

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.

Historical characters appearing by name cannot be copyrighted and are therefore omitted from the copyright claims. All other characters in this story are © Joan Jacobsen, 2008.

This is not a historical account of actual events. It is a work of fiction and consequently, the author will not be held responsible for historical accuracy.

Legal Notice: This story is Copyright © 2008 by Joan Jacobsen. This story may not be modified in any way. This story may not be posted on a mirror site or any other Internet site without the written permission of the author. This story may not be distributed on print, magnetic, electrical or optical mediums without the expressed permission of the author.

Joan Jacobsen hereby asserts moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Chapter XXI

Mass was a tense experience. Pil and Ravn were located near the exit and neither liked the feeling in the church. The priest had gone through the motions, but he was no less angry than he had been when preaching by the well, and it made everyone present nervous and jittery. Valdemar, being noble, albeit a stranger, was placed near the main altar. The locals were packed in tightly, every villager from both Hahzenfeld and Pelzendorf was present, and the church hadn't been built for that many furs.

Pil wanted to leave. The vixen wasn't afraid of the priest anymore ... not after that talk she had had with Adelheid two days before in the stables ... but she found him repulsive and his overt hatred offended her. From the look on Ravn's face, he felt much the same way. He had spent a good deal of time with Adelheid since they came back from that awful hunting trip and Pil was pretty sure the two furs had taken a real liking to each other by now. It was always nice to see.

But the equine's words kept coming back to her. That Valdemar would need her before the end. She didn't think Adelheid had prophetic abilities as such, but there was just something in those words that struck a cord with Pil and her thoughts kept revolving around them.

It was almost time for communion at least. That meant they'd soon be out of here. Pil sincerely hoped that by next Sunday, they would be somewhere else, even if that meant Ravn would have to leave Adelheid behind. She didn't like the village ... and it was still raining. It hadn't stopped since she and Ravn had been out hunting ... not even for a moment, and by now, everything was completely drenched. Thatched roofs were so heavy with water it had started seeping into almost every building. The mud outside was so deep in places that one risked sinking in to one's knees.

Worst of all, the ennui that had settled on everyone was hard to cope with. Adelheid's father was getting gloomy too, even though his daughter remained cheerful. Probably because of Ravn. But apart from her ... everyone was affected.

The old stranger selling relics had left a couple of days before, too. Apparently, he'd decided to take his chances with the weather anyway, and Pil couldn't blame him for wanting to get away from Pelzendorf. The village was neither friendly nor welcoming.

The priest raised the cup of wine towards the crucifix, speaking the words of transubstantiation, but as he turned around, Pil noticed the look on his face had changed.

It was almost triumphant.

He reached out behind himself and placed the cup on the altar.

Some of the locals got up to go take communion, but they were stopped by a dismissive paw-gesture from the priest. Then he took out a large, rolled up scroll and held it aloft.

"NONE of you shall receive Holy Communion today. Or indeed on ANY day, until you have properly atoned for your sins!" he said.

There was some confusion amongst the furs in the church. The priest was speaking in German, not in Latin, and they did not really understand why they couldn't parttake in the holy rites as they intended.

Pil nudged Ravn who looked like he was falling asleep. But he came around and paid attention once he realized what was going on. Valdemar was halfway out of his chair and from the look on his face, Pil could tell he intended to protest.

"What sins?" a young male asked. He sounded quite confused.

The priest sneered. "You all know what sins!" he growled. "They are grivious enough that even the Curia has learned of them and Holy Father has decreed that all of Pelzendorf and all of Hahzenfeld is placed under Interdict UNTIL the Holy Inquisition has deemed that all sin has been purged from you all!"

Again he brandished the scroll. Then he opened it and started reading.

Pil couldn't hear half of it. The locals were protesting. Some were weeping. Some looked like they'd been punched ... hard ...

Valdemar was on his feet and moving towards his friends and Pil nodded to Ravn who started towards the noble to help him get through the protesting villagers.

"THIS IS THE PAPAL SEAL!!" the priest roared and held the scroll aloft. "UNTIL THE INQUISITION DECIDES OTHERWISE, NO FUR IN PELZENDORF OR HAHZENFELD WILL RECEIVE ABSOLUTION. NO MASSES WILL BE HELD. NO HOLY RITES PERFORMED OF ANY KIND, INCLUDING CHRISTIAN BURIALS. REPENT, SINNERS! REPENT AND BEG FOR GOD'S MERCY!"

The outcry in response was so loud that Pil wondered why the roof of the church didn't collapse. For now, she just wanted to get out of the building. Ravn managed to move enough furs aside to let him and Valdemar reach the door and Pil opened it and stepped outside.

It was still raining ... but right now, that was preferable.

###

"They are many ... " the scout whispered.

"How many?" Harald asked, also keeping his voice low.

The fox was hiding behind a large tree. A path led through the woods only a few long strides away, and his troops were hiding in bushes, trees and behind rocks all around him and on both sides of the path. It was a perfect spot for an ambush. The path turned nearby and unless an incoming enemy sent out scouts, they could be taken completely by surprise.

There hadn't been any enemy scouts.

Only two friendly ones.

The young fur looked confused. "I ... can't count past more than five, Milord," he said, shamefully. "But they're not as many as us."

"So we outnumber them ... and we have the element of surprise on our side. Tell everyone to be ready," the fox said, drawing his sword.

The scout nodded eagerly and crept away. Harald closed his eyes and sighed. Spilling blood on a Sunday ... so this was what it had come to? But what choice did he have? A group of Hinze's furs were inbound. Armed and escorting two ox-drawn carts, full of

supplies. No doubt they were there specifically to catch whoever had destroyed the hunter's camp.

They had no idea how many furs they were up against, and now they'd find out the hard way.

He waited a while. The enemy was moving through the woods, towards the village that Harald and his furs had visited two days before.

If they reached the village, they would find out it was loyal to the crown and the killing would begin. Harald *had* to prevent that. It wasn't simply a matter of it being the right thing to do ... it was an all important signal to send to other loyalists out there. If the rumor spread that there were troops fighting for the Queen in the area, and that they wouldn't let harm come to loyal peasants ... then Hinze would find it harder to bully everyone.

Of course, there was a backside to that situation too. Harald couldn't protect more than one village, and even then only against limited numbers of enemies. Hinze might simply decide to step up the violence.

Harald sent a quick prayer towards Heaven, hoping God would favor him and his.

A small rock fell to the ground next to him and he nodded. That was the signal from the lookout he had stationed in the tree. That meant the enemy was now in sight.

Then it was almost time. Harald started counting under his breath, while listening intently. He couldn't make out exactly how many enemies were out there but he could hear the wheels of the carts creaking and the sounds made by the animals pulling them.

12 ... 13 ...

He flexed his fingers around the grip of his sword and nodded to no one in particular.

15 ... 16 ...

This was so different than outright war. He had thought so many, many times. It was far dirtier and far, far deadlier. No one would care about noble birth here. No ransom would be offered or given. This was what it always meant to go to war for commoners, but for him ... it was a very different feeling.

19 ... 20 ...

"NOW! ATTACK! ATTACK!!!" he roared and spun around the tree.

His troops dropped out of trees and came out of hiding all around him. A few stayed in the trees, in perfect positions to pick off individual enemies with their bows.

Harald flung his cape aside and broke into a flat out run towards the nearest fur in front of him. He was a young feline ... who died with a look of absolute confusion and surprise on his face. He couldn't be older than sixteen ... maybe seventeen.

He was an enemy, serving Hinze and Count Erik.

Harald didn't even pause, leaping up over the dead fur and onto the first of the ox-carts, hacking at the fur in front of him. All around him, his troops were tearing into the surprised enemy with reckless abandon.

But some fought back. From behind the second cart, a group of seven or eight furs counter-charged.

Combat was joined in earnest. Furs slashed and hacked at each other. Limbs were crippled ... or lost. Lives snuffed out. Guts opened, heads severed ...

Harald didn't even pause to think. His furs needed his help.

Roaring at the top of his lungs, he jumped off the cart, sword overhead for a powerful blow brought home with both paws. He struck with all the force he could muster, splitting an enemy from shoulder to midsection. Blood showered him as the corpse fell away from him.

Then he felt pain ...

A lot of pain ...

###

Father Bernd growled but couldn't help a smile spreading on his face as he slowly and deliberately hammered the scroll up on the inner door of the church. He'd decided against hanging it on the outer doors, since the rain would ruin it in moments. Then he turned around and glared angrily at the locals, all gathered to look at him. Some were clearly angry as well. Most of them were terrified. Many were weeping.

He didn't even look at those. He concentrated at the angry ones. They were ready for his Lord to claim them. They were the ones who had grown to hate and resent the Church.

"Go home. Repent and atone. Pray. *Debase* yourselves before God!" he sneered. "And if you want this scroll to come down, then you will help the Inquisition find and punish the heretics and witches in Pelzendorf and Hahzenfeld. All of them! By hatred and flame!"

"Your God doesn't seem to do much except hating these days!" one voice hissed back at him.

He didn't see who said it, but he had to use considerable willpower not to laugh out loud in triumph. Most of the furs in front of him immediately started looking for the one who had spoken. Shrieks of "heretic!" and "You're to blame!" went up ... but no heretic was produced.

Father Bernd pushed his way through the crowd and headed for home. If things went as he expected, Pelzendorf and Hahzeldorf would be alight with pyres within a week. And he understood his Lord's intentions now. If these simpletons ... if these foolish, gullible furs killed an innocent, then they would be irredeemably damned.

But some might give themselves willingly before then. Aiperos had foreseen that it would happen, in fact.

As he cleared the throng, he turned around and looked at the villagers, narrowing his eyes. "I expect you to cooperate. If you learn of heretics and witchcraft, my door is open and you can report it to me. You will not take matters into your own paws until the Inquisition arrives. If you do, you are nothing more than simple murderers. This will happen according to the law as dictated by Holy Mother Church. Not according to your whims!"

That was a particularly nice touch, if he had to say so himself. Aiperos hadn't explicitly told him to say that, but he knew the locals. Rumors took hold easily, and if he gave those rumors a couple of days to spread, they'd be far stronger. Besides, whoever ended up on the pyres, there would be furs who would swear to their innocence. To see their loved ones and family put to the torch by the Inquisition would make those protesting even more resentful of the Church.

He turned and walked away towards his house. Behind him, a female voice rang out.

"SHOULDN'T YOU HAVE KEPT US SAFE FROM THIS?"

He turned his head and stopped momentarily. "You are all responsible for your own souls. I have merely been a shephard. YOU let the predators in amongst you."

Then he resumed walking.

Behind him, the outcry of rage and disappointment was sweet music in his ears.

###

"There is little time to waste. This whole village has gone mad," Valdemar said and sighed, looking towards the scene near the church, from the doorway to the inn.

Ravn nodded. "You can say that again. Do we really want to be here when the Inquisition arrives?"

"No!" Pil said, firmly. "Not if I can help it anyway."

Valdemar rubbed his face. "I agree. But I still have to find out who is behind this insanity. The priest? He's angry and full of bile, but ... many priests are like that. It's not that uncommon and they help keep a lot of furs on the path of moral virtue."

"But ... " Ravn began, gesticulating towards the now dispersing throng of furs in front of the furs.

"Ravn, I saw that letter. I was up close. It bore the Papal seal, just as the Priest said. Can you blame him for being angry, when he is preaching to furs who are so sinful that they end up getting interdicted?"

Ravn closed his mouth and sighed, then shook his head. "I guess not," he mumbled.

Pil looked between the two males. "Didn't you want to go and look for the assassin around the village, anyway? And what if he's not hiding out there, but in here ... in the village itself?"

Valdemar nodded and rubbed his eyes wearily. Pil's question was very valid and he had thought along those lines himself. "I did want to, but we'd find nothing out there in this accursed weather. We *have* to wait ... for the rain to stop and the ground to dry out at least a little. And if we start searching the village the assassin would probably know it within moments."

"How?" Ravn asked. "How would he know?"

"Because if he's here, then the villagers are almost certainly helping him hide. He'd need food for one thing," Valdemar answered.

Pil wanted to say that the assassin might be hiding in plain sight for all they knew, but she didn't get to speak up before Ravn did.

"I have a really bad feeling about this whole Inquisition-thing," the lynx said, his face growing dark. "The villagers have already made it clear what they think of our hosts. What's to keep them from denouncing them as heretics?"

Valdemar looked back outside and shrugged. "Nothing," he said, honestly.

Ravn gritted his teeth. "Are we going to let them do that??"

"No. But you know as well as me that we can't stop an Inquisitor," Valdemar answered. He didn't look pleased about the situation either.

"We could offer to let them come with us! You'd need a good innkeeper when you rebuild your home!" Pil burst in.

Ravn nodded and looked at the vixen. "That's not a bad idea. I don't think they'll come unless they have no choice but if they are denounced ... "

"If they are denounced, Ravn, the Inquisition will investigate them!" Valdemar broke in.

The lynx nodded, going quiet.

Valdemar closed the door and headed towards the fireplace. "If only this damnable rain would stop ... we could go search the whole area. If we could just establish he's not hiding out there somewhere, he'd have to be in the village ... and who knows, if the Inquisition arrives, it might actually do some good."

"How?" Ravn asked.

"You're repeating yourself!" Valdemar grumbled. "But think about it. There is a good chance that the reason this whole village has become corrupt is because of the assassin. We already know he's in league with the Evil One. In fact, I plan on telling the Inquisitor about what happened at Slien so he knows what to search for. If we are lucky, he'll catch the assassin and we get to see him burn at the stake!"

Pil wanted to say something. She wanted to point out that any tracks would have been gone within the first moments of the downpour, considering how heavy it was. She also wanted to tell Valdemar that while the Inquisition might well find the assassin, other furs were probably going to suffer too. That Ravn had a legitimate reason to worry for the safety of their hosts. She wanted to ... but she didn't know how to phrase it, and she didn't want to take away from Valdemar's hopes.

Instead she went in search of Adelheid in the kitchen ...

They could all do with something warm to eat and drink.

###

It wasn't the first time Harald had been wounded, but this was painful. An enemy had crept up on him and stabbed him in the back, and while Harald had turned around and cut down the fur like the coward he was, the fox was still in a lot of pain. He wasn't sure how serious the wound was, but there was no time to think of that now. It would have to wait until the carts had been brought back to the village and they were safe.

"Milord ... I have some bad news," Jon said and Harald turned to face his quartermaster.

"Go on," the fox urged, sitting down on a rock. He felt tired and he knew he was still bleeding.

Jon didn't ask. He went straight to work checking the wound. "Two furs on horseback escaped. They were bringing up the rear some distance away and they turned around and rode off before we could stop them."

"That is bad news indeed. Hinze will know of this by this time tomorrow," Harald groaned. "Anything else."

"We lost three furs. And we've got four wounded, apart from yourself. And Milord, you're going to have to lay low for a while. This wound is deep. If it grows angry ... "

Harald sighed and hung his head. "I've got little time to lay about, especially if Hinze is coming."

"You may not have much choice. I can stop this from bleeding but ... "

"I know ... "

Jon nodded sagely and got to work bandaging the wound as best he could.

Harald didn't protest. He sat there and let Jon get to work. There wasn't really anything else he could do. So they had suffered losses. It couldn't be avoided. He had known this when they started out, but it still felt awful. And they didn't even have a priest nearby who could give the dead a proper, Christian burial. They'd have to do the best they could, though. As for the dead rebels, that was a different matter.

"How many enemy dead?" he asked. Little black spots danced in front of his eyes and he closed them, resting his head in his paws.

"Fourteen, Milord. You took care of four of them yourself. We've got eight prisoners who surrendered when they realized they were outnumbered."

"We can't bring them. Kill them."

Jon looked uncomfortable at the order. "Milord ... the others ... they are just ordinary furs. Killing prisoners in cold blood isn't ... it doesn't sit too well with them," he said, quietly.

Harald sighed again. "I know. It's a dreadful thing, but what choice do we have? We are too few to guard them and if we let them run they'll just go back to Hinze's forces."

"Yes Milord," Jon mumbled.

The fox blinked a few times and got up without waiting for his wound to get properly bandaged. Then he headed towards the group of furs he could see by the cart furthest away.

"They surrendered when they knew they had lost," one fur told Harald and stepped aside. Eight ragged looking rebels were kneeling ... disarmed and with arrows pointed towards them.

Harald looked at them. "You're asking for mercy I take it?" he asked.

They nodded eagerly. One of them dared to look up. "Yes Milord. Please ... spare our lives."

"Like you spared the lives of loyalists you came across?" Harald asked. "Or like you intended to spare our lives? Or the lives of the furs in the village nearby?"

The fur looked back down again, shaking all over. Harald flexed his fingers. There was a prickly sensation in his fingertips and he was still feeling faint. But he'd spare his furs the discomfort of executing these rebels if he could.

"There is only one punishment for rebellion. But because you surrendered, I will grant you the same mercy I would grant a captured noble," he said, matter-of-factly.

"Wh ... what is that?" the rebel asked, without looking up.

"A merciful, swift death," Harald said, evenly, before looking at the guards. "If any of them try to run, shoot them ... then pin them to the ground with arrows and wait until they bleed to death."

He got grim nods in return as he pulled his sword and got to work.

It turned his stomach ...

But what choice did he have?

###

Valdemar hadn't said much since sitting down by the fireplace. Pil had brought some food and drink from the kitchen, but she was tired of waiting and she had gone upstairs looking for Adelheid. The equine hadn't been in the kitchen when she went there to look for her. Instead, Klaus had given her some hot soup and ale, and both Ravn and Valdemar had seemed pleased to get some food in their bellies. Pil had almost inhaled her food and drink before heading upstairs. She wanted to suggest that Adelheid and her father pack their belongings and get out of Pelzendorf while there was still time. She had no doubt what would happen if the equines stayed until the Inquisition arrived. It was unlikely to end well and Pil wasn't going to let the only two nice and friendly furs in the village end up on the rack ... or worse ... if she could help it.

And there was probably very little time to waste.

She headed towards what she believed was Adelheid's room and opened the door ... completely forgetting to knock.

What she found inside nearly made her shout out in surprise.

Adelheid was sitting on the edge of her bed, feeding a badly wounded male canid resting there. The equine looked shocked and very surprised ... but clearly realized that making a scene was not going to help.

"You could have knocked ... " she said, rather reproachfully.

"I ... I'm sorry," Pil managed to stutter. "But what ... "

Adelheid shrugged and fed the canid another spoonful of food. "I found him up on the hill not long ago. I was helping one of the local boys find his flock of sheep in the mist, and we came across this fur. I couldn't let him bleed to death, now could I?"

Pil shook her head. "No. But ... but I know this fur!" she whispered.

Eskild turned his head around a little and Pil had to cover her mouth not to scream at the sight of the wound on his face.

"God almighty," she whimpered. "What happened to you?"

Eskild looked a little confused at first. Then realization dawned on him. "Valdemar Halk's ... squire," he mumbled. "Thought you ... mute."

Pil blanched, realizing she had forgotten all about that. But there was nothing she could do now except play along. "No Sir," she whispered. "I'd ... better go. Adelheid, I needed to talk to you but I'll wait until you're done," she said before backing out of the room.

She closed the door and took a couple of deep breaths. This was all wrong. The two Hospitalers were supposed to go in a different direction from Slien. How could Brother Eskild have ended up in Pelzendorf? And what had happened to cause him such horrible injuries? And what about the Prior?

Nothing was what it seemed to be. Nothing was *right*.

Ravn came up the stairs with a harrowed look on his face. "We're too late," he wheezed. "An Inquisitor ... by the well ... "

Pil clenched her eyes shut and grimaced.

They were too late indeed.

###

Aiperos ... in the guise of Inquisitor Corsa ... stood by the well. The rain was still cascading down, but that was all part of the plan. He was waiting. The locals had noticed him, and they were coming towards him slowly and uncertainly. All except Father Bernd, who was of course in on the plan. The priest was approaching him with arms spread wide, his face displaying every sign of joy and happiness imaginable. Behind him, villagers were sidling closer. Others were still only looking from doors and around corners.

The demon patted the neck of his mount. It was a massive black horse, chomping at its bit and stomping restlessly in the mud.

It was, of course, not real. But to anyone looking or touching it, it would feel as real as any other horse.

"Your Emminence!" Father Bernd exclaimed. "It is truly a pleasure and a great relief that you have arrived so swiftly."

He spoke loudly. Loudly enough that even those hiding around the corners would be able to hear it, despite the rain. Aiperos almost snickered ... but he restrained himself.

"I am Fra Matteo Corsa of the Most Holy Inquisition," he said in a grating tone of voice. "I am here at the behest of the Curia. My baggage train will arrive later, but I felt it was necessary to ride ahead. I understand that this area is innundated in the filth of unholiness and sin, and I can begin my ... inquest ... without my assistants."

"Indeed Your Emminence," Father Bernd said, bowing deeply before his master.

"It is not much of a village. Yet I am told of the gravest of sins being committed here! WHICH of course simply serves to illustrate that Evil hides in the most inconspicuous of places! Have you done as instructed by Holy Mother Church, Father?"

Father Bernd nodded eagerly. "I have, Your Emminence. The church is closed until such a time where you lift the Interdict."

"Good. Good," Aiperos said and nodded, gravely. He flicked the hood of his robe back and raised one paw towards the sky, pointing a single finger upwards. "THEN HEAR ME ... FURS OF PELZENDORF AND HAHZENFELD!" he roared.

A good crowd was gathered by now, but everyone kept a healthy distance to the new arrival. They all looked afraid, but curiosity had made them come to see for themselves anyway.

"It is God's Will that your sins be purged!" he exclaimed in a loud tone of voice. "But salvation is within your reach. All you must do is assist me, and thereby the Holy Inquisition, in cleansing this entire area of the foul taint that has befallen it! If you do so, then I bring you HOPE. HOPE and JUSTICE!"

Lightning split the sky above the demon's head and the villagers whimpered pathetically in their huddled crowd.

They were little more than insects. So few of them would be truly useful but Aiperos was quite sanguine. Finding Father Bernd had been a coup in itself.

"Excuse me ... Your Emminence, but I have grave news to report that may help you," a voice said behind the "Inquisitor".

Aiperos turned around slowly. Again he had to restrain himself not to laugh in glee and clap his paws. Valdemar Halk was standing there, head bowed in respect.

"Yes, my son. You do not have the look of a simple peasant about you. Who are you?" he asked ... although he already knew. This was all about keeping up appearances.

Valdemar raised his head. Water was dripped from the tip of his nose and he was drenched from the rain, but he didn't seem to care. "I am Valdemar Halk, Lord of Slien up north of the border. My keep was destroyed in a single night and all my family slain by a servant of the Evil One. I have tracked him this far, and I am sure he is still in the area. I would be eternally grateful to Holy Mother Church if this vile fur was caught and burnt for his sins!"

Above Aiperos' head ... the skies began to clear. First, the rain lessened. Then within a few moments, it stopped entirely.

Aiperos nodded and turned to look at the water-logged village and the group of drenched furs still clustering nearby.

"You see?" he said and spread his arms out to the side magnamoniouly. "God has already shown a little mercy on you by stopping the rain. And all that took was one fur ... not even one of you ... who came forward and helped me. See for yourselves ... Opus Dei!"

Most of the furs in the huddle fell to their knees and started praying. The flood seemed to be at an end.

Aiperos turned and looked at Valdemar again. "I will need all the information you have, and your active help in finding this evil fur, Lord Halk. You are charged by Holy Mother Church to assist. How do you answer!?"

Valdemar felt his knees go weak. He ... who had wanted to go to Jerusalem for the glory of Christendom ... was being asked to help save the souls of all these villagers. He would get to do good works for the Church anyway!

He knelt.

"I am a good Christian," he said, solemnly, "And I swear by the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the power of God that I will assist His one, true Church in any way I can!"

Aiperos nodded and turned to look at Father Bernd. "I require lodgings. I will begin my inquest tomorrow. Spread the word to everyone in both villages!"

Father Bernd nodded and hurried off.

Pil and Ravn stood in the doorway to the inn. Neither of them said anything ... but they had seen what went on by the well.

The looks of worry on their faces spoke louder than words anyway.