

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 VII

"That'd be the village, am I right?" Brother Eskild asked and pointed towards the houses in the distance.

Prior Ivar narrowed his eyes and held up a paw to prevent the sun from disrupting his view. He nodded and got a better grip on the reins, looking sidelong at the blonde knight next to him. "Well, it used to be at least. That place is a collection of ruins. As far as I can see, most of the buildings are completely destroyed."

Brother Eskild nodded with a grim look on his face. "It looks that way," he admitted. "But I do see movement down there."

"That would be the baron and his retinue, but just to be on the safe side..." Ivar said and nodded to his knights, all of whom unsheathed their weapons. "At the trot then...follow me!"

The small group of furs approached the derelict village. Just in case it wasn't Harald Agger but someone hostile Brother Eskild had seen, Ivar wanted to make sure they were ready for a fight. They traveled light, or at least as light as one would ever see Hospitallers travel. They had brought only one horse for each fur ... the one they rode ... and there were no squires along. They were dressed for war and they were all trained to ride day in and day out in full battle array. It wasn't comfortable, but it meant they were ready for a fight at a moment's notice, instead of having to stop and get armored.

As they got closer, Ivar recognized the baron amongst the furs he could see, and he sheathed his sword as he approached the fox.

His knights all mirrored the move.

"Lord Agger, I received your message," the lynx said and nodded to the fox.

Harald returned the nod and gestured to the ruins around them. "As you can see ... this is an accursed *mess!*" he said, "Well met, Prior. I am glad that you have arrived. We have a significant number of dead villagers and there is no priest available. I ask you to please administer the proper funeral rites, so that we may cover their graves."

"How many?" Ivar asked, raising an eyebrow.

Harald sighed. "Everyone in the village. There were only two survivors. The eldest son of the Halk-family and his squire. Both were in the village when this disaster happened. The keep was up there on the hill. It seems to be the center of where the devastation started, and I have every reason to believe the Evil One is involved."

The knights all did the sign of the cross to ward off evil, and the Prior looked towards the stricken ruin on the hilltop. "I see. May I ask why you are so sure that the Great Enemy is behind this?"

"The keep was built of stone, Prior, and in the blink of an eye, it was turned from a strong, fortified position on top of a hill into what you see up there. Not overnight, not in the space of a few prayers, but literally in the blink of an eye. The central tower has collapsed in on itself and the hole looks like it's been painted with stale blood. It's atrocious to look at and frankly, I'm going to spend weeks in the confessional when I get back to my estate, to purge my soul of this!" Harald said, sounding like he could use a priest and a confessional right then and there.

While his knights made disbelieving sounds, Ivar simply listened and looked back towards the ruin on the hill. He knew the Baron to be an extremely trustworthy fur and someone whose honor was beyond reproach. If he said that was what had happened, the lynx believed it.

"I'll have to talk to the survivors. Lord Halk is dead ... how old is his son?"

"Old enough to want revenge and to be capable of claiming it if he gets a chance."

Again the prior nodded. "And his squire?"

"A boy named Peter. He's younger than his liege, and apparently mute. He's skittish and very shy, but a good hunter. He'll keep us all fed before we continue onwards," Harald said, matter-of-factly. The young female in disguise had, in fact, not said anything to anyone, apparently for fear of giving herself away. If he could tell Valdemar to instruct his 'squire' to play mute, Prior Ivar wouldn't want to question her.

Brother Eskild cleared his throat. "Prior, the stench of death is already in the air. I suggest you see to the funeral rites of the villagers, and the rest of us will stable the horses and groom them."

With the barest of nods, Ivar dismounted and held out the reins to Eskild who also got off his horse. "Take care of my charger as well."

The blonde canid nodded and took them. "Of course."

###

Pelzendorf was a dreary, utterly banale place. The most exciting event of the year was no doubt the harvest festival, but that was months in the past ... or future, depending on how one looked at it ... and the rest of the year seemed to go by with everyday nothings, spiced up with commonplace humdrum. Furthermore, Aiperos had already noted, that the general level of intelligence in the village was enough to make anyone's eyes water. The townsfurs were superstitious, suspicious of each other and outsiders, prejudiced ... particularly against the villagers from across the river ... and plain stupid. If he had asked almost any one of them what two plus two was, they'd have said it depended on what God wanted it to be and felt perfectly content with that answer.

Very few of these souls stood any chance of salvation, but then again, he wasn't there to save anyone. Far from it.

The local priest was apparently no better than most of the townsfurs. Only a few of them showed the light of intelligence or the spark of ambition in their eyes when he spoke to them. Even fewer showed both.

The oldermale was one of them. He wasn't even particularly old, despite his title, but he was clearly smarter than most of the locals, and that was probably why they had elected him to the position he held. Another was the innkeeper and, to his surprise, one of his daughters. She worked as a scullery wench and knew how to count beyond ten, she could come up with quick and witty replies and she clearly wanted more from life than serving beer and porridge to travelers. He hadn't really expected to find that in this reason-forsaken place, but he knew not to underestimate females. It was, in his opinion, one of the most clear-cut examples of the abject stupidity displayed all around the world, that males considered females inherently inferior.

He acknowledged that mortal females were not as physically strong as males, but as a direct consequence of that, they had thousands of years of practice in getting males to do what they wanted in ways that made those very same males think they were in fact the

ones making the decisions. Males were strong, females were clever and as far as Aiperos was concerned, they had the same capacity for raw intelligence and certainly the same capacity for ambition.

He lifted his mug and sipped the contents. He preferred wine, but beer was all that was available in this part of the world, and it would have looked very strange if he, a traveling wise-fur, older than old, would suddenly ask for sophisticated fare. As beer went, this wasn't too awful anyway.

"Is there anything else I can get you?" the voice of the smart scullery wench asked and he looked up.

She stood in front of him, paws on her hips and with a raised eyebrow. A blonde equine in her early twenties, she was past her marriable prime by several years, and yet Aiperos had heard how, the night before, the village males sighed lustfully after her whenever she was out of earshot.

He didn't doubt for one second that she knew of those sighs.

"No thank you," he said and smiled, making his bushy mustache curl upwards. "I'm fine."

She nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, there is one thing you could do. If you don't mind answering a question, that is?" Aiperos said once she had taken a few steps.

She turned back around and shrugged. "Not particularly. Not sure I *can* answer, but I'll do my best," she said.

"Well, there is always that," Aiperos chuckled and slowly got to his feet, supporting himself on his cane to complete the image of a tired old traveler. "It's simple enough though. I would like to talk to the priest of Pelzendorf. I'm told he is a most severe and strict fur ..."

The female chuckled. "That'd be an understatement. He makes sure we all remember how sinful we are. I heard he gave Ulrich a hard time for impregnating his wife a few days ago."

"I see. Well, copulation is an act of lustful carnality, isn't it?" Aiperos asked, still smiling a friendly little smile.

The grimace that ran across the female's face obscured her good looks for a moment. It was a look of unbridled loathing and disgust, and Aiperos knew it was meant for the priest. "I know it is, but Ulrich is a good male who works hard, tithes on time, feeds not only his own family but his wife's old, feeble parents as well and who never misses Mass. He and Gretha have tried to become parents for years, and he gave them such a hard time about not having any children yet, for all that time. And now that it finally worked out for them, that is wrong too?"

Aiperos felt a stab of pure bliss in his chest at this description. The priest would be a fantastic target. "That does not seem right to me," he said, slowly, nodding in his most sagely way.

"Probably because it *isn't* right!"

"So the Church is wrong?"

The equine shook her head. "I never said that. *Father Bernd* is wrong."

Again, Aiperos smiled that friendly, supportive smile of his and nodded. "But he is the representative of the Church in Pelzendorf. That would make the Church wrong, wouldn't it?"

"No. The Church is more than a bad priest. Eventually, Father Bernd will die and we'll get a different priest, and we can hope he will be better. When the time comes, Oldermale Ebert will go to the bishop and petition him for a good priest," the equine said, thoughtfully.

"And will that work?"

The equine shrugged. "Probably. There's a new bishop in Bremen, and rumor has it he's a very decent and compassionate fur. He will listen to Oldermale Ebert's petition. But it could be years before that time comes anyway."

Aiperos took a few steps towards her and nodded once more. "Don't worry, it will all work out for the best. I know it will," he said. "What was your name again, young lady?"

"I'm hardly a lady ... but my name is Adelheid."

"You're more a lady than any female I've seen in Pelzendorf since arriving."

Adelheid smirked crookedly. "That says more about Pelzendorf than it says about me, I think."

Chuckling, Aiperos winked at her and headed towards the door. He stepped outside and looked at the sky. Pretending to cough so as to cover his mouth to disguise his snicker, he continued towards the home of Father Bernd. With what Adelheid had told him, two distinct scenarios were possible to him. One involved the untimely but entirely accidental death of Father Bernd, and the other involved reaffirming the priest in his malpractices. The latter plan would take longer to come to fruition, but would yield better results, whereas the former meant he could ensure a new bad priest arrived, thereby crushing hopes and leading to immediate despair in the town. But that would quickly vanish in favor of renewed lethargy and indifference.

Besides, he had time. In fact, he had all the time in the world. If he closed his eyes to listen for the sounds of divine music, all he could hear was his own broken note. There were no Angels on their way. They didn't know he was there, and even if they did come, he was strong enough to get rid of scores of them without much effort.

The ritual had worked.

The world would fall ... one village, town or city at a time, and it would start in Pelzendorf.

Well, strictly speaking it had started in that ridiculous fishing hamlet and in the basement of the keep on the hilltop, but that had been a matter of destruction, not subversion. Pelzendorf and then Hahzenfeld ... and then Bremen. It would spread from there, a cancerous boil under the very feet of Holy Mother Church, and by the time the clergy realized it, it would be too late to stop!

He stopped by the stone house that the sheppard had identified as the priest's home the day before. Approaching the door, he made sure to bend slightly so as to look old and frail. Then he knocked on the door with his cane, and leaned on it while waiting for someone to answer.

After a while, an old female came and opened. She had the same empty look in her eyes that told Aiperos that apart from a soul, there was little else in there.

For a split second, he felt angry. These creatures had been given such a tremendous gift at their creation, and what did they do with it? Squander it on useless, insignificant, unimportant little lives, without ever striving to better themselves or their lot in life, blindly accepting the orders of their so-called 'superiors' to be poor, stupid and *content*.

"Father Bernd?" he asked.

The old female nodded and stepped aside to let Aiperos pass. Clearly, she was the housekeeper. Normally, priests weren't allowed to live with females at all, but it was not uncommon for them to do so anyway. Secret marriages, mistresses, children ... it was seen everywhere, often because the locals didn't know it wasn't allowed.

The house was cold. It was probably difficult to heat, and since the priest officially lived alone, there was no point in trying to warm rooms that weren't used most of the time. The interior was sturdy. Oak furniture with carvings was used for almost all the furniture, and as he entered the main room, Aiperos saw both gold and silver. Not in large amounts, but the crucifix on the wall displayed a suffering Christ in gold, and two goblets on the table were made from silver. The priest wasn't rich, but he was better off than most of the local townsmen would be. Living in a stone house was evidence of that in itself.

"God's peace upon this house," Aiperos said and bowed his head in an entirely insincere show of respect. "I take it you must be Father Bernd?"

There wasn't even the faintest of tingles from this priest. He had no faith whatsoever ... at most a delusion that he did.

"That is correct," came the answer. Father Bernd was a shrivelled up husk of a wolf, who had no doubt been both strong and well built in his youth. Now he was in his forties and his prime had long since passed. "And who are you?"

"I am called Aiperos. I am merely a traveler from Greece, whom God has seen fit to lead to this place."

"Aha. A Greek, eh? No doubt one of those Eastern heretics then!"

Aiperos shook his head and smiled. "Oh, I assure you, I acknowledge the power and position of Holy Father," Aiperos said with a disarming smile and gesture. "In fact, I have come here carrying holy relics for trade, and the townsmen here in Pelzendorf certainly seem to need a stern reminder of the necessity of mending their wicked ways!"

Father Bernd raised an eyebrow. "There is already a relic in the altar in the local Church. A hair from the head of blessed Saint Benedict, no less!"

"A strong relic, indeed. But what of the side altars, good Father?" Aiperos asked. In fact, the idea of a hair from the head of Saint Benedict was laughable. No doubt whoever had made the altar had plucked a hair from his own head. That was often how it went, at least. If someone bothered to gather up all the bones around Christendom allegedly

belonging to some of the more commonplace saints, one would be able to put together at least two dozen complete skeletons from three or four different species of furs. A hair was a 'safe' relic. Any fur would have tens of thousands of hairs on their head and no one would ever be able to rightfully contest whether a particular hair had ever graced the head of a saint or not.

"What side altars? No one ever pays them any heed!" Father Bernd growled, clearly not satisfied with that.

"Ahh, all the more reason to bring a proper relic to the notice of the local townsfurs, I would say. What side altars do you have at your church, good Father?"

"Saint Augustin and Saint Ursula. Why?"

Aiperos smiled widely. "Then you are in the most blessed position of good fortune, Father Bernd, for I just happen to have with me ... right here ... a tooth from the mouth of Saint Augustin himself, and no less than a whole foot of cloth from the shroud of Saint Ursula!"

For a moment, the priest looked interested. Then suspicion crossed his face. "That is easy for you to say, but how do I know they are genuine? And even if they were, how would they benefit me?"

"Father ... really ... I wouldn't be so mean as to try to sell you something so important without *proof* that these relics are what I claim them to be. I have letters of authenticity from Rome, and they carry seals of no less than three arch-bishops and *two* cardinals!" Aiperos said and smiled warmly.

Father Bernd sank further down into his seat. His gray fur was matted across his face and his tonsure was stubbly. He practically radiated suspicion and distrust, and he looked sickly. "What good will they do me, though?" he asked.

"Think of it, Father ... these are relics worthy of a grand Cathedral, and with such powerful objects of faith in your possession, you would have a church to which pilgrims would come from far away! It would be a constant reminder for the townsfurs to remain faithful and virtuous, as well."

"That is all well, but what good will it do to *me* ... not everyone else!"

Aiperos tried desperately not to smile. Instead, he put his face in sad folds and nodded. "I know of your ailment, Father. The wasting sickness is a terrible thing, but God will forgive you and cure you, and if you should choose to buy these relics and make them

available to those who come to see them for a small ... entirely reasonable ... price, you would be able to live in comfort."

Father Bernd coughed. "My legs will barely support me anymore. Standing for mass means I will sleep for a day and a night afterwards! I've prayed until my knees were raw and my tongue swollen, and it has changed nothing! *Nothing!*"

Stepping closer, Aiperos smiled again. Furs always did this ... they always ended up telling him their deepest secrets, or at the very least confessing their weaknesses to him within moments.

"And so you lost faith in God, didn't you, Father...?" he said, sympathetically. "You started doubting ... and eventually you lost hope. And finally, after years of clinging on to those last shreds of belief that gave your life meaning, you accepted that your faith had disappeared."

The priest hung his head. He didn't answer. His shoulders heaved and he looked both angry and on the verge of tears. "Take your useless trinkets and *leave!*" he sneered, pathetically defiant.

Aiperos simply ignored it. Instead he reached up to take a small, black leather bag attached to his walking stick by a leather cord. He opened it and let a tooth roll out into his paw. Gently holding the decrepit thing to Father Bernd's tonsure, he felt like screaming with joy at the pure, perverse pleasure of what he was about to do.

"Oh holy Saint Augustin, hear my humble prayer. Please, ask God to take away that which ails this good priest, and let him regain the strength of his youth that he may once more serve the Church and his flock with fervor and zeal."

He didn't even bother to wait for a reaction. Instead, he put the tooth back in the black bag. He didn't feel more than the faintest of tingles, and the ritual still protected him. There was no sound of silent trumpets being played ... no choir of perfection ruining his solemn, broken note.

Heaven had no idea what was going on ... and by the time the ritual wore off, it would be far, far too late!

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Harald got a hold of Valdemar before the Prior, and pulled him in behind a blasted wall. It was all that remained of the houses in the hamlet, but for now it would do to shield the two of them from any prying eyes and ears.

"If he asks about your squire, say I've been wrong and he's really just your page-boy. Remember, his name is Peter and for God's sake, remember that he is mute!" he said, lowly.

"Mute?"

"The prior wants to question you both about what happened here!"

Nodding hurriedly, Valdemar's eyes grew wide in realization. "Mute! I understand!" he exclaimed.

"Good," Harald answered and peeked around the corner, "I think you will be on your way from here by tomorrow morning at the latest. You probably have to let Ravn know the truth though, or he'll figure it out."

"I will, once we're clear of the hamlet," Valdemar said. "He's trustworthy?"

"He isn't in my employ but considering what he said on the boat during the passage, I would trust him," Harald said and shrugged.

Valdemar nodded. If his liege lord would trust Ravn, then he would too. He ran a paw through his hair. "I still need armor and a horse."

"I've got the horse in paw. You can get a good weapon from any of the guards, and I'll make sure you have enough money with you to pay an armorer. The main problem with that of course is that making good armor takes ages!"

"Isn't there a tournament at Bremen in a week's time?" Valdemar asked.

Harald nodded. "There is. You'll find good armorers there, and they can work fast if you have to. But you don't really have time to enter the tournament."

"If you hadn't noticed, all my belongings are gone with the castle, Milord, including my accreditations. They probably wouldn't let me compete anyway, and even if they did, as you say, I have other, more pressing matters to attend to. The point is there will be armorers at Bremen, many of whom will have half-finished armor along that just needs finishing up. I am not particularly large or particularly small. It will be easy to find someone who just needs to make minor adjustments and finish the smithing job. The tournament lasts four days if I remember correctly. If we're there the day before it starts, it should be enough time," Valdemar explained and straightened up. "It won't exactly be embossed with gold and filigree but it will be durable and that's what matters in armor."

Harald smiled. It was a good point and succinctly made. "Then you should head for Bremen. Prior Ivar and his knights will go in another direction, no doubt. No matter what, we have to assume that the assassin has gone south. Staying within the realm would be foolish, and if indeed he has done so, he will be found. If he's made a run for it, it's up to you and the Prior respectively. Between us, he's got a lot more hitting power behind him than you, but I know determination when I see it ..."

"... And in this case, determination will carry the day, Milord. Count on it. In any case, this does mean I should leave today. I'll have six days to reach Bremen, and we may only have one horse."

"I'll make sure you have one each. You need to travel swiftly. Every day you spend in Bremen, you should make sure to ask around about anyone coming south from Denmark."

Valdemar nodded. "I'll go find Pil and explain about the whole Peter-the-mute-page-thing," he said and looked around the ruined wall again. "When I come back, I will go to the Queen and tell her how I only succeeded because of your help."

Harald smiled crookedly. "You are strong enough to do this. I expect nothing less than success from you."

"I'll come back in victory, or not at all, Milord. On my oath as a knight of the Realm."

"That's all I can ask for."

Valdemar nodded and headed off to find Pil. Harald waited a few moments longer before he slipped back towards the inn.

###

Pil picked up her arrow and the hare it had been embedded in, pulling the two apart. She drew her dagger and quickly opened the animal's belly, pulling out the intestines before cutting a small incision near the ankle-joints on the hare's hind legs and pulling a string through. Tying it to the other two hares she had so far shot, she slung the brace over her shoulder. She was about to head to a new position from which to shoot, when she noticed something.

Pickings had been slim. Three hares, even if they were all large, well nourished animals, would not feed more than a few of the furs at the ruined hamlet, and she was getting a little annoyed at her inability to find useful game. She would have to find more food before she went back, but where to find it was the question.

In the distance, there was a copse of trees, and she had more or less decided to head that way to see if she had more luck there, when she noticed it.

There was a glint, like sunlight reflecting in polished metal and she immediately ducked low. It came from the edge of the treeline, and cursing at her luck, she realized that whoever the metal belonged to had no doubt seen her long ago. Ducking out of sight wouldn't really help but at least she could try to sneak towards the rocks while covered in tall grass, if something came towards her.

For the moment, she stayed completely still.

The glint was there again, just once or twice ... but it didn't seem to come any closer.

Frowning, she found herself wondering what it was, and she started crawling, on all fours, towards the copse of trees. Sneaking away might be safer, but she needed to know what it was. At least she told herself she needed to know. What she probably needed, she realized, was to move quietly back towards the hamlet where she could get help. But then again, if it was nothing, she didn't want to disturb the nobles. They would just get angry.

Angry nobles were dangerous nobles.

She crawled through the grass, but while the glinting of metal occasionally repeated itself, no one came towards her and she couldn't even see anyone there.

Finally, she pulled out an arrow and got up to a crouching position, cocking it on her bowstring. Then, very carefully, she rose onto her feet. She was ready to shoot if anything looked suspicious or dangerous, but nothing happened, except that the sun hit whatever metal it was again. Frowning once more, Pil advanced cautiously towards it. She was close enough by now that she should have seen anyone near the treeline clearly, but there was nothing to be seen.

She lowered her bow, but kept the arrow cocked, walking at a normal pace towards the treeline.

Finally reaching it, she found the reason for the gleam. A long bladed dagger hung in one of the trees. It was a beautiful piece of work, with a hilt with bone carvings and pretty, polished stones, and it looked like whoever had passed this way had simply lost it by accident. Looking at the ground, Pil saw hoofprints. Not equine ... these were larger. A horse had come by this way. It had been shod, and it had been trotting. She followed the hoofprints a short while, but almost immediately it became clear that the horse had

slowed to walking pace amongst the trees. However, the owner of the dagger clearly didn't know he had lost it.

She turned back to get the dagger, still dangling from a branch. The scabbard had fallen off and was laying on the ground. Apparently, it had only dropped away a few moments ago, as no leaves had been blown on top of it yet. That would also explain why she hadn't seen the gleam before, and Pil shrugged, picking the dagger off the branch and the scabbard up from the ground. Putting the weapon back in its scabbard and tucking the whole thing safely into her belt, she would have to tell Valdemar about this. If he didn't recognize that dagger ... clearly an item belonging to someone of wealth and standing ... it was probably important, and if he did recognize it, it was his. Either way, she'd better bring it back.

A familiar sound behind her made her cock an arrow again and slowly, she turned around. A large, fat grouse was looking at her from further in amongst the trees and Pil smiled. That would go nicely with the three hares. She'd still need more, but at least she was getting there.

She pulled her bowstring taught ... the bird simply stood there, staring dumbly at her. It would be the easiest shot she'd ever taken.

When the arrow struck home, the grouse beat its wings in surprise a few times, then fell over dead. The vixen smiled and slung her bow over her shoulder, approaching the dead bird.

It wasn't until she picked it up she noticed the clearing further ahead.

Or the things in the clearing.

A moment later, Pil was running full tilt back towards the fishing hamlet ...

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As Aiperos left Father Bernd's house, he was still smiling. His tongue ran over his teeth in the left side of his jaw, feeling the empty space where one of his molars had been, and he grinned. The priest had bought both the 'shroud' and the 'blessed tooth', and his plans were now well underway.

The next thing he had to do, of course, was visit Hahzenstadt. But that would have to wait until the next day. For now, he planned to let things ferment for a day or so. In that time, he would try to learn more about the locals and how they viewed one another.

It was almost too easy ...