

## Chapter 5

The city slept. Overcast clouds blocked moonlight and starshine alike. The air was still, a pervasive, inky gloom broken only by the cries of the dying.

The rear door of the VoMambre inn opened. A will-o-the-wisp glow detached itself and floated away. Rather than rising skyward to escape the plague-beleaguered city, it bobbed on invisible steps, crossing the porch, gliding down rickety stairs, and stealing along the diagonal of the dirty, darkened quad. It hovered momentarily upon the threshold of the stable, illuminating the irresolute face of Lady VoMambre. Unspoken indecision tinged the downturned corners of her lips, grayed the crow's feet that bracketed heavily-lidded eyes.

Wavering a moment more upon varied inner thoughts, Lady VoMambre allowed the stables to win her over. Holding the tail of her nightcap as a scarf across her nose, she pressed her way past the half-drawn door and entered the animal pens. It was a difficult maneuver, with the lamp in one hand and her wine cup overflowing in the other.

"Child...? Are you there? Awake..."

A figure stirred in one of the empty straight stalls. Fluttering bits of straw rose into the air. "Mama? Is- is that you?" Could it be? Mother never ventured to the stables.

Lady VoMambre appeared at the foot of the stall, lantern held high. "Child, dear. Have you been crying all this time? No sleep at all? Not a wink?"

A snuffle and a whimper came in answer, nothing more. The youngest VoMambre turned her head to the wall in shame.

"Your father just informed me. I- I- must have slumbered when you came in... Earlier, I mean." Derelict eyes darted behind her nightcap veil. "My condition, you understand..."

The child said nothing.

"Your father tells me you leave tomorrow. With the priest. What was that, dear? Turn to me so I can hear..."

The young daughter chose to raise her tone rather than face front proper. A voice choked with emotion echoed out of the corner:

"I- I can't... face... Not with what... Papa says things... about you... About me." Her voice cracked audibly. Shoulders so broad, so strong, shook with tender agony.

"Yes. Yes, he does say things." Her mother reflected. The lantern grew heavy in her hand. It drooped. Shadows became long and stark. Details, imperfections, became pronounced, grotesque. "You need not listen to his words, child. What he believes has no import to the world." The wine cup found its way to her lips.

"I- but..." The young one found no words.

"Dear... your father is harsh to us all. Not just you. He despises so many. Even himself."

"He says..."

"What does he say? Nothing. Nothing your ears must listen to." The cup rose and fell again. It fast became light in her grip. And her thirst? Impossible to slake.

"More than my ears listen, Mama." She turned, tear-streaked cheeks as red as her hair. She held up dirty, rough hands, staring as if they were the claws of a monster. "These... these... And this..." she plucked at her long, russet tresses. "My ears can ignore so many words, Mama. But my eyes see otherwise. They see the truth-!"

"Nonsense, child."

"Oh Mama! What nonsense? How can I fool myself? I see my beautiful sisters with their tiny, soft hands. With hair as golden as the sun! Oh, they are Papa's children. They are VoMambre. But me? Me? Who am I, Mama?" She curled her fingers so the blackened nails resembled talons. The image elicited a fresh burst of tears. "Oh, Mama! Oh, Mama!"

"Cease, child! I insist! Foolishness! Insult me to my face, will you? Enough I must suffer from your father! I will not stand it from my own child! If you weren't so grown to womanhood, I'd take you across my knee like the child you are." The lamp in her hand jerked with emotion. Shadows slithered and bucked.

The hulking child toppled face down into the straw of her bed. Her muffled voice sobbed, "Oh Mama! I am to leave tomorrow- perhaps forever? Never will I know my true father! Perhaps *he* would take me in. I would not have to go with this priest. If Papa doesn't want me, maybe he will. Tell me a name, or a village, before I go, Mama. I ask nothing else. I take nothing else. I'll never mention the VoMambre name. Just to know my true father-"

"Nonsense child!" Lady VoMambre's voice was shrill, outraged. Both cup and lamp danced now, clanking together during more heated moments. "You are your father's child! On my life, I swear this to you! For better or worse, you are the flesh and blood of Ernst VoMambre!"

The sobbing continued.

"Child-"

"It cannot be true, Mama. Four sisters, all beautiful. Long, long, slender fingers on a delicate hand they are. I am an ugly thumb, sticking out all bent. No... no..."

Lady VoMambre turned her back. Her cup was drained, and with it her patience. In an instant she and her lamp were gone, both heading for the comforts of the inn. Amid the falling darkness, her words hissed:

"You are your father's child. First and last, you *are* your father's child."

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The soldiers on watch heard the carriage clear across the benighted city. The *clop clop* of hooves on cobbles rang with the edge of metal shoes and at once they knew this was no common Death Cart on the approach. The hour was too late for respectable business. Something surely was afoot. The men in their peaked, steel helms gathered in the hollow of the gatehouse, spears in hand, halberds poised. Long, dark hours of listening to a dying city unnerved the toughest soul. More than one sigh of relief issued as a mortal carriage hove into view.

"Hold there," cried the master, raising a gloved hand before the driver. "Documents. Papers."

The driver made no move. From the black, lacquered cab a hand stretched forth bearing folded parchment. The guardsman came forward, taking the papers for scrutiny. They unfolded to reveal waxen seals and tailored ribbons enough for a king's writ of passage. In a trice, the documents were returned. The order to open the gate was announced.

"God be with you!" the commander offered in conclusion.

"And with you," a faceless, toneless voice returned from the depths of the darkened cab.

"Hy-ah!" The driver cracked his whip and the team drove for the gatehouse arch.

The city was bordered along her southerly districts by the river Noreau. The massive Pont Meneuf stretched from the gatehouse to the opposite shore, arrow straight, level, solid. She was the longest bridge in the kingdom, an architectural masterpiece of function and genius. Six carriages abreast could find room aplenty along her walk. Beneath her undulating arches the slow, mournful waters of the Noreau passed quietly.

Endless souls displaced by the pestilence lingered at the head of the bridge, lining the outer walls of the city, holding to a slim hope of entry. Throughout the lands lawlessness filled the void spawned by King Pest's appetite. Those who survived and bore no stomach for outlawry sought the protection of walled places. A city already rife with death, however, had no interest in possible carriers from afar- brothers and sisters though these wanderers may be. Pike and halberd kept the wretched out. Nevertheless, with nowhere to turn, the refugees kept to their vigil, hoping someday, somehow, to pass the guards at the gate and live in relative safety again. As the gates creaked with movement the huddled masses jumped to their feet as one. A spear of light from the gatehouse spilled out onto their grimy, upturned faces.

The rolling carriage trundled into the milling swarm of humanity. Where the sea of flesh and rags refused to part, the coachman drove them down beneath iron-shod hoof and iron-clad wheel. The carriage body jostled up and down in response to each fresh impact. The guardsmen said nothing, keeping to their duties, closing the massive gates against the survivors.

Free of the throng, the driver brought his team a steady canter. Shouts and cries dwindled in his wake until only the hammer of hooves and the rumble of wheels filled the air.

The halfway point of Pont Meneuf was marked by a pair of over-sized sculptures that rose from the stonework like vaporous djinn released from their bottles. The figures face each other from opposite sides of the causeway, titans of the deep, trident spears locked in ferocious battle. Beneath this arch of immortal combat the dark carriage slowed to execute a wide turn. She stopped to one side, close to the edge, facing the city just departed. The bridge was deserted.

Silence.

Time was measured in the bubbling whispers of the river Noreau far below.

From the city came the toll of the Cathedral bell: midnight.

Upon the final stroke of twelve the driver came alive. From his perch he fairly slithered to the ground and moved to open the door of his cab. Out stepped one man, and after hesitation, a second. Even in the terminal darkness their collars marked them unmistakably as priests. They were an incongruous pair, with one the elder and one the younger. Such were the arrangements of the clergy, as were all philosophies that held to the student-pupil relationship. Sparing the driver a curt nod, the pair strolled quietly to the opposite side of the bridge.

Once alone, the younger broke their quietude:

"The bridge is deserted, Arturo. This is a fool's errand. He would be here-"

"Patience, Brennen. A few moments more. Surely we can afford him that." The elder bore an air of indifference. His eyes skipped over shadows in the darkness. High upon the plains of the far shore flickered the pyres of the Plague Fields. The livid flames writhed in the void of his pupils. Absently he picked out the slow train of Death Carts that moved from the city, to those grim pastures, and back again. Day and night. Night and day. "We have come all this way..."

"What if our information was inaccurate?"

"Impossible."

"But-"

"Ah- here we are now. You see? A minor delay. An insignificant transgression. Nothing more. We are dealing with the lay class, you must recall. They lack the formal discipline we so possess. Inherently."

Two figures arrived from the opposite shore. The wan glow of their lamp was fueled with a wick pinched tight by the bony fingers of poverty. It was borne by a young lad near to becoming a man. In his other hand was the tiny grip of a young, young girl child. Between the pair they carried all their worldly possessions.

"Welcome," bade the elder priest. His teeth flashed in the darkness.

The younger priest said nothing, his brow lowering with disapproval.

"I- I have come as instructed," said the lad. His voice wavered and cracked between youth and adulthood. Were his lot in life more bountiful he would have been broad of shoulder and deep of chest. Instead, his lean frame was a scarecrow in need of stuffing. The girl in his protective hand was no more than seven or eight winters. "There was mention of an agreement..."

"Indeed. You desire to serve the Church? To serve God? Be this true?"

"I- I would protect my sister, sir. To see her safe within the walls of the Cathedral, away from the Pest. Aye, I would serve the Church to that end."

The priests stood silent a time. "An unusual request, but not without its merit. As they say, every man has his price. So too does every boy, it seems. Sanctuary from the Black Death? For your sister."

"Our parents have perished, good sir. We have lost everything to the bandits. There is only death and famine outside the gates of the city. Lawless men."

The younger priest, Brennen, made a noise low in his throat. A glimmer of irritation passed over the elder's face, but his recovery was deft and effective. In a genuine voice Father Arturo prompted the boy, "Take your sister over to yon coach. Leave her in the charge of our driver. Say your farewells, my son, and return hither when you are ready to serve." He smiled.

With a slow nod the boy took his sister across the bridge. The girl bit her lower lip, silent resignation to her fate.

Once again alone, the priest, Brennen, nearly exploded in a hoarse whisper, "What madness is this, Arturo? The boy is useless to us! He can no more stop Rathbourne than the girl beside him! We have wasted our time with this! We should have gone to a professional from the outset-!"

"Curb you tongue, my friend. We need not a killer, nor an assassin. We need only a pair of eyes. A pair of loyal eyes. The younger, the more impressionable those eyes, the better. Besides, my usual agents are needed here in the city. Squandering them on this ridiculous farce-!" He cut himself off, only to resume a moment later in a more sedate tone. "Rathbourne is a lunatic. I set these events in motion from an idle curiosity, verily. He is no threat. The boy shall tag his heels a day or two, a week at the most. He will return to us with words of a broken, dejected man. Here now, the lad returns. Say not a word lest you ruin everything."

"Her name is Jenna," the lad announced. "You will keep her safe within the walls of your church? Safe in God's house? Away from the plague?"

Father Arturo thought carefully before responding. The long, slim fingers of his hands came together at the tips to form a cage. "The Plague touches all walk of life, my boy. It is the judgment of God upon the world of man. It strikes down the sinful. It passes over the just."

"I- I- well, father, I feel better so long as she's in God's house. Away from the lawless men."

"So be it. Our task for you- God's task for you, my son- is an important one."

The boy's gaze became intent.

"There is a priest of our order, a man named Rathbourne. He will cross this very bridge tomorrow morning. He embarks upon a long journey. A long journey to the doorstep of the Abyss. We fear he has become a servant of the Dark Lord, the Evil One himself."

The boy shuffled on his feet.

Arturo continued: "We suspect he has fallen under the sway of false logic and corruption. We fear he is in the grip of sorcery! Sorcery spawned from his very own ignorant hand."

"A- a sorcerer...?"

"Fear not, lad. God is with you." Arturo had planned for the superstitious mind. He fished in his robes a moment. "We grant you these- a talisman of protection, and a writ of passage." He offered the two items. The holy symbol flashed silver in the lamp light, swinging from a hair-fine chain.

With fumbling hands the lad took the totem, dropped it about his neck and kissed it reverently. To the folded parchment he gave a dubious look, holding it awkwardly in his dirty hand.

"Show the writ to any clergy you may meet," Father Brennen explained, seeing plain ignorance in the boy's eyes. "It proclaims the bearer- that is you- as a servant of the Church. Any assistance you require shall be granted. Food, water, shelter-

"Information," Arturo broke in with emphasis. "You may ask any question and they are bound to answer. Furthermore, you are not required to answer any inquiries. Tell no one your mission. Remember, my son, agents of the Evil One are everywhere. Your mission must be secret, known only to yourself!"

The boy folded the writ carefully, juggling the lamp in the process. "Forgive me in saying, sir, but I still do not know what my mission is!"

"The priest Rathbourne, my son! *He* is your mission. Follow him along his journey. It will be a long trail- into the mountains. Perhaps beyond. Follow closely, but not so close as to be caught. If he discovers you are upon his scent-!" The intent of his meaning hung in the air. "Keep your distance, my boy."

The lad nodded, mouth clamped shut. For Jenna. This was for Jenna.

Arturo warmed slightly, sensing he may ruin his hold upon the lad. Too much fear and the lad would flee. "Once Rathbourne has found his prize, he will turn homeward to yon city. Our city. It is then you must act! Conceive a way to snatch the item he has found. It is nothing to you- but carries the fate of this man. It is proof of his trafficking with the Dark Lord. Once we have it- once you return it to us- we can punish the man fully! And perhaps, yes perhaps, save his immortal soul."

"Is it- I mean- the item- what- will it harm- hurt me-?"

"Nothing of the sort. In fact, it may be a delicate thing. Therefore, do be careful, mindful of its fragile nature."

"And the tome," the priest Brennen added. "Rathbourne keeps a journal We shall need that as proof as well."

"Yes, quite," Arturo agreed coolly. "Both items are to be returned to us. Do you understand?"

"Rathbourne. Two items. Brought to you- here?"

"The writ will gain you entrance to the city. From there find your way to the Cathedral."

"Follow the bells," Brennen suggested with a smile.

"Off with you lad- here are some silver bits for the long road ahead. You need not worry about going hungry! And a hood for you face would help keep you from notice. Quickly now, dawn will be here sooner than thought. Off with you now-"

"M-my sister-?"

"Of course. In God's hands. She awaits your triumphant return already! As do we. God's speed, my son. God be with you."

Marveling at the shiny bits in his palm, the lad backed away with repeated bows. Casting a last, longing look at his sister by the carriage, he made his way along the bridge for the far shore. The two priests watched the lad's departure with a critical eye.

Brennen snorted. "This is not a wise idea. Folly at best."

Arturo allowed the briefest of smiles to crack his lip. "The boy will serve his purpose. In time... Driver!" The coachman came forward at once, crossing the expansive bridge on long, sure strides. Brusquely, the priest Arturo muttered, "Slit the girl's throat and throw her into the river. Let the thirsty Noreau swallow the bother."

With a curt nod the driver moved to perform his duty.

Impassive, Father Arturo said to no one in particular, "She may very well be a carrier. The pestilence..."

Brennen murmured in absent agreement. A thought was forming. When it arrived in full light he gave a start, as if pricked by a pike head. He shouted, "Driver! A moment! Hold!"

Arturo raised a critical brow. Has he gone soft on me, then?

"What if," the younger priest conjectured, "what if Rathbourne finds his miracle cure? He is adamant on the prospect. What if he does achieve his goal? A cure..."

Arturo shrugged. "The boy shall bring it to us. The cure- if such a fantasy does exist- shall fall into our hands one way or another. When he asks, we shall claim the plague took her life."

"Agreed. But what say you if we could *cause* as well as cure?"

Arturo furrowed his brow. "I do not follow you, brother."

"If Rathbourne is searching for the cure, why not let us search out the cause? If our hand held the leash of King Pest, attack or heel upon our command..."

Arturo speculated in grim silence. "You *are* thinking ahead, my friend. Our allies will find themselves cured. Our foes... suddenly stricken."

"Death is most convincing, most persuasive. Even to the most stalwart."

"A sickening, creeping doom. A lingering, painful death that leaves a man ample time to reflect. To... reconsider. Indeed! And we- with the cure- shall help him best decide his proper course."

"Or not," Brennen chuckled sardonically.