

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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Epilogue

It was a bright, clement day at the monastery. It was early morning, and monks were coming out of their cells, yawning and trying to rub the last sleep out of their weary eyes. It would be time for breakfast soon. After mass, of course. Then more prayer, and work, and more prayer. The daily routine at a monastery was only broken on holy days, where prayers and mass were celebrated even more rigorously.

The courtyard was still soggy after the outlandish rainfall during the night. The weather had been so bad that many of the monks hadn't spent much time sleeping. They had been praying instead, convinced that the end of days had arrived. Lightning had split the sky again and again. Twice it had struck so close to the buildings that everyone who had managed to sleep were awakened. One had split an olive tree. It was over a hundred years old, but had never produced much yield ... but it was still sad. It had stood so close to the monastery walls that one could use them to climb in or out when no one was looking.

It had been used extensively for that purpose by younger monks and novices for decades. Everyone knew about it and no one did a thing to change it.

The other bolt of lightning had set fire to a toolshed, but the rain had been so fierce that it had doused the fire quickly enough. It hadn't spread at least.

A couple of yawning monks shuffled across the courtyard, the bottom of their white robes already soaked through. They looked more asleep than awake and no doubt, they would find a way to snooze for a while during mass. It was frowned upon but everyone did it from time to time. Mass was lengthy and once you had seen it a hundred times, it did rather lose its novelty anyway.

It, like everything else at a holy institution such as this, became routine and trivial.

A feline in his forties came walking across the courtyard. He was wearing a heavy gold crucifix around his neck and his right ring-finger was adorned with a very large, almost gaudy signet ring. His tonsure was perfect ... as if it had been renewed that very morning. The look on his face was one of slight awe mixed with a clear sense of his own value.

It made for a strange mix.

Next to him walked a tall but rather thin canid. He looked like a wolf, except he wasn't as brawny as most of that breed tended to be. He, however, was clearly the reason for the feline's sense of awe.

He was dressed all in red and white. With a broad brimmed red hat, a red cape and a white gown and enough gold trim and jewelry to pay a king's ransom. He walked with a light stoop, but while his posture made him look like he was getting on in years, his steps were secure.

"This is a beautiful convent. And the monks are disciplined. I see only one closed door to the cells," the Cardinal said, pointing towards the doors around the balustrade. "I assume that fur is about to be woken up and reminded of Mass?"

"Your Eminence is most gracious," the feline said, clearly flattered. "But that cell belongs to Brother Luca. He is exempt from Mass and other Holy Services until his task is completed. The task the Curia set before him."

The Cardinal nodded slowly. "Very good. Then everyone is accounted for, as I assume that Brother Luca is already at work."

"I imagine he is putting the last touches on the manuscript now, Your Eminence. It will be a relief for him to complete it. He is an old fur and probably misses being able to attend mass. At his age, even monks feel death approaching and he will, most certainly, want to make sure God is with him."

Smiling slightly, the Cardinal nodded. "Of course he would," he said, matter-of-factly. "Now, show me to the scriptorium, Abbot. I must collect this manuscript and bring it to Rome forthwith. It is a matter of some urgency. Holy Father is writing on a very important edict and he will need this manuscript to complete it to his own satisfaction and the glory of Our Lord."

The feline smiled and nodded. "Of course. Your Eminence will be satisfied, I am sure of that. Brother Luca has done excellent work ..." he began but fell quiet when he saw the glare the Cardinal sent him.

"You have read it? You have seen the contents of this book?" he growled.

The abbot shook his head vigorously and cast his eyes to the ground. "No Your Eminence. I swear before God, I have not even gleaned at it. The instructions from the Curia were very specific! But Father Luca is our finest calligrapher. His texts are beautifully written and easily read. That is all I meant, I swear on the sanctity of the blessed virgin!"

The Cardinal seemed mollified and he nodded, slowly. "Very well. It is good that you have not read it. The information therein regards events that took place over a century ago, but knowledge thereof is restricted to His Holiness, Pope Innocent, and those he deem worthy thereof such as select members of the Curia ... like myself. Brother Luca was chosen to write it down for his exemplary service to the Church over a long life."

"I am sure Brother Luca understands the honour that has been shown him," the abbot said and immediately regretted it.

The Cardinal huffed dismissively. "The only honour is that which we constantly give to God and His Church."

"We are all but servants," the abbot squeaked, realizing he was in trouble. But at least that seemed to calm the Cardinal down again.

He led the way into the passage under the balustrade, up the stairs and up onto the balustrade itself. The Cardinal followed closely behind him, without speaking a word.

As they turned a corner, the Cardinal took out a folded up piece of paper. It had a seal on it, but it had been broken. "As for Brother Luca feeling honoured, this was intercepted by my guards during the night."

"What is it, Your Eminence."

"It is a letter from Brother Luca. Suffice to say the contents are ... questionable. He seems to have lost his faith."

The abbot looked horrified and immediately did the sign of the cross three times in front of himself. "And the messenger?"

"He fought like something best not spoken of in this holy place," the Cardinal grumbled. "But he is dead. My guards finished him off."

The Abbot nodded and once more did the sign of the cross to ward off evil. "But to have lost his faith? Brother Luca was always such a devout fur."

"No one is ever above reproach or suspicion, abbot," the Cardinal said, sternly, before pushing open the door to the scriptorium when the feline gestured towards it.

He entered, followed by a flustered and fearful abbot. The feline emitted a low shriek of surprise at what he saw, but the Cardinal simply nodded, sagely.

Across his writing desk, Brother Luca was slumped. His oil-lamp had burnt out. His inkwell had fallen to the floor and the ink had all spilled out around his feet.

He was clearly dead.

He was also smiling serenely.

At first glance, he might simply have been sleeping. His eyes were closed, but ... nonetheless, it was obvious to anyone but the most casual observer that he was dead.

The abbot began praying immediately, kneeling. The Cardinal rolled his eyes and gestured for the fur to rise as he approached the dead monk's desk.

"If he's lost his faith, your prayers are wasted anyway. God won't help such a fur," he said and moved Brother Luca's corpse a little to get to the book.

It looked finished and the Cardinal nodded as he read the last few lines, just to make sure. Yes, it was indeed finished.

"I am compelled to point out, that I am not surprised that Brother Luca lost his faith," he said, not taking his eyes off the page.

The abbot looked worried again as he rose to his feet. "How ... why is that, Your Eminence?"

"You seem to keep a very lax attitude to some things, abbot. The monks may *seem* disciplined, but out there on the balustrade, I saw a *female*! Really, abbot ... a female inside the walls of a monastery? You really allow the sinful, perverted progeny of Eve to set foot in this place?"

"A ... a female?" the feline croaked. He was sweating badly.

The Cardinal flicked back a few pages. "Indeed. A young vixen, and she was dressed like a male. A further sin, may I add. And she was armed! With a bow, nonetheless. I understand that you need game for the monks to eat at times, but a *female*? Let alone a female in the monk's private quarters? I might think something unsavoury was going on, abbot!" he said, his voice full of blame and reproach.

The abbot shuddered and cast his eyes to the floor. "I shall see to it that she is removed from the premises at once! She must be one of the locals. Sometimes they crawl over the wall to steal herbs and vegetables from the gardens, Your Eminence. She'll be found and punished, I promise!"

He hurried out and began running along the balustrade calling for monks to come and help him search.

Father Bernd looked after him and closed the book with an evil little smile. "Good luck finding her," he muttered and patted Brother Luca's shoulder. "It's time to leave."

And the soul of Brother Luca shuddered ...