

Chapter 1

Every city has its pockets of solitude. One such haven was the courtyard of the Inn VoMambre. It was a small quadrangle cobbled with worn stones that rarely saw the light of day. In the winter months they lay buried beneath snow and slush; in the spring it was the ubiquitous mud that crept into every corner of the city. The long, dry summer and cooler, crisp autumn hid the stones beneath a patchy layer of dust, straw litter, dead leaves, and manure. It was a peaceful place, quiet. Rarely did the screams of the dying penetrate its outer defenses.

Along the northerly border stood the inn of the VoMambre family. Its thatched roof rose in great dome, the shaggy hunchback of a slumbering giant. Dormers along the third floor peeked like the black eyes of mice in a haystack.

On the east stood a long row of stables beneath a low loft. Here the modest family livestock dwelled. There was even space enough for the occasional beast of burden that should arrive in tow- for paying customers only, naturally. A bleat, mutter, wicker, or snort could be heard time to time, though never in such commotion as to warrant mention.

Facing directly opposite- to the west- leaned the family carriage house whose name had long outlived its purpose. No carriage stood therein, only dust, sacks of oat or grain, and cobweb memories from another time. Venturing through these doors lead to a side alley. A twisting turn to the right led up to the main thoroughfare of the city. As with any fortress, the carriage house gates were always kept shut and locked.

The final compass corner of the VoMambre sanctuary- south facing- was an imposing sandstone structure nearly half again taller than the inn itself. None of

VoMambre name knew what lay beyond that barrier: mansion or prison, temple or brothel. Such comfortable ignorance was commonplace in transplants. The interests and ideologies of the emigrant mind clung to the colors of a banner that yet fluttered on distant winds a world away. Intermingling was a low priority, if tolerated at all.

On this day hardly just begun, the fourth daughter of the VoMambre dynasty sought a moment's escape from her chores. Vivian Elise stood upon the back porch of the inn, leaning heavily upon a wooden rail weathered to the color of gray stone. Sullied rays from the rising sun lit a twist of scorn upon her cherry lips. The morning pottage was still warming in the pot and all she wanted to do was sit down! The bastard child she carried was full to ripening, a leaden bell girded about the base of her spine. Fire burned in her ankles, her knees, her hips. Every joint ached. Every limb was swollen, bloated, heavy. Savagely she thought:

Once I was so beautiful. Only months ago...

She twined a golden lock of hair about a pink finger.

I shall be beautiful again-

The morning peace broke under the *clunk* and *thunk* of half a dozen water buckets. They emerged from the stables as a gaggle of geese, tethered by a pair of large fists into two tight flocks. The wooden tubs banged hollowly as their keeper paused to maneuver the stable door shut with a broad shoulder.

Instantly Vivian VoMambre straightened. Her chin rose. This affront stamped the crease of a frown across her delicate brow. Her demeanor bristled with disdain.

He had arrived.

Though the youngest of the VoMambre clan, he was by far the tallest. Their own father hardly stood even to his eyes, which were dark, almost black, like a villain's. His

shoulders were broad, his face edgy at the corners, his arms thick, strong. Here was the single incongruity in the long, illustrious VoMambre line. Each daughter had been more beautiful than the last, beauty surpassing beauty, year after year, season unto season- until this aberration. This... disgrace. A fine calligraphist penning the voice of angles- high, sweet, golden- only to end the verse with a smudgy blot of punctuation that was required by dint of protocol rather than purpose or necessity.

Vivian watched sourly as the water buckets and their keeper lumbered across the courtyard. Oh how the lout moves like a draft horse- plodding, witless! The mind of a dumb animal drives those feet one after the other. Or hooves...

I was beautiful *once*, Vivian thought again, ruthlessly. Pressing a hand to the low spot of her back, she groaned. For all the good it did me, at least I can say I was beautiful once...

The youngest VoMambre, keeper of empty buckets and infinite chores, caught the creak of porch planks. Leaning back to a stop, bucket hinges squawking, a pair of eyes peered across the quad. "That you, Viv?" The accompanying grin was an equal mix youthful optimism and genetic myopia- myoptomism. "Mornin'!"

Vivian sighed. If only *she* would not speak. Then the illusion would remain intact, unbroken. The world need never know there were five VoMambre daughters, rather than just the four that mattered. But no, no- even that one little luxury was not to be had.

Vivian turned for the kitchens, tossing over her shoulder:

"Be thankful you're ugly."

The rear door banged shut.

The grin remained a moment longer, but only a moment. Comprehension dawned and with it faded all expression. The youngest VoMambre daughter waited for the cobbles beneath her feet to open up and swallow her whole. Head and shoulders slumped. The ground remained intact. Her bowed head stared down at the empty buckets in her hands, her heavy, masculine hands so red and cracked from use. How was it a hand so mistreated, so abused, could develop tough calluses that protected it from future hurts? What made hands so lucky? Or her so unlucky?

The youngest of the VoMambre clan sniffed.

And sniffed again.

The bump of buckets reminded her of duties neglected. Grateful for the distraction, she turned a turbulent mind to the task.

In that instant the rear door banged open and the sister Vivian reemerged. One hand on her swollen belly, the other clenched in a fist, she called out in a shrill voice, "Em! We need wood for the fire! Go to Guillome- not that sod Dorion. His boughs are but twigs. Always wet or rotten at that! No skimping!" The *ting* of a copper coin sounded.

The youngest held her breath and stood statue still. She could not see the coin tumbling through the air, apart from a brief glint along its edge where the sun struck it momentarily. Her ears would tell where it came to rest upon the cluttered cobbles.

The sister Vivian slammed the door shut with a laugh, timing it just so.

The coin was lost.

Setting down her flock of buckets, the youngest sank to her knees. She searched out the copper by touch, down on all fours like the family dog.

Another morning had begun.

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"Right this way, Father! Right this way!"

The rear door was forced open under the impetus of Master VoMambre, head of the household. He held the wearied door open for his guest, alternately wiping his hands upon apron or sleeve. Sporting an enthusiastic grin, he nodded endlessly and ushered his guest down the steps to the empty courtyard below.

"Pup!" he called as they moved, his voice overloud in the tight quadrangle. Hands always on the move, he signaled his guest to wait with a patting motion. Apron strings fluttering, the rotund proprietor called again, "Pup! Pup! Where are you!" He disappeared into the stables. His calls continued.

The waiting guest wore the somber expressions and habiliments of the priesthood. The wide-brimmed hat clutched in his hand matched the midnight black of his robes and cloak. His free hand smoothed wispy tendrils of hair gone iron gray. Startled by the wrinkles of his own hand, the priest stared at it with wonder. Whenever did I become so old?

Master VoMambre emerged, red-faced from his exertions. Again holding up his hands in a gesture of forgiveness, he huffed across the courtyard to trample about in the carriage house. Calls and cries and echoes. A second time he returned, still empty-handed.

"Your son has wandered off it seems?" the priest muttered. He cocked his head. Was that the distant chime of the Cathedral? What was the hour? His count was immediately interrupted:

"I assure you Father Rathbourne, it will only be a moment to find my errant-Vivian! Come here girl! Have you seen Pup? The Father has important appointments. We mustn't keep him overlong! Where's Pup?"

Caught in the open doorway, the fair-haired daughter poked her head out momentarily. "I suppose she's still off getting the wood. Remember Papa? Don't blame me..."

VoMambre winced. "Of course not, girl. Of course. Off with you now! Your Mother needs help in the kitchens. Scat!"

The priest Rathbourne turned a severe gaze upon the burly proprietor. "Daughter?"

Master VoMambre affected a guilty grimace. The hem of his apron became a knot in his busy fists.

"VoMambre- scoundrel! Scoundrel not once, but twice! You told me a son you had to offer! You deceive me. My journey is an arduous one! Not fit for a woman! I cannot afford the delays- Oh, how you waste my time!" The priest waved his hat in a fist of frustration.

"Oh no, Father! I assure you- God as my witness- you must see the girl before you go! A perfect match she is for your need! Tough as iron. Not your usual woman- nothing of the sort-"

"I will not!" Pulling at the edges of his cloak, Father Rathbourne strode for the carriage gate and the street beyond.

"Father, I pray thee," VoMambre pleaded, his heavy hand catching the priest's arm. "Wait but a moment for her return. I promise upon my name she will suit your needs better than any stableboy-"

"Blood, fire and iron!" the holy man burst, sputtering on his rage. His face and high forehead went red, a livid scarlet against the iron-gray of his hair. "Unhand me, sir! Lure me hither on false pretenses- and now you dare accost my person! A night in the stockade suits either offense! Together, they may very well land you in a dungeon suite! Release me this instant or I shall shout for the watch!"

"But sir-"

"Unhand me! There- it *is* the hour being tolled! I have business at the Cathedral. I shan't be late. Your lies and deceit, VoMambre, God forgive your soul for such treachery! I shall say a prayer for thee, though you may deserve it not."

"Forgive me, Father. I only hoped- I only wanted..."

The priest broke away in a flurry cloak folds.

Master VoMambre remained mired on the spot, fists balled into knots of impotent rage. When the outer gate clashed shut and the silhouette of the priest was gone he snarled:

"That stupid girl! She has ruined everything!"

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In the purple-shadowed streets of early dawn she moved as any man. Tunic and trouser suited her chores over the ghastly impedance of bodice or skirt. Lifting and hauling, shoving and wrangling, the girl was both bull and ram rolled into one from day up until darkness come. Pulled back with a simple leathern cord, long chestnut hair was functionally kept in the fashion of men rather than combed, primped or styled. It was the tail of a wild roan, a horse sleek and beautiful and untamable. And someday hers.

Through the thick of her cloak came the constant prick and stab of rough-cut firewood. Easing her steady gait, the girl bent forward and rolled her shoulders like a

bear. The bundle of sticks rustled higher upon her back. Dried bark and leaf crumbs fluttered to the cobblestones, dusting the toes of her boots. Big, square toes. Big, square boots. She looked elsewhere. Deft hands wound the slack in the cording. At once she set off again for home.

Born in the upper rooms of her parents' inn she had lived her entirety within the sentried walls of the great city. There was none larger, complete with king and militia and all. A lifetime, and still she felt her heredity, a stranger in a foreign land, an outsider. She did not belong. The faces met in business had eyes only for the coins she carried. There were no friends, only family. Life had taught her the two were not synonymous. When she was home, she longed to be away, elsewhere. Being apart in the city was frightening, and once away she could never get back soon enough. Her only solace was in the Church, twice a week, without fail. There she found some peace, a twinge of belonging. Was it not said all were welcome in the house of God? She was part of 'all'. If only it were permissible, the young VoMambre would attend mass every day. Master VoMambre, naturally, had other uses for her time: practicality over piety. After all, how many transgression could a young girl amass in the course of a week? Had he his say, she would attend but once a year for annual confession and penance. Bold as his talk may be, her father was not so brash as to defy the all-seeing eye of God. And so the Sabbath it was, with another mid-week mass squeezed in between chores.

Prayers were her only friends. And the animals, when home in the stables. Both listened, day or night, fair weather or foul. Neither mocked. Neither teased. How she longed for a dog- a dog of her very own. The city would not be so frightening then, with Violet traveling at her side. The animal was one of many favorite fantasies, a big strong

bitch named Violet who was all love and kisses to her mistress- and snarling Hell on earth for anyone foolish enough to meddle.

But there was no dog, no Violet, no love nor kisses. Only Hell on earth. She walked on, accompanied by her prayers.

Prayer subject matter was plentiful- the Pestilence saw to that. Everywhere dangled the black shrouds, draped over the house lamps, marking the doorsteps where Death Carts must stop by law and pick up their fares. So many prayers for so many unmet souls. She uttered them silently, in passing, while sturdy feet wended a path up the crooked streets and narrow alleyways. She tried not to count them, those flocks of black scarves. She tried not to think about the death that even now loomed all around her, reaching out with its invisible claws to *tap tap tap* its next victim. Nevertheless, try as she might, some grim aspect of human nature kept a toll in the back of her brain: up up up...

She changed streets often, for each new avenue, every corner turned reset the count to zero. Keeping to shorter side streets also pruned the toll to a manageable number.

When the Death Carts rumbled by, full to overflowing with the lifeless, the tender VoMambre averted her gaze. All those faces, swollen, marked, twisted in grimaces of pain- they left scars upon the mind. Those scars festered at night and fostered nightmares.

An older sister once confided that merely staring a corpse in the eye was enough to bring it upon you. At first it seemed another prank, a cruel jibe at her gullible, trusting nature. A week later she, too, was dead. Up went the black scarf over the door of the VoMambre Inn. Off did she ride on a chauffeured tour of her own. To the grave she

took the intent of her words: genuine maternal warning or mindless sibling torment. The youngest VoMambre would never know.

The death screams were not so easily checked. Fortunately, these were short, pinched outbursts, reserved for the very end, the last exclamations of the dying. They happened most often at night, late, when her head was buried in sleep. If sleep was elusive, she had learned to clench her jaw tight *tight* and spell out the names of the months. That blocked out the cries. No one suffered longer than S-e-p-t-e-m-. For some, Death staked its claim while still in the midst of J-a-n-u-a-r-y.

She shrugged beneath the weight of her chores, and turned another corner.

Zero.

Right off the mark: *one two three* black rags. They fluttered in the early morning breeze like black wraiths. A Death Cart choked the narrow side street, its driver out of sight, deep within one of the afflicted homes. Thankfully, the young VoMambre faced the wagon from the front, her view of the dead hidden out of sight by the draw horse. How dreary a chore for any man or beast, hauling away the dead. Surely this beauty would prefer a run in the open fields, or a race down the shores of some distant sea. Untangling a hand from her firewood cord, she reached for its muzzle.

"There there, Beauty," she cooed. Already it had a name, a history, a personality. "I wish I had a carrot for you. I wish I did. I wish I did! You're a beautiful girl, yes you are. Aren't you? Aren't you now? Yes you are. Yes, you are! I wish I had a carrot to give..."

The squint of pinched eyes relaxed. They widened, eased, lost the edgy glint of fear and suspicion. Sadly only animals saw how beautiful they were, deep with thoughtfulness and compassion. And longing.

Commotion on a near stair step brought her dalliance to an end. The driver had emerged. He dragged his grisly passenger in a bear hug hold. The VoMambre daughter scuttled up the opposite side of the Death Cart, eyes fighting not to stare. They caught sight of the family in the open door, a young woman- younger than even she- and a boy hardly old enough to speak. They were wrapped in their bed things and quilts to see off their father, or uncle, or older brother. There were no tears. No one cried anymore. Fear choked all emotion. Selfish fear: When is it to be my turn? Today? Tonight? Tomorrow?

Caught up in her thoughts, distracted with her head turned over one shoulder, she buffeted the back of another early morning pedestrian. A toothless old man stumbled from the impact. His white, wiry hair was as wild as his laugh. "Eager for a ride on the cart there, boy! You watch! You may just get your pass tonight! Ha haaa! We all gets a ride sooner or later, eh! Ha haaa!"

The young VoMambre daughter ran herself all the way home.