

*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 XXIV*

"They are coming."

Harald closed his eyes and tried to gather his thoughts. The night had been rough and he hadn't slept much. His wound had kept him awake. It had begun to hurt ... deep inside him and he knew what that meant. It was as it had to be.

He had made his peace with himself and with God, and he was not afraid of dying.

But he worried for his troops and the villagers and he nodded at the news. "I didn't expect them this soon," he said and sat upright.

A young fur, a rugged looking canid with crooked teeth and sharp eyes that had brought him the news, looked in horror at the ground where the noble had rested. A dark, wet patch under him showed that he had bled during the night. "Milord, your wound ..." he started but Harald made a dismissive paw-gesture.

"My wound is not our chief concern," he said. "You have young children at home. I believe eight or nine of the others are in the same situation. You are to take those furs and get the females and children from the village out of here. Hide in the woods. We can't all hide, so the rest of us will try to buy you some time. Get them to safety and tell everyone what happened here. That is now your duty, do you understand?"

The canid nodded and swallowed hard. "I'm ... yes Milord. I will do as you say. God bless you and keep you."

Then he turned and left. Harald got up and shuddered. He shook his head hard and tried to think straight. It was difficult but he needed to be of clear mind when the battle began.

Such as it was.

It wouldn't last long in all likelihood. He could run ... or at least his furs could run ... but if they ran without the villagers, no one would ever believe those loyal to the Crown would stand up for common furs again. Hinze would win all those who swayed between who to support, and if that happened, the rebels would win. The crown would rest on Count Erik's head.

The thought nauseated the fox and he sighed deeply. If a few of his troops tried to get the females and children to safety, though, that sent an important message as well. Especially if the rest stood and fought, even if that meant their deaths.

He could hear shouting outside. Clearly, the evacuation had already begun and he clasped his cape around his shoulders. It would hide the bloody stain on his back, at least for a little while. Then he headed outside.

Jon approached him with a grim look on his face, and he nodded to the lapine.

"I heard," he said. "We can't all run. Some of us must stand and fight to give the females and the young ones time to escape."

"I agree," Jon said. "But you look terrible, Milord."

"It doesn't matter. I'll be dead by nightfall, Jon. Either from this damned wound or the swords of our enemies. It happened during the night. It feels like I have something sloshing around inside me ... and the pain is quite severe."

Jon hung his head. "I ... am very sorry, Milord. I have failed you."

Harald chuckled even though it hurt terribly. "You've been a great help. You haven't failed in any way, Jon. I am just sorry it has to end this way. A lot of good furs will die today."

Jon narrowed his eyes. "Then let's make sure more bad ones die first!"

Harald nodded and smiled. "That's the spirit."

He looked on as the females and children, carrying only a bit of food and a few private, easy-to-carry belongings were led towards the woods by his furs. He turned around and blinked against the sun a few times.

In the distance, a dust-cloud gave evidence that the enemy was coming.

###

Aiperos cracked his knuckles and watched. The villagers of Pelzendorf and Hahzenfeld were building pyres. Several of them. They stacked logs and kindling higher and higher, but they weren't done yet ... far from it in fact. The raging hatred the villagers had kept pent up inside them ... their irrational fears, their pettiness ... all mixed up to produce a volatile, wonderful concoction and Aiperos was ready to reap the benefits of his work.

First these two villages ... then the world.

If the Church could not stop this, they could stop nothing, and the entire disgusting edifice would be brought crashing down upon itself and on the heads of the priests and prelates, papists and pontifs. It would be glorious.

"Prepare the Church," he said out the corner of his mouth.

Father Bernd nodded. "Yes Master. For when the pyres have burnt down?"

"Yes. I want to celebrate mass immediately afterwards. I want the screams of the dead to still linger in the ears of everyone taking part, and I want to rub Heaven's face in this. They've lost. Utterly. This world is mine!"

Father Bernd felt a giddy sensation of glee and he nodded again. "It will be as you instruct, Master," he said.

No one heard them. No one paid any heed to the two of them, busy as they were preparing for the evening's horrible event.

Father Bernd turned around and headed into the church while Aiperos folded his arms across his chest and smiled. As soon as the first victim died, his victory would be absolute. They would start with the old female. Then move on to the fat peasant and his wife, and then the blacksmith. And finally ... finally the equine. As the single most righteous and decent fur in the entire village, her death would be the final insult to Heaven.

But as long as even one of them died, he won.

Valdemar Halk would return too late to stop anything, and he would only then realize that he had in fact been part and parcel to the deaths of four innocent furs. He would crumble. His will to resist would be shattered and he would be clay to be molded in Aiperos' paws.

He, like the priest, would be an excellent retainer. And he too would be rewarded for his service.

Aiperos smiled.

Yes ... he would reward those faithful to him.

He would be a benevolent Lord. A caring Master who would take care of those who served him well. Those who did not would be cattle to be used, killed or punished. And then he would present this world to *his* Master.

Lucifer would claim this world for himself.

And Aiperos would be the foremost Duke of Hell. Oh, he'd give Lucifer this world to rule for sure ... he wasn't stupid enough to try to tangle with the Lightbearer, but such loyalty would be rewarded beyond even his wildest imaginations.

Even beyond that.

And Aiperos had a pretty lively imagination.

He smiled ... and cracked his knuckles again.

###

Most of Harald's remaining troops were in hiding. Most of the male villagers had joined them and besides, running would be useless. With females and children in the group, not to mention a few old furs well beyond their prime, they would move far too slowly to escape. And that many furs couldn't hide in the woods. All Hinze's forces would have to do was fan out and move in amongst the trees. Harald knew they'd be found ... probably quite swiftly ... and killed.

But this way, they might buy those trying to escape just enough time to get deep enough into the woods to hide. If they split up in two or three smaller groups, each with a couple of his furs to guide and guard them, they should be able to make it.

At least some of them would. And that was better than nothing. But those who stood and fought would die. He knew it. Jon knew it ... everyone knew it. There were far too

many rebels out there. The cloud of dust told Harald everything he needed to know about that from the moment he first saw it. Now the rebels were close enough that he could make out their advance guard and he was not reassured.

There were thousands out there.

*Thousands.*

Even if every arrow he and his remaining furs had struck home, and even if every wound was fatal, and even if no enemy was struck by more than one arrow ... they would still only have to march on at a slow, steady pace, and they'd overrun the defenders by sheer weight of numbers. There was nothing he could do to stop them.

Military history was full of famous last stands, and Harald knew his military history well. It was glorious, it was bloody and it was ultimately a death-sentence. But it wasn't necessarily futile. That was what he placed his hopes on now. Not for himself, or even for the furs fighting with him ... but for those trying to escape to safety.

"Hold your fire until they are clearly within range. I don't want to waste a single arrow," he said, calmly.

He was standing with his back to ten of his furs, all holding their bows at the ready. His sword was drawn ... his cape slung over one shoulder. He was sweating and there were little black spots dancing in front of his eyes, and his fingers felt numb, but there was nothing to do about it. He had to stay alive as long as possible. That was the whole trick. To live as *long as possible*.

That had always been the goal of a last stand. The goal was not escape or survival ... but to live *long enough* to deny the enemy the possibility of advancing further, just for long enough to achieve some strategic goal in itself.

He inverted his sword in his paw and went down on one knee, holding the weapon like a crucifix. Behind him, he could hear his troops kneeling as well.

"Most merciful God, hear our prayer," he said, calmly. "We face our last fight, and we are prepared to die for what we know is a just and holy cause. Your order on this Earth must not be upset, but we alone cannot stop these rebels. But we can show them that good furs will stand against them, and that they face determined enemies who are not afraid of death. We can give them pause, even for a brief moment, and we can help save innocent females and children by giving our own lives. And so we do your mighty work

and die in the knowledge that Heaven awaits the just and the righteous. Into your care and to your judgment we commend our souls. Amen."

"Amen," came the collective response from those kneeling behind him.

Some of them whispered a little prayer of their own. Just one or two of them seemed to know their Pater Noster.

They were afraid. Harald could not blame them. But he was confident they would stay with him. If they had wanted to run ... they would have done so by now.

"ARROWS," he called out. The ten furs behind him cocked their bowstrings. The trick, of course, was that far more bows were aimed at the advance guard of the enemy ranks ... from hiding. Whoever led this force would be shot at from many directions at once. Maybe a leader or two could be picked off that way.

Just maybe.

The enemy ranks halted. A single fur came out in front, one paw raised.

"PARLANCE!" came the shout from the rebel ranks.

Harald narrowed his eyes and smiled grimly.

"I do not waste words on traitors," he sneered. "Kill him!"

A moment later, the rebel sank to his knees and fell on his side with two arrows buried in his chest and throat.

"I AM HARALD AGGER, BARON OF AGERSKOV! I SERVE HER MAJESTY, THE QUEEN AND THAT IS MY ONLY ANSWER!" Harald roared.

There was no response to that.

The rebels just charged.

###

The pyres were ready. The church was being prepared. Father Bernd had spent so much time rubbing his paws together in sadistic expectation that they felt raw in places. But he could barely wait. Now they'd come to see the truth at last. Now they'd understand ... this filthy, loathsome vermin who inhabited Pelzendorf and Hahzenfeld. Those who had

helped apprehend those who were to be burned were already damned beyond salvation. Their hate and their complicity had done that for them.

"Morons the lot of them," he muttered and looked sidelong at his master.

Aiperos snickered. "Yes. It's glorious isn't it?" he asked.

The priest had to agree. It was. And it would be even better once the screams of the dying started rising towards the sky. It was a stroke of brilliance not to burn all four at the same time but one after the other. The impression would be drawn out much longer and would affix itself far more deeply in the simple minds of the villagers who witnessed it. They'd hear the pleas, the begging, the whimpering, the wails of agony ... all of it ... and they'd revel in it. They wouldn't know what crime they were guilty of until it was too late for them to turn back and then ... and *only* then ... would they understand what their unwillingness to use simple sense had brought them. What their eagerness to hurt each other had accomplished.

How their petty squabbles had led them beyond the light of God.

"The church is prepared, Master," he said and lifted the head of the wounded knight. "He's not woken up yet?"

"I don't intend for him to wake up. I want him tied to the same stake you tie the innkeeper's daughter to. It'll make a nice finale ... burning a warrior monk and the most unselfish fur in the village together."

"Yes Master. You don't think ... *they* ... are going to intervene?"

"No. They've tried twice and both attempts were feeble. The only way they can stop this is by sending a heavenly host of such size and power that everyone in Christendom will know within a week."

Father Bernd swallowed. "They can do that?"

"Oh, sure. But that would be a great victory too. Think about it," Aiperos said and smiled evilly. "God has to send an army of Angels to deter a demon, walking freely upon the Earth, from killing innocents because the Church has failed to protect them. Oh yes, that kind of news will certainly make doubters flock to the Church in droves."

"I understand," the priest grinned. "Even though people will still believe in God, they would understand your power as well, and the Church as an institution would be exposed as powerless and feeble."

"Absolutely correct. The amount of new heresies springing up all over the Christian world would bring the church to its knees in a matter of a couple of years. The mitre would fall from the Pontiff's head and the foundations of the Church would shatter and crumble. Hundreds or even thousands of different Christian denominations would spring up. Fur would turn on fur in mass religious slaughter and even if by some obscure miracle they decided not to kill each other, they would be divided and fractured and rife for plucking," the demons said and picked up a long, thin blade from a table.

Father Bernd nodded. That made perfect sense to him. "I am honoured to be able to take part in this, Master," he said and felt a shiver of pleasure run down his spine.

"You should be. Now wake up the equine. We can't disappoint our audience tonight, and they expect her to have been tortured."

"Of course, Master."

Aiperos flicked the blade over in his paw a few times while Father Bernd brought Adelheid back to consciousness. She was tied to a table. The blood from the head-wound had clotted into her fur. Normally, torturing someone who was already weakened would be a bad idea. She might die before the main event ... but Aiperos was no ordinary torturer.

And besides, he was slightly bored.

###

Harald felt the first bolt hit him. And the second. The third one he barely noticed. He was praying. He'd been praying since the charge began and he had never stopped. Fully twelve enemies lay dead around him, and behind him, his archers had long since dropped their bows and pulled other weapons. They had fought like lions. Like the heroes of old.

But they had died.

The rebels were simply too many. Harald stumbled towards one of the huts and leaned against it. He was barely able to remain standing from exhaustion and blood loss. It wouldn't be long now, but if he could just claim one more foe ...

Just one more ...

A thin looking feline came at him with a spear. He stumbled to the side at the last moment and the polearm got stuck in the clay wall behind him. The fox spat a bit of blood and broke the spear-shaft before running the rebel through to the hilt of his sword.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see one of his archers get hit by two crossbow bolts. He slumped in a doorway and lay still.

Very still.

Another fur came at him and he felt like he barely had the strength to lift his arms anymore, but somehow, he found the will to evade that foe as well ... and to level a blow at the back of the fur's neck. It severed the spine and the oncoming enemy collapsed in a disorderly heap.

It was the last hurrah ...

Harald couldn't find the strength to fight on and he fell to his knees. His sword fell from his fingers and he collapsed backwards onto the muddy ground.

If only Death would come and claim him right about now, he'd be grateful enough. He had never been in this much pain in his life, and he couldn't even find the strength to cry out.

But Death stilled his chill paw yet, and Harald lingered on the verge of consciousness as two ... then three ... then five shapes came into view above him. He couldn't distinguish them anymore. They were armed though. And clearly, they wanted to kill him.

"HALT!" a voice snapped nearby.

The five figures withdrew. Harald cursed his rotten luck and tried to blink. It was difficult ... he felt too tired and too weak to open his eyes again and he lay there, arms out to his side, eyes closed ... bleeding and dying.

It was just like in his dreams.

So this was how it ended then.

He could think of worse ways of dying.

"You are such a fool," a voice said above him. It sounded like the same voice that had ordered the five shapes away and he forced his eyes open.

Above him stood a lanky, almost pitch black canid. He had the most sinister eyes Harald could remember seeing on any fur.

"Hinze," he croaked as blood bubbled out the corner of his mouth.

"How right you are," the canid said and shook his head. "And you are Harald Agger, Baron of Agerskov as you so generously informed us before the attack. Count Erik told me he very nearly had you duped."

"Why the ... charade ...?" Harald asked.

Hinze shrugged. "I have no idea. I think he respected you. Maybe he wanted to see if he could lure you over to our side. Maybe he just wanted to get you to a place where you could be killed off safely before you posed too big a threat. I suppose he succeeded in that. The losses you've cost me are insignificant. You've lost. Your few troops are dead. The villagers are being cut down as we speak. I'd say the day is mine but it wasn't even a battle to begin with so why use such lofty expressions?"

He leaned forward. Harald could see a gigantic sword strapped to the canid's back. He wore good armour too. Easy to move in. Chain and scale mail but it looked well made.

If he could only find the strength for one last blow ... but that was a fool's errand. He was too tired to do anything except dying.

"Hinze, leave him be. He's lost. You don't need to humiliate him," Count Erik's voice said and the boar came into Harald's field of vision.

The fox noted that the other noble looked ... almost sad.

"Traitor ..." he growled.

The count shook his head and smiled around his tusks. "Oh, you're quite wrong. I want what is best for the realm, and the realm is not well served with a female on the throne. In that respect, I'm far more loyal than you. You've given your word to one fur. I've given it to my country."

"He's a fanatic," Hinze said and shrugged, making a derisive paw-gesture towards the fox on the ground in front of him. "You can't argue with his kind. He led what ... a couple of dozen furs this far north, into lands held strongly by his enemy, and he expected to win? Don't waste your breath on furs like this, Milord. He's ..."

"He's a good fur, first and foremost!" Count Erik snapped, silencing his henchfur. "A noble and decent fur and I will see to it that he is properly buried. I will hear no more of your derisiveness towards him. He fought for what he believed in, even if that cause was wrong and I will respect him for that!"

Hinze's incisors showed momentarily before he nodded, slowly. "As you say, Milord. But what about his troops? If he wished to die for his *queen*, he could have done so, but why take thirty ordinary peasants with him to his death? Peasants like me! Like most of your own troops!"

"Because he thought he could accomplish something and stay alive. Isn't that true, Harald? You actually thought you stood a chance," Erik asked, wearily.

Harald didn't answer. Thirty, Hinze had said. So they didn't know about the ten he had sent away with the females and children.

He smiled ... then it had not been in vain.

"He's smiling. I guess that means you're right," Hinze said and sighed. "Such a damned fool. Thirty furs against an army ..."

Count Erik looked like he was about to answer. Then he looked up sharply. "What was that?" he asked.

Harald hadn't noticed anything. He was tired and slowly bleeding to death and how he managed to still be alive, he didn't even really know himself. But clearly, the boar had heard something. Hinze raised his head too and sniffed the air.

"Horses," he said. There was a twinge of fear in his voice. "A *lot* of horses."

Harald let his head slump to the side. Around and between Hinze's legs, he could see the nearby hilltop covering one of the sides of the approach to the town that wasn't covered by the woods.

Someone was there. Someone ... at the top of that hill. And he wasn't alone.

And he was mounted.

He saw a banner unfurling in the breeze.

He wanted to laugh when he felt the ground beginning to shake. But he didn't have the strength. Instead, he just watched as hundreds of mounted knights came galloping down the hillside with the setting sun slowly sinking down behind them ...

They were marvellous.

And when they hit the rebel army in the flank and rear ... they had already won.

###

Pil had put together a small campfire and she had managed to get it going. She had caught a couple of rabbits and skinned them, and they would be eating soon.

But there was something wrong. Ravn and Valdemar were both seated opposite from her, and they both looked harrowed and exhausted. It had been a long day, and they had managed to find more signs of evil than any of them had probably hoped to see in a lifetime, but by now it was time to rest. They could miss something important once it got dark, and the shadows were getting very long and deep already. It would be dark very soon.

Still, she couldn't shake that strange feeling that something was not as it should be.

She turned the spit and prodded the rabbit once, even though it was nowhere near done yet.

At least it had been a normal rabbit. She'd been wary of approaching it once she had shot it, after the experience with the birds who wouldn't die, but it had turned out to be a normal animal. She had shot another one and gone back to the camp ... flayed the animals, prepared them and started on the campfire. They'd eat well at least.

And probably sleep reasonably well, even though they were a ways out from the village.

They could have gone back, but even though Ravn obviously already missed Adelheid, none of them seemed particularly eager to go back to the village. Even Valdemar. He didn't like what was going on there, and it showed on his face, plain as day. Except he clearly kept convincing himself that he was doing important, godly work ...

Pil wanted to slap him to get him to see sense. What was going on was horribly wrong. Furs denouncing their neighbors ... friends, even their family. The same furs they had lived amongst for years. Even if Pelzendorf and Hahzenfeld had the Interdict lifted, both villages would be broken for years to come. No one would trust one another anymore.

Did you get my father tortured?

Were you the reason he burnt my mother?

Why did *I* have to suffer?

Those were the kinds of questions that would not be asked ... but which would linger right there under the surface. Sighing, she got to her feet and brushed her paws off on her thighs.

"Excuse me boys. I need to take care of something private," she muttered and walked towards some bushes.

It was upwind from the campfire and she wouldn't have soot and specks of ash flying into her fur that way.

But why could she still smell the fire then? And ...

That was what was wrong!

She could smell burning meat. But the rabbits weren't burning. She swallowed and narrowed her eyes against the lengthening shadows, looking in the direction of the villages.

What she saw on the horizon made her fur stand on end.

"Guys!" she called out. "Get the horses! We're leaving!"

Ravn blinked. "What?"

"Yeah, what do you mean we're leaving? The food ... " Valdemar began.

Pil turned towards them, pointing backwards towards the direction of Pelzendorf. "I can see a glow. And I can smell burning flesh."

Ravn looked at Valdemar ... who looked back.

They both spoke with one voice.

"She's got good eyes!!!"

They were on their feet and running towards the horses before Pil even got back to campfire.