless, Harald completely supported the Queen's stance. With the King dead, she was the sole surviving member of the Royal House. In effect, she was the new king, although naturally that was impossible. The only alternative, however, remained the late King's German relations and they were a bunch of incompetent, self-obsessed imbeciles, as far as Harald was concerned.

"I shall inform His Grace that he is to pay his respects to the rightful ruler of Denmark, my Queen," he said, firmly.

"Do that, Loyal Agerskov," the Queen responded, still without looking up from her work. "How goes the search for my son's assassin?"

"I have some leads, Your Majesty, and I have reason to believe I will receive important information when I speak to His Grace. One of my riders returned while I was at Mass, and he had ridden his horse into the ground to get back."

Finally the Queen looked up and towards the Baron, who in turn dared to raise his eyes to meet her gaze. The sorrow that he had seen when she learned of her son's death was still there, as strongly as before, but it was coupled with the fiercest determination Harald had ever seen on the face of any fur. He felt a shudder run down his spine at the mere thought of offending this powerful femme. She was born to rule.

At that moment, Harald understood just how insignificant her gender was.

The femme in front of him *would* rule the Realm. And he would see it come to pass, even if it cost him his life.

When she spoke, it was with the deepest gravity, and Harald quickly lowered his gaze to the floor again.

"If you have possible leads waiting for you in the great hall, Baron Harald ... then why are you still kneeling by my door?"

Harald didn't waste time answering. Instead he bowed his head a little deeper and got up, backing out of the room and hurrying down the stairs.