

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 XXV

"A superb victory, Milord. Worthy of the chronicles! Your outstanding leadership has brought a great and decisive victory with it and Her Majesty will certainly reward you richly for it!"

Harald could hear the voice. But he didn't recognize it. It wasn't directed at him anyway. He was still alive. How ... he didn't know. Everything seemed so distant and even the voice sounded like it was coming from far away.

But the voice had mentioned a victory for Her Majesty. So the rebels were beaten.

He tried to smile but he couldn't make his face obey him.

"Be quiet and keep looking! Lord Agger must be here somewhere!" a harsh, commanding voice responded. It sounded quite urgent.

That at least was his business, and Harald tried to remember where he had heard that voice before. It was so hard to think straight.

His thoughts went back. It was so vivid too ... almost like he was there himself. Standing in the Great Hall at Nyborg Castle, waiting to swear his allegiance to his King. First in the line of waiting furs was ...

Was ...

Of course.

He forced his eyes open. With an effort that defied nature, he raised first his head ... then himself off the ground as he slowly, slowly got back on his feet. Everything hurt.

His wounds made his body feel like he was literally coming apart. His joints ached in ways he couldn't describe. It felt like someone had poured molten metal into his every muscle, making him heavy and painfully sluggish. He could barely stand and in his mind, there was no doubt that this was the end. It would only be moments ... but if he could stave it off for just a little while yet. He'd die on his feet and at least he wanted to pay his respects.

To the Marsk of the land.

The General of the Queen's armies.

"Marsk Moltke ... " the first voice said. "Look ... over there!"

Harald could see two furs on horseback, amidst the ruins of the village. Several of the huts were on fire. Others had collapsed. There were corpses *everywhere*. Corpses and blood and viscera.

One of the two mounted furs was a reedy, almost emaciated looking feline and he was pointing in the direction of the hut Harald was leaning against. The other was the most powerfully built wolf Harald had ever seen.

He'd seen him before, kneeling before the King and swearing his allegiance to him.

Black furred, sitting astride a charger so large it nearly defied reason, holding a bloody sword in one paw.

He was a vision of power. And one Harald could die happy having seen in this of all places.

"LORD AGGER!" the wolf exclaimed and turned his horse towards the fox and approached at a cant.

"Mi ... lord Marsk ... " Harald wheezed and tried to at least nod his head. It nearly made him fall over.

The wolf looked horrified. "God's blood! You ... "

"I'm dying ... I ... know. How did you ... ?" Harald tried. He couldn't make his tongue work and the words were hard to come by.

The feline came up alongside the marsk and made to dismount but the wolf stopped him. Harald was grateful. Right now, he didn't want to be held up. He wanted to die while standing on his own.

"My troops?" the fox whispered.

"We found two badly injured who wore your colours. We'll make sure they are given the best care. I'm sad to say the rest are all dead," the wolf said. "To answer your unfinished question ... we were lucky enough to come across one of your runners. We gave them both horses and sent them on their way, after they showed us your signet ring. They told us where you were headed. The army was already mustering when the abbot's messenger found me and I took what were already present and left immediately."

Harald felt a small surge of relief. Then everything had worked out as he had hoped anyway. "Then the day ... "

"Is ours, Lord Agger. Count Erik's head is already being mounted on a lance. Hinze is being quartered as we speak. The rebellion is destroyed. The Queen's reign is secure."

Harald felt tears press themselves to the fore as he lifted his head and looked at the wolf again. He nodded, slowly. "Please ... see ... that justice ... is done to the families of ... of all those who followed ... me here. And tell my family ..."

He blinked. Inside him, something finally gave away. The pain lessened ... then stopped. He smiled. A genuinely warm and content smile.

Sliding down the wall of the hut, his mouth filled with blood. He didn't taste it or even feel it anymore, nor did he feel any pain from his wounds.

The last thing Harald Agger heard was the voice of the Marsk.

"You have my word, Lord Agger. It will *all* be taken good care of."

Finally, darkness closed around him. Something put a gentle, cold paw on his cheek.

He exhaled heavily, one last time ... and then at last, lay still.

Marsk Moltke hung his head and sighed. He did the sign of the cross in front of himself and looked sidelong at the feline. "Find eight strong furs and have him carried with all honors to the rear. Have his wounds cleaned and have him prepared. Find some way of transporting him back to his family and then send an appropriate escort along with him."

The feline nodded slowly. "Immediately, Milord," he said and turned his horse to ride back to find someone to help.

The Marsk dismounted. He wiped the blood off his sword and sheathed it. Then he crouched in front of the body of the baron and gently closed the fox's eyes.

###

As they came closer to Pelzendorf, Valdemar and Ravn were glad they chose to trust Pil's eyesight. There was no doubt that something was burning in the village and they spurred their horses on.

"PIL! LISTEN TO ME!" Valdemar shouted.

She rode up next to him to let him know he had her attention but didn't take her eyes off where she was riding.

"If they are doing what I think they are doing, I don't want any more fires lit. Do you understand me?" the canid asked, looking sidelong at the vixen.

She nodded. She knew exactly what he meant. But she was nowhere near as experienced a rider as he was and she didn't want to speak up or look at him and risk losing her focus and fall off. At this pace, that could be fatal and besides, there was no time for the males to stop and pick her up.

Ravn pulled his sword and rode on with only one hand holding the reins. The look on his face was one of determination mixed with fury and he seemed displeased that his horse wasn't capable of flying so he could get there faster.

They got to the top of the hill outside Pelzendorf and stopped for the briefest of moments to get their bearings.

It was exactly as they had feared. In the square, around the well, were four huge pyres. Two were already aflame. Two were still unlit. Pil narrowed her eyes and swallowed.

"It's the blacksmith on one and Adelheid and Brother Eskild on the other," she said.

"I've never been so grateful for anyone's good eyesight," Valdemar said. "You've been amazing, Pil. Ever since we left Slien, you've been amazing. All the things we would have missed if you hadn't spotted it ... I dread to think of it. Now let's go and save them!"

The vixen nodded. Ravn was already on his way down the side of the hill. The villagers had noticed them too.

"RAVN! YOU GET THEM OFF THOSE PYRES! I'LL HOLD THE VILLAGERS OFF!" Valdemar shouted.

The lynx just nodded in response.

Valdemar felt strange. He knew this was a possibility when the inquest had started and he had been so eager to help the Inquisitor. But this was wrong. First of all, he himself had vouched for Adelheid and Brother Eskild was a knight of the Church! Besides, the Inquisitor had said nothing would happen until the investigation of the countryside was completed.

He had lied.

That was the simple truth of it. He had lied to get all three of them out of the way.

It was painfully clear to Valdemar now. He had been used as a simple tool, and he wasn't going to let this happen.

But what was there to be done? If they got those furs off the pyres and onto their horses, they would still have to escape with them. And ...

He could see three furs holding a fourth.

Klaus. He was being held up by two furs, a third holding a sickle to the equine's neck. Even at this distance, it was clear that something was terribly wrong with Klaus's face.

There wouldn't be enough space on the horses this way.

They'd either need a fourth horse and there was no time to look for one ... or ...

He sighed. There was really only one solution.

Pil brought her horse to a halt near the edge of the place. She quickly got her bow ready and nocked an arrow, aiming for the most obvious target in the crowd.

The fur with the torch.

The villagers all turned to face them. They closed ranks and many of them growled and hefted tools like scythes and pitchforks. Several long, sharp knives were drawn as well.

Valdemar didn't even stop. He trusted Pil's aim and her good eyes and spurred his horse one last time, making it jump clean over the heads of the villagers. Most of them were in a hurry to get out of the way once they realized he wasn't stopping anyway. Getting trampled by a charging knight on horseback wasn't exactly what they had in mind for the evening.

"DISPERSE THIS INSTANT!" Valdemar roared and drew his sword with one paw while grabbing his mace from his saddle with the other. Oh how he wished he had worn his armour but it was still at the inn. He hadn't brought it. After all, they were looking for markers and unholy animals, not armed conflict.

Next to him, the villager with the torch lay dead on the ground. An arrow having gone straight through his left temple and halfway out the other side. He was still twitching.

Pil's aim was remarkable as always and Valdemar was grateful for it. The villagers were not dispersing however. They weren't advancing either, though. None of them seemed particularly interested in tangling with a very armed and very angry knight.

But that didn't help Valdemar. Until they left, there would be no way of getting those on the pyres to safety.

"Can you ride?" he asked without looking up at the blacksmith.

The fur nodded eagerly. "Milord, I'd ride to the end of the world right now if it meant getting out of here!" he answered. "My wife and youngins already ran. They threatened to burn all of them too if they didn't leave immediately!"

Valdemar nodded. "Ravn will help you find them and then you go with him and my squire. They'll help you all get to safety."

He wanted to ask Adelheid and Brother Eskild too but the equine had clearly been tortured and seemed to be in a tremendous amount of pain. She was weeping and her dress was soaked in blood in places. The knight on the other side of the pole was gagged ... but looked like he could at least sit on a horse.

"RAVN!" Valdemar called out.

"I'm on it, Milord!" the lynx answered and pulled his sword. "Either you sorry sacks of shit part ways and let me through or I'll cut a swathe *through* you. I don't care how many of you I have to kill and I'll sleep very soundly and very sweetly tonight knowing I've claimed those lives. I'm not going to ask again!"

The villagers wavered. A few of them started moving away. Two young males, however, approached Ravn's horse. The lynx rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"Don't say I didn't warn you!" he growled.

One of the two raised an axe to strike but suddenly stopped mid-motion and dropped his weapon. An arrow was imbedded in his chest. Ravn reared his horse and the flailing

front hooves of the animal hit the unfortunate fur on the shoulder and head, crushing both.

Ravn's sword took care of the other one.

"I TOLD YOU!" he shouted.

That worked. Most of the villagers parted ... hurriedly trying to get away. The lynx rode up to Valdemar and dismounted. "One on my horse, one on yours, one on Pil's," he mumbled ... not that he really minded if the villagers knew Pil was female by now.

As far as he was concerned, they all deserved to die.

"No," Valdemar said and shook his head. "Look at Klaus ..."

Ravn looked where the noble was gesturing. Klaus had fallen to his knees, his minders having run off. The dreadful damage done to his face was obvious even at a distance.

"You've got to be kidding me ... " Ravn wheezed, horrified at what he saw. "I'll kill the lot of them! Every last stinking, filthy piece of ... "

"You *have* to get them to safety!" Valdemar whispered, urgently. The villagers seemed to be regaining their courage and some were turning back towards them. "Hurry. We don't have much time. Let Eskild take my horse. I'll hold them back."

"M ... Milord, you can't stay!" Ravn protested even as he started crawling up on the unlit pyres.

Valdemar smiled bitterly. "You're my friend, Ravn ... and I've come to value your friendship, but right now I'm giving you an order. Do as you're told."

The lynx slumped a little as he cut Adelheid's and Eskild's bonds and removed the knight's gag. "As you wish, Milord. We'll come back for you though!"

"There won't be a chance to do that. Just go. If I can fight my way out, I'll follow you, but don't wait for me. Get the blacksmith and Pil and Klaus and go, for the love of God!"

Ravn jumped to the next pyre and cut the blacksmith's bonds too, before crawling down and running over to help Klaus. It wasn't easy. The equine was panicked and it took a few moments before he realized that whoever was trying to get him to his hooves was a friend.

But in the end it worked. Pil approached, now mounted once more. The blacksmith got up behind her and Eskild mounted Valdemar's warhorse ... slowly and with some difficulty.

He nodded to the knight still standing on the ground. "Thank you. I'll make sure this isn't forgotten," he said, wearily.

Valdemar simply nodded. Then he turned around just as Ravn helped Adelheid up on his horse before mounting as well. The villagers were approaching again. The panic that had beset them when some of their number started dying had dissipated, and they were closing in on Valdemar, slowly but surely.

They were armed.

And led by the priest.

That damnable ... foul ... viciously perverted priest.

Valdemar narrowed his eyes and made a thoroughly obscene gesture towards Father Bernd.

"HOW DARE YOU DO THIS TO INNOCENT FURS?" he bellowed.

The priest sneered and approached even as Valdemar could hear the horses behind him, leaving.

He sighed inwardly. With them left his chance of survival. He couldn't kill all of them. They were just too many. If he'd been armored then he could maybe have lasted long enough to make the rest of them run away but ... not like this. He was good but not that good.

The priest came closer. He looked livid and he pointed an accusing finger at Valdemar. His voice was shrill and hateful when he spoke and he didn't stop approaching the knight. "Clearly, you are in league with the Evil One. CLEARLY you have become corrupt yourself, to help a witch and a heretic and a sorcerer escape unharmed from their just punishment! These furs are trying to please God and Holy Mother Church to have their Interdict lifted, and you would protect those they must kill for this to happen? His Eminence is preparing mass in the church even now, and you would stand in the way of these furs achieving salvation? How dare we, you ask? How dare YOU?" he shrieked.

Valdemar spat on the ground. "A Knight of Saint John, a a tavern-wench and a blacksmith you mean!" he answered. "You are nothing but a filthy coward, killing females ... the old and the infirm!"

Still Father Bernd came closer. Valdemar wondered for just a few moments what was going on, until he realized at the last moment. He raised his sword just in time as a heavy metal candlestick, probably from the church, came down towards him again and again. He staggered backwards. The priest was outrageously strong and the blows felt like the impact of trebuchet-stones.

Valdemar stumbled backwards, but managed to keep his footing. He knew if he slipped, he'd be dead in moments. The villagers would pounce on him like rabid dogs.

Still, it hurt all the way to his shoulder every time the makeshift mace impacted with his sword.

Mace ...

He narrowed his eyes and met the next blow with one of his own ... before bringing his off-paw around, crashing his own mace into the paws of Father Bernd.

The priest shrieked in pain and dropped the candlestick, and Valdemar quickly sheathed his sword, reaching out and grabbing the priest by the scruff of his robe.

"You're so eager to see furs burn!" he sneered and looked straight into the face of the wolf ...

He saw little except madness in the eyes that looked back. Madness and rank evil.

Then he turned his face towards the villagers. "YOU'RE ALL EAGER TO SEE FURS BURN! Then let me give you what you *want*!"

Without another word, he yanked Father Bernd out of balance and flung him into the still burning remains of the last pyre to be lit.

The priest's robe caught fire almost immediately as he flailed around in the red hot flames and embers. His pained screams would have been pitiful ... if Valdemar had the capacity to pity him. As it was, Valdemar simply ignored the sound and turned to look at the villagers, drawing his sword again. "Who's next?" he growled and hunched his shoulders, ready to take on the charge he expected would come.

The villagers wavered again. Father Bernd staggered out of the flames and, screaming as his fur and skin was burning brightly, he ran, like a living torch, towards the church.

Valdemar noticed it, but didn't see fit to follow while still facing down the armed villagers.

"You're all damned. All of you," he wheezed. "You there ... yes, you!" he said and pointed his sword at one of the females he had heard speak at the inquest. "You were so eager to please the Inquisitor ... if indeed that is what he is ... that you kept coming up with more incredible lies. Don't deny it! Every time he praised you a little for being helpful, you wanted to be praised more and you came up with something else, just to hear him say you were helping God. Hypocrite! LIAR!!"

The female shrank back as Valdemar advanced on her. She looked left and right and shook her head, trying to deny what he was saying but her guilt was practically written all over her face.

"AND YOU!" Valdemar roared and pointed his mace at a male. "You said the blacksmith was in league with the devil. That he was summoning up evil spirits with the blows of his hammer, but when the Inquisitor said the village needed a blacksmith, you immediately said you could do the job instead, just as well. You were just trying to get rid of him so you could take over his smithy. You were willing to burn an innocent fur for your own gain. You'd pick the property off a dead fur, like the ghoul that you are! *Murderer!*"

A few villagers looked at the male Valdemar was pointing towards in horror. But Valdemar knew it was hypocrisy. They too had condemned others. They too had lied for their own benefit.

"God has forsaken this place, but whether he had before this began, I doubt. But now? Certainly. The Inquisitor said the Evil One has servants here!" Valdemar said, loudly.

Before he got to continue, he could see flickering lights from within the church itself.

Fire.

He narrowed his eyes.

"I see a lot of them right here in front of me. And I will kill each and every one of you if you do not immediately go home. I'm not going to ask you to repent! It is too late for that. Be thankful that I think that Fra Corsa is more important than you lot!"

One or two of the villagers looked like they were contemplating fighting. Valdemar recognized them as some of the younger furs who had chosen the flaggelants path only a few days before.

He didn't have time for this nonsense. Shoving aside a female so roughly she tumbled to the ground, he walked up to the first of the two.

A swift, accurate blow of his mace sent the fur crashing to the ground, his skull opened and his brains laid bare.

As Valdemar stepped across the still twitching corpse, he glared at the rest. "Do you doubt my words now?" he sneered.

The villagers were not warriors. And they would recover their courage once more and Valdemar knew that he probably wouldn't be able to scare them off a third time. He just needed them to give him a few moments. Enough time to get into the church itself without getting hacked down from behind.

They backed up ... not as swiftly as he would have liked, but they backed up nonetheless.

He grabbed the opportunity and ran to the church. Behind him, he could hear the crowd reacting. Seeing him running seemed to snap them out of the fear they had been affected by. They roared in anger and began running after him but it was too late for them to catch up.

Valdemar made it into the church. He slammed the door shut behind himself and threw down the crossbar just in time to hear the impact as the villagers slammed into the door from the outside.

It was a solid oak door. They could pound at it till the skies fell and the seas boiled and nothing would happen.

But Valdemar knew he was in trouble nonetheless. He was locked inside the church ... and it was burning.

He could have run to the inn but there were more doors leading into that than into the church, and besides, Fra Corsa was here ... in the Church. The priest had said so.

Wiping his forehead, Valdemar turned around. The priest had set fire to the interior of the church but the Inquisitor was there. Standing by the altar, serenely and calmly awaiting Valdemar.

He was smiling.

"Welcome, Valdemar Halk of Slien. You are too late, but I must admit I am slightly impressed by your effort nonetheless."

###

Brother Eskild had trouble sitting upright in the saddle but he managed somehow. It was hard for him to ride with someone else on the horse, though. His wounds were giving him a lot of trouble.

Pil and Ravn had both noticed but they had to get away from the madness in Pelzendorf as fast as possible. Ravn was holding a now unconscious Adelheid in front of himself on his horse and she was in a terrible state. The deep worry on the face of the lynx showed Pil just how much he cared for the equine and she wished there was something she could do. Then suddenly she realized ... that there was.

Adelheid had given her the answer that day in the stables.

"Ravn, stop!" the vixen called out. "Please. Stop."

"What? We don't have time! We can't even ride fast enough as it is!" Ravn called back, but he did stop his horse.

Pil dismounted. She grabbed her bow and arrows and her long dagger from the saddle and nodded. "I know. That's why I'm getting off here. Hey ... Blacksmith, what's your name?"

"Gunther," came the answer.

"Gunther, you have to keep Klaus in the saddle. Brother Eskild, you take my horse. You have enough trouble keeping yourself upright!" Pil said before looking at Ravn. "God's speed Ravn. Get them all to safety."

"WHAT?" the lynx burst out. "You can't be serious?!"

Pil smiled a little. "A few days ago in the stables, Adelheid told me Valdemar would need me before this was all over. She was right. He's my friend like he's yours, Ravn. He gave *you* an order ... not me. I won't let him face this alone."

"But you'll die, Pil!"

"Maybe."

Ravn looked about to protest more when Brother Eskild looked up. "You're ... female ...?" he asked.

Pil sighed and nodded. "Yes. I'll answer for that when I come back. *If* I come back. But right now ... there are far more important things to deal with than what clothes I wear."

The knight nodded slowly. He tried to smile but his ruined face made it very difficult. Finally, he made the sign of the cross in the air towards Pil. "Go with God. You are very brave ..." he said, quietly. Then he looked at Ravn. "I can't fight ... and your master gave you an order. Let's at least make sure they don't do this in vain."

Ravn's mouth opened and closed a few times. Then he hung his head. "I won't let anyone forget you ... or him," he said at last.

Pil just nodded and set her jaw. "Hurry," she whispered.

Then she turned back towards Pelzendorf ... and started running.

###

"Who are you?" Valdemar demanded. He clenched his weapons tightly and began moving very slowly towards the shame surrounded by flames at the opposite end of the church.

"That is the wrong question, little knight," Aiperos answered with a wry smile. "The correct answer would be to ask WHAT I am."

"Then what are you?" Valdemar asked. The heat in the church was already quite bad. He could see the smoldering form of Father Bernd slumped across some burning chairs nearby. That was where the fire had started.

"I have had a lot of names, really," Aiperos said. His voice was not unkind, nor without a touch of humour. "I am one of those who were cast out for loving God above all others. One of those whose love God repaid with treachery. To you ... and to all furs ... I am ruination made flesh. Destruction come to life. I am the executioner's axe, the last breath before oblivion, the instrument that undoes that which is created. But you may call me Aiperos."

Valdemar shuddered as he even heard the name. It made something twist and turn inside of him. "I'll call you what I damned well please," he growled. "You've lost! The blacksmith is on his way to safety. So is Adelheid and her father ... and Brother Eskild."

Aiperos actually laughed heartily. "Do you think they matter? They were merely the finishing touch. Two furs died out there. Two innocent furs ... killed, partly because of your help at the inquest!"

"I was lied to and deceived. I wanted to help clear those who were innocent."

"Keep telling yourself that, Valdemar, and you'll end up forgetting what you were willing to go to Jerusalem to do!"

The knight narrowed his eyes against the heat. "That is *different!*"

"Oh yes, I'm sure all those Scaracen females and children were veeeery guilty," Aiperos chuckled. "Hypocrisy doesn't suit you. In any case, as I said, you are too late. You can't win this."

"Watch me!"

"No, you don't understand. You really *can't* win. Heaven or Hell, God or Lucifer, it doesn't matter. You ... are just a *nobody!*"

Valdemar sneered and took another step forward. The flames were licking up the side of the church by now. The flames were far taller than they should be, and he realized they were not entirely natural.

"God loves us! We all matter ... the Bible teaches us this!" he retorted.

Aiperos laughed again, just as heartily as before. "Oh yes, tell that to the sick and the lame, why don't you? Nothing happens without God's say-so, after all. The church and your bible teaches you that too. So why not ask one who was on the receiving end of all God's mercy," he said, the sarcasm in his voice so thick one could have used it to batter a bear to death.

Valdemar was about to ask when he saw the impossible happen. The priest ... the burning, smoldering, horrible priest rose to his feet and simply brushed out the fire. The flames died out immediately ... and he looked utterly unharmed.

"What a spectacular blessing you have bestowed on me, Master," he said and smiled, without taking his eyes off Valdemar.

"I am a merciful and generous Master, Valdemar. Father Bernd learned this. He had spent years dying a slow, painful death from the wasting sickness. He'd prayed to God so long and so hard he had ended up losing his faith when no answer came. Now look at him. Healthy and hale ... "

"Then his faith wasn't strong enough to begin with. Doubt is one thing but to lose one's faith ... the bible ..." Valdemar began but Aiperos cut him off.

"The *Bible*! Oh yes. Written by furs for furs with the intention of controlling furs. Do you really think someone would found a religion by saying "There is only one God, he is all powerful and he reallyreallyreallyREALLY doesn't care about you"? That would attract scores of followers for certain. Grow up, Valdemar. You are too intelligent for this!" the demon said and made an irritated gesture with his right paw.

Valdemar felt anger rise up inside him again. "He gave us his SON!" he roared. "How DARE you question God's love when He ... "

"The young carpenter from Nazareth? Yes ... a very sad story, really. But highly entertaining to watch. I suppose he had some divinity in him. You could probably call him God's "son" if you stretch your imagination a little, but do you really think God *breeds* like you do?" Aiperos asked, irritably.

Father Bernd shook his head. "God *creates*. Every priest knows that."

"Indeed," Aiperos said and smiled at his minion. "And you know what that means, don't you? It means you are all God's children. *All* of you. So was I, for that matter, until I grew up and realized I didn't have to take orders from my parent anymore. Like most children. Only as opposed to most parents, God was mean about it."

Father Bernd snickered audibly. His robes were burnt and fell off his chest as he did so, leaving him bare-chested but with the rest of his robes held in place around his waist by his belt.

"Good parable, Master. I'll remember that one," he wheezed.

Valdemar was torn between which of the two furs to deal with first. The priest was closer ... but ...

But that *demon* was far more dangerous.

"You're all lies!" he snapped. "Why should I listen to anything you have to say? You're lies made solid!"

Aiperos rolled his eyes. "Oh now you're hurting my feelings, sob sob boohoo. But the truth is far more damaging than lies in this case. If I lied, you'd believe me ... trust me on that. But you *don't* believe me, do you?"

"No."

"But that is the point. In Hell, we're *really* good at lies. Terribly good at them in fact. But we're not that good with truth. In Heaven, they're awfully bad at lies but horrifyingly

good at truth. Too much of one good thing and all that ... see? You must have a little of both."

Valdemar shook his head. "God is the truth. God is love!"

"Tell that to the tens of thousands butchered in His name before anyone even tried to convince them of that precious truth!" Aiperos growled. He narrowed his eyes a bit and took a few steps towards Valdemar who had come to a halt about one third down the length of the church. "A century and a half ago, the King of your country took the Cross and gave God a whole HOST of new souls at the tip of his sword, just like ALL crusaders always did! You yourself wanted to be one. To go kill Moors and Scaracens."

"They are filthy idol-worshippers and servants of Satan!" Valdemar retorted. The heat was starting to get to him and he was worried that if he kept walking forward, the priest would hit him in the back.

"They are not allowed to carve idols at all, Valdemar. And the one they call Allah, who you believe to be a pagan god? Allah means God in their language. They see Jesus of Nazareth as a prophet, only in their language he's called Ise. Moses is important to them. Abraham is the originator of their faith. They worship the same God you do!" Aiperos chuckled. "You are so ignorant it would be funny if it wasn't sadly the case for almost everyone on the continent."

Valdemar shook his head and held up his sword to show the demon he was ready to fight if it came to that. "You lie again!" he sneered.

Father Bernd laughed overbearingly and picked up a burning piece of wood. It didn't seem to hurt him even though the flames licked over his fur and skin again. "He already told you ... if he lied, you'd believe him. Stop prevaricating, you idiot! He's not your enemy!"

"So he's my friend, is that what you're saying?" Valdemar asked, looking hatefully at the priest.

Aiperos shook his head. "Of course not. Why would I make friends with an insect? A speck of dust? You're a momentary amusement, and yet ... this war that I am fighting and in which I have just won a decisive victory ... is all about you. Or at least all about furs just like you. You know what that makes you?" he asked, smiling ingratiatingly.

"Tell me!" Valdemar asked. He wasn't sure where to look anymore and the heat was stinging his eyes. The roof was on fire now.

"A prize!" Aiperos said, mirthfully ...

The windows exploded. One after another, the windows all the way down the length of the church blew out. The suction of air leaving the overheated room knocked Valdemar off his feet and down on one knee as he gasped for breath.

He had to get up! He was vulnerable like this and he fought back against the pain and discomfort. If he had to die, then he was prepared but he'd take these two with him!

But ... a prize?

Was he really nothing more than something to be gambled over and won?

He swallowed and managed to stagger back to his feet, but his face betrayed his thoughts.

Aiperos nodded sagely. "At last you're listening. Good."

"No ... I can't. It's wrong. I mustn't ... " Valdemar wheezed, trying to gather his thoughts. The roar of the flames made it hard, and he shook his head. His vision was starting to swim a little. The fur in front of him blurred for a few moments. Then the form of Fra Matteo Corsa vanished and in its place stood a gigantic, blue and black-furred lion. He was wearing strange armour ...

Valdemar had seen this creature before ...

In Bremen.

In the Cathedral.

He gasped and took a step backwards.

"Of course you can listen," Aiperos chuckled. The rumbling sound made the floor shake. "Stop paying attention to the scripture in your head and acknowledge that while it is difficult for me, I am telling you the truth!"

"Like you did in Bremen?"

"Precisely."

Valdemar felt his anger rise again. He pointed his weapon at the demon, however feeble the gesture might be, and planted his feet. "Then what about my father? My FAMILY? All those innocent villagers at Slien? If none of us MATTER then why kill them all?"

Aiperos smiled. It was a brutal thing to behold and one that Valdemar wished he had been without, but nonetheless, there it was on the demon's face. A smile. It just made the creature look even more evil. "Ahhh ... *finally* an *intelligent* question," he said. He made a paw-gesture towards Father Bernd who put the burning piece of wood down. "I offered your father power. I believe I told you this in Bremen as well."

"You did! You said he wouldn't make a simple sacrifice."

"Indeed. I asked him for one simple thing to prove he would give himself to me, and he refused."

Valdemar showed his fangs again. The tip of his tail was so hot by now he had to flick it constantly to keep the pain off his mind. This wasn't going well at all. But for some reason he couldn't simply attack. He needed these answers. He needed to *know* ...

"What did you offer him?" he asked.

Aiperos' smile grew a little wider. "Why I thought that would be obvious? I offered him the throne of Denmark. Not just for himself but for his lineage until the end of days."

"I ... I would have been King?" Valdemar asked, incredulously. He found it hard to believe and even so, he was a loyal servant of the crown. It felt wrong to even think it.

"No you pathetic simpleton! Don't you get it? The sacrifice I wanted was *you*! I would have given your father three strong sons, as loyal and powerful as you in return. All he had to do was show he was willing to serve me. But he wouldn't renounce God and he wouldn't kill you," Aiperos said, sounding rather annoyed that Valdemar still hadn't gotten the point.

The knight felt his mace drop from his fingers. He stared at the demon in front of him and his mouth fell half open. "Father ... " he whispered. Tears were coming to the fore and it wasn't because of the heat stinging his eyes either.

Aiperos shrugged and turned, moving back towards the altar where he turned back to face Valdemar again. "So I manifested in the cellars under your keep instead of in a nearby clearing where your blood would have brought me forth. Everyone died except you. Even the fur who summoned me was killed but that wasn't terribly important. He'd done his task admirably, poisoning the King. He was staying the night at Slien. I think he planned to move on the next day, but he never got the chance. Instead he snuck into the keep, went into the cellars and brought me forth. I suppose it is a quirk of fate that

the one fur I had originally planned on dying was the only one to survive. I took an interest in you for that reason, Valdemar. It seemed ... amusing."

Valdemar blinked. So the kingslayer had made it to Slien and he hadn't known. But that wasn't impossible. Furs stayed at the inn there from time to time. But he had snuck into the keep? How?

It didn't matter. He probably had the help of demonic powers to do so anyway. And he was dead.

But ...

"Why me though?" he asked. "Why did you want *me* dead?"

Father Bernd moved towards the altar as well, occasionally glancing at the roof but Valdemar kept his attention on the demon.

"Don't think too highly of yourself. You're not chosen for greatness, Valdemar. You would have made a good sacrifice that's all. A first born son and all that," Aiperos explained and picked up the chalice from the altar. He looked at it indifferently and flicked it away to his side to clank off the wall.

"So my family died faithful to God. I thank Him for that," Valdemar said, wearily. This wasn't going well at all but at least he had that much to comfort himself with.

Father Bernd grinned. "Thank Him all you like, your Lordship. It won't make any difference. He isn't listening. Nor are any of His angels. None of them could possibly care less about you. This isn't about your needs ... it's about your soul! Those who own the souls control the world."

Valdemar felt his hatred for the priest nearly overtake him. He began moving forward again but his clothes were starting to be unbearably hot. The cloth itself was so hot by now it hurt to wear it, and what little metal he was wearing was starting to sear him in places.

"The true Church teaches us that if we live by the scriptures, we go to Heaven. That if we repent our sins we will receive absolution and enter the Kingdom of God. Are you trying to tell me that's a lie too?" he growled.

Father Bernd just snickered and looked to his Master. Aiperos shook his head.

"Why would I tell you such a thing?" the demon asked. "Isn't it better to let you make up your own mind? Look, I don't really care about you. No angel would and believe me,

I'm very much an angel. What are you? Clay, molded by God because he got *bored*! But look at children. Give them a toy horse and chances are they'll break it by the afternoon. Or two days later they'll have found a new toy they like better. You're nothing but clay toys, and yet you think God cares? That he listens and forgives? If it wasn't so patently foolish, I'd feel sad for you."

Valdemar shivered. The words were getting to him and he started to cough. Behind him, a lot fell down from the rafters. Some of the roof came with it.

"Let me tell you one thing," Aiperos went on. "Forgiveness isn't all it's made up to be. Purgatory, which you believe is where sin is purged from your soul after you die, didn't even *exist* until the Church invented it to keep the faithful frightened and in line. They made it up and we played along. I mean ... it was such a brilliant idea we asked ourselves why we hadn't come up with it ourselves! Now we get to play with the pure ... not just the really wicked!"

"WHAT?" Valdemar shouted. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He grasped his sword firmer in his paw and steeled himself. All this talking was draining him. He had to attack soon or it would be too late.

"Don't look so shocked," Aiperos grinned. "The early Christians didn't even know of the concept of Hell. They used the word Gehenna ... which was a refuse dump outside Jerusalem where criminals were incinerated amongst other things and where great heaps of garbage smoldered ceaselessly. Armageddon is a plain a few days march from the city walls, you dimwit. But the Church needed something to scare the faithful into line with, and of course ... " he leaned forwards and sneered hatefully, " ... if you *bought* a little mercy from them, you could get out of Purgatory quicker."

"Indulgences," Valdemar coughed and nodded. He had never liked the idea himself.

"Indeed. The meek may inherit the Earth, but the poor can't buy their way out of pain and agony! But you know something? Not everyone who goes to Hell ends up burning."

"What do you mean?"

Aiperos shrugged. "We only burn those who think they did something wrong. Those who go there, proud of their actions, knowing that they lived to the fullest of their abilities ... we don't. Why should we?"

"Is this where you ask me to sell my soul?" Valdemar wheezed and took another few steps.

Aiperos chuckled again and shook his head. "Give me some credit. Souls come to Hell in abundance. None of us ever truly needed to bargain for a soul."

Valdemar spat on the floor in disgust and raised his weapon. In just a few moments ...

Aiperos looked utterly unimpressed. Behind him and to his right, part of the church wall collapsed. It led outside ... away from the village and he looked at Father Bernd and nodded. "I still have need of your service. Go," he said then looked at the knight in front of him again. "And you are being feeble. Just ask yourself this: God works through His Church. A Church which condones murder of those who never even heard of God in the first place. A Church that lets the rich buy their way out of torment in the afterlife, while the poor suffer. And don't look at me like that. We honour that deal! After all, why shouldn't we? Heaven is hacking its foot off with a dull axe and I swear, Hell has never resounded with such laughter!"

Father Bernd began sidling towards the hole in the wall as he had been ordered, but he never took his eyes off Valdemar who was now within five yards of the altar and Aiperos.

But he was also starting to succumb to the heat and the smoke and the flames.

He made a feeble swing but Aiperos didn't even bother to move. It was as if the attack had never happened and Valdemar fell on his knees, coughing hard.

"If the poor ... pray to the Saints and ask them to beseech ... God on their behalf then ... then their time in purgatory will ... " he tried, but again Aiperos interrupted him, laughing.

"Oh yes, *please*. Do pray to the Saints. Let me supply you with a complete list in fact!" he roared, laughing so hard more timbers fell from the ceiling. Then he leaned forward and whispered sweetly near Valdemar's ear. "Thou shalt make no craven idol and thou shalt have no other Gods but me ... "

"But the Saints are ... inspired by the holy Ghost and the Trinity is ... is one ... " Valdemar wheezed. He could barely see anymore, but he still tried to find his sword to attack again. It was hopeless ... he couldn't see clearly and his fingers were aching.

Aiperos snickered and walked around the kneeling knight. "How remarkable," he said, waving a paw towards Father Bernd who slipped out of the church and ran into the night. "You just managed to do the impossible. Here, at death's door, you managed to solve a conundrum that not even the finest scholars and mathematicians have managed to crack. You just turned *three* into *one* with a simple statement."

Valdemar shuddered and fell down on all fours, coughing harder and harder. He could taste blood.

He could have ... he should have attacked sooner. But he had needed answers. He had wanted them. And now it was too late.

Aiperos didn't stop circling him, though. He kept talking in a deeply overbearing tone of voice as if berating a foolish child. Valdemar tried to block out the demon's words but it was no use. He was totally, utterly at Aiperos' mercy and they both knew it.

"So the Holy Trinity is now one. And it inspired the saints, which, by extension makes them part of God as well. Or at least their actions. So now God isn't just one anymore ... or even three. God is LEGION! How do you think your pathetic monotheistic church would feel about you spreading THAT kind of tales, my would-be crusader? Yet it is exactly what the Church is saying already. Lies upon lies upon lies, and yet simple truth from *my* lips are denounced as abject lies simply because you don't *like* what I am."

Valdemar swallowed hard. His vision failed. Things went from a blur, to a big gray mass ... to darkness.

"If Heaven is not Heaven ... and Hell is not Hell ... then what is true?" he whispered as he finally slumped down to the floor.

Aiperos smiled. This time, it was almost a kind expression but Valdemar didn't see it. The demon canted his head a little to the side and watched for a moment, before bending down, closing Valdemar's eyes.

"*You* are ... " he said, softly.

He looked at the husk of what had until a moment ago been Valdemar Halk of Slien and shrugged lightly. The noble had been a far worthier conversation partner than almost any mortal he had met so far, and closing his eyes in death seemed reasonable enough to the demon. After all ... he still got to keep the *real* Valdemar.

Rolling his head on his shoulders, he sighed wistfully and bent down, extending his claws. Valdemar's soul left his body. As Aiperos expected, the canid had a strong soul ... one that looked remarkably like his physical body, except it was somewhat more androgynous. That at least was to be expected ...

One of the few things the Church had gotten right was that souls had no gender. Which only made its mysoginy all the more ludicrous.

It wasn't conscious yet. Souls, after death, usually took a little while before coming around. So the soul of Valdemar Halk lay across his paw and Aiperos was all but ready to leave.

An arrow struck his face.

Blinking in surprise, he took a step back. The weapon hadn't done any damage ... no mere mortal weapon would hurt him, which really only made Valdemar's heroics all the sadder, but whoever had fired that arrow was a good shot.

"Put him *down*!" Pil growled near the hole in the wall.

Aiperos smiled. So the female had returned and snuck in while he wasn't watching. How amusing. He chuckled and canted his head again. "You're not afraid of me?"

"Terrified. Now *put* him *down*!"

"How amusing. But I'm really not going to let you take what is rightfully mine by conquest."

Pil didn't answer. She cocked another arrow and fired again, the arrow striking Aiperos' throat and bouncing off. The demon frowned and waved his free paw as if trying to swat away a fly.

"You can't hurt me with that weapon. Now leave and you might still survive. This building is coming down in moments, and you will either die in the rubble or because I killed you myself. Unless you run away. It won't be cowardice. No one can blame you for running from a demon. Not even the Church," he said, irritably.

Pil shook her head and narrowed her eyes. Sweat was pouring off her in droves. "What part of "put him down" didn't you get the first two times, Demon? I'm not leaving without him!"

Aiperos shrugged indifferently. "Then you're not leaving at all. Be that as it may, do please elucidate me. Why did you come back for him? Is it love because if that's the case, I'm sad to tell you, you'll be dying in vain. Not only is he dead ... but I can assure you he didn't love you!"

Cocking another arrow and taking aim, Pil sneered in defiance. "It's not love. He's my friend. Something you can't possibly understand! I'm not leaving here without him!"

"You're repeating yourself, female! For pity's sake, be more creative. Ah well, if you had left, you would have lived. Now ... it's too late," Aiperos said and looked up towards the ceiling.

A beam came loose. It was a massive, flame-covered thing and as it came down, Pil barely got to look up in time.

It didn't change the outcome.

It hit her full force.

Aiperos cringed and grimaced. "Oooh, that's got to hurt!" he said, then snickered. The crunching sound had been rather pleasing. "Ah well, no more witty banter then. And you, Lord Halk, are coming with me. After all, you were so *eager* to help me before! Now you get an eternity of it!"

The doorway of the church collapsed. The remnants of the roof came down around Aiperos who spread out his arms to his side and laughed heartily. Outside, the screams of the horrified villagers were barely audible over the roar of the flames.

They had good reason to be horrified. They were facing damnation because of what they had done and Aiperos would not let them escape that. The back wall crumbled and collapsed, crushing the remnants of the altar completely underneath it, burying Pil's corpse in the rubble. Aiperos shrugged again and began walking. Once he was outside, he'd finish off the villagers and take their souls with him as well.

An arrow slammed into his back. This time he was sure what it was because the weapon not only drew blood.

It *hurt*.

"I said ... I'm not leaving without him. Now put him down or I'll have to shoot again!"

Aiperos turned around and looked at the soul of the vixen who had died only moments before. He was surprised. For a soul to come around that quickly, she would have to be unbelievably strong. Far stronger than she probably had known herself.

"YOU IDIOTIC FEMALE! Will you STOP that?" he roared. "You can make it hurt but you can't *stop* me like that!"

"Says you," Pil growled and fired another arrow, taking a chunk out of Aiperos' ear. "I'm willing to keep trying. Now put him down!"

The demon's free paw shot up to the wound and he roared in pain, if only for a moment before the wound healed up perfectly. For a moment, he contemplated attacking the ghost in front of him but then ... he smiled and stopped.

"How long are you going to keep this up?" he asked.

Pil shot again. The arrow imbedded itself in the demon's paw as he brought it up to block the shot. He growled and pulled it out with his teeth. "Very well then. Humour me at least ... and tell me why this friendship is so important to you?"

Cocking another arrow, Pil didn't shoot just yet, but she did take aim. "My my, it doesn't look like I've got fewer arrows in my quiver than when I started. Very useful! And to answer your question, I heard what you said! About God not caring. About the Angels not caring. But you know what? I knew that deep down already. The only fur to ever answer one of my prayers was almost burnt at the stake tonight, but she's safe now, and so is Ravn and they'll be happy together. But Valdemar shouldn't stand alone! So I came back for him because I'd die for my friends!"

Aiperos rolled his eyes. "You DID, you idiot!" he exclaimed.

Pil smiled and shot again. The arrow slammed into Aiperos' chest and he cringed in pain as he pulled it out. "I think that proves my point, don't you?"

Aiperos smiled again. "So you're really telling me you've chosen against Heaven?"

"Don't try your luck, Demon. I've got plenty more arrows here and you don't seem too eager to attack me for some reason. I choose neither Heaven nor Hell. I choose to be *me*. And I swear to you, on my corpse and on Valdemar's ... I'll hunt you till the end of days. You will *never* be rid of me!"

Smiling even wider, Aiperos finally put down Valdemar's soul. It shuddered slightly and groaned. "*Now* at last you're making things interesting, Pil. Very good. Very good indeed. But if you don't care for Heaven then why hunt me?"

Pil moved forward as the demon moved back until she was standing astride Valdemar's soul. "Because of what you did. I don't have to side with either you or God to know what's right or wrong. I can make that out for myself!"

So there it was. The source of her strength. Aiperos nodded again and spread his paws out to the side. "Excellent. This world is mine regardless of this. I'll just wait until the villagers die off one by one and claim their souls in due time. Time is a resource I have in abundance after all."

Pulling taught her bowstring again, Pil narrowed her eyes once more. "Anything else you want to add on your way out?"

Aiperos chuckled and shrugged. "Only that I look forward to seeing you again, Pil. Excellent name, by the way ... for an archer."

Then he faded from view.

Leaving the souls of two furs in the flaming ruins of a village church.

Outside the screaming was coming to an end.

It began to rain.

And in the distance, three horses were safely on their way away from Pelzendorf.