

## Prologue

Peter Fairfax looked right, then left, as he had been taught as a child, and started to cross the road. Although in his fifties, he moved quickly, his body toned by the exercise he'd forced himself to do over the years since his wife had died.

The June day was warm, slightly muggy, as if rain wasn't far off. London wasn't comfortable in the heat and, as he strode along the pavement, he contemplated the holiday he was planning for himself and his daughter, Marian.

He wrenched his thoughts away from the pleasant prospect and concentrated on his present problem. Something was wrong, that was for certain, and if his suspicions turned out to be true, he'd have to involve the police, something he would normally detest, but in the circumstances, there was no alternative.

It could all be a mistake, he admitted, then mentally discarded the idea. A month, maybe, but years, impossible.

The thought of betrayal was bitter to him: perhaps he had been too trusting, had placed too much power in the wrong hands. Still, now it was done and the result had to be lived with.

At the next crossing, he paused, then after checking the street started to cross.

There was a screech of tyres as a car raced towards him. He hesitated, then took a step backwards as it came to a violent stop a few yards away, its doors swinging wide as it did so.

Two burly men leapt out and ran forwards.

He caught the glimpse of metal as they approached, lifting their hands ready to strike, and just had time to raise his own hands in a vain attempt at defence.

His last thought, as a hammer smashed into his skull, was of his daughter.

## Chapter 1

In the freezing black night the moon played Hide and Seek with scudding nimbus clouds and sent flashes of cold steel gleaming through the branches of hoar-frosted trees. The stark winter forest appeared as a series of rapid still frames in the intermittent light.

A slight girl was desperately clinging to a great black stallion that was charging along a barely distinguishable woodland trail. The dreamer had a moment of dizziness as, seemingly suspended in the air some ten feet behind the girl, her viewpoint twisted and swung to follow the wildly galloping horse.

Branches hung low, and the dreamer instinctively ducked her head to avoid them, although some part of her knew it was only a dream.

The girl's hair shone silver in the moonlight, but the observer seemed to remember that it was blonde. The breath of the galloping horse condensed into misty clouds in the icy air, clouds that were swept away in an instant by the rush of the horse's passing. The metallic thud of hooves on the frost hardened track echoed in the mind of the watcher.

And she felt the cold as well, and shivered in her dream.

The image may have lasted as long as ten minutes, or as little as ten seconds, but it was to remain fixed in her memory as long as she lived.

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Another time she dreamed of the same young blonde girl, no more than twelve, sitting on a high wooden stool, arms folded in composure, face serious, attentive. She seemed to be in some kind of classroom, although, as far as the observer could tell she was alone with the teacher. He was an elderly man, half-hidden in the shadows of the room, which was lit by brilliant, slanting beams of shuttered sunlight in which flecks of dust hung suspended.

The girl was robed in a slightly rustic dress of natural wool; leather sandals on elegant feet that peeked shyly out from below the hem of her dress. She was listening to her teacher who was speaking in a slow, deep voice, in a language unknown to the dreamer; but as is the nature of dreams, she understood the words perfectly.

“Tell me, Marie Anne, of mercy.”

The girl-child said, slowly and clearly, “Mercy is an attribute of God. As we are made in His image, it behoves us to attempt the impossible and reach His state of perfection by modelling ourselves on His attributes, therefore, we must, when and where possible, be merciful.”

“And justice?” prompted the old man, his voice echoing from the shadows.

“Justice also stems from Our Lord. So, we also, must be just in our dealings with others and judge them by the light of knowledge, not with the darkness of ignorance. We chastise evildoers with the sword, but with understanding, pardon those who sincerely repent their transgressions.”

“You have learnt your lessons well, Marie Anne,” commented the old man.

The girl smiled. A wide, delightfully uninhibited smile for such a serious faced youngster. And it was that smile which dispelled the dream.

The next day, when she awoke, the dreamer wondered why the smile of the child had filled her with so much contentment.

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She was seeing the castle from the top of a low hill some two miles distant. The fortress was perched threateningly on a shoulder of a mountain, overlooking and controlling a narrow pass. The stark whiteness of its walls and tower contrasted sharply against the endless blue of the sky.

Around the base of the mountain ridge, huddled together in protection against the fierce heat of the noonday sun, was a collection of white walled, red roofed cottages. A few columns of bluish-white smoke rose vertically into the still air. She could smell the scent of burning pine resin. Not quite big enough to be a town, the village certainly provided sufficient homes for the workers she could see in the cultivated areas of the valley. Pine trees ascended the mountain slopes, but the rest of the terrain between

her and the castle was a mixture of fields and softly wooded hills.

Although she wasn't certain, she suspected that the sea was near. Maybe just because of the particular tint of azure in the sky, or perhaps it was the faint salt tang she could taste on her lips.

She was still pondering on this when the scene dissolved into darkness.

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The sun beat down on the top of her head with noonday ferocity. She was watching a group of youngsters playing ... no, practising with wooden swords in the castle courtyard. The yard, which was of a dry, dusty sand that was kicked-up in powdery swirls each time feet moved, resounded to the shouts and cries of the youngsters.

Marie Anne, the fair-haired girl of her previous dreams was there amongst them, deftly thrusting and then parrying with ease the return attack of a larger boy.

Suddenly, the girl threw herself forward, rolling in the dust to the boy's left. She avoided his clumsy swing at her with an eel like movement, twisted with a natural agility, and slashed her opponent a bruising thump on the back of the leg, to be rewarded with an agonised howl of pain.

The piecing cry, echoing round the high, enclosing walls, caused all practice to stop. A stout, middle-aged man dressed in leather trousers, jerkin and high boots, shuffled out from the shelter of an archway to examine the leg with dispassionate calm.

"Nothing much to bawl about," he admonished the boy, whose tears were leaving fresh trails on his dirty, sweat-stained face. "Use your hands and rub it hard. And thank God that it was just play and not for real, or you'd be walking like me for the rest of your life."

He faced the girl who'd been calmly watching while he'd examined the boy's leg.

"Unorthodox, Marie Anne," he commented. "Suitable against one, or two right-handers, but not against left handers like me, or in battle." He nodded abruptly and turned to move away, then twisted his head to add: "But it was very elegant!"

The girl grinned widely at the man, who displayed a few broken teeth in reply.

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It was early on a cold, grey winter's morning. The three judges sitting in solitary state in their stone box, which overlooked a small amphitheatre, were stern and serious in their long white robes.

Spectators were filing in to line the stone benches set in a horseshoe shape round the arena. A single man, armed with a rake, scratched over the sand beneath the tiers. Four guards who stood, swords drawn, equidistant round the edge of the sanded area gazed at him in boredom.

There were two entrances to the fighting area, and through the West archway strode a tall man dressed in black. He held a heavy sword in the right hand and, pausing fractionally, he raised it in formal salute to the judges.

From the East entrance, two guards escorted a man whose hands were manacled behind his back, and whose ankles were linked by a short length of chain. His guards halted him in the very centre of the arena.

A single, crystal clear note of a bell rang through the buzz of conversation and all sound ceased.

The judge, in the centre of the three, rose slowly to his feet and looked down on the prisoner, distaste in his eyes and voice as he said quietly; "You, Carl de Limperoux, have been found guilty of robbery and murder. The sentence of the court is death. Have you anything to say before sentence is executed?"

There was absolute silence. The judge waited, motionless. Only the fresh morning breeze moved his robes. Finally, he nodded, "Very well. Let the sentence be carried out."

The guards kicked the prisoner's feet from under him, dropping him to his knees, then forced his head down by pulling his manacled wrists up. The man in black stepped forward and raised the great sword he carried. He waited. An expectant hush spread through the spectators and it seemed that time stood still.

The sweet tone of the bell sounded once more.

In an instant, the executioner swung the sword down. There was a thud of metal striking meat, a rasping gasp of air gurgling out of a severed throat and a thump as the head spun to the ground. A fountain of blood gushed from the dead man's neck spraying the legs of the executioner, and staining

the yellow sand a deep russet.

The dream turned to a crimson darkness.

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The black night was thick and silent. Then, as a soft chanting began to echo through corridors of yellow stone and reverberate in her mind, she, from a viewpoint high above ground level, started to distinguish faint details of the chamber.

Lamps were lit: flaming torches set in metal sconces on the walls. She could see where the flames of a thousand torches had burnt and stained the walls black with soot above their flickering flames.

It was a smallish chamber of warm, golden coloured stone, along one wall of which Roman arches led onto a large hall, brilliantly illuminated by candles and torches; a hall which bustled with hundreds of colourfully robed men and women. The men wore medieval clothes; tight hose, boots, dyed shirts and leather jerkins. Fine, sharp pointed daggers hung at their belts. The women wore long sendal gowns of the more subdued pinks, blues and browns. These trailed on the stone floor displaying an elegance missing from most modern clothes.

The chanting continued, now changing into a type of plainsong, but not the customary religious chant. Here, she could hear bright feminine voices cutting through the deep bass and the strong baritones of the men. Although she didn't recognise the language, she knew it was a song of rejoicing, of triumph.

Not a church, she was sure of that. But there was a mystic atmosphere about the whole. Some sort of rite was to be enacted.

The voices of the choir faded into silence and the rustling movement and whispering in the outer hall stilled. The air was heavy with expectancy and anticipation.

She could hear something soft, but familiar approaching and all of a sudden recognised it as the scuffling slap of soft leather soles on stone tiles, yet she couldn't remember ever hearing that particular sound before. A flickering movement of brighter light as hand-held torches reflected into the chamber from the golden stone of the walls.

A small procession entered the room through the arch at the extreme left. Eleven people, principally men, but with three or four women among

them, all erect of bearing and serious in expression, escorted a woman; a girl rather. She couldn't have been more than sixteen or seventeen; although there was maturity about the confident way she carried herself: neither aggressive, nor submissive.

The watcher attempted to see more, but as is the mystery of dreams, the more detail she tried to make out, the less she managed to discern. She could see that the escorted girl, and somehow she knew it was an escort of honour, not guard, was about medium height and had short-cut blonde hair. At first, the girl's facial details remained a blur; as though distorted through uneven glass, then the watcher suddenly realised it was Marie Anne, the same girl as in past dreams.

The men and women escorting the girl were easier to distinguish: they were dressed in blue-dyed hide tunics over white silk shirts, dark leather trousers. All wore polished riding boots but walked easily in them. They were strong men, haughty women, but their expressions were softened by half-smiles fitted to a festive occasion.

It suddenly became apparent to the watcher that she was witness to some sort of graduation ceremony. It had that feel about it: work done, now the reward.

Her viewpoint abruptly changed, sending a wave of nausea into her throat. From the new angle she was surprised to discover that the chamber had never been empty. Relaxed in an ornately carved oak chair sat a motionless man dressed entirely in white. Yet his very lack of movement caught her attention and, once caught, it was held by the expression in his eyes. Here was a source of authority indeed; a power so great it transcended the normal bounds of space and time and was perceived by the observer across the limitless gulfs of dreams.

Slight and delicate in build, his hands, with their raised veins and mottled skin, testified to his age. The dreamer tried to put a number of years to him, but found it impossible. He was old. Older than time remembered: an age that transcended the normal span of years. Old as the pyramids are old: as ancient as the first faint dawn of mankind. His eyes held a fountainhead of grace and wisdom and an amusement that was reflected in the faint smile that tenderly touched his lips, a testament to the don of humour.

In front of him, set on a pure white marble slab of some half metre square, was a slightly flattened dodecahedron of blue-black crystal some twelve inches in height, fifteen in diameter. Spread out on the flat top surface of the crystal was a set of jewels. Sapphires, miniature copies of

the great crystal, were inlaid in gold. The principal gem being a one-inch high representation of the great crystal hung on a thin gold chain. There were also two gold rings, on each of which the sapphire was cut and polished into a dodecahedron; and two bracelets, on these, the stone was wider, flatter. Somehow, all the jewels gently pulsed with some sort of life, some sort of energy.

The escort separated four long paces from the throne and stood immobile, leaving the girl to approach alone, her steps hesitant in the still silence.

The man in white stood in one lithe movement that belied his years. His half-smile broadened into a genuine welcome, and he raised both hands to the girl who had sunk to one knee in reverence before him.

“Marie Anne,” he said. “Come! Stand straight and tall. You have attained to that state which is your birthright. Be welcome.” The words, which were not English, were perfectly understood by the observer: something natural, which wasn’t even questioned, just accepted, as so often transpires in visions.

The girl lowered her head, then, as she gained confidence, raised it to face him directly. The entrancing crook of his lips was hesitantly replied to. She smiled.

“My Lord,” she said and bowed her head once more. Her voice, although quiet, level and assured had sounded loud in the absolute quiet of the chamber, however when she lifted her head again, the pure delight and exultation in her eyes was eloquent.

“My child! Although, I believe that from this moment on I will have to call you, ‘Lady’, I cannot tell you how much this attainment of yours means to me. Since the death of your parents many years ago, I have treated you as a beloved daughter. I know your blood parents would be proud of you at this moment. They were true and honourable themselves, and I have no doubt that their daughter will follow in their footsteps.”

He reached forward and cupped his hand under her chin, tenderly raising her head to face him directly. “You have been tested time and time again, and have passed all those tests. You have been trained by the finest swordsmen in the land, learnt to defend your life with sword and dagger and, what is more important, have gained knowledge of when not to use those deadly weapons.

“I have only one short question to put to you: one, after the many that your mentors have made over all these past years. Probably the most



important of your short life.” He paused and studied the girl closely. “Do you, Marie Anne de Vilmanne, of your own free will, unforced by any man or woman, accept those responsibilities and obligations that have been placed on you by your birthright?”

There was a deep pool of silence into which the girl’s voice serenely dropped her reply: “Yes, I, Marie Anne de Vilmanne, accept all the responsibilities, and will fulfil all the obligations placed upon me.” There was exultation in the youthful voice.

“Then, bow your knee, my Lady, and accept your reward.”

She knelt and placed her hands on either side of the crystal block. The tension in the hall was reflected in the silence and rigid stances of the escort.

The old man raised his right hand high and a shining sword glittered blue fire in the dancing light of the flaming torches

“By the power of the Almighty One who rules all,” he said, “admit Lady Marie Anne de Vilmanne into the mysteries of the Adepti.”

He laid the blade gently on the right shoulder of the kneeling girl. As he did so, the crystal block pulsed with a piercing blue light that flared for a long ten seconds and which seemed to be absorbed by the girl herself. The gemstones on the crystal glowed in the aftermath of the brilliance. The watcher knew they were alive with some form of mystical energy.

A sigh from the spectators echoed round the hall.

“Rise Lady Marie Anne. Accept these jewels as arms and armour, to protect you from evil, to enable you to serve fully the White Tower. For from now and henceforth you are Lady Marie Anne de Vilmanne, Servant of the White Tower, and Mistress of the Stones of Power. You are a protector of the innocent, the weak and fainthearted; judge of the lawless; executioner of the wicked and soulless; friend and comforter of the righteous.”

The unseen choir cried in exultation and there were cheers from the colourful host in the hall beyond the arches.

The torches themselves seemed to flare until their light filled the watcher’s eyes, burning out her view. She shook her head and blinked to see the morning light of a June day streaming through the bedroom window, and her dream was already a fast receding memory.