

The Prisoner

1st February 1355

Winter's icy blast whistled and howled across the Northern Pyrenees. Before the last flake of snow had fluttered gently to ground, the golden eagle rose from her eyrie on top of Rocher de Batail, the improbable pillar of limestone towering above the upper reaches of the Ariege River.

The eagle assessed the direction of the wind and lifted her wings. In a split second she was airborne. She drifted north with the river, away from winter, towards spring. As she hunted for food and for a mate, a burst of sunshine produced thermals in the valley. She was free to idle away a portion of the day soaring effortlessly above and around the Chateau de Foix.

Far below in a cavern deep beneath the chateau warm water gushed from a fissure in the dark rock. It carried the faintest smell of sulphur but was a perfect temperature for bathing.

Ximene Trencavel stood naked in the small chamber beneath the spring, arms stretched above her head, as she revolved slowly on tiptoe, so that the invigorating cascade massaged every inch of her body.

Minutes before, she had emerged from one of four pools cut into the solid rock of a much larger cavern. There the water spilled out across the floor and through the pools, which were shaped to allow an occupant to lie in comfort as the water flowed over them.

Steam rose continuously and in the light of the torches, which lined a terrace overlooking the cavern, the steam seemed as solid as the rock itself, albeit in perpetual swirling motion. The torches revealed that this was no man-made chamber. The arching walls, which supported a roof too high to be seen clearly, were natural rock. The terrace and the curving staircase that led up to it were however elegantly constructed, Romanesque.

As Ximene lingered under the natural shower, she made up her mind that the time for prevarication was over. She glanced upwards towards a terrace hardly noticing the dramatic background; she had seen it a thousand times before. She knew he was there, brooding—unhappy as a dark cloud on the horizon. She left the shower, determined to take the first steps to shape her destiny.

From his vantage point on the terrace, Dominic LeClerc initially could see little more than a shadow as Ximene advanced towards him. She showed no self-consciousness as she emerged from the curtain of steam, crossed the uneven floor and ascended the staircase. As she climbed, he could now see her clearly; slender, light on her feet, graceful; the exuberant tomboy was now undoubtedly a woman. Dominic's heart thumped.

Her breasts were much fuller than when he had first seen her. Now she looked just like the gypsy girls who, in summer, swim in the river alongside the town. He reflected that after half an hour in the hot bath, Ximene looked younger than her sixteen years. Her jet-black hair had sprung into a profusion of curls. Her eyebrows, also jet-black, seemed thicker than usual, and her lips fuller. Only her eyes, azure-blue, betrayed the sensuality that totally captivated him. She shook her head to remove the excess water.

Dominic handed her a thick, woollen gown and waited, heart in his mouth. Surely she could not deny him. He had been her partner for over six months in the transition classes.

Together they had learned how to give and receive pleasure. Surely she could not deny him?

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Habitually, Ximene delayed putting on the gown for a long minute and even then swung it round her shoulders, giving him every opportunity to admire her body.

She shook her head again and cut short the display. Now was not the time for exhibitionism. Pushing her arms into the sleeves of the gown, she tied it firmly round her waist. She returned Dominic's stare and smiled. Taking his hand, she led him to two wooden armchairs that gave a view across the chamber. She gazed at him, shaping her face to show sympathy, taking care to force a smile.

'No, Dominic. It is not something I want to do. Every time we have been together we have had instructors standing alongside us.'

Dominic's eyes clouded.

'Yes, they were helping us, but it was you I wanted to please; it was you I wanted to please me.'

'I am sorry; they were just lessons. I will have good memories ... but now the Transition is complete. You know that as from tonight we become "Credentes", believers. Our Cathar faith requires that our relationship start anew. All you can do is express your love for me and patiently wait for my reply.'

'Isn't that what I am doing now?'

The smile left Ximene's face. Perhaps, as she had occasionally suspected, Dominic really was stupid.

'I seem to remember that we have had at least two formal dinners in recent months. I did not hear you expressing your love for me on those occasions.'

Dominic spluttered to get the words out of his mouth. 'I am simply not good at singing and at poetry. Some of our group want to, intend to, are planning, oh whatever, to sleep together after the farewell dinner in March; I just thought it would be wonderful if we did the same.'

For the first time the softness left Ximene's voice.

'No, it is not something I want to do.' She rose and walked determinedly towards her own apartment.

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Dominic found it difficult to decide whether to run after her, begging, or to stay behind, proudly indifferent. He chose the latter course but told himself a lie, because he was far from indifferent. He burned with indignation, he was humiliated by the rejection.

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The chateau, town, and valley of Foix, surrounded by the foothills of the Pyrenees were, in every sense of the word, a stronghold. Soldiers manned the four mountain passes into the town as tightly as the battlements of a conventional fortification.

The upper level of the chateau, with its two towers, was unmistakably a fortress rather than a palace, and thus made little allowance for the comforts of life. The small private rooms in the towers were simply inadequate for any public function. For this reason, the main hall—a link between the towers—served not just as a reception room but also as a library, office, conference hall, and dining room. The main hall was really only the roof space above the massive cistern, which collected rainwater in sufficient quantities so that even the most extended siege could be withstood. The hall and cistern had been fortified, but the emphasis had been on strength, not craftsmanship.

Six years earlier, Ximene's parents had died within weeks of each other. Her uncle, Gaston Phoebus—Comte de Foix—had immediately declared himself her guardian and moved her, first to Bearn, his modern palace in the west and then, after a brief visit to Paris to the Chateau de Foix, having convinced himself there was a need for greater security. He had deemed it appropriate that a female relative should act as a chaperone. Ximene now lived within the chateau with her grandmother, Lady Eleanor Padilla.

Eleanor's quarters offered more comfort than the upper chateau. A series of reception rooms and bedrooms, terraces and gardens, had been constructed around the lower rock. Direct access linked these apartments to the hot water springs in the ancient cavern below where Ximene had so recently bathed. Builders had constructed the apartments from stone, excavated locally but with a much better finish than the fortification above. Over the years, Eleanor had softened her surroundings with drapes, tapestries, couches and elegant tables. She had even arranged for glazed windows, an impossibly extravagant luxury.

In the library, three large bookshelves gave testament to her commitment to learning. Sacred books of the Cathars, the last copies in existence, filled one of the bookshelves.

Hung on the fourth wall, a tableau depicted the major events of the Albigensian crusade, when the lands of Occitan had been ripped from their rightful owners and allocated to Frankish crusaders. Separate panels showed the Pope blessing crusaders, crusaders slaughtering Cathars, crusaders dragging Cathar women from their homes, the Inquisition torturing the Cathars, and finally Cathars burning to death at the stake. Underneath, in the Occitan language, an inscription read, 'All this was inflicted on us because we follow Magdalene's teaching.'

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Eleanor waited for Ximene in the library. As she entered the room, Ximene apologised for being late. Eleanor shook her head; she neither needed nor wanted an apology. Her heart ached for her granddaughter's predicament.

'This should be a big day Ximene, exactly twelve months after your Progression. Now you really do enter adult life! You should be planning for your first adult function and be trembling in anticipation of finding out which man will declare his love for you. I know that your friends have planned a dinner at the hunting lodge at which, as a group, you can begin to practice the principles of the Courts of Love. I am so sorry, darling, but Gaston has told me very forcibly that you must under no circumstances leave the chateau. I think he has said as much to you?'

'Very forcibly, he has threatened severe punishment if I disobey'. Ximene's eyes glittered and flashed 'But Why, Why?'

'Because outside the walls of the chateau, for those who share our faith, for those who want independence for Occitan and therefore particularly for you, there is great danger.

Gaston is not called your guardian for nothing. I genuinely believe his motivation is concern for your safety.'

She stood up and walked towards Ximene with open arms, first pulling Ximene's hands apart so that she could admire her, then enveloping her in a loving embrace. Ximene returned the embrace momentarily but then pulled away.

'Grandmother, you promised to help me escape from Gaston. To live my own life, to be free. Why has nothing happened?'

Eleanor sighed and then shrugged her shoulders. She pointed at the tableaux behind her. 'None of that has changed. Once you leave these walls you could also be targeted.'

Ximene's eye's flickered and flashed.

'You have talked to me about escape from Gaston's clutches but you have done nothing! Suddenly I realise, you have done nothing.'

Eleanor bowed her head. She felt ashamed, knowing she had been less than honest with Ximene.

'You are right, Ximene. I have done nothing; the risks are too great.'

'Why, why am I at risk?' Ximene glared at her grandmother. 'I have no kingdom, no possessions. What threat can I be to anyone?'

'Despite me extolling Gaston's virtues as a guardian the risks have all been created by his promoting you as the rightful heiress to Occitan, offering your hand in marriage as such. He expects to gain personal benefits from the negotiation of a marriage contract. Your grandfather, Raimon, did not return here to reclaim his inheritance but simply to live on the land he loved. Gaston has changed all that. Rightly or wrongly, the Pope has taken that seriously.'

Ximene's voice rose in in both tempo and tone.

'What on earth does the Pope think I could do?'

'Marry someone of the same religion, attract the support of those dispossessed by the Crusade, set up a new Occitan, provide a refuge for Cathars, send missionaries to other countries, undermine the Roman Church's power base, starve the Pope of the material wealth he values so highly.'

'And could I do all that?'

'You would be extremely unlikely to succeed, but you just might! The Pope will want to eliminate that risk. He will attack you, sooner rather than later. The risk is that you could be captured, tortured and burned at the stake.'

'Wouldn't a liaison with a powerful man keep me safe? Could the right man protect me?'

Eleanor smiled. She did not mind that Ximene was brave and optimistic but at the same time naive. It was exactly what the best young people should be. However she believed it was her task to protect Ximene until Ximene knew how to protect herself.

'Well now there is a good marriage candidate. You met Monsieur Froissart during his recent visit, so you know he was not here to hunt with Gaston or to help Gaston write his book. He was here because the Pope would like you to marry the heir to the English throne, Edward, the Black Prince. Monsieur Froissart was sent to evaluate your potential as a partner for the Prince.'

Ximene eyes again flared.

'Do you think I care whether that hook-nosed, beady-eyed little frog approves of me.' Ximene shook her head vigorously. 'I suppose I should be flattered.' Her eyes flashed towards the ceiling.

Eleanor struggled to avoid the frustration and anger rising within her. All she had ever wanted to do was help, but at the same time protect Ximene. Eleanor made as if to answer, her mouth opened but Ximene gave her no chance to speak. In contrast, words flowed from Ximene's lips in a torrent.

'Does the Prince understand that a marriage, even a Roman marriage, is a worldly contract, designed to stabilise the inheritance of wealth and power and nothing more than that?'

'Ximene, what I do know is that the Prince has sympathy for our religion and is powerful enough to protect you.'

'The Pope would like me to undergo a Roman Wedding! You have told me yourself that it is only since the Crusade that the Church of Rome has insisted on turning a simple marriage contract into a ceremony of their church. By linking their form of marriage to concepts of legitimacy, inheritance and right to rule, they are able to place a tithe on the distribution of wealth.

They maintain that love outside of marriage or indeed sexual pleasure without the intention of procreating additional people to tithe is a sin. It is just another example of their love of material possessions. That is what you have taught me isn't it? Why should I be interested in what the Pope wants? He and his church are servants of the devil.'

Eleanor recoiled from Ximene's oral assault. Ximene was indeed repeating her own teaching back at her. Eleanor wished more than anything in the world to walk away from all these difficulties. But she, too, had her responsibilities. She took a deep breath and searched her conscience to distinguish between right and wrong.

'It's not so much what the Pope wants, dear. It really is an opportunity. The English kings have never allowed the Inquisition into their territory. They do not publicly support our religion but they tolerate it. When our women were forced to marry crusaders, they carried our faith north with them. Some of the English royal family share our beliefs, so they would be unlikely to have a different policy for Occitan. Whatever the Pope believes might happen, they would deprive the Inquisition of its power. Occitan could once again be independent, our culture and religion saved.'

She pulled Ximene into a close embrace and whispered in her ear, more to give a sense of intimacy than any fear that they might be overheard.

'I am only interested in your welfare, darling. I want you to be happy; I want you to be loved. You don't have to be a princess or a queen to achieve these things, but it might be a safer option.'

Again Ximene pulled away, spitting defiance. 'If ever I do give myself to a man, it will be for love, and I won't need a ceremony of the Roman Church to confirm its validity.'

Eleanor's mouth went dry. 'You may find it impossible to avoid that eventuality. In the event, most girls enjoy the ceremony. It makes them feel like a queen for that day and in your case it would be for significantly longer than a day.'

'It is not what I want, Grandmother. If I am to marry a prince, this prince even, it will be because we actually like each other, perhaps love each other. As you have taught me so well, affairs of the soul, unions of our spirit, often outside of sterile marriages, should always take precedence. If I am to take part in a roman marriage, the Prince must understand and accept this.'

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Ximene buried her face in her Grandmother's shoulder, pleased to be able to hide the resentment she welling within her. She then pulled away, turning towards the door to hide her feelings.

'I must put some clothes on, the day is slipping away.'

Ximene spent some time combing and brushing her hair and almost as long deciding what to wear. It was a deliberate attempt to re-impose some order on both her hair and her mind. Finally she felt calm enough to be seen in public. She then descended to the students lounge.

Alyse, one of Ximene's best friends and a distant cousin, was kneeling on a chair by the huge oaken table which dominated the centre of the room. She was stretching in an effort to read the top of a page of a very large, elaborately bound book.

Lounging in a window alcove was Pipa de Roet. Pipa's father was the Constable of Beaufort Castle, an English possession, though Pipa claimed to be Flemish. Stood by her, tall, slim, dressed in black was Alessandro Cocchi, the Florentine artist now based in Toulouse. He was bent over listening intently to whatever story Pipa was telling, they were both laughing.

Allessandro immediately sprang to attention when Ximene entered the room. He positively danced towards her and taking her hand made an elaborate bow to kiss it tenderly.

'Good morning Dona.' Ximene raised an eyebrow wondering why he had invented a title for her.

Pipa jumped to her feet and ran towards Ximene.

'Look, look, see what Allessandro has brought.' There, in the best possible light, behind the door she had just entered, was a portrait, which Allessandro had been working on.

Allessandro approached the portrait and waved his hand towards it.

'As you know Dona, I made many sketches. I discussed them all with the count and this is the treatment he chose. I thought you should see it before Monsieur Froissart takes it away. I have also brought two of the original sketches, which you might like to keep.'

He indicated the sketches lying on the far side of the table.

Ximene eyed the portrait critically and then wandered around the table to look at the sketches.

'Hmm I prefer these, they make me look more approachable.'

She looked again at the portrait and shook her head. 'The finished portrait makes me too grand. Much grander than I really am.'

Allessandro shook his head just as vigorously. 'That is not possible, Dona you are grand, perhaps the grandest lady I have ever met.'

Again Ximene raised an eyebrow, outright flattery. She smiled, realising that he saw her as a potential source of future commissions. As he must know why this present commission had been obtained it meant he thought that Monsieur Froissart was suitably impressed. At least in his mind, a marriage to the Prince was now inevitable.

Pipa looked from Ximene and back to Alyse.

'With your hair pulled back like that; pinned with side combs and the tiara it could be Alyse. In any case the mantilla makes you look very Castilian. But it is a good likeness.'

Ximene responded in a light tone of voice.

'Yes, well my grandmother is always telling me there is a family likeness between us but normally we don't wear the same clothes, Alyse nearly always wears her hair up and I nearly always wear it down so nobody notices.'

Pipa, not able to contain herself, talked over the last few words.

'Well you both have the same eyes, the same complexion and exactly the same hair colouring.' She turned to Alyse and playfully tugged at the combs. 'Come on Alyse let your hair down and let us see.' In the playful struggle, which ensued Pipa did not fight too hard and Alyse did not resist too strongly. Nevertheless Alyse's hair did become unpinned. Pipa was triumphant 'There you are I told you, you are alike.'

Alyse pushed Pipa away. 'Well at least I am different from you!'

'Oh! And what does that mean?'

Pipa's appearance matched her personality, light, frothy and amusing. Even now her mouth was twisted into a smile though she was not actually smiling and her eyes seemed to ask a succession of cheeky questions. Alyse again pushed Pipa away.

'You just don't care, you are so untidy'

Ximene felt Alyse was being a little unfair. She knew that Pipa's tousled blond hair hardly ever experienced a comb let alone a brush but it always looked as though it had been carefully styled to give a carefree, uncontrolled appearance.

Ximene looked at a Alyse and again at the portrait.

'Alessandro, tell me. I posed for many sketches in many modes of dress but I do not remember wearing exactly the costume in the portrait. How did you create this final image, from you imagination?'

Alessandro laughed 'No not from my imagination, There were many sittings required, the comte did not want to burden you unnecessarily, so the lady Alyse modelled for the portrait.'

Ximene deliberately rolled her eyes.

'So in fact the portrait Monsieur Froissart is taking back to England is of Alyse, not of me?'

Alessandro glanced from Ximene to Alyse and back again.

'No. No Donna, the sittings were only for the dress and accessories, the face is yours.' He suddenly unclipped the portrait from its mount and carefully commenced to roll it up.

'Well, good, I am glad you had the opportunity to see the portrait, I must pack it away now away as Monsieur Froissart will be leaving soon for England.' He hurried out of the room completing the rolling the portrait as he went.

Ximene made sure the door was shut before turning to face her friends. There was silence, broken in the end by Alyse.

'You don't look happy Ximene.'

'Don't worry Alyse, it is not important to me. If the portrait shown to the Black Prince is of you rather than me I really do not mind. However perhaps I should at some stage mention it to the Prince that it is really, perhaps he might like to marry you instead.'

Alyse winced. 'I am sorry Ximene I only did what the count asked me to do.'

Ximene regretted having started this.

'I have told you, I really don't mind.'

'You say that but you are clearly unhappy about something.'

Ximene flinched, promising herself to work on hiding her feelings more effectively. She instantly broke her resolution.

'Well I certainly don't enjoy being the subject of an auction.'

'An auction?'

'Nothing more, nothing less.' She adopted the tone of an auctioneer. 'What am I bid for the hand of Ximene Trencavel in marriage? Yes, you may inspect her. See we have her here in a gilded cage!'

Pipa opened her mouth several times. She blushed and then the words tumbled out.

'Monsieur Froissart is some sort of friend of my family. He is going to visit my mother and father at Beaufort on his way back to England. He has talked to me quite openly. He thinks you could be the next Queen of England.'

'Hmm. Perhaps. I have made it clear to Monsieur Froissart and the Count that I must meet any proposed marriage partner, and that includes the Prince, before agreeing to anything. They all, every one of these so-called suitors want to marry me because they think it will give them control of Occitan. Well it might but I have also made it clear that they, any of them, must meet my conditions.'

'Which are'

'Independence for Occitan and freedom of worship for those who follow the Cathar faith.'

Allyse's jaw dropped she looked at Ximene with wide eyes.

'You would turn down the chance to be queen of England?'

'I would if my conditions aren't met.'

'Oh, Ooooh! Tell him it was me! I only wish I had the chance.'