

Chapter 4

When the gatekeeper returned from his mid-day repast he walked with a leg of chicken in one hand, a flask of wine-bittered water in the other, and a heel of bread lodged in his maw. He had an easy stride, a full belly, and visitor at his gate. The newcomer clanged the bars repeatedly, and no doubt had been doing so for some time. The gatekeeper knew the type. Aye, he knew the type.

"Gone from your post!" the gruff visitor snuffed. A piggish head glared from beneath a greasy leather cap. Earflaps and drawstrings dangling down and quivered with indignation. "Ah've been shaking your cage for better part of an hour 'ere!"

The gatekeeper passed calmly, disappearing into his hut to deposit the remnants of his lunch.

"Aye there! Are you blind as well as deaf, man? Open up the gate, Ah say! Ah have business here! Your master'll be none too pleased with such a lack eye on your post!"

The gatekeeper emerged carrying the bony remains of his chicken leg. He chewed the scraps mildly, standing to face the fellow through iron bars all weepy with rust. In a bland tone he replied, "None through the gates of LaMongué during the noon hour. Rules." He slurbered a fatty swatch of meat past his gums.

"Is that so?" the other said, unconvinced. "Is that so! Ah'll wager your master'll have another mind to say about that there! He's ordered me here. 'Quick as thought' was the call. And 'quick as thought' Ah came- only to find you gone from you post nearly the whole day past!"

At this the gatekeeper chuckled.

"Laugh, will you? Well, once your'n master finds out about your'n rules, out on the street you be!"

The gatekeeper chuckled again, gnawing his bone. "Not my rules. Master's rules. Gate closes at noon. Don't open again until the Cathedral tolls one. That's the way it is. 'Quick as thought' or no- gates don't open 'til one!"

The visitor had no ready response. His impatient hand shook the gate.

The gatekeeper regarded him coolly. The chicken bone grated noisily on his few remaining teeth.

"Well then..." the visitor murmured. He released the iron bars and flexed his fingers. Over his shoulder a stodgy push-cart waited. A young lad with sandy hair sat shivering by one enormous wheel. "Mmm, my boy there..."

"Ah..."

"Teaching him the business, you know. Getting on to be a man."

"Mmm..." The chicken bone resounded: *crack!* "Good to know a trade." He sucked the marrow.

Across the city came the slow, lonely toll of the Cathedral:

O-o-o-n-n-n-e-e-e...

True to his word- to his master's rules- the gatekeeper produced his keys, shot the correct one home, and swung the iron grille open. He flicked the spent chicken bone into the gutter. "Welcome to LaMongué, stranger."

The visitor swung about and snapped his fingers. His son jumped to and together they assumed their proper stations at the push-cart arms. With a grunt, a heave, and a muttered curse from the elder, the pair got the two-wheeler moving. Tools and oddments within the box clanked and clattered. Iron-shod wheels rumbled like metal thunder over

the cobbles. The cart was loud as an avalanche and threatened to shake itself apart in an instant.

"Plenty of room in the yard there," called the cartman over the racket. "You got a particular place in mind?"

The gatekeeper waved a dismissive hand, busy with fastening the gate. "You know you business better than I."

"Well enough, then!" To his boy, the cartman said, "Run ahead, lad, and guide your old man in. Get us close to that wall there. Guide me in, guide me in now..." He craned a non-existent neck to see around the bulk of his cart. "Guide me there, boy!"

The cart surged and slowed in time with the man's labored step. When it came to rest, the creak and clatter ceased in a sudden, hushed halt. The cartman flexed his fingers and clapped his hands. "Here then? Good enough?"

The gatekeeper came up slowly, offering naught but passing curiosity. "Whatever conveniences your duty. Makes no matter mind to me."

Nodding, ever nodding his squat head, the cartman dragged a small iron forge from the jumble of equipment. Wrapping his burly hands about its girth, he grunted and swore, lifting it to his chest and staggering a few paces. The forge hit the ground with a curse and a clang. Huffing, the cartman instructed his son, his apprentice, "Load her up with the coals and get 'em stoked. Nice and hot while I'm gone. Good lad! Quick like a rabbit- run run run..."

He turned to the gatekeeper, proposing, "Shall we have a look at him, eh? Need to assess the job."

With a shrug the gatekeeper motioned him along. Across the empty courtyard they went taking a direct route to the cage where the Suicide lay.

"That's 'im."

"Lord A'mighty and all that be sacred! What a wretch!"

The gatekeeper made a non-committal noise- one from his endless supply.

"Suicide."

"Ah." The cartman rubbed his jaw speculatively. "Still alive in there?"

"Does it matter?"

The cart master raised a brow. "Suppose not..."

"Want 'im out of the box? Or is it better chained?"

"Wellum... may as well leave be. If'n his is alive, the fetters 'ill keep him from thrashing' about and causing trouble. You'll be wanting an 'S' then-"

Suddenly impatient, the gatekeeper shook his head and ushered him away. "Not so. Master wants a 'C'. Master was clear upon that point. 'C' with appropriate papers."

"Ah- is that so? Well then, 'C' it is!"

"And he wants it clear. Deep and clear, so there will be no mistaking. No mistaking at all."

The cartman laughed jovially. "Deep and clear- as you say! Ah'll burn 'im right though, Ah will! Hundred years from now his bony skull will yet show the scorch, har har!"

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The sheer force of VoMambre's bellowing laugh blew open the door- or so it appeared from the common room vantage. Open it flew, wide, to admit the innkeeper's rolling guffaw. It remained thus for a two complete heartbeats before the burly man appeared at last in the worn frame. "We have a deal then!" he declared, raising his heavy pewter stein and draining it. "A deal! Come in then and let us feast upon it, then!"

Rightly so- rightly! In and let's us have a- blazes! Who's left my door open? What's this? Damnable women! Don't you know I'm not made of coin! Well- do you? Do you!" After two unsteady steps forward, he glared into the room menacingly.

The common room- his common room- was empty. No one heard his cries. The void nearly brought a tear to his eye. Not so long ago the place was run to overflowing, to bursting with patrons. Had to turn them away back into the street! But not now. No, not now. Not for many, many months. The hearth burned a thin fire. A few tables sported flickering candles. Heat and light of the kitchens spilled out between cracks in the swinging doors. Ghosts of memories lurked in the long, shadowy spaces between.

"Ah- blast. Well then." He raised his stein to drain it a second time, found it empty, and swore an oath. "Damnable women!"

Remembering his guest, VoMambre stomped out into the night air and fetched the fellow forward. "Come now, Gustave, a meal's on for us! Good businessmanship. In we go-!"

Into the room entered a slump-shouldered man of middle years and few achievements. He was sparse on top and heavy about the middle. Unlike his host, there was nothing loud nor outspoken about him. His hands were always held close, his back was always facing, and his eyes were forever drawn to the floor as if their strings had been cut.

"If- if you say, VoMambre. If it is no trouble-"

"None at all! In we go- Vivian! Viv-*I*-an! Where are you girl? This way Gustave. No not there. Over here- the best seat in the place! Viv-*I*-an! Two plates- and wine! Now girl! Hup!"

Gustave carefully removed his coat, his eyes daring to rove the room in search of the girl Vivian. "I- I think your servant is not about, VoMambre."

"Nonsense!" the innkeeper blustered. His tone lowered as he crossed the room in search of a refill. "Damnable women are everywhere- underfoot like rats... Roaches... 'Tis my whole problem...!"

The swinging door of the kitchens creaked. In the glow of hearth fires beyond stood the daughter, Vivian. "So you are back, Papa-"

"Ah! There you are- at last. Two plates, girl. And be smart about it." VoMambre rolled his shoulders, readying to tap a fresh cask. A spigot was in one hand, a worn wooden mallet in the other. "The best of whatever's on the spit. Don't skimp! *Gah!*"

The mallet drove home on the first strike. "Experience is what *that is there!*" he proclaimed, twirling the hammer in his hand before dropping it back behind the bar. He paused briefly to wipe the spray of his attack from his vest. That done, he righted the cask and set it in its proper place. When he returned to their table, he sported a frothy tankard in each hand.

"Much gratitude, VoMambre. It will slake the thirst of our walk."

"To our walk!" the innkeeper announced, raising his mug and taking a long pull.

"Yes... well..." Gustave raised his own in meek salute. His drew a dram or two, wincing at the bite.

"Best table in the whole house! Do you know why? Tell me man! Why is that?" VoMambre pounded the table. "Eh? What there?"

Gustave sat back, astonished by such sudden questioning. "I assure you, I know not. We were merely to have a quiet meal and close our agreement-"

VoMambre gave the men a sly look, tapping the corner of his eye. "Ah... ah...? Eh...? Ahhh...?" Wagging his tankard, he nodded to the portrait over the table. A handsome man of robust youth and vigor posed in dated military uniform. His chin was strong, his eyes bright, sharp, and his golden hair tied back in a neat tail. "Comrade in arms- during the war, you see. Best damned soldier to step onto a battlefield! Saved my arse countless times. And I his- so no debt was there to repay on either score. Such a friend every man should have. I'll tell you..." He raised his cup in a toast. "Tobias Buckford! May God rest his soul!"

"Here here."

They drank.

Finishing with a wipe of his sleeve, Gustave inquired, "Died in the war, did he? Shame."

"No sir! Not on you-u-ur life. Came through without a hair out of place. Luckiest bastard- the stories I could tell- ut! Viv-/-an! Hold there girl! Where are you running off to? Where's our plates?"

VoMambre's daughter shot a harsh glare. The sour pucker of her countenance dropped out of sight behind the bar and bobbed back again an instant later. She help up a pair of long skewers pointedly before turning the men a haughty shoulder. The kitchen door swung shut after her back.

"Pure defiance that one there," VoMambre growled into his mug. "Spiteful minx..."

Showing judicious discretion, Gustave kept their conversation to the previous topic.

"Luckiest man you say? Survived without a scratch?"

"Hm? What's your story, Gustave? Make sense man!"

He nodded at the portrait.

"Ah! Tobias! Ol' Tobias. What a man! Such a friend. No no- did not die in the war. Came through right as rain, certainly. Such a friend- friend as any man should- Helped me out to no end after the war as well. I'll tell you...! Don't know how I'd've gotten this place into good books without him. Always around in those early years. Had himself his own room right under this very roof. One of the family without a doubt. Helping out in every way. A true, true friend. Such loyalty- you don't find it these days! Eh, Gustave. What's that? What'd you say?"

"Me? Nothing. Nothing at all."

"Well, then. Let's to business. Now... about that nag of yours. I'll take her off your hands for free. You see. I'm doing you a favor."

"But- VoMambre. We've already closed the deal. It's been agreed-"

"Heh? Agreed- ah! Here we are then. Supper has arrived. No more business talk during the meal. That's law beneath the VoMambre roof!"

A heavily-laden Vivian crossed the dark, empty common room. Her serving tray carried two long ka-bobs of lamb and vegetables, a large bowl of rice, potatoes, and spiced yams. A pitcher of mead sloshed at her every step. Flatware clanked quietly. She placed the tray down with a clatter. Every movement bemoaned her condition: swollen ankles, aching lower back, wearied shoulders...

VoMambre fostered no sympathies. "Don't huff your woes to the world, girl! Should've thought about that before you gave up the goods! No one promises the life of a strumpet will be wine and roses. But that's the road you chose-"

"Oh!" Vivian slammed down the plates with a livid face. Her cutting stare threw heat enough to melt stone. The father merely laughed:

"Go on then, slut. Go rest your feet. Or back or ass or whatever. I'll serve our guest. At least there's one member of this family with a shred of decency for company!"

Fuming an inarticulate cry, the young girl stormed across the common room and back into the sanctuary of the kitchen.

"Walks like a bloated duck even in a rage. Sorry for that display, Gustave. Women, you see. Thick as thieves. Takes after her mother, that one. Whore."

Gustave sat wide-eyed. Was a free meal truly worth such subjugation?

VoMambre served with drunken efficiency. "Mustard spice?"

The guest blinked. "Why... yes. I suppose. A daub on the side..."

"There you are, man! Plenty enough. Brought up from the East, you know. The best spices to be found. The infidels are craven, cowardly bastards. But they know how to color a meal. Eat up! Enjoy!"

VoMambre's mouth never ceased, not even in the midst of a meal. Between gulps and slurps and swallows he kept an endless torrent of conversation:

"The world went to pot the year Tobias died!" He shook his head. "And been getting worse since! Just when I think this is the last year of my miseries, that nothing more can go wrong, some new tragedy hits! Like this damnable pestilence! I cringe to surmise what'll be perched upon my step next season! What could possibly top such a blight? Eh? Piles of dead in the street! What then, think you, man?"

"He perished in the plague then?"

"Who- what? Speak with a sense- oh, Tobias. No no- years before." VoMambre chuckled. "Died from a poisoned cup!" He chuckled again, tearing into his ka-bob.

Gustave blanched. "You find poisoning humorous?" He eyed the plate set before him.

"No no..." Another chuckle escaped. "Thinking of what brought it on. Tobias was quiet the ladies' man, you see. You see? Always a dashing figure. Had the women following him, he did!"

"Poisoned by one of his ladies?"

"Husband! Ho- the husband! Found them out he did. Here now, pay attention! Could save your life." He leaned forward. His bald forehead wrinkled as the brows pushed skyward. "Never stitch the wife of an apothecary, eh! Eh? Keep your darning needle to looser weaves. Lesson to be learned there!" Settling back his great bulk, he pointed a knife at the portrait. "'Twas the wife I got the painting from, in fact. She had it done for old Tobias as a gift or some such maudlin nonsense. Women! *Pfah*. But the husband found out, or what have you, and the rest was a swift cup of death for my only true friend." He raised his tankard for another tribute.

"How... terrible..."

VoMambre slammed his cup down. "And it's been nothing but ruin since! The beginning of the end, you see. The harbinger of doom they call it at mass. Tobias got out while the gettin' was good. Crafty to the last. Out with a smile on his face. Me? Me, I've had to suffer. And suffer..."

Gustave shook his head, but otherwise kept his tongue.

"Before that horrid year I was a man who had everything! Everything! Can you believe such a tale? Look around- this room once crawled with every walk of life. Ah, such coin as never- *har-r-rrem!*" He cleared his throat and spat upon the floor. "Every hour of the day, every day of the year. I had a faithful wife who produced four of the

most beautiful daughters you could hope for. Albeit, a son or two would have been *preferred*, you understand, but such is the luck of chance, eh? And then- everything fell to ruin that same year." He counted off his miseries between mouthfuls, holding up a finger for each incident. "Tobias is put into the ground. My wife- of many years- betrays me with another man. Oh- she denies it to this day- to this day! But the proof cannot be denied. My youngest daughter- well, you've seen the girl. Spit ugly if ever. Bad sheep out- undeniably. If I ever find the lout who sired her- *ah!* Can you say otherwise, Gustave? You've seen her, all hulking and stooping and built like a man. What court would pair her with my true daughters?"

Gustave kept a careful silence. He dared not blink.

"Ah- you're right. I see the wisdom in your eye. Why beg the scandal, eh? To what end? Better to accept the little whelp as my own rather than besmirch the VoMambre name! Others have pointed out her different look. But I says back, I prayed for a son- just once a son- prayed and prayed and prayed- and this was what the good Lord saw fit to give me: a boy in a girl's body! Ha! Some laugh at the joke. Laugh out loud. Others, well... others are shrewd. They know. They know another man planted his seed in my gardens."

He scraped his plate, creating furrows in the bed of rice. The fork took on a menacing aspect. Never again would another man set his seed into *those* soils. It had been a long, cold standoff of a marriage since. A battle of wills. He scowled. Should another child spring from that womb he would have his proof of infidelity. She knew it as well.

"And then my poor inn begins to fall to ruin! I can't keep up the repairs. And women- what good does a brood of women do me? Things slip, things all. And then this

damnable pestilence! God- such a mess! No more wayfarers. No more customers! Not only does it rob me of my business- robs me of my daughters! Two of them- taken within a month. After I dole out sizable dowries to their husbands' families. Lord forgive my complaint- but I was *robbed!* Thought I'd get something out of the deal, bringing two men into the household, two solid lads to marry my daughters and work the inn. But no- no! All of 'em, swept up by the plague! Seems Death favors newlyweds- just my luck!"

He ruminated into his cup, sucking at a scrap of something between his teeth. "The next one married off and moved away- far away. Wanted to cheat death, to break the chain. Mmm... Lost a fortune on her dowry. And then this one-" he jabbed a thumb in the direction of the kitchens. "This one takes after her mother- sleeping with God knows what. Slut. Another mouth to feed in a moon or two. And who do you think will have that bill to pay? Who? You know who. What did I deserve for all this?"

"Perhaps, VoMambre-"

But the dinner guest, Gustave, was forgotten to the embittered innkeeper. "All I do is give give give. All they do is take take take. I'm an old man these days. Older than my father when I was his age." Suddenly he brightened, lifting the round out of his shoulders. "Well that's to change! Eh, Gustave! As soon as we settle the matter of your horse. One horse will take the bastard child off my hands. Been banging my brain over a year on how to marry *her* off. Ugly as she is, the dowry would beggar the king himself! And my soul to boot, I'd wager. But ho! Such opportunity. Send her off with a priest. What better way? Almost made a mint on the deal- but with a priest you know how it is. They are poorer than those they pray upon. Church has all the gold, not her servants!"

"But we have sealed the deal, VoMambre. You've forgotten..."

VoMambre thumped the table with an insistent fist. "Now don't go haggling last minute on me, Gustave! I've been an honest man with you, up front. I've even spotted a meal for your hungry puss. I need that horse to get rid of the stupid girl! You've no use for the beast yourself. Why, it's got two hooves in the gravy already, tired and worn as it is. The priest will be here first thing in the morning, and I've needed to get rid of that extra mouth for a year now! Ugly as a pig, and eats like one, too!"

"Ah.... VoMambre..."

"Eh, what...?"

Gustave inclined his head in the direction of the rear door.

Throwing a look over his shoulder, VoMambre picked out his youngest standing in the shadows. "How long you been skulking there, Pup? Snooping, eh! Stupid girl. Have you finished with the beasts already? Go on. Off to the kitchen. Fix a basket for your trek tomorrow. And go up 'n' say bye to your mother. I won't stand for delays on the morrow. When the priest comes to take you away, you go. Hear me? Get it over with tonight. Go on now. Let the men to their business."

The youngest VoMambre darted sideways for the kitchens, her head averted lest they catch the tears upon her cheeks.

"Raised her as my own, which is better than she deserved. Time's up girl. The world is waiting for you now."