

Chapter 2

The air of LaMongué had a taint to it, unique and distinct from other quarters in the city. Some said the place was cursed. Others maintained the earth upon which it stood was bad, a burial ground from ancient times whose decay rose up through the stone flags at night to poison the nose, the lungs, the mind. When the winter winds moaned, so too did her long halls. When the summer thunders rumbled, the cells of LaMongué roared with equal fury.

Father Rathbourne suspected other asylums were much the same. His was no exception.

Moments ago, the master of LaMongué had stood in the VoMambre's courtyard. Now the familiar walls of his study surrounded him. Of his long walk across the city he could recollect nothing. Was he still abed, dreaming this day and its events? Dropping his hat to the jumble atop his desk, the weary priest shook out the folds of his cloak. Remnants of early autumn air, fresh and crisp, escaped in gusts, tickling his nose. Here then was proof enough his early morning trek had been no idle fancy, no dream. VoMambre and his deception...

"Even now the man wastes my precious time!" Rathbourne grumbled softly in exasperation.

"Pray do forgive the intrusion, Father," came an unexpected response. "I only thought to- I shall come back, at another time-"

Looking up, Father Rathbourne caught the fleeting robes of his resident acolyte. The frayed, black hems of the fellow's robe fluttered just out of sight. "Nothing of the sort, Jacques." He called the young man back. "Nothing of the sort! Lost in my

thoughts only. I did not see you there. Forgive an old man his ruminations. Do come in, my son. Come in. It is well nigh time."

A curly-haired head poked around the jamb. The narrow face of the student was dotted with faint freckles. The lean visage of the tutor was etched in wrinkles. Half a lifetime separated the unlikely pair, if not longer. The remainder of the young man, from the shoulders down, remained hidden from view.

Rathbourne waved him in, uttering a sigh that ended in a half-laugh of folly. "I speak of a fellow I met this morning. Only him..."

The young acolyte, Jacques, brightened. "Oh, the stableboy engagement." He entered the chamber, steps light, hands clasped behind his back. The belt of rope knotted at his waist wagged beneath his posture. "Not as expected?"

Rathbourne hesitated over his reply. A long, pale hand came up to massage the back of his wrinkled neck. "No, not nearly as expected." He continued to rub his neck. "I suppose I was overly strident with the fellow. His intent was genuine, I'm sure. Only... Only..." He shook his head sadly. His hands came together with a *clap* of hollow palms. "My temper has been short of late. Shrinking with each passing day it seems..."

"The Tribunal." The acolyte's comment was not a question. Jacques nodded, empathizing his mentor's anxiety.

Rathbourne agreed with a tacit nod of his own.

Several heartbeats passed.

The student waited patiently, obediently, hands clasped, belt ends wagging.

At last Rathbourne noticed his indulgence. In a moment his eyes cleared and a chuckle escaped him. "So eager to begin your day, my son? To see your master off and assume his old, dusty robes?"

The young novice bore an honest, likable smile. "Verily, I am eager to start the day, yes Father. I swear upon my robes, LaMongué shall be in good keeping during your absence. I shall see to it myself every moment, God willing!"

The elder priest chuckled again, speculating, "No reservations, my son? None at all? Hesitations? All this responsibility..."

"You have trained me well, Father. From your wisdom- and the Lord's will- all shall be right in this corner of the world."

"Amen."

"Amen!"

Rathbourne's enthusiasm dwindled like the flame of a candle spent. His last flare was hot and bright, and then gone in an instant. He stood poised, leaning slightly into his thoughts.

"And you, Father?"

"Hm? And I?"

"Reservations, Father?"

"Hm! Ah... yes, well..." Rathbourne's hand found the back of his neck again. "And me. And me... Jacques, my son, I am a man far, far removed from his homeland. Swaying a Tribunal would be difficult enough in my own yard. But here..." He smiled wanly and continued to rub, kneading the tight muscles that refused to ease. "I am a stranger far from his kith and kind..."

But the youth was already headlong into his speech:

"Your work here at LaMongué has been exemplary, Father! Every ear at the Cathedral has heard the wonders performed at LaMongué. All in the Lord's name- all performed by you! There can be no denying it. Why, the miraculous recovery of the Duke's daughter alone has set your name forever-"

Rathbourne began to pace. He gazed about his offices, eyes and spirit equally restless. He spoke quickly. "Too much success can be as bad as too little! They question my departure. Twice already have they met! Each time no conclusions. Will this time be any different, I wonder? These delays, are they on purpose? Do their queries carry a kernel of truth? If it is my Destiny to do the Lord's work here, here in LaMongué, why then should I assume the habit of the wanderer? The pilgrim? Why go looking for my calling when already it has found me?" His pace slowed. He stopped. A frank expression loosened the cords of worry about his temples. "And my work here- our work Jacques- has met with only one success in fifty. Hardly a bounty by any measure or rule. Most of these poor souls will end their days here, hidden behind these walls, stinking in their cages, fading into their filth. No. Some successes, a rare few. But this... this..." He crossed the chamber to place a hand upon the leather-bound ledger upon the lectern. "But *this*...!"

"None have found fault with our logic, Father. Your treatise is most thorough."

"Hm. Yet for all its thoroughness, it has not been *proven*, either. Nor can it be so- here behind a desk, here within these walls." He took up the book and held it to his chest. He stroked the leather cover like a cherished pet. "Faith- *any* faith- is built upon a foundation of imagined stones, my son. We believe them to be there, and so they are- presto! And these invisible stones provide the basis for simple souls to construct their lives. Such is our lot, no Jacques?"

"Invisible stones stronger than iron, Father. Such is our faith."

"Mmm. So long as no one points out to the contrary. Invisible stones..."

"Father?"

Rathbourne shook his head, chasing the notion away. He spread his arms, the sleeves of his robes and cloak spreading like the wings of a bat. Executing a half turn, he announced, "Here then, young sir! Your offices! To your duty now, and I to mine. God be praised if we are both successful in our ventures!"

"Amen!"

Rathbourne ushered the novice around the desk to his new position. Catching up his discarded hat, leaving with only the clothes upon his back and the ledger of his life's work, the resigned priest made his exit. "Ah, how I must have looked my first day at the helm! A fine captain you shall make, Jacques! A fine captain indeed!"

The newly-appointed master of LaMongué straightened to the challenge.

Upon the threshold, the elder priest cast back a thoughtful look. "What then will be your first order of business- *Father* Jacques?"

The young man flinched before the title. His expression drew a laugh from the elder priest. "Twill take some getting used to, I suppose."

"Indeed!" the younger admitted, composing himself. Looking down, running a thoughtful finger along the edge of the desk- of *his* desk- Father Jacques proclaimed at last:

"The Suicide."

Rathbourne hesitated. "Mmm,. yes." Long, white fingers clutched the spine of his book. "The Suicide..."

Jacques prompted, "I had him put in a courtyard cage for the night. As per your request."

Rathbourne chewed his lip into a frown. "And his demeanor this morning?"

Jacques shrugged. "I have not been to see him this early. He may not have survived the night."

"Mmm... it was a cold one..."

Lost in thought, Father Rathbourne drifted from the chamber without proper good-bye.

Jacques- *Father* Jacques- allowed the man his peace. Anyone setting off to save the world deserved as much. Sincerely, he muttered, "God be with you, Father. God's speed, God's will, and God's grace be to you, Father Rathbourne."

* * *

A permanent scowl had taken up residence upon the lips of Vivian VoMambre. Doughy hands kneaded a tough, yellow ball for bread. She hissed a sigh of irritation, pausing to rub the end of her nose with a bent wrist. "Do I have to do everything myself around here!"

The dull *thud thud thud* of the butter churn stopped immediately. "I can help, Viv! What do you need- ?"

Vivian flashed a dark, condemning look. The youngest VoMambre sank back to her stool wordlessly. Eyes narrowing, the travel of Vivian's gaze shot up the dark stairwell that led to the private rooms above- to their parents' chambers.

"You know Mum has her condition, Viv. But she'll be up soon..." The slow rhythm of post and pound resumed: *thud thud thud. Clump clump clump...*

Vivian rolled her eyes, mouthing the word 'condition'. She stuffed the dough into a bread pan and punched it down with a balled fist.

"Have to let it rise first, Viv." *Clump clump clump. Clump.*

The fist struck again, lashing out at more than just flour and yeast. Picking up the pan, Vivian waddled across the kitchen, free hand pressed to the aching part of her lower back. Grumbling, she placed the loaf to bake in the hive next to the fire. "It's not bad enough I have to... without so much as a... burdened with more than anyone should... if I had my way... if anyone cared about *me*..." Picking up a salver, she wiped it down with the hem of her apron and headed for the common room.

The door swung open and shut.

The butter churn slowed.

"Don't worry, Vie," said the youngest VoMambre, looking to where her imaginary dog lay by the hearth. "She'll brighten up once Mum comes down. You'll see. No need to worry." *Clump clump clump* went the churn. "Not Mum's fault she can't sleep at night. She takes all her medicines, just like they tells her to." *Clump clump clump.* "Takes 'em every night. Needs time to work, they do. And we'll keep praying. She'll be better soon. And then, when she's fit as can be-"

"Who *are* you talking to?" Vivian stared from around the corner of the door. The way her sister ducked the question told her all she needed to know. Shaking her head, she leaned in to snap up a dishrag and then disappeared. Through the cracks of the swinging door came the distinct utterance:

"Imbecile..."

The butter churn thumped to a halt. "Not..." the young VoMambre insisted quietly.

Clump.

"Not..."

Clump. Clump clump cl-

"Ghhhaah-!"

The rear door of the kitchen flew open in a fury. The rattling planks banged off the wall and swung back shut: *slam bang slam!* The noise made her jump, sending her stool tumbling. The butter churn wobbled like a wooden duck. The door swung open again. This time the meaty arm of Master VoMambre held its rebound in check.

"There you are!" he pressed out between clenched teeth.

She cringed.

"Where have you been?" he demanded, slamming the door shut upon entry.

"What have you been up to? Hiding?" He shook his fist menacingly.

"I've- I've been at the churn all morn-" she stammered. Her legs came up, one then the other, bending at the knee and releasing. They were eager to be elsewhere, springing for escape. It would only go worse if they got their way.

"Liar!" he shouted, slamming a fist upon the table that separated them. The hand swept laterally, knocking several pots to the floor- *crash tang bang!* "I could not find you this morning-"

"Such clamor!" Vivian objected. From the common room she backed her way into the kitchens, her tray piled over with dishes. "Trip over your own strings, Em? Or has your invisible dog toppled the-" Catching sight of their father, she became a sudden mute.

He spared her not a second glance. He had no time for her. His victim was plainly set in his mind.

The youngest VoMambre cowered at the edge of the hearth. "Papa- Papa, I went to get firewood- but I came right back-"

"Liar!" he insisted, closing in. "I've been to see Dorion this very moment. Ran clear across the city searching for you! And to what? He has no memory of-"

"But I went to Guillome. Guillome! Viv told me- told me to... Guillome..!"
Pleading eyes turned upon her sister for corroboration.

Vivian laughed. "Don't drag me down into the mud, Em. I said no such thing!"
With a flick of her dishrag she left the pair to themselves.

"But Papa-!"

He struck her.

"But the wood is right here, Papa-"

He stuck her again. "Liar! Sharker! Don't you run from me! Get back here!"

"P-P-Papa...!"

"Where were you hiding? Skulking about the sanctum again, were you? Prayers over an honest day of work? Is that it?"

"No- no. I was getting- get- get- getting...!"

"Oh, shut up! Stop that crying! I've no time. No time! Leave that. Leave it! Stop your sniveling. Your sister can finish that. You come with me. Up now! Go!"

"But Papa-!"

"Don't Papa me! Move! Move, or I'll give you something to cry about. I'll be rid of you this day, mark my words. End of your bother once and for all!"

Under a heavy hand, Master VoMambre herded his youngest out the rear door, so much cattle off to the slaughter market.

* * *

The cage was the type reserved for violent cases. Fetters at the four corners kept the subject restrained in a prone position. The Suicide had never shown violent action, save for the slash across his own throat. And that had occurred prior to his arrival at LaMongué. His spirit had been torn from his heart, his strength bled away in crimson streaks long before the asylum had taken him under its wing.

Crossing the courtyard on brisk steps, Father Rathbourne gauged the Suicide's aspect from afar. The fellow was naked except for his chains and where tendrils of early morning fog crept through the bars of his prison. The man was a drowned corpse risen from the depths of a watery burial. Rathbourne did not veer from his arrow-straight course for the gatehouse. Gripping his ledger, the priest muttered a prayer for the dead and a lament for the fallen. He concluded:

"Lord God, grant me the wisdom I lack to serve my fellow man..."

The gatekeeper of LaMongué was an ever alert man. Wized like an ancient dwarf, the stout, whiskered fellow had his great key ring at the ready before his master arrived.

"Morning, Father," said he, affecting a slight bow at the waist. His keys rattled on their ring as the lock was turned. The heavy gate of black iron swung outward on oiled hinges.

"And to you, Vaughn. What say you for the day's weather?"

The dwarf sniffed the air, one hand still upon the gate. He twirled the brass ring speculatively. "Wouldn't surprise me if'n the first snow of the season falls come night, Father."

"Snow indeed! With winter so many weeks away. Cold! Cold indeed!"

"I'll take snow over Devils' Tears!" the gatekeeper shivered despite himself.

"Oh? I had not heard."

"Lit up the sky like fiery rain last night, Father. Dozens, hundreds- more than I could count. On and on they came. Late, late! Couldn't sleep from the cold in my joints. Mebby I was the only one in the whole city up to see 'em. Lucky me," he grumbled, shaking his head. "Bad omen! Bad, bad omen!"

"Shooting stars," Rathbourne reflected. A single shooting star grants a wish. A shower brings misfortune, ruin, calamity. Yes, a bad omen indeed.

"Bound for the Cathedral, are you? Another meeting with your superiors, Father?" The gatekeeper nodded knowingly at the book in his master's hand. "I don't know my letters from my thumbs, Father, but those who do- those who know the ins and outs of it all- they say it's quite the read."

"Ah, yes," Rathbourne said absently, passing the tome from one hand to the other. Suddenly uncomfortable, he returned it to the original hand, and then tucked it up under one arm. The leather of his book, of his genius, felt suddenly hot. Judgment Day was nearly upon him. Or at least, upon his ideas. No matter the Tribunal's decision- or lack thereof- his mind was set. His course was charted. LaMongué was another man's responsibility now. There was nothing holding him here anymore.

The clatter of a cart in the street and the toll of an ominous bell brought the priest a timely- if not altogether welcome- distraction. The gatekeeper turned his hairy head as well. A low, wide Death Cart constructed of charred wood came crawling behind the slow plod of a draft horse. The steed's head drooped in an expression of weary duty, of sorrow. At the beast's side walked the Corpse Collector, one hand on the bridle, the other clanging a low, steady dirge from a tuneless bell. Bodies stacked like logs filled the back of the cart.

"Do not stop upon our doorstep today, Master Death!" The dwarf motioned for the cloaked apparition to keep moving. "We've none to feed your Plague Fires today-"

Rathbourne interrupted. "Here, sir. Your services *are* needed."

"Father? I've no report of plagues in the night. Least none have been stacked at my gatehouse, as you see."

"Plague, no," the priest agreed. "But the Suicide. He has expired at last. God forgive his tormented soul."

"Has he then?" The dwarf squinted in the direction of the lock-box. "Him there? On the end row?" The gatekeeper started across the courtyard, counting off keys on his ring. "I'll have him out of his coffin in a spot, Father!"

Rathbourne let the man do his duty. He remained at the gate, barring the way against the grim wagon keeper. Visitors to LaMongué were not allowed without proper approval. And even then certain preparations were required. The tenuous asylum air was easily upset by the most mundane visitations. Admitting this spectre and his cart of death would send everyone into a frenzy. "Close enough," he warned, gagging on the reek of putrefied flesh.

The wagon master held his ground, eyes devoid of expression. They were chips of flint that lurked under a black hood, hid behind a swathing of scarves. The death bell quieted. All that remained was the creak of his leather: stained apron, tall boots, long, protective gloves.

Rathbourne doffed his hat, covered his mouth with a section of its wide brim. The Plague! The Plague! God's judgment? God's wrath? Everywhere death and dying. It spared no rank, no station. From peasant to monarch, from saint to sinner, none were

immune! It stuck a babe in its youth, yet passed over its twin in the very same bed! Was this the work of Divinity? How could such randomness be construed as-

Rathbourne caught himself in the same old arguments. Rhetoric! There would be time enough to grapple these questions at the Cathedral. No point working the mind to exhaustion before the fact. Forcing himself back to the moment, he muttered, "My son, tell me your business has fallen off in recent days. Bring an old man some cheer. Say the Mistress of Black Veils has tired of our fair city and moved on."

After a hesitation, the cloaked shoulders shrugged noncommittally.

The jangle of keys marked the dwarven gatekeeper's return. Huffing over his brief trot, he reported, "None for your wagon after all, Master Death." To Father Rathbourne he explained, "The Suicide falls short in living up to his name! Still some breath in him yet. Wasted on the wrong folk- I say. With bodies turning black everywhere you look, and that one puts a knife to his own throat? Wasted I say! Off with you there. Off with your rotten cart. Come back on the morrow and mebbly we'll have some for the likes of you..."

Rathbourne turned from the gate, forgetting their visitor. "Still alive...?" On slow, careful steps, the priest strode to the Suicide in his cage.

Drawn to the four corners of the box, the wretch lay facing the Heavens he so mocked. Days of stubborn self-neglect left him a sunken husk. The paste of his flesh was drawn taut, paper-thin. Knobs of bony joints threatened to puncture the delicate film. Greasy, black strands matted his forehead in a slick web. His jaw was rough from several days of growth. The viscous gash across his throat festered.

Rathbourne hovered above the bars, pensive. "And yet you still live... By the grace of God alone, do you drawn a breath. Truly a miracle. How else can it be

explained? How? Miracle I say. But you would disagree. You would say He is capricious. Wanton even." The priest shook his head sadly.

A single eyelid cracked. For a moment only the white showed, marbled with red. Then a hazel iris surface, bobbing like cork on water. Something akin to a groan followed.

"Nothing to say today?" the priest rejoined. "The fire in your belly has burned low at last, I see. Yet the scald of your tongue is still remembered by my flesh. Hard to imagine you are the same man! The heat you threw at me, at my calling, even up to the Throne of Heaven itself! None were spared your criticisms!" He paused, shifting his weight, awaiting a reply. He slapped his thigh with his hat. Nothing. Not so much as a groan.

"Nothing? Nothing at all to say?" Rathbourne looked up, glancing about the yard. The other cages were empty. The gatekeeper was true- the weather was too cold for the usual occupants. And after last night's cold snap... yet he still lived.

"You are a strong one. By that I mean of will, resolution, not frame. You long for the sweet release of death, as you put it. Clearly the Lord has rejected your request. You live! His wisdom, His forgiveness, protects your soul. We both know there is a special corner of Hell for suicides. This cage-" he rapped the bars with a toe "-is palatial by comparison. The rooms that await you in the Abyss...!" He scuffed the bars again with his boot. "I've given you a taste of Hell on earth. My methods, harsh some would say. But here you are, alive the next morn. And- God willing- much the wiser from the experience. Perhaps you have reconsidered your crime? Perhaps Reason has come to you in the night? Visited as you shivered, ever wakeful? Yes? Yes?"

He saw the answer was no.

The priest sighed. "You've had much more good fortune than your brethren. Two were hanged upon the spot! The others were burned at the stake immediately after their Tribunal." He crouched low, bending at the knees and steady himself with a hand on the edge of the box. "I offer you the opportunity to serve the Lord, penance for your sins, redemption my son! This- this means nothing!" He reached between the bars and pinched a flaccid biceps. "The flesh is so easily swayed and destroyed. Just as easily restored! A warm bath, hot meal, fresh linens? You'll be able to ride the world over in service to our Lord! I offer you that chance, one last time. Join me, my son. Turn the evils of your past into the justices of the morrow! What say you? You want to live- I know it! Say it! Confess to me your desire for life-

The Suicide turned. His head was too heavy to lift. Both eyes opened, mere slits. The muscles of his neck writhed, threatening to burst the clotted wound.

"Yes, yes my son!" Rathbourne placed a pale hand upon the frozen shoulder within the cage. The prisoner's body trembled with a chill "Tell me you still have faith!"

"M-fff m-fff..."

"Yes, yes my son. I am here!"

"M-fff m-fffv..."

"Speak the Lord's name and I shall know you join with me-

"...Vienne..."

Rathbourne's expression soured at once. "Still is it! Still! Blood, fire and iron! You mock me! You mock the Word. Even on the brink of your doom, your damnation, you mock all!" Disgusted, exasperated, the priest jumped upright and headed for the gate.

"...Vienne...!"