

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 V

The sun hadn't come up when Pil and Valdemar left the warden's house. Day was only just asserting itself, and the mist covering the ground hadn't quite been burned away yet. It was a chilly day, and the mist would remain for a while yet. The forest was unknown terrain to Valdemar and while they moved with reasonably good speed, he was already feeling the onset of weariness. Going up and down escarpments and climbing over fallen trees was a far cry from his normal routine. He was in good shape from his training, but this required him to move in ways he wasn't used to. A lesser fur would have collapsed already, he knew that, but it still annoyed him that he wasn't quite able to keep up with his guide.

They would travel the rest of the day to get to Slien, but they both expected to reach it before nightfall. Going via the road was much faster, but Pil had pointed out that after what had happened at the keep, she would like to be able to hide in case something hostile came along. She couldn't hide in plain sight on the road, but she could with trees all around her. Valdemar had agreed with her, but by now he wasn't sure if he'd been right in doing so.

Her concern was understandable and probably even commendable, but she had already gone to the village once, and she hadn't been attacked. In fact, she hadn't seen a single living soul at all. What were the chances that they'd be attacked if they used the road *now*?

Furthermore, if they arrived at the keep with him being completely exhausted, he wouldn't be able to put up any kind of serious fight if someone hostile came around *there*. Frankly that seemed a lot more likely to him. The village had valuables to plunder, after all. Food as well.

"Pil..." he said and stopped moving, putting his paws on his hips and looking down.

The vixen stopped a few steps further ahead. She turned and looked back at the young noble. They hadn't moved as far as she would have liked by now, mostly because he wasn't used to traveling through dense woods. Besides, he was making as much noise as she expected of a fully armed and armored knight...

Only he wasn't armed or armored.

"Yes?" she asked, smiling.

Valdemar shook his head. "This isn't working. Even I can hear how noisy I am, and if I am to venture a guess, we're only traveling about half as fast as we should be. Unless we want to spend the night under open skies, I suggest we go via the road. Think about it ... you went all the way to the keep and back without meeting anyone. The chance we'll run into someone hostile now isn't all that great."

Nodding, Pil had to agree with the logic in Valdemar's reasoning. Staying out of doors at night wasn't exactly her idea of safety given the circumstances, and besides, Valdemar was still not fully recovered. But they wouldn't make it to the village before nightfall if they didn't pick up the pace, and Valdemar was already moving as fast as he could.

"Well, any enemy within a mile would know where we are anyway, considering how much you huff and puff," she grinned.

Valdemar was about to protest. Then he chuckled and shrugged. It wasn't as if Pil was wrong after all.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to this kind of thing. I'm strong enough, but moving rapidly in this terrain is a skill I've never needed to learn," he said, "Anyway, let's get onto the road. Let me have one of your knives. If we run into something nasty, I'll be able to defend myself at least."

Pil nodded and reached to her belt, taking the larger of her two daggers, holding it out to the noble. "Not quite a broadsword, but it'll have to do for now," she said and checked her quiver. Fifteen good, iron-tipped arrows ... that would do in case they got attacked.

Valdemar took the dagger and pulled it from the scabbard, checking the blade's edge. It was sharper than Brother Rijkaard's tongue and he smiled. "Good blade, this," he said and stuck it in his belt.

"Thank you. You don't get far as a warden without good tools," Pil answered. Strictly speaking, she wasn't a warden of course ... but she did the job of one.

Valdemar nodded and looked around.

"It's over here," Pil said and pointed, before changing directions, "The road is that way."

They changed course and Valdemar could already feel how the prospect of walking on a road was invigorating him.

###

It had come far already. Traveling was made so much easier when one had wings, and It had been fortunate enough that there had been a heavy cloud-cover yesterday. It had managed to go a significant distance, but by now it was bored to tears and wanted entertainment. Killing peasants wasn't going to cut it, and yesterday had been a dismal failure after the good start with the mounted fur. It had attempted to lay waste to a village It had come by, but It had arrived in the middle of Mass, and apparently, the local priest actually had faith. It had been incredibly annoyed. Not that It couldn't tear an army of devoutly believing priests to pieces, but it was uncomfortable doing so, and It was looking for *fun* ... not discomfort. It had left the village alone and continued onwards.

By now It was observing the area from just within a cloud. There were several isolated buildings within reach but those were boring. What fun would it be to rip down a peasant's hut when It could level cathedrals?

There were two villages nearby though. Those seemed promising. In the far, far distance, It could just make out a large city, but the villages were much more tempting. Walking into a major center of civilization, causing death and destruction left and right would bring a lot of unwanted attention, and It wasn't in the mood for that. But if it could start with the neighboring villages, It could have some real fun and lay the groundworks for bigger things to come.

It could see flocks of sheep and cattle, too. Not large flocks ... but large enough.

It grinned ... an idea springing to mind.

###

Baron Harald was in an abysmal mood as he looked over the side of the ship. He had barely slept since last night and what sleep he had gotten had been in the saddle. He felt a driving need to go and collapse in the aft of the ship, but the captain said these were

dangerous waters and he wanted everyone alert and awake, keeping an eye out for reefs and sandbanks. Once that was done and they were safely at sea, Harald could get some sleep.

The Baron had been in a good mind to tell the captain to mind his manners, but deep down, he knew the fur was right. If they ran aground or got caught on a reef, he'd rather be awake and alert. He was a good swimmer, but he didn't fancy the idea of being half asleep if something like that happened.

He tried to stay awake by going over what had happened last night. He had gone directly from Her Majesty's chambers to the Great Hall, where His Grace and the rider had awaited him. So had His Grace's almost disembodied displeasure. A mere Baron summoning the most powerful potentate in the Realm on short notice was highly irregular, and His Grace had made sure Harald knew this in painstaking detail.

Purgatory had been mentioned.

So had at least three of the seven deadly sins.

And Harald had listened to all of it, patiently, knowing that His Grace was well within his right to be angry. Nonetheless, his presence was absolutely necessary. When finally Harald had a chance to explain why His Grace had been summoned, the Bishop had been quite instantly mollified, and he had immediately taken it upon himself to deal with the spiritual part of the investigation. Remembering how Prior Ivar of Antvorskov had wanted to be informed, Harald had dutifully requested permission to include him in the whole affair. The Bishop had given this a moment's thought and allowed it.

Given what the returned rider had said after Harald and the Bishop were done talking, the Baron was glad he had remembered the Prior's request.

The rider had the most piteous tale to tell, and Harald had been deeply affected by it. Having gone south-west, the rider had made excellent speed. He had a good horse and there had been no interruptions. He had stopped briefly in a couple of hamlets he had passed, to ask if they had seen or heard anything, but while the locals were all shocked to the core at the death of their King, they had seen nothing suspicious. The rider had pretty much come to the conclusion that he wouldn't find anything, but he still continued onwards, intent on completing the tour he had been assigned. Just in case.

Once he reached the coast, he was happy he had done so. He had arrived at a fishing village, where he had decided to stay the night. The locals had tended to his horse and given him food and drink, and he had fallen asleep in good cheer, convinced he'd

complete his tour in time with the speed he had made. Around the witching hour, he had been woken up however, by commotion outside the house.

A lot of commotion.

He had gotten up and gone to look for himself. Two fishing boats had just come in. That in itself was not unusual, but these were not local fisherfurs. Nor were they casual visitors. In fact, visits between fishing hamlets were rare, since the locals would always protect the secrets of their fishing spots fiercely. But these two boats hadn't held fisherfurs from other hamlets. On board had been females and young children. Cold and frightened, many of them weeping bitterly. Others were praying ... praying so feverishly that no one had been able to snap them out of it.

The rider had been shocked to see the scenes that played out with the sixteen furs. Fourteen children and females and only two fisherfurs ... one in each boat, to help sail it. They described boiling seas, destruction, terrible scenes of carnage. Death and destruction.

At Slien Keep.

The rider had helped these refugees. Getting them food and helping calm the children. He had listened to what they had to tell, asking each and every one of them ... even the youngest of the children. He had explained who he was, and where he came from and on what errand. The news of the King's death had struck the refugees like a sledgehammer. Some of the females started talking about the end of days. The children had wept again.

He had even remembered to investigate the boats and while he admitted he was no expert on the matter, it did look like the wood had been damaged by high temperatures, confirming the stories of boiling seas.

After a while, the rider had collapsed and slept fitfully until after sunrise. When he got up, he had asked those refugees who were awake if they had remembered anything new. Some of them did and he had realized he needed to wait until they were all awake to get as much information as he could, but he couldn't bring himself to wake them. They had needed their sleep after what they had gone through, but one by one, they woke up and he had questioned them again. Around mid-day, he was all done. Then he had wasted no time, grabbing some dried meat on the way out, where he had jumped on his horse and ridden like the Devil was after him. He had pushed his horse to the limit to get back to the castle as fast as possible, but when he got back, Baron Harald had been attending Mass.

Harald had listened to all this. Once the rider was done, he had simply looked at His Grace. There was no need to say anything. They both clearly understood that this was no coincidence, and that the two events had to be connected. After a long, quiet spell where no one had said anything, His Grace had instructed Harald that he would deal with the investigation in Nyborg, since that was clearly a matter involving the servants of the Evil One. That made it a church-matter. Harald agreed, however reluctant he normally was to give authority to the Church. In this case, however, His Grace had far better chances of success than he did. Besides, if someone had attacked Slien Keep, it was an attack on the realm, and that made it a secular matter. One which Harald not only could, but *should*, deal with. The Halk family were nominally in his service, and both the Lord of Slien and his oldest son referred directly to him as their Liege. He himself had knighted Valdemar Halk of Slien, and if the Keep had been destroyed as the rider had explained, then his lands were under attack and he could not sit idly by. He *had* to go investigate.

He had immediately set out. Commandeering twenty armed and mounted furs from among the castle guards, he had made ready to leave. He had no time to go by Agerskov to gather his own armed furs. He would need to get to Slien Keep as fast as possible. That meant sailing. It was faster than going over land, and in any case, Funen was an island. He would need to sail eventually. He had told the rider to get some sleep, then get a fresh horse and then go directly to Antvorskov. A scribe took down a letter for Prior Ivar, and Harald placed his baronial signet-ring in the hot wax, before giving the sealed letter to the rider and instructing him to place it directly into the paws of the Prior and no one else, on pain of death.

Then he and his retinue had set out overland. Nyborg was a harbor-city and there were plenty of boats there, but rigging one would take time and then they had to sail around the island of Funen, which would take longer than sending a rider off in advance to get boats rigged somewhere else. He had ended up taking fifteen of the twenty armed furs along for the crossing, sending the rest back with all but six of the horses. There just wasn't room for more of the beasts on the two long, but old-fashioned trading ships they had found passage on.

By now, Harald really just wanted to sleep.

He probably wouldn't be able to for a while yet, though. He had no choice but to stay awake until they were clear of the reefs and sandbanks, after all.

Not for the first time, he imagined what he would do to the fur responsible for all this once he got his paws on him.

There wouldn't be a need for an executioner ... *or* a torturer.

Just a gravedigger.

###

Valdemar felt better walking along the road. Of course he would have preferred to ride, but at least this was stable, even surface to walk on. The road was of good quality. It wasn't like the old Army-road running down the length of Jutland, which had been maintained for centuries, but it had been used for generations. If enough furs used it, a path would appear. That path would eventually widen, and if carts started going the same way, their wheels would eventually cut out a road.

"We'll be there soon," he said and looked around. He knew every rock and every blade of grass of this area. They were only a few miles away now.

Pil nodded. "We will. I came this way with you on the way home. I remember stopping for a breather over there," she said and pointed to two large rocks, leaning against one another.

"What? At the drunken trolls?" Valdemar chuckled. "I thought that was bad luck."

Smiling, Pil shook her head. "That's what the fisherfurs say. To me it's just a convenient place to hide."

Valdemar nodded. The local legend spoke of two trolls who, ages ago, had plundered the farm of a peasant. They had run off with his mead and, once they had made good their escape, they had sat down to drink their ill gotten gains. The peasant, however, had been so furious that he had called upon the Lord to punish the wicked thieves who had stolen his entire year's supply of brew and God had answered the peasant's prayer by turning the two trolls, sleeping seated against one another, into those large rocks. The peasant had caught up, grabbed the rest of his mead and gone home.

The way Valdemar saw it, that was typical of the way many Danes believed. In earthly things. A God who would protect a peasant's produce was more use to them than a God who wanted His faithful to reconquer some far-away city in a distant, strange land.

That kind of thing was for nobles, not peasants ... and so the peasants found their ways to remind themselves that they too should pray to pay proper respect to the Almighty. Fisherfurs, tradesfurs, peasants, nobles ... all saw God differently, and yet the Church all tried to make them see God in the same way.

Priests had to be extraordinarily stupid or extraordinarily patient, Valdemar thought. Perhaps being both helped. Old Brother Rijkaard hadn't been stupid though. Just stubborn. Maybe that trait was useful as well.

"What will you do once you speak to your Liege Lord, Valdemar?" Pil asked, without turning around, "I mean ... we'll get there, but what are you going to say to him, and what will you do if he listens? Or even ... if he doesn't listen?"

"My name is good enough," Valdemar said, shrugging. "If the Baron won't listen, others will. I still have my good name, and amongst nobility, that counts for something. But I don't think he will turn me away. He has a reputation to maintain, and he is known as a good, just fur. He'll help me gain my revenge, because in doing so, he will have bound my services even closer to the Agger-family. I will owe his family a debt that I will never be able to repay, and he knows it. It's a small investment for him."

Nodding, Pil picked up a pebble and rolled it over and over in her paw before throwing it as far as she could. "A keep is no small investment ..."

"He won't help me rebuild the keep. I will have to find a way to do that myself, but somehow I don't doubt I can do that once I get even with whoever did this in the first place. If nothing else, the King will help rebuild it. Having a keep at Slien is a good idea. It means a defensible fortification against pirates in a critical area, as well as a defensible fortification against invasion from the south."

"That's all well and good though, but what do you intend to do to gain revenge? None of us know what's happened."

"I'll figure that out ... somehow. Perhaps Baron Harald has some idea. He's a very intelligent fur."

Pil smiled. "Intelligent, honorable and just. He sounds like a model noble."

Chuckling, Valdemar shrugged. "He's my Liege Lord, Pil ... I am duty-bound to try to emulate his deeds. But yes, I think he is a remarkable noble. He's stubborn, he's proud and he's got a temper, but frankly I see those as virtues in a noblefur and a warrior."

No matter how she turned it, Pil couldn't find a way to disagree with that. Well, perhaps with the pride, but being stubborn and having a temper certainly helped a warrior, and they were probably useful for nobles in general. As long as that temper didn't flare when innocents could get hurt. Temperance was a skill she hoped this Baron Harald that Valdemar so clearly admired, had also acquired.

"If there's no food in the village ... if someone already carried it off ... I'll go shoot us something edible. Since you're the Lord of Slien now, I doubt you'd object to that," she said and looked over her shoulder.

Valdemar shook his head and smiled. "No, that would be good. But let's see if there isn't something there we can eat, already."

None of them spoke for a while after that, but it was clear they would reach the village before nightfall.

###

Harald could see the inlet. He wasn't tired anymore, having managed to catch some sleep at last, and he was ready for whatever would come. The Captain was already getting the ship ready to go into the inlets. The horses were awake and clearly not happy with still not being on dry land. No doubt the poor creatures would be terribly sick once they got back ashore. It wasn't that the crossing had been bad. Not at all, but most furs who weren't used to the sea had that problem when getting back ashore, and that went double for animals.

"How long do you think it will be before we get reinforcements, Milord?" one of the castle guards asked him.

Harald recognized the fur. He wasn't the oldest fur there, but he was the one with the best attitude. These were all good troops, as they had to be to serve at the royal castle at Nyborg, but the one speaking to him had leadership potential. The others listened to him. Harald had made a point of noticing that, and getting the fur's name. He was called Ravn and he had been a blacksmith before his smithy burnt down. He was a powerful lynx with small scars up his arms as most blacksmiths had. Small furless patches, life-long reminders of the heat of a furnace and the splinters beaten off a piece of red hot steel, when hammered by an expert.

Ravn ... the name was fitting for someone like this particular lynx, Harald thought. Ravens had been considered harbingers of death since pre-Christian times, and the fur next to him had that air to him, so hard to define, of someone extremely capable with a sword.

"No idea," Harald answered, honestly. "I don't even know what we will find there. But I won't let these boats sail off without us if there are superior enemy forces in sight. Otherwise, I expect that Prior Ivar will reach us as soon as he is possibly able. Maybe in two days time, if the wind is with both my messenger and him."

Ravn nodded. "Well and good, Milord," he said and leaned against the railing. He looked into the water but stayed quiet.

Harald was wise enough to know something was on the commoner's mind, and that he was waiting to be asked by his social superior. Again the Baron told himself that had Ravn not already been in service to the crown, he would have hired the lynx on the spot, himself. Ability and smarts in the same fur was a good combination.

"Well and good ... but ...?" he asked.

Ravn shrugged. "What will we do once the hospitallers get there? They'll want to take charge. They don't take orders from anyone and they are impossible to work with."

Harald chuckled and nodded in agreement. "But they are outstanding warriors, I'm sure you would agree."

"I know I wouldn't willingly cross blades with one of them, and I'm a damned good warrior myself," the lynx said and spat into the water. "But they are still a bunch of obnoxious, self-centred pricks and let me tell you, Milord, I want to catch the King's assassin as much as any fur on this ship!"

The words had been spoken with deep sincerity, and Harald found himself raising an eyebrow and looking at the lynx with a new sense of appreciation. He nodded, slowly, and gestured for Ravn to continue. The boat was mid-turn and the inlet was almost right in front of them. Harald would pay attention to that in a moment, but for the time being he wanted to know what made Ravn so angry.

The lynx shrugged again and looked into the water once more for a long moment. "He was my King, Milord."

"He wasn't a very good King, though. He was just a child. His mother made most decisions, you know that."

"He would have *become* a great King! And even if he hadn't, he was still my Lord and Master."

Harald made the decision there and then to ask the Queen to transfer Ravn to his service once they got back to Nyborg. A fur that loyal was worth his weight in gold, especially if he could fight. He looked back to the inlet. It led to a wide fjord, and near the bottom of this would be the village and the keep. Or what was left of them anyway. They were still too far out for him to see anything that far away, but Harald was sure he wouldn't like what he saw once they landed.

"You are a good fur, Ravn. You will do good service to the Realm ... I have no doubt," he said.

"Thank you, Milord. I won't let you down," Ravn answered, without taking his eyes off the water.

###

Seeing the remains of the keep had nearly knocked Valdemar out. The village looked ... and was in fact ... deserted, but at least it was still standing. His home, however, had been returned to rubble. It wasn't even a ruin. Ruins were recognizable as what they had been before but this looked like a quarry gone bad, and Valdemar had again found himself struggling to keep tears at bay. He had walked amongst the heaps of rock and here and there he had found something laying on the ground that he recognized.

A silver goblet. A tool, used in the keep's smithy. A ring.

It was absolute devastation, and he had found it very, very difficult to look down the hole where the central keep had stood. He had done so ... and dearly regretted it. It looked as if the insides of the hole had been painted with blood. Like the rocks that had fallen down had been dipped in a gigantic vat of gore and left to dry on their own. In the bottom of the hole, it looked like a big pool of blood had coalesced. He didn't see a single fur down there. Everyone was gone. Everything he had known was destroyed. His family had been killed.

He would have been killed, had he not been wallowing in self pity at the inn, getting drunk beyond recognition.

Now he was sitting in the inn. Pil was checking pot over the fire. They had found it in the larder, where the Inn-keeper had used it to soak bread in ale. It made for a solid when boiled, but to say it was tasty meant breaking at least one of the ten commandments. Some kind of porridge was the main course for almost all furs though, and at least this one wasn't made from boiled fish.

"It wasn't the pirates," Valdemar said at last. He hadn't spoken since the visit to the keep, and Pil had started looking quite worried.

She was visibly relieved that he spoke, but she did cant her head to one side. "Why is that?" she asked.

"They would have looted the place before destroying it. Metal is in short supply for them, yet they left blacksmithing tools behind. And a silver goblet ... and a gold ring. And that was just what I found while ... while ..."

"While trying to cope with what you saw. You're right, of course," Pil answered and poured some of the ale-porridge into a wooden bowl. She grabbed a horn-spoon from her belt and wiped it on her cloak to make sure it was clean, before putting it down on the table before the young noble. "Here ... eat this. You need food," she said.

"What about you?"

"Oh, I'll have some afterwards, once you've eaten your fill."

Valdemar shook his head. "Nonsense. There's plenty for the both of us. Find another spoon and a bowl and sit down with me. It isn't much of a meal but ... at least it's hot. And I'd ..."

Pil looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "I understand," she said and went to look for something to eat with.

Nodding gratefully, Valdemar started eating. At least the porridge wasn't too bad. The inn-keeper kept a great big cauldron for this kind of thing, but he tossed in practically all the leftovers from the inn, and the remains of what was left in the ale-mugs at the end of the night. It was a foul concoction, but the smaller pot had clearly been meant for himself and his family. He had used fresh ale and bread that hadn't gone mouldy yet. It wasn't a meal fit for a noble, but right now he didn't care. All he wanted was a full belly and the company of someone friendly and sympathetic.

Pil smiled and placed a bowl on the table but didn't sit down. "You wait here, and I'll go get us some cool water from the well."

Valdemar nodded again and continued eating, slowly. He'd probably be on his second bowl by the time Pil came back but that was alright. He was very hungry, and he had a lot of things to think about. Such as where they would find a horse. He hadn't seen any coming in. At least no live ones. He'd seen two dead ones just outside the village perimeter. They had just collapsed in the field where they had stood.

How would he ever get all the dead furs buried? He didn't even have a priest around, and without the proper rites, the souls of all these villagers would come back to haunt him, he was sure of that.

Pil came bolting back inside, a wide-eyed and terrified look on her face. "Ships!" she wheezed. "Ships in the inlet! Two of them. The old kind ... long boats!"

Valdemar was on his feet and through the door before the bowl of porridge had hit the floor. Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps pirates really were responsible and now they were coming back to claim their loot? Not if he had anything to say about it!"

He growled and narrowed his eyes to look out over the water. He had the sun at his back. They wouldn't be able to spot him as easily as he could see them in the sharp, late-afternoon light. He stood perfectly still to try and gauge the strength of his enemies. Two ships, like Pil had said. Well, not really ships as such. Long boats of the ancient type, used mostly for coastal trading these days. Pirates did use that kind of vessel a lot. It had a shallow draft and could hide in damned near any inlet and behind every rocky outcropping. But something wasn't right. He could see odd movement on these boats.

Then it dawned on him. "Horses," he said, nodding. "Those aren't pirate vessels, they rarely have horses. And even if they do, they don't bring them for raiding. They take up space on the ship and for what use?"

Pil looked relieved. "Who then?" she asked.

"I don't know. But I do know that they won't react kindly to seeing you."

"Wha ... whu ... but ...?"

"Pil, you're wearing leggings and you're *armed* for God's sake!"

The vixen swallowed and nodded. "I'll go hide then," she said and made to run off, but Valdemar stopped her.

"No, I probably need you here. Here's what we'll do..." he said and started explaining.

Pil wasn't sure it would work, but she realized there were few alternatives. Unless she wanted to stay in hiding for potentially quite a long time, they had to try. For a brief moment she thought of scouring the houses until she found a dress she could put on, but that wouldn't work. She couldn't *move* in a dress. If they did need to fight, she'd be totally useless, and until the furs on the ships were actually on land, there was no way of being absolutely certain that they were friendly. Still, Valdemar's suggestion was risky, and she ran off to one of the larger houses with a certain amount of apprehension.

Valdemar cursed his rotten luck. He only had the long dagger with him. He could have looked for a sword in the rubble of the keep, but the chance of finding one hadn't been

great, and besides, he had been so distraught he hadn't even thought about it. Right now, he would have liked a sword though. A good, sturdy mace would have sufficed. Even an axe would've been useful.

The prow of the first ship touched the beach and Valdemar began walking towards it.

###

Harald saw the single fur approaching. He was pretty sure he'd seen a second one run towards one of the buildings but he couldn't know for certain. What mattered was that a single fur was no threat. When the shape got closer, he nodded to his troops and gestured for them to be at ease.

He recognized Valdemar Halk easily enough. That dark fur stood out a mile.

"Greetings, young Valdemar!" he called out, "Or is it Lord Halk of Slien now?"

Valdemar stopped briefly, then clearly recognized the speaker. Harald could see the relief on the young knight's face even at a distance.

"Milord, I cannot begin to describe how pleased I am that you are here!" Valdemar answered and knelt, "And I suppose I am Lord of Slien now, but as you can see, it seems to be a title without trappings."

"I still see a village and good lands. Those are trappings worthy of a knight of the Realm, Lord Halk, but I am disturbed that the reports of the keep are true. What happened and how in God's name did you survive that kind of devastation?"

Valdemar approached, shaking his head sadly. Harald noted that the fur in front of him looked more mature than the young, rather reckless pup he had knighted a few years before but that was probably to be expected, considering what had happened here.

"I wish I knew," Valdemar said and sighed as he stood before his Liege Lord, "It happened while I was not at the keep, but in the village. I was knocked out by a strange blast, but my new squire saved my life and took me to a warden's cottage where I recovered these past few days. Milord, I must humbly ask you to assist me with weapons, armor and a horse so I can seek revenge on whoever did this. My family has been wiped out. I'm the last living member of the Halk family. It falls on me ..."

Harald nodded and waved a hand reassuringly at Valdemar. "Of course, of course. You will have what you need, though I don't have the funds to help you rebuild your keep.

But if you should want it, there is a place at my own keep for a strong fur like yourself. And your squire of course."

Valdemar looked immensely relieved at this meagre promise, Harald noted. The young noble really must have lost everything to show that much relief over a simple promise of arms and armor.

"The King might help rebuild the keep. It serves two functions after all. Both against pirates and against the Emperor to the south," Valdemar said and smiled wearily.

Harald sighed deeply. So Valdemar didn't know about the King's death yet. All things considered that wasn't surprising, with everything that had happened at Slien. Still, he would have preferred to not heap bad news upon misery.

"His Majesty is dead, Lord Halk. Slain by an assassin most foul and devious. I am charged by Her Majesty, the King's most gracious mother, to find this assassin and do what must be done," he said, looking straight at Valdemar's face to gauge his reaction.

The news made Valdemar run hot and cold. He felt like someone had punched him in the face, wearing a mailed gauntlet. "Dead...?" he whispered, "God preserve us all."

"God preserve us all indeed. The King's death appears to have been caused by ... unnatural sorceries," Harald elaborated and looked at the keep.

For a moment, it looked like Valdemar wasn't sure what to make of the whole situation. Then he slowly pointed towards the ruined keep. "If it is sorcery you are looking for, Milord ... you should come with me."

Harald nodded. He gestured for Ravn to get everyone indoors and to take care of the horses, before turning to follow Valdemar towards the keep.

Perhaps he would finally get some answers.