

### Chapter 3

The paneled doors of the Inner Sanctum soar to the height of four plus forty cubits. Their layers of stalwart oak are mighty enough to withstand any ram. Moving but one of the matched pair requires a team of seven men- braced shoulder to shoulder. Mandates governing a Tribunal plainly state discussions and councils of the process are meant for servants of God only. Such ecclesiastical discourse only confounds and stupefies the lay, ignorant ear. As such, each Tribunal begins with two teams of seven bending their backs to seal the protective doors close. The muted rumble and quake reverberates to the very foundation stones of the mighty Cathedral. The conclusions of a Tribunal have much farther-reaching effects: whenever those great doors reopen, the fates of nations sway.

Upon his high throne of stuffed red velvets and gold filigree, the High Priest waited for the thunder to quell. As the arms of his chair settled and the last echoes dwindled, he rose to declare this Tribunal begun. On either hand ran similar chairs, two rows facing each other down there upon the main floor. Assembled were the familiar faces known of old, each dressed in the satins of their station. Though every priest looked a twin to the man on his right, and all swore fealty to the One True Master, their minds were unique. Each had his own biases, prejudices, convictions- endless opinions and interpretations of the Truth.

"Gentlemen," began the High Priest, "as final arbiter of our church it is my duty and obligation to oversee every Tribunal. However..." He extended a hand to the odd chair upon his dais, to the out-of-place dignitary who sat silently to the right. "I am first and foremost a humble servant to our liaison from the Mother Church." At this he turned

to their guest and extended an offer. "You have traveled so far, Blessed One. It shall be your wisdom that breaks our stalemate. If you would you care assume the throne, I shall graciously relinquish." The High Priest concluded with a humble bow from the waist.

The white-haired dignitary lifted a hand in simple gesture. He said nothing, silent as his curled fingers. It was plain the council should continue as it would, as if his presence here was of no import.

The High Priest nodded. Returning to the flanks of robed men, he began:

"Gentlemen, we have all heard Rathbourne's dissertation upon a number of previous occasions. He has presented his manuscript in exacting detail. We have questioned him, his methods, his conclusions. In turn, we have deliberated and voiced our own opinions- at great length." Even now memories of those long, unresolved evenings weighed like a physical presence upon his body and psyche. Squaring himself, he continued with more alacrity. "It was our own indecision that moved us to seek council from the Mother Church-" Immediately he amended, with a gracious nod of apology to the chorus of creased brows: "I restate: it was our *lack* of conclusion, our *lack* of resolution that pressed our hand for higher opinion. We have all made our own decisions, and stick to them doggedly. Rathbourne's theory... is a compelling one. Argument for and against are strong, equally balanced, like matched gladiators."

Several of the gathered shifted noisily in their gowns.

Unaffected, the High Priest concluded:

"It is then our duty to lay before our glorious guest the sides of the argument. He has heard Rathbourne's theory in detail under private audience. The time is now for rebuttal. God willing, we shall have a final decision at last. Who shall begin-?"

"Rathbourne is a heretic!" came the immediate response. The volcanic priest first to find his voice nearly leapt from his chair. Fiery indignation blazed in his eyes. "The man is an affront to the robes he wears. The grounds of his theory are steeped in defiance to The Almighty. It is well-established that this blight upon mankind is punishment for his sins! We are *meant* to suffer, and suffer we shall! A cure will come when He deems it proper. Only then! One day the wind shall blow clean and sweet, wicking away the taint of this Black Death. Searching for a cure is folly. A waste! Defiance, in fact! The man must be dealt with, punished, destroyed!" Finished with his attack, the blustery priest released his grip and the folds of gown tangled therein. Waiting for argument- but receiving none- he seated himself with a reluctant air. There was more fire in his veins, but none had taken up the gauntlet thrown down.

Upon his throne, the High Priest allowed himself a brief fantasy. The presence of their esteemed guest was generating a surprising effect upon his flock. There may come about a resolution after all- could it be? Turning his head to their guest, he raised an eyebrow for comment. The visiting dignitary made no sound. He remained as before, sitting quietly with hands held loosely in his lap. One would think him daydreaming, so calm, tranquil his demeanor. Then his head swiveled in a new direction. Another voice had assumed the floor.

"It is not a sin to try and better one's situation. The man, Rathbourne, is no more defying the Lord than a ploughman in his field. A crop shall not grow without an honest day's effort. Rathbourne's interpretation of the Scriptures points a similar path for success. He is merely following the Word of God as it has been put down through the ages-

"His theory! His theory only. None here concur entirely."

"Nor disagree- entirely."

"I should said otherwise!"

The High Priest sank back in his chair. His fantasy was lost. The arguments had begun.

"Yet we have *not* come to a definite conclusion. That alone proves some merit to the man's idea-

"The question is not whether Rathbourne's theory is right or wrong, quest or folly. The simple answer to that notion is to simply send the man on his way. The question, gentlemen, is what part the Church shall play in this venture. For surely Rathbourne has vowed to embark upon his journey- with or without the Church's blessing and support."

"The man does have conviction, if nothing else."

"So where to we stand, gentlemen? Is the fellow a heretic, or savior of the world-?"

Harsh coughs and disapproving grumblings arose.

"Forgive my choice of words, brethren. I overstep myself. Let me rephrase and ask again: do we call him madman or benefactor?"

"Who he is, what he is, remains irrelevant. His theory is pulled directly from the Scriptures. To disavow him is to disavow the cornerstone of our very belief. But then, if we assist and the man fails- the Scripture is thrown into the mud and the Church looks the fool."

"Which is precisely why the man's interpretation is in error. The Holy Word *cannot* be wrong!"

"But should he succeed? If he accomplishes his task outside our auspices, then there you have the Church reduced to the role of jester. If a decision of a Tribunal is proven wrong, where then shall our process lie? What forum shall it call home?"

"Do we *want* Rathbourne to succeed?"

The bold question brought a sudden still to the vaulted chamber. Heat and argument stumbled, cooled. At long last someone showed the courage, the audacity, to state the common fear: how would Rathbourne's quest affect their position in the world? Would his venture tear down the stones upon which they stood? Would they be reduced the fate of common men?

Eyes both bold and surreptitious sought reaction from their visiting personage. All were disappointed. Still there came no comment, neither to encourage nor discourage. The wise man remained calmly in the background, content to observe and not interfere.

His small eyes pierced to the soul.

At once, as a group, the gathered priests realized this was no simple debate. They were being observed- watched by the eye of Mother Church herself. This meeting extended beyond these granite walls, these vaulted chambers, to other places more hallowed, more powerful than their own limited influence. Petty politics and intrigues were overshadowed by a larger, looming mother entity. Each man realized he was alone, local alliances sundered, fraternal links dissolved. Under the all-seeing eye of Mother Church, each man was being judged for this own merit. They were all on thin ice, lured out deep by their own petty shortsightedness. It was folly to cling to others as they sank through. Now was the time for every man to show himself, for true confessions.

"The plague is a curse- as well as a blessing. Hear now, I care not for all the dying and disruption it has brought to our kingdom and countless others. I cherish the day the Black Shadow lifts from our lands. But when have we seen our masses so attended in the past? Every day our beloved Cathedral is overrun by the faithful coming to pray. To pray for their dead, to pray for their lives, to pray for the future-

"And to fill our coffers with their offerings."

"Allowable tithes-

"Fear money!"

"I say not! No amount of gold can deter His hand! Even amongst our own ranks-" a quick gesture to a peer who sported the pockmarks of a pestilence survivor- "we are no more immune from the tincture of the Plague than our congregations! No! Our own ranks have contracted the terrible blight as much as any other. Those touched by God have endured, and survived. Those who toss his wisdom aside have fallen. No amount of gold can change that!"

"Yet we do not turn away the coins. We accept them as-

"Gentlemen! Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The High Priest rose from his seat. "We are all aware of our views. I tell you now I can name every man here and his opinions front to back. This is not an arena where we bludgeon a decision out of one another. We are here to state the facts, our views, and to let Mother Church decide." He executed a half bow to their guest. "A formidable task, indeed."

The dignitary blinked softly. Resolution was still to come.

Returning to the assemblage, the High Priest resumed:

"Divining the purpose of Pestilence is not the crux of this meeting. Its social- and yes, economic- impact upon the Church are *not* the issue before us. The question at

hand is a decisions on Father Rathbourne's request. The answer to that question rests upon the worthiness of his theory. We shall stick to that topic, gentlemen. I am quite certain we weary our guest's patience with our own brand of courtly politics and bickering." He seated himself with a deal of fuss arranging his robes. "Who then will speak further to the matter of Rathbourne's quest?"

Unaccustomed to such verbal chastisement, the dual ranks of silks and satins stewed momentarily. Ultimately, it was the youngest of their rank who first recovered, his tender ego much more pliant. Solemnly he rose.

"Gentlemen and honored guest, Rathbourne has put much thought into his theory. We may call him heretic, for his conclusions are bold. We may call him hero, for his intentions are noble. We may also sit and call him many, many things. These words amount to so much humid breath. Action, gentlemen, will reveal the truth to the matter. With the approval of Mother Church, I humbly offer my assistance to Rathbourne and his venture." The youth nodded reverently to the snowy-haired dignitary. The small man returned a nod of his own. As before there was neither acceptance nor renunciation.

The young speaker seated himself, his point made.

"Others?" prompted the High Priest.

"Traipsing about the countryside will do the populace of our city no good! The presence of clergy in the city is a far more immediate, and beneficial need. Rites must be performed for the dead, there is no question to that! Already we are burdened day and night to meet that single need alone. As sure as I sit here, I know the brief course of this Tribunal will mean for me a throng of corpses back in my quarter of the city. I shall be blessing well into the early morning hours. One man can search out this secret answer as well as two. Or two thousand. Rathbourne is the only one who knows what he is looking

for. I say let him go- alone. Let us not waste our own resources on slight chances. We are so desperately needed here. Let the man go, and go silently. Where does it say we need a decision here and now?"

"A cowardly approach. It does not speak well of your Faith in general."

"I am speaking for the name of the Church- not my particular view. For the reputation of our Church, I say! Non-believers rake the name of our Faith daily, saying, 'Where is God if not to help his people now?' 'Where is the Almighty and His infinite power? Even his priests are struck down!' For us to publicly announce this quest- only to have it fail? More fuel for the heretics and their arguments. Why give them that if it can be avoided?"

The holy visitor from the Mother Church cleared his throat. A decision had arrived. The council went silent, the air sucked from their lungs.

Pressing hands to his thighs, the wizened representative pushed himself to his feet. He signaled for his cloak and wide-brim hat. The High Priest took it upon himself to perform the honors. Hat and cloak were fetched and transferred with only minor difficulties. Together the pair descended the dais and headed slowly for the great double doors looming at the far, dark end. The gathered clergy rose to their feet, every ear straining to hear the whisper-soft words being put into their master's ear:

"God's will is God's will, my son. We cannot fathom His wisdom. The Pestilence is part of His plan. Rathbourne's theory, too, is part of His plan. We are all parts of the intricate tapestry. You, I, His Eminency- all of us- threads in that grand weaving, intertwined into an image that covers our world. Always remember, it is *His* hand that weaves the final picture. The design has long since been set in His mind. The unfolding of life is merely the assembling of those pieces. It is not for us to say what that

picture should, or should not, be. Death and ruination? Peace and prosperity? We cannot see the tapestry as a whole, so we cannot guide the threads to their proper course. Only He sees the whole picture."

"What shall we do then, Holy One? Surely..."

The superior raised a frail hand, the flesh white as snow. "We are all threads. That is all we are, all that we can be in His hands. Two strands may intertwine, but always they remain separate. Rathbourne will forever be his own thread, leading to a single destination. Twine more threads about the man and his path may become tangled, knotted into ruin." He pointed a finger skyward, pausing to allow a little smile. "Too many cooks, eh?" He shook his head lightly, the grin remaining. "No. no. Let the man run his due, follow his course, as it should be. The Church will assist in its own way. The rest of us, we must live our own threads to their own ends. That is the only assurance of a smooth, coherent tapestry."

He braved a little sigh, patted the High Priest genially upon the shoulder, and waited for the huge door to part.

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The great slab granite steps of the Cathedral were ice beneath Father Rathbourne's feet. Today was the coldest day of his career, of his life. Descending slowly- the noble edifice towering behind him as a disapproving parent figure- he mulled the final decision of the Tribunal. A small writ hastily penned was all that he had to show for it. Stamped with the crimson wax of his order, it was official as any Royal Decree. He stopped to read its content again. Stifling a sigh of exasperation, he tucked the note between the covers of his ledger and turned to face the Cathedral one more time. Holding his hat to his head, he craned his neck to gaze up the long, towering steeple, a

distant pinnacle of Heaven. The grandest church in the kingdom, a monument to God and His Word, a landmark known the world over, home to the most revered minds in the Church- and a writ was all it had to offer?

"Such irony would kill a lesser soul."

And so began his quest.

The city teemed with humanity. Despite the Pestilence, the children of God continued their daily toils. Only now, with the decision made, the answer in his hand, did Rathbourne notice. All morning he had been secluded in his own thoughts, his own world, oblivious, wandering the city from one end to the other without notice. That inner realm, his hiding place, was gone, dust blown away on the wind. *This* was his world now- all of it, his. Alone. He glared at the milling faces, bustling shoulders, shouting voices. And yes, the Death Carts as they trundled past in an endless caravan.

Alone.

A cold wind ruffled Rathbourne's cloak and robes. The brim of his hat fluttered noisily. Now that he had no hearth to call home, he felt for the first time the true chill in his nostrils.

He started down the long step for the busy square below.

A figure at the foot of the Cathedral steps met his eye. He was a priest dressed in the black robes of their station. Rathbourne felt he knew the man by sight, if not by name. His mood, drowned by the betrayal of his order, urged him to avoid the other, to ignore him entirely. He had his writ, after all- what *more* could be possibly need? The young priest, however, proved impossible to miss, intentionally or otherwise. He held the reins of a great charger that in turn blocked all egress from the Cathedral stairs. The

beast was big, solid, black, carved from a huge block of volcanic obsidian. Thwarted, Rathbourne drew up short of the pair.

"What's this then?" Rathbourne muttered.

A smile upon the young priest's face slackened. He confessed, "Brother Rathbourne, I do not begrudge you your mien."

The voice was the missing piece to Rathbourne's memory. Here was one of the Tribunal members. The common robes were a far cry from the silks and satins. "Come to see me off on my grand adventure, is it? Fond farewells for an old man and his folly?"

"We are of similar minds, I assure you. But the Mother Church has spoken and we must serve our Master-" The stallion snorted and shook his thick mane. Harness and tack jingled. The youth steadied the mount with some effort. As he did so, he added, "The Tribunal would never admit it, but I voiced my desire to join you on your bold departure. I most dearly want to see it through to the end. However..."

Rathbourne barely refrained a scowl. "However, your masters have spoken. You must heed their will."

"Indeed!" The younger priest suddenly became apprehensive. His eyes caught figures in the distance- more black robes and wide brim hats. "They are looking for me. I must go! I wish you God's Grace on your adventure, Brother Rathbourne! The Church compels *my* life- but not my steed's. Take Champion as your own and use him well! I only wish I had more to give. God be with you- may your quest succeed!"

He left so quickly Rathbourne had no time to ask how a priest- sworn to a life of abstinence and poverty- could possibly come into owning such a beast.

"I'm no equestrian..." he muttered.

Champion responded by backing away, steel shoes scraping on the cobbles of the street.

"Ho there!" the startled priest begged. "I've no hand for this- easy boy! Easy... easy... easy..." Inexperienced hands fumbled between the leather of his ledger and the leather of the reins. The stallion shook its head expressively, testing the priest and his grip. "Easy there, now... good boy..."

"Rathbourne! Father Rathbourne! We've just caught you! Ho there! That's a beauty you've there, no doubt!"

"Caught-? Caught me?" Struggling with the horse, his attention drawn, Rathbourne could spare not a moment to face his accoster. "I- caught- *ho boy!* There there-!"

"Spirited!"

"Yes- I- a gift- by- *oh.* VoRattum. It's you- *easy boy!* You. I hadn't realized..."

The riled horse dragged its new owner in a circle. The beefy innkeeper did his best to stay in the priest's field of view. The three made a curious dance in the street.

"I really do not have time- VoRattum- for- *ut!* For- for- talk. I have my hands full at the moment- *ugh!*"

"VoMambre, father. Vo- Mam- Bre! Ah there, let me get that for you, father!" The innkeeper crouched to catch the fluttering pages of the dropped ledger. Too stout about the middle, the aproned proprietor dropped to one knee and fished the book from the dirty cobbles with the delicate paws of a bear. "Here we are- here were are then. No harm done!" he reported, struggling to rise. His coarse hands swiped at the grit upon the covers.

"I- I thank you, VoMambre. But as I said, I haven't the time. My day has been ruination from the start, and a foul mood grips me."

"Say it isn't so, father! I am here to make good my name in your eyes-"

"If you mean- *ho boy!* If you refer to the matter of this morning- I forgive. We shall call it a misunderstanding and leave it at that."

"No- no misunderstanding-!"

"Really, VoMambre. The bellow of your voice spooks the beast."

The persistent innkeeper kept to his course. The prospect of being turned away a second time added volume to his already booming voice.

"Upon the eyes of my dead mother, father, you must listen-!"

"I would not-!"

"Just a moment-!"

"VoMambre! You're *ho-ah!*"

The horse reared at last. It went up upon springs with a wail. The two men cowered back, mindful of the hooves rolling in the air. Where VoMambre was merely startled, Rathbourne was in the full grip of fear. A scene from his young, impressionable youth- that of a man trampled to death- bled his manhood to naught. His precious ledger was forgotten and dropped again. Both hands shot up to grip his hat and pull the wide brim down over his ears. The rest of his body doubled over for the crushing blows to come.

Through clenched eyes he *sensed* more than *saw* another body jump into the path of the beast. There was a great shout- not the bellicose bark of VoMambre, though it was strangely similar. It spoke to the horse as a general would discipline his troops. Rathbourne recovered in time to watch as a tall youth in stable garb grabbed the reins

with one deft swipe. With that single fist, the boy hauled the horse's head to front as a fish on the line. In a smooth, fluid motion the lanky lad caught the stallion's jaw in his free hand and with applied pressure brought the beast to an immediate, obedient standstill. Fire burned in the stallion's big eyes, complete with flaring nostrils and hooves that paw the ground to sparks. But the lad held true, equal fire in his dark eyes. His outthrust jaw was set like granite. Will against will.

"Ha ha! There you are!" VoMambre cheered, triumphant. "What do you think of *that*, Rathbourne? Could you use such a stablehand to tend your beast during your travels? Could you now-? Oh- ah!. Allow me again!" In his jubilation, the proprietor managed to retrieve the dropped ledger and assist the trembling priest back to his feet. "Rathbourne! Rathbourne- speak man! The worst is over! The steed is tamed!"

"Yes, yes. I see that. I- I thank you, VoMambre. And your son."

"My son!" He laughed, swatting the priest on the arm. "My son, you say!"

"Yes, of- of course. The resemblance is quite unmistakable. Who else could the lad be, but your son?"

"What say you to that, Pup?"

The lad continued to steady the steed, eyes locked upon the beast's own.

"Nothing... Papa..."

Rathbourne paused to right the tattered ledger, smoothing bent and sullied parchment pages. He spoke while fussing with his life's work. "Thank you, lad. You're a good boy. Splendid. Perhaps you've saved my life just now. I'm not much of a horseman, I'm afraid."

VoMambre laughed uproariously.

Rathbourne raised an eye at the boisterous outburst. Tucking his ledger under one arm, he assembled what he could of proper decorum. "Truly, I offer my gratitude. And my apologies, VoMambre, for my earlier tone. The day and the beast got the better of-"

He froze.

VoMambre laughed anew as realization dawned in the elder priest's eyes. Proudly, the innkeeper declared, "I've brought my *daughter* to you, sir! As you can see, she- *she* I say- is most capable with all things four-legged. What say you? Ah-em? Ha ho there!"

Rathbourne stammered, flustered by his own blunder. "I- my apologies, my child. I- the horse- startled..."

The VoMambre daughter nodded, her eyes trained upon the scheming stallion. "A fighter, this one, father. You'll have to teach him who is in charge. Or he will teach you!"

VoMambre laughed again with a clap of his hands. "Best to heed her advice, father. She knows the ways of the beasts. Speaks to them I'll swear. Spends more time with them than with people. Sleeps out in the stables with them and all-"

"Yes yes, of course," the priest said quickly. He plucked his ledger out from one arm, turned it about, and tucked it under the other arm. "Well then, I- I thank you for your assistance, young miss... but I have to be on my way. The day is passing. Much to do-"

"She can help!" VoMambre insisted, sidling up to the priest. Placing a heavy arm across Rathbourne's bony shoulders, he took the clergyman aside. His gruff demeanor settled to a lower, more confessional tone. "Listen, Father. Do a man a favor.

You *must* take her off my hands. For the love of God, think of *my* position. I've wed off an army of daughters before this one- dowry after dowry after dowry- just to be rid of them! Costly enough, even when they are pretty as cherubs. But this one- I'd have to mortgage my inn just to get a fellow to *look* her way! And that may not be enough."

Rathbourn gasped at these blunt words. Unless the daughter was stone deaf she could hear every debilitating syllable.

"God gave me this legacy of daughters- blessing or curse I know not which betimes. The least *He* can do- the least *you* can do- is take one of 'em off my hands for not so much as a penny! You need not worry about your priestly vows- of that you can be sure. She can no more stir the passions of a man than could a- than-" He pressed his lips together, searching in vain for a metaphor. "She like the one there, with all the snakes in her head. Turning a man's blood to stone-"

"VoMambre!" Rathbourne had at last found his voice. "Such words- a father for his own daughter! Flesh of your own flesh! VoMambre, you *are* a scoundrel!"

"What? I'm a business man, father. All I ask is take her away. She's always talked of becoming a nun- haven't you, Pup? Eh! Off to church every Sabbath for worship. Only place she goes, outside of her chores. A more pious girl you'll never find. Loyal! Strong as an ox! Splits the wood every day for the fireplace."

"I- I-" Father Rathbourne stammered, switching his ledger from one armpit to the other several times in succession. "Take her to a nunnery if that is what she wants- I- I have no-

"Their dowry is threefold again more! I can make no sense of it either- but there it is. Costs a father more to marry his daughter to God than to a man-"

"VoMambre, it is impossible! Leave me be from your madness. I- I have only the one horse. We cannot ride together. No- not at all. That will not do. Hardships of the road- no place for a woman-"

"Nonsense! They don't come any tougher. She's bested the plague, she has. So ugly Death won't even take her! Show him your scars, Pup. Where those black blisters bubbled up and marked your skin. Go on show him. Ah well, you've the point, father. Shy she is. Blessed by God, though, to survive the Pestilence and all, I mean. They don't come stronger- no sir! Add to that, she's an excellent rider. Loves the beasts to death. And a trainer- did I mention? Natural born. She could manage the reins for you."

"Impossible!"

For his numerous faults, perhaps because of them, VoMambre was a shrewd businessman for he knew how to read a man. Rathbourne's nervous fingers upon his tome spoke volumes. The man was mortally terrified of the powerful stallion.

"I'm a businessman, Rathbourne!" he concluded, offering the priest a reassuring squeeze beneath his arm. "What say you I offer my daughter *and* a steed as well. A nice, tame, docile beast that is timid as a newt? Eh? Hm?" He sidled closer. "She's a wonder with the brutes, you know. Upon my honor, I'll wager all that I have she could tame that charger there in a fortnight- if not sooner. All she needs is the chance-"

"I- I don't have a fortnight-"

"Of course you don't! Who does these days? Time is a thing of the past in this modern era. But on the road, there you will have plenty of time to let her tame the beast." He repeated his words, thumping a blunt finger upon the priest's chest at every syllable. "Let... her.. tame... the beast..."

Rathbourne caught on at last. "Let your daughter ride the stallion..."

"While *you* ride her tame little goat of a mare." He pulsed his arm to help the holy man with the decision process. "Oh, you may ride out of the city on the mare, but you'll return triumphant from your journey upon that charger there! That charger who will obey your every command. Eh? Eh? E-e-e-h?"

Gathering himself, Rathbourne pulled free of the proprietor's grasp. Gathering his cloak about him, he ventured, "She can truly tame this animal? Upon your honor, VoMambre, will she be loyal to me upon the road. It will not be an easy journey."

"Look at her, father. No one was better designed for hardship than she! It's in the bones!"

Despite his initial protests, the priest was forced to give the matter some thought. His order held no help for him. There was no one else. Beggars could not be choosers. He eyed the girl. Thinking beyond his own needs, he suspected taking her away might be the best thing ever to befall the poor girl. "Very well, VoMambre. Have the steed brought back to your establishment and readied for travel at first light tomorrow. I shall arrive in the morn with my things." He turned pointedly. "Have *both* horse ready..."

"Of course, father! Of course!" He grabbed the priest's hand and shook it vigorously. "You won't regret this, father! Best decision you could have made! You won't regret it at all!"

"Yes, well- until tomorrow-"

VoMambre continued to voice his well-wishes, even after the holy man had turned and started off. Within the span of a few heartbeats the priest was lost in the crowd. VoMambre's good cheer vanished immediately.

"Stupid girl!" he barked, swatting his daughter across the face without warning.

She flinched beneath the blow, but otherwise kept her vigil with the horse.

"Papa- what? What- ?"

"Stupid girl!" he repeated. "Why didn't you do something- say something to sway the man? Here, if you were half a woman, you could have charmed him into taking you away with him. It's- it's- ! Who wants to travel the roads all alone? Truly? particularly an old man-"

"But I don't *want* to go. To leave Billy and Serra and Thom-"

"Who? What? Where did you find friends to miss?"

"The animals, Papa. My animals. I can't take them with me-"

"Phaf! I should have known! No- dearie! Off you go! You eat like a horse- which may be why you get along so well. I'm cutting you loose. But now- now I have to *find* a horse! Bah! Stupid girl! I should have known getting rid of you would cost me an arm. Even to a priest! A priest now! Such a world! Ug! Of with you now. Back home with you. Take the stallion and go. Ready for the journey. Pack your things. Say good-bye to your mother. No delays on the morn. No excuses! Off with you go- go- go!"

"But Papa. Where are you-?"

"Stupid girl, I'm off to buy a horse! Haven't you been listening?"