

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 VIII

Pil was relieved when they left the fishing hamlet. In her opinion, they had spent too much time there already and the feeling that the dead were watching them was invasive. She hadn't been too pleased to hear that the burly lynx was coming with them, though, but Valdemar had promised her that it would all work out. He would tell Ravn the truth as soon as they were a safe distance away from the Prior and his knights, and then they'd take it from there.

The noble had shown a great deal of confidence in his ability to defuse any uncomfortable situation that might arise when the lynx found out he was traveling with a female in disguise, and Pil found that confidence to be infectuous.

Things would work out. Somehow. She wasn't sure exactly how, but they would.

Now they were all riding a horse, and moving southwards. Pil had ridden a horse only a few times in her life, and never an animal as feisty as this one, and she found it difficult not to fall off. She didn't let on about it. Eventually, she would learn and until she did she would have to be quiet. She didn't want the two males to think she couldn't cope with the situation. That might mean that Valdemar would decide to send her back to her parents and while she missed them already, she still had to help find the fur who had destroyed the village and the keep. She had to ... or her family might not have a future.

They had left the hamlet behind at daybreak, and it was nearly noon now. Pil's stomach was growling and she took out a small piece of meat and ate it. She had managed to scrape the bones of last night's meal for some meat-shavings specifically for this purpose. No doubt she'd have to find something for them to eat before nightfall. They wouldn't reach a village until the following evening at the earliest.

Valdemar was talking to Ravn. Pil could only guess that he was explaining the situation to the lynx, but to her surprise, Ravn didn't seem upset. Instead he nodded once in a while and he seemed to be asking questions now and then as well.

All she could do was wait until she got told what was going on.

###

Prior Ivar was a wise fur and what he suggested was no doubt the right course of action, but Brother Eskild still felt a pang of uncertainty. It wasn't right to question his superior's instructions, but he still felt a need to do so. Biting down on his tongue, he stopped himself before he asked questions he had no right asking, and looked straight ahead.

He and the Prior were alone. The other three knights had been sent in different directions. All of them northwards. While it was prudent to make sure the assassin hadn't traveled that way, Brother Eskild would have preferred to send one rider that way, and keep four going south. But it wasn't his decision to make, and no doubt, Prior Ivar had good cause for his decision.

Baron Agger was on his way home. Not for long, probably, since he would be needed at court again, but he would swing by his estate on the way.

And of course, Valdemar Halk was on his way south as well but that was little comfort to Brother Eskild. While Valdemar seemed fervent enough, he still needed equipment, and frankly, he and his small entourage struck a peculiar and less-than-reassuring figure.

Sighing, he crossed himself and prayed silently for success. But in truth, he had no idea how to catch a fur about whose appearance he had no information.

Perhaps the Prior had an idea. It was pretty much all he could hope for, at least.

###

Valdemar let his horse drop back alongside Pil's. He smiled at her and nodded reassuringly, but didn't say anything for a short while. Slowing down further, he made sure Pil did so as well so that they dropped out of Ravn's earshot. He noted the obvious difficulty the young female had with riding, but also the stubborn refusal she showed in asking for help with it. He would offer a few suggestions, but not until she asked for advice. He didn't want to hurt her pride.

As they rode in silence, he looked around the landscape. The gently rolling hills were covered in brush. Here and there, the occasional small puddle or stream offered watering possibilities for local wildlife, but very few furs lived here. Apart from a sporadic clump of trees or even a lone birch left more or less on its own, there were no woods within sight, either. He knew if he turned west, he would reach real heath very soon.

This kind of land was very beautiful at certain times of the year, and quite a sight in the mornings as well, when mists were rolling in. It was mysterious then ... and most furs knew well to be wary, for at such times, the Evil One was close. Valdemar never quite believed that, much to Brother Rijkaard's dismay, but to the young noble, such mornings were special. He liked it particularly when he could walk through such a mist, covering him up to his waist but leaving his torso free. He'd swirl his paws through it, and wonder ...

Such mornings didn't happen all that often, but sometimes ... just sometimes ... he'd sneak out of the keep early in the morning and he'd be lucky to find such a spot.

No longer.

He realized his smile had faded, only to be replaced by a sad and worried expression, and Pil looked nervously at him. He let the smile return and looked at her.

"I was just ... thinking of what I'd lost," he said, by way of explanation.

Pil nodded and bit her bottom lip. "I can't even begin to imagine ... " she started, then stopped herself, and shook her head. There really wasn't much she could say that wouldn't sound cheap.

"Thank you," Valdemar said, quietly.

"Whatever for?"

"For not saying 'I understand'."

Chuckling, Pil shook her head again. "I couldn't understand."

"Anyway, Ravn was surprised, but not upset. He said he wasn't going to make a fuss over it, and that as long as you had a good reason ... which incidentally he felt you did ... it wasn't his place to judge you."

"Thank goodness."

They were quiet again for a moment, and Valdemar tried to think ahead. They'd go to Bremen, and there he would find an armorer. Baron Harald had carried a heavy purse, and he had given most of the contents to Valdemar. It would have to be enough, but somehow, Valdemar wasn't sure if it was. If not, he would have to settle for less than a full suit of armor.

"When you came back yesterday, Pil, you were short of breath. What happened?"

The vixen shuddered noticeably, closing her eyes. "I wanted to tell you about this, but I didn't know how to," she said. Her voice was full of worry and dread.

Valdemar raised an eyebrow. "Tell me about ... what exactly?"

"Promise me you won't get angry at me for not telling you this yesterday?"

Reigning in his horse, Valdemar stopped and Pil did the same. He looked at her with a questioning glance. "I can't really make that promise, but I promise I will try at least."

Sighing, Pil pulled the dagger and the scabbard from her belt. She had kept it under her cape so as to keep it hidden. Not so much from Valdemar as from the other nobles at the hamlet. They would have asked her to go back to the clearing where she found it and she really didn't want to. Not with what she had seen there.

She was scared, pure and simple.

"I found this yesterday, just as I was getting that grouse. I thought it was such a fancy thing it had to belong to someone of rank, and I wanted to show it to you, in case you recognized it," she said and gave Valdemar the knife.

He took it and looked it over, unsheathing it. "I do," he said, wearily. "It belonged to my father. Why didn't you give me this yesterday and where did you find it?"

"I didn't because I was scared you'd tell me to show you the place. It was by a grove of trees, near a field with some big rocks on it. I hid by the rocks most of the day and only went to the grove later, to see if I could shoot a few more birds. But ... "

"I know the place. But?"

Pil hung her head. "Well, I found the dagger there. But there was also ..."

"Also?" Valdemar asked, somewhat confused. He had no idea what his father's dagger was doing in that copse of trees.

Pil realized she had to explain what she had seen. All she could do was hope Valdemar wouldn't want to turn around to go back and look ... or even worse, send her home. "Well, there was a terrible mess in the clearing. Someone had rammed poles into the ground. There were animal heads displayed on them and someone had burnt a huge bonfire there. The whole place reeked once I got close," she said, looking down.

Valdemar's eyes widened. "Pil ... "

"I know, I know, I should have told you, but I was *scared!*" the vixen whimpered.

For a moment, Valdemar did feel anger rising within himself. Then he shook his head. Pil could not be expected to cope with that kind of thing. She was young, and she had never had to deal with death before. Not like this at least. In fact, Valdemar realized, it was amazing she hadn't broken down with what she had seen in the fishing hamlet. She had clearly preferred being out hunting, but she hadn't shown fear once while there. For that reason, if for no other, he knew that what she had seen in the clearing must have been very unpleasant indeed.

"You're actually braver than I think you realize. Most furs would not have been able to cope with what you've seen these last few days. I'm not angry," he said, trying to smile reassuringly. "But I would have liked to see that for myself. My father was a good, God-fearing fur and if someone tried to implicate him in this whole affair ... "

Pil nodded and swallowed hard. She fought back tears, mostly because she didn't know why they were coming in the first place. Was it Valdemar's kindness that did it? Was it shame at her fear? Or was it just everything that had happened finally catching up with her?

Maybe it was all of that, and more.

"I got a good look. I could ... tell you what it looked like, exactly?" she said, hoarsely.

Valdemar nodded. He could see Pil was at the verge of tears, but this *was* important. "If you could?"

Closing her eyes for a moment, both to gather her thoughts and to remember exactly what she had seen, Pil took a couple of deep breaths. "First of all, there were six or seven stakes hammered into the ground. They were quite tall. Taller than you. Animal heads had been placed on top of them. There was a goat and a boar ... I think a deer as well. I didn't like looking at them. Someone had drawn symbols on the ground too, but they

were mostly gone. I think the dew had done most of it and it looked like someone had tried to stomp it away too."

"That is strange. Why leave the stakes standing if they had tried to remove the symbols with their feet?" Valdemar asked.

"I ... don't know. It just looked that way," Pil said, biting her lips again.

Valdemar shook his head. "It's alright. I didn't mean it as a question for you in particular. I was just wondering aloud. Anyway, what else was there?"

"There was the remains of a bonfire. It wasn't right by the stakes or the symbols, but more off to one side. It must have been a pretty big fire, judging from the scorched area of grass. I guess that's why they hid amongst the trees? So it couldn't be seen as easily from a distance.

"Good thinking. That's probably why."

Pil felt somewhat reassured by the praise and she even managed to smile a little. "Well, the smell was really something else. I don't know what they had been burning, but it stank like ... "

"Like?" Valdemar asked, grasping at straws.

Shrugging, Pil looked up at last. "Well, have you ever tossed meat into a fireplace? You know ... accidentally dropped a nice, juicy rib that you were gnawing on? That's what the smell was like. Like burnt flesh and bone, and there was something else there as well, but I really can't tell you what that was. I've never smelled anything like it before. It isn't something you'd find in the area, I can tell you that, though. It was absolutely vile, and very overpowering."

Valdemar thought about that for a moment. Then he nodded. "And you say you found my father's dagger there? Did you see any other objects?"

"None, but that doesn't mean there hadn't been any. They could have been burnt too."

"Again, that's good thinking."

Pil smiled a little again. Valdemar looked like he was already deep in thought and she didn't want to disturb that. So she let him think ... and rode on silently next to him.

###

Adelheid was at the well, getting water for the inn when she saw it.

At first, she didn't really believe her own eyes but the evidence was quite incontrovertible. Father Bernd had just walked past her. Without a cane. With his back straight. And with a ferocious glint in his eyes, even for him.

But the priest had been sick for years. Slowly but certainly wasting away, growing weaker and weaker until he had barely been able to walk, and needed to support himself on a heavy cane to even allow himself to shuffle along at a snail's pace. And clearly, she wasn't the only one to notice the stark and profound change that had come over the wolf.

Other females gathered at the well were staring after him. They normally met there, exchanging what little gossip they had ... occasionally starting new rumours to build on. Adelheid had often been the target of such rumours. Being a scullery wench, and unmarried at her age, meant the locals could be counted on to say just about anything about her. She'd been called everything from whore to witch, and she knew there was little she could really do to change it. It was an ever-worsening spiral, too. It meant that none of the local males would want to get involved with her in any serious way. They'd *pay* for her services ... and she had often been offered money for it ... but she wasn't like that. But while they'd pay, they wouldn't want to get involved in anything serious.

The stupidity of this situation was almost enough to make her laugh, if it wasn't so damned bitter. There were several young males in the town that she would have thought a good match for herself, but most of those had long since married and those who hadn't wouldn't marry *her*. After all, she was a whore or a witch ... or both.

A whore who refused to sell herself. She groaned at the thought and shook her head, hoisting the yoke over her shoulders.

Looking after Father Bernd, she saw him headed for the church. Since he was the priest, that shouldn't be a surprise in itself, but Father Bernd rarely went there except when he had to. No one really asked questions why. He was sick, and walking around in a church that was cold even in summer probably wouldn't do him any good.

But he had gone there now. On his own two feet, with a straight back.

Had it been any other fur, she would probably have been happy for them, but in the case of the priest, she wasn't sure if this would be a turn for better or worse for Pelzendorf, and so she hurried home to tell her father what she had seen.

###

"Why are you doing this?" Ravn asked.

It was getting colder, and the fire hadn't quite taken yet. Pil was skinning a hare that she had shot. At least she felt useful in that respect. She kept everyone fed, even if she had lost an arrow while hunting. It had struck a rock and the arrowhead had bent, and the shaft had splintered. Still, she had managed to catch something edible and right now, that mattered more than a broken arrow. Going to bed hungry would leave them tired tomorrow, and they were already far from familiar lands. They had made reasonable good speed, and she had picked up the idea of how to sit in the saddle as they day progressed. It wasn't comfortable and she felt sure she had the beginnings of saddle-sores, but she knew a bit about herbs and she had found some useful mosses near the campsite. She'd make some patches with that and sit on those tomorrow. After that, she would hopefully no longer need them. As long as they didn't move faster than a trot, she could keep up. If the two males broke into a gallop, she'd be unable to keep up.

"Well, if I don't skin it, it'll taste weird, and if I leave the head on, you can't put the spit through," she said, shrugging.

Valdemar nearly choked on something and he looked away, looking like he was about to laugh out loud.

Ravn ignored the noble's antics and kept looking at Pil. "That's not what I meant. I just want you to explain to me, in your own words, why you're here. His Lordship told me already, but I'd prefer to hear it from you. Look, this is dangerous, and it's no place for a young female."

Pil had known all day that this question would be asked, and she had gone over how she wanted to answer it again and again. But as the case always was in cases like that, she ended up simply saying what came to her, rather than some pre-determined, rehearsed lines.

"I'm here because Valdemar needs help, and because my family's future depends on his success. And I'm here because what happened at the hamlet was wrong, and I want to see some justice done for all those innocent furs," she said and looked at the grizzled lynx.

Ravn nodded, matter-of-factly. He didn't seem upset or displeased with the answer, just not ... fully satisfied either.

"And what will you do if it comes down to a fight?" he asked and stoked the fire a little. It was finally catching.

Filling the hare with wild blueberries that she had found on a bush near a lone tree, Pil closed the dead animal with a few small, sharpened sticks. Then she ran the spit through it before she quite carefully placed it over the fire.

"I should have brought a cooking-grill for this," she muttered, "You know, like the one used in kitchens, on three feet to place over the embers."

Ravn smiled crookedly. "I know the object ... and you are dodging the question."

"Not really," Pil answered and shrugged. "The truth is, I don't know what I'll do because I don't know what the situation will be. I've never killed anyone, or even hurt anyone if that's what you mean. I don't want to, either, but that won't be my choice."

Again, Ravn nodded. "I suggest if things get violent, Milord ... that she stays in the background as much as possible," he said and looked at Valdemar.

"I certainly had no intention of deliberately placing her in harms way, Ravn, but she's got excellent eyes, and she's a fine shot. She might see things we miss and as you can see, food isn't going to be an issue while she's along," Valdemar said and wrapped his cloak tightly around himself to shield himself against the beginning evening chill.

Ravn fell silent for a while, before looking around. "Nothing's going to happen out here on the heath anyway," he finally said.

"Probably not but we should still keep watch," Pil added. "I'd rather not wake up tomorrow only to learn that someone stumbled upon us during the night and decided to run off with the horses and Valdemar's money."

"You take the first watch then," Ravn suggested, "Then wake me up and his lordship can take the early morning watch?"

Valdemar nodded. "That seems like a good plan. And that hare already smells nice."

"Patience ..." Pil chuckled. "If you eat it now, you'll get a stomach ache. Wait until it's done."

Muttering something about patience being overrated, Valdemar tried not to smile too widely. It wasn't easy, though. He had a very good feeling about this whole adventure already.

###

Aiperos looked at the church building. He wouldn't go near it, of course, but he wouldn't have to, either. The priest was already firmly in his grasp. It had almost been too easy. He would have to visit the neighbouring village soon, to get things started there as well, but until further notice, he was quite happy with the way things were progressing in Pelzendorf.

The priest was a central figure in any community.

He was sitting near the well, playing a little tune on a bone flute, tapping the rhythm with his left foot, all the while he observed the comings and goings of the locals. They were just about as empty-headed as he had expected, and he detested them ... but he couldn't show that. A few children looked up at him, curious as to who he was and how he played his instrument. At least he didn't mind the children too much. Children always had hopes and dreams. The problem was when they grew old enough to betray those dreams.

So what if they dreamt of fortune and glory? So what if most little boys promised themselves that one day they would be knighted, too?

Those who succeeded were pathetically few. Maybe four or five in a generation if *that* many. The problem, as he saw it, was that most of them never even tried. If at least they fought tooth and nail, to the absolute limit of their ability to achieve their dreams ... and then failed, that would have been something. He would have respected the attempt and acknowledged that the goal was probably too lofty. What he despised was the lethargy, the inactivity, the apathy ...

The *acceptance*.

That things were as they were as they were and that they might as well not bother. He loathed that sentiment, and as far as he was concerned, those feeling that way were unworthy of the souls they had been given.

If the child of a village peasant in all earnest told him that it was his greatest dream to farm the land and grow crops, he'd find the child strange ... but at least he would respect the kid for being a realist. And once that child had grown up to become a peasant, he would acknowledge that he had reached his dreams. Aiperos could not hate such a fur, although he did find anyone settling for so little rather unimaginative and dull.

His whole problem lay with those who betrayed their own dreams. And he could see those dreams, clear as the light of day ... right there, on their faces. Even if they had

forgotten these dreams themselves, long ago. The mounted sergeant he had killed on the way here, was just as guilty. He had dreamt of being a priest as a child.

Adelheid had dreamt of owning her own inn, and she was working towards that, and would almost certainly achieve it by taking over from her father when he died. She hadn't married, and so the inn would be hers. If she married, the inn would be her husband's and she would own nothing. So long as she didn't marry, he respected her. There were very few others in town that hadn't forgotten their childhood fantasies, but they *were* there. The blacksmith had everything he had wanted from life, for instance. One or two of the peasants had ended up where they wanted to be as well. That was about it though.

His tune became a little wilder. There were no adults around and he let his foot beat out the sound of a drum, as the music turned more martial. A couple of young boys quickly caught the rhythm and bounced their knees in tune to it.

Aiperos smiled. Just as he had Father Bernd in his grasp, he would claim every other fur in this village soon enough. But they were just the beginning.

###

The Queen was still waiting for Baron Harald's return, but she had no idea when that would be. What she did know was that she wanted him back, as soon as possible. She trusted him above most of the nobles now present at court, and he had to be back, anyway, for her son's funeral.

One didn't simply dig a hole and dump the body in when the dead fur in question had been King. One waited until all the nobles had arrived to pay their proper respects. They were almost all there now, however, as were most of the ecclesiastical potentates, and soon, the funeral would take place. The Bishop of Roskilde would be in charge of the actual ceremonies surrounding that event, and the Queen had to admit that Baron Harald's trust in the fur seemed reasonable and well placed.

At the moment, he was sitting to her left. Around the table, thirteen other bishops and nobles were assembled. The greatest males of the Realm.

One of them, a powerfully built and scarred boar, leaned forwards over the table. "Your Majesty, we must cleave to the main issue!" he growled.

The Queen realized the growl wasn't hostile. Like so many boars, the boar in question had some fairly impressive tusks and he could either drool or growl. Most went for the growl, and frankly she was grateful for it.

She nodded towards the noble in a gracious manner, before straightening her sleeves. "I realize what you consider the main issue, Count Erik, but personally, I don't see the issue of succession as nearly as important as ensuring the stability and peace of the Realm at such a desperate hour."

The boar looked annoyed, but kept his voice as respectful as his tusks allowed. "With all due respect, the two issues are interconnected and cannot be separated. With succession in place, any rebels will be dissuaded!"

"Or they may very well feel that until the next King has been crowned, a revolt is nearly legitimate," the Bishop of Roskilde added, looking directly at the boar, then at the rest of the nobles with a challenging gleam in his eyes, as if daring them to be the first one to revolt.

Count Erik glared right back at the bishop, leaning slightly over the table and clenching his fists in anger. "The Realm is like a female in need of a firm husband to control her. Without it, she has no direction and no one to guide her, and she will be lost. That is how it is, and how it has *always* been!"

The Queen didn't hear the Bishop's angry retort, and she barely noticed the squabbles that broke out in general around the table. She was deep in thought. Now more than ever she needed Baron Agger to return as swiftly as possible.

###

After morning prayers, Brother Eskild got to his feet and looked at the Prior. He needed to ask something, but he knew it would seem irreverent of him to do so. Still, if he didn't he wouldn't keep wondering and it would gnaw away at him until he found out.

Sighing, he decided he had to ask and he looked towards his superior. "Prior Ivar, may I ask a question?"

"You may," was the answer as Ivar got to his feet.

Brother Eskild spread out his arms. They were miles away from any kind of settlement and while they were consistently riding south by south east, it seemed like they were just heading rather aimlessly into the Holy Roman Empire.

"Where are we going? Apart from into the empire, that is? I am curious, simply because it seems to me that young Valdemar Halk and his small retinue were on to something by heading for Bremen. For a large city. But where are we headed exactly? And ... why are we heading *there* of all places?"

"I'm not sure I follow you, exactly."

"It's pretty simple, really. Why are we heading where we are heading of all places, and not somewhere else?"

Prior Ivar chuckled. The younger knight was right to be confused, really. He brushed his paws off against one another and headed towards the horses. They were grazing near a tiny stream, but while they no doubt enjoyed the rest, he wanted to move on.

"We are heading towards the Imperial Court, Eskild."

"Erhh...very well, but why there of all places?"

"The assassin already killed the King. Who stands to benefit the most from his death?"

Eskild thought this over long and hard. "Well ... the next in succession would be the obvious question but he didn't have any sons, brothers or even uncles. I'm sure they are quarrelling about succession back in Nyborg already."

The Prior nodded. "Almost certainly. But there are male survivors of the King's line. They are simply a splinter of the family that split off generations ago. His Majesty had distant relations in the Imperial nobility, and they will almost certainly make their claims known."

"Ahhh, I get it. You are assuming the assassin was sent by the King's German relatives then, and you are going to find them and find out?" Eskild said and looked like everything fell into place in his head. "But what if they make trouble or won't answer questions? We need more help then."

"Unless you're prepared to invade the Empire, we can't force them to talk by capturing them. We can, however, try to talk to them by being infallibly polite and by letting them believe we would be on their side. That we didn't come to find the assassin ... but that we came to offer our support for their claim to the throne."

"Prior, we mustn't lie!"

"I don't intend to. I intend to let them come to their own, wrong conclusions."

Again Eskild nodded as realization dawned on him. "So you're not going to actually say you support their claims? You're just going to let them think you do?"

"Exactly. Politics, Brother Eskild, is two-thirds omissions and one-third guile," the prior chuckled as he gently got a hold of the horses to lead them back to the camp to get them saddled.

Once they rode on, Eskild thought that he was happy to be part of one of the holy orders. Politics did nothing for him.