Everyone comes to Jerusalem asking for something - forgiveness, glory, fame. Most questions go to God, but some come to the King, who wields a different kind of power. Baldwin the Fourth has a new chess partner, asking for land for a new monastery, and not all the members of his court are happy about it.

- Inspired by Song of a Peacebringer by Mercury Gray
The Cross

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lo tems vai e ven e vire

Per jorn, per mes e per ans,

Et eu, las no.n sai que dire,

C'ades es us mos talans.

Ades es us e no.s muda,

C'una.n volh e.n ai volguda,

Don anc non aic jauzimen.

Time comes, and goes, and runs away,
In days, and months, and so in years;
And I, alas, have naught to say,
For my longing ever one appears.
It’s ever one, and never falters,
For I love one, it never alters,
Of whom I’ve had no happiness.

-Bernart de Ventedorn (Translated by A.S.Kline)


Her master was laughing.

It had been nearly three years since she had come to Jerusalem, and Aude of Vinceaux still had not reconciled her ears to the sound, for the King of Jerusalem did not laugh easily. The disease which was so quickly taking over his skin was also robbing his lungs of their ability to draw breath, and doing so too quickly usually broke down into a painful coughing fit. It made the people around him nervous, to make him laugh - and while most of the court gave him a wide berth on behalf of his illness, it was a fear of that hacking, rasping cough that kept his beloved sister Sybilla away, sending Aude in her place to keep her brother company and entertain him. No one spent more time here than she, Sybilla’s servant in theory, but Baldwin’s in practice. It was an...unorthodox arrangement, to say the least, an unmarried woman spending time unchaperoned with an unmarried man, but this was the East, and things were done differently here.

None of this, however, explained why Baldwin was laughing.

Because that meant something else - that there was someone else with him, making him laugh.

Aude quickened her pace, the book she’d found in the marketplace of much less interest to her now. Who might be visiting the King? And what news did they bring that would cause such
amusement as to make him laugh? There was precious little news these days to bring him joy, much less outright mirth. The reason she’d gone to the souk herself was to find something to cheer him. The little volume in her hand was only a collection of fables, meant more to instruct than entertain, but there were one or two funny illustrations that she thought he’d enjoy, and she was hoping that would be enough to lift his mood, which had been dark of late. (The doctor had found another lesion on his arm, and he’d lost more motion in his hand. Soon, they thought, he wouldn’t be able to hold a pen.)

Sure enough, there were two figures at the chess table - the King, in his customary white and blue robes, masked and bandaged against the rigors of the world, and another man whom Aude could not recognize, at least from the back of his head. But then, a full head of dark hair and a surcoat were hardly enough to identify someone in Jerusalem, especially when the device was a new one. What house bore a six-pointed star and crescent on a bare field?

She cleared her throat from the doorway, alerting the two men to her presence, not wishing to seem as though she were eavesdropping. The king looked up, his eyes still bright, showing the smile that his hidden lips could no longer form. “Ah, Aude! Come, sit and console your king while he loses.”

“His majesty is not losing yet,” his opponent offered graciously, which made the King laugh again.

“But I will be soon! Raymond has a devilish sense of humor if he thought sending you here would entertain me.” Baldwin gestured her in close, to his side of the table so she might see his opponent. “Aude, allow me to introduce to you Seigneur Mathieu Saint-Clair. Messire, my sister’s lady-in-waiting, Audemande de Vinceaux.”

The knight stood to make his bow- and if she didn’t know any better, Aude might have thought God had played a cruel trick and stolen a hero from one of her poems to taunt her. Tall and well-made, he was clean-shaven, with a strong jaw and a face that seemed at the same turn boyish and unspeakably wise. His gaze was direct and clear - and, Aude thought, feeling a trifle warm, rather though he might do unspeakable things to a woman in the dark if she would let him - or if she wouldn’t. “Madame.” Taking her hand to kiss her fingers, Aude was surprised to find his touch cool - cold, even, like marble. “The King was speaking earlier about your poetry.”

“His majesty is kind to mention it.” Just what had the King said about her poetry, anyway? But the Seigneur’s face did not offer any further clues.

Baldwin, for his own part, seemed unconcerned by his visitor’s piercing gaze, or his cold hands. “Will you not sit and join us? Aziz, a cup of wine for Lady Aude. Is it still my play?”

Aude accepted the cup, and made her seat on a couch near to the chess table, letting the two men resume their game. “What brings you to Jerusalem, Seigneur?” she asked politely, taking a sip and watching him study the board. (His eyes, she noticed, were no less focused on the game at hand then they had been observing her. The intensity was a little unnerving.)

“The business of the immortal soul,” the knight said with a slim smile - a pat answer for a visitor to the Holy City. Everyone in the city was here on the business of the soul - or so they said. Aude tried not to look skeptical, but there was little she could hide from Baldwin - the king made a cautionary noise from behind his mask and moved a rook.

“The Seigneur came about a grant of land for a monastery his father wishes to endow.”

Oh, well, then. “I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed, messire. The Templars or Hospitallers need no new houses - or men to fill them. I’m told it’s fashionable now, to come to the east and dedicate yourself to one in service.” Hundreds of men without enough faith between them to fill a thimble,
If the Seigneur noticed her disdain, he did a good job of hiding it. “His interests lie with a new order - dedicated to Saint Lazarus. A hospital, too.”

“For pilgrims?” Aude asked, trying to retain a look of polite interest. There were hundreds of pilgrim hospitals and hostels - a new one every day, it seemed.

“For those afflicted by leprosy.” The silence in the room was tangible. "There is not yet a place of sanctuary here for them, and the city feels it keenly.'

Well, he picks his targets well, Aude thought to herself. If the Saint-Clair family were to appeal to anyone for the cause of lepers, the Leper King would be the one to whom to go. “He seems a … strange patron for a monastic order,” she observed lightly, glancing around the board for a moment before looking at the Seigneur again. “Lazarus came out of the tomb and into the world, not the other way around.”

Seigneur Saint-Clair met her eye again, and again Aude felt more like a bird under the eye of a falcon. *This hawk will eat the Little Dove, if you give him cause. Do not provoke him!* “My father has always had a special affinity for that story,” the knight offered lightly. “He was given a second chance at life, and desired to celebrate that in the foundation of a house of prayer.”

“Yes, before you came, we were discussing second chances,” Baldwin said. “And immortality.”

“A weighty subject for the heat of the afternoon,” Aude said lightly, settling further into the cushions with her wine.

“But you did not answer my question, my lord, before the Lady came in. Should you not like to be immortal?” The Seigneur asked with a smile.

Baldwin gave a slight but expressive shrug, his hand lingering near one of his rooks and then deciding to move a pawn instead. “What use is living forever if the body is imperfect? It is not, I think, for me - for what man would wish to continue on forever as I am?” The honest, plaintive quality of his answer made Aude pause.

But the Seigneur was ready for that. “But if the body could be made perfect, my lord - if every imperfection could be wiped away?

“Then I should grow bored of living,” Baldwin pronounced. “Consider, my lord - I know my life upon this earth is short - shorter than most. Because of this I know I must live well in the time I am given, and that there must be no waste. I take my counsel from good men, and try to govern wisely. I am good to my friends, fair to my enemies, generous in my largesse and frugal in my complaints, all so that when I am gone, hopefully people will say ‘He was a good steward of his gifts.’ What use have I for immortality? Aude will write about me so that I will be remembered as I want to be - as the people who knew me saw me.” He glanced at Aude, and she knew, underneath his mask, that he was smiling - the soft affection of a friend for a friend. “That is enough for me, I think.”

“And you, Lady Aude?”

As he said the words, Aude felt her heart grow cold again, and wondered, perhaps, if this was how Mary had felt, standing before the Angel with his burning eyes, and taking upon her the terrible burden of bearing the world’s salvation. *Would you take such a thing, his eyes seemed to say, if I could give it you? A lifetime spent in the turning of the world?* She set her shoulders a little, trying to diffuse her growing sense of unease. “I will be, messire - in my poems. A hundred years from
now, when people read them, they will know me, a little.”

“And if your poems are lost?”

Was he trying to provoke her pride? He spoke as if he’d burn every copy, just to see what it would do to her. “Then that is God’s will, and I will be as a grain of dust in the desert. It would be...vain of me, to wish otherwise.”

“How pointless you make ambition seem!”

“Could pointlessness not be ascribed to any endeavor?” she asked, giving up all pretense of detachment in the face of his own stubbornness. “Your father wishes to build a monastery. A house is built, monks are found, prayers are written and raised to God. Hopefully it continues on into the next age, and his memory is preserved forever - but it may not. Walls crumble, men die, books burn, names are forgotten. That is the risk anyone takes. In the end, nothing is sure but death.”

The king cleared his throat - or was that more laughter coming from behind his mask? Aude gave him a very dark look. Sometimes Baldwin had a strange sense of humor. “Come now, you two, let us leave the battle on the chessboard. The Seigneur may need your help, Aude - his monastery library shall require books, and you know all the booksellers in the Old City.”

The poet tried to master her indignation and return some calm to her face - for she very much thought that both her King and his guest were silently laughing at her. Confound her temper for betraying her like this! It was hard enough to be a woman at this court, let alone one with the luxury of her own opinions. “You shall want religious texts, of course.”

“I would like every kind of book imaginable.”

Aude looked at him again, frankly and honestly. “What strange ideas you have for your monastery, messire Saint-Clair.”

The Seigneur smiled again, a maddeningly superior expression. “My father tells a story he heard from his nursemaid about Lazarus - that when he rose from the tomb and was given new life by our lord he embraced it fully, and took advantage of everything the world had to offer, and when he last departed this life, as Methuselah did, at a great and venerable age, he was wise and learned and could discourse upon any subject given him, including the messages of our Lord. So shall the monks of our house be - learned in every subject imaginable, and hospitable to scholars and students and those wishing to better discern the will of God. And poets, too, if they come. Perhaps we shall have one of your books, madame.”

Now he was baiting her. “I would think the scribblings of a court poet too ...ephemeral for a monastery, my lord. They are entertainments, not the sustenance of the soul.”

“And your history of Jerusalem, this - Peacebringer the King tells me of? Has that no sustenance in it?”

Aude cleared her throat, and swallowed, uneasy. So that was what Baldwin had mentioned. Oh, speak to her of anything but that.”That is yet unfinished, my lord.”

He smiled, and she could not help but shiver. “When it is complete, we shall have a copy made, and preserve it, too.”

She smiled, thinly, and the game went on. She could hardly leave, while they were still playing, and so contented herself with another cup of wine as the Seigneur and the King discussed books,
the difficulty of keeping mice out of one’s papers, the wine they were enjoying, the general good quality of grapes from Galilee and their merits against those from France, a dozen or more items of little consequence other than that of filling the air between the two men as they sent pieces back and forth across the board - leaving Aude with nothing to do but study them.

They were of an age with each other, these two men, and yet so different in what life had dealt them. One a paragon of manhood, tall and strong-limbed, with a body that was used to battle and the sword, the other crab-shouldered and so weak he could no longer sit to hold court, his only exercise the turning of pages, a guttering rushlight next to a well-trimmed taper of wax. But - and this gladdened Aude’s heart a little to see - Saint-Clair never made mention of the fact, never assaulted his host with his own good fortune, as other men (she thought here of Baldwin’s brother-in-law Guy) would have done. He came from, it seemed, crusader stock, some distant great-uncles who had fought with Godfrey of Bouillon and the first Baldwin to take the city from the Caliphs. (A family name, Baldwin - apparently his brother bore it also.)

Both quick-witted - else how would the game have gone on so long? Saint-Clair had a very direct strategy, fitting for a man who could meet opponents head-on, while Baldwin played a long game, often taking two or three turns to set up some plan. Once - just once - after he’d taken a piece, the Seigneur made a noise of disbelief and complained, almost to himself, “You play like my father.”

It was a good game - if Baldwin was nothing else, he was patient, but Matthieu Saint-Clair, it seemed, was patient, too. And Aude, in a moment of weakness, found herself thinking, What would Jerusalem be like if this man were king?

No sooner had the thought entered her head then she covered her mouth with a whimper, afraid that she’d said the thing aloud. What treason’s this? The two men paused, wondering what sudden calamity she’d seen on the board that they had not, and she shook her head, clearing her throat and brushing away Aziz with the pitcher of wine. Perhaps - perhaps that was why Baldwin had mentioned Peacebringer - knowing that Saint-Clair looked the part of the hero-king, he’d done his best to remind him who the poets would really remember.

A bishop darted across the board and tipped Baldwin’s king over. “You let me win, my lord.” The Seigneur sounded disappointed.

Baldwin looked him square in the eye, his expression enigmatic behind his mask. “Did I? I must not have seen your bishop.” He cleared his throat and sat up a little, raising his hand for Aziz to attend him. Aude knew that look, and sat up a little straighter herself - the King was in pain and doubtless looking for an opiate. Saint-Clair had the right of it - the King seen the opening for the piece and had thrown the game to make it end sooner. “If you’ll excuse me, Seigneur - the hour is late and I have business with Aude. Attend upon me tomorrow, with your brother, and we will speak further.”

“My lord is very kind.” Saint-Clair rose from his seat and bowed, kissing the royal signet without a second thought, his own clear skin a strong contrast to Baldwin’s mottled, waxy mess of a hand. A bold move, Aude thought, for a newcomer; fear of his disease kept most of the court at bay when oaths of fealty were required. Or a desperate one. He knows what he wants, and how he’ll get it, and his plan leads straight through to the King. What strings had he pulled, what favors granted to get his audience with Raymond, the door by which all the King’s guests entered? What lies would he tell to stay here in the King’s good grace? The knight’s eyes passed over Aude again, and he bowed in her direction, too. “Perhaps I shall hear one of the famous poet’s works, when we next meet.”

Aude merely nodded, and tried not to look too sour, letting the door close behind the knight before
she let her scowl loose. Christ’s wounds, had her shoulders really been in her ears the whole time? Her back ached from sitting so long.

“You didn’t like him.” It was an observation, rather than an accusation, made while Aziz prepared his lord’s posset and refreshed the incense in the burners. A new mixture, perhaps - it suddenly smelt of clove.

“I don’t like men who say one thing and mean another.” The chess, the mention of books, kissing the King’s ring- the flirtation with me. He made a long study of my lord to find out what would gain his trust, or move him to action. And there was something about the story with his father that struck her as...wrong, somehow, a hidden element that she could not quite place. I don’t like men who play with my friends, she wanted to say, though she knew it would hurt Baldwin’s feelings to have her say it. Or who play with me. You didn’t come to Jerusalem to take the Cross, Mathieu Saint-Clair, and you and I both know it.

She swore she could still feel those eyes burning at her, and it unsettled her as nothing ever had.

Chapter End Notes

I started with this idea of Baldwin IV and Matthew playing chess after reading in Discovery of Witches that Matthew had been in Jerusalem, and that Phillipe had wanted to start a vampire kingdom there. Since Deborah Harkness was very nonspecific with this idea in the first book, and since I am a huge Kingdom of Heaven fan, the idea of two of my favorite fictional chess players meeting was too good to pass up.

Jerusalem in 1187 is a city on the edge - the enemies on their borders have now all unified and are prepared to strike, internal factions make raising an army difficult, and the King, who should be at the center of war preparations, is afflicted with leprosy and scarcely able to walk, let alone lead an army to war. It's the perfect place for a vampire patriarch to try, once more, for his dream of a kingdom for those of his kind. Additionally, real-world history suggests that the Knights of St. Lazarus may get their start around this time, fighting in 1187 at the Battle of Hattin.

The World of All Souls has since informed me that it was the First Crusade, not the Third, in which Matthew was involved, and the Siege of Acre at which he was present the second Siege of Acre, in 1291, not the first one in 1189. I may return to the idea of this being his second trip to the Holy City - since Jerusalem is at the very center of the world for asking forgiveness, after all.

Audemade of Vinceaux, or Aude, is an original character from a story I wrote on ff.net several years ago called The Song of a Peacebringer- she is originally from Poitiers, and comes to the Holy Land as Sybilla's lady in waiting. She's a trobaritz, famous for her love poems, which are usually more in the style of Tristain and Yseult, and a set of eyes and ears for Baldwin, who cannot leave his rooms. (I want to add that she's had that name since well before finding out it was one of Ysabeau's.) The Song of a Peacebringer is the epic poem she writes in praise of Baldwin IV, her last work for him.
On a Field, Azure

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Amics, s’ie.us trobes avinen
humil e franc e de bona merce,
be.us amera, quand era m’en sove
q’us trob vas mi mal e fellon e tric,
e fauc chanssos per tal q’ieu fass; auzir
vostre bon pretz, dont ieu non puosc sofrir
que no.us fassa lauzar a tota gen,
on plus mi faitz mal et adiram

Friend, if you had show consideration,
Meekness, candor, and humanity,
I’d have loved you without hesitation;
But you were mean and sly and villainous
Still, I make this song to spread your praises
Wide, for I can’t bear to let your name
Go on unsung, and unrecknowned,
No matter how much worse you treat me now.

-Castelloza, translated by Meg Bogin

On a field, azure: Loyalty, faith, chastity, strength, truth.

In Aude’s mind, heaven was almost certainly a monastery.

For where else could one know that one was perfectly safe, and watched with perfect good grace, and loved? In heaven, the theologians assured her, there would be all manner of good things - and for Aude, there could be nothing better than books, and a garden brimful with flowers and herbs and sunshine, and blessed silence in which to enjoy both.

And the Monastery of Saint Lucy had such a garden.
Even here, in the hustle and bustle near the Zion Gate, one could find silence and contemplation and just a little bit of heaven, if one knew where to look - and if the nun who kept the gate knew one’s face and one’s name. A woman could go in with the weight of the world on one's shoulders and leave perfectly at peace.

And she had greatly needed that peace. It had been a week since the arrival of the Seigneur Saint-Clair, and every day since, it seemed, she found him in counsel with Baldwin, or else Raymond, or even, once, talking with Guy and Gerard de Ridefort, the three men laughing over some shared joke. He was becoming inseparable from the men of power - and it unsettled her, for reasons she still couldn’t name, other than that she was certain he was looking for far more than a grant of land for a monastery. There was no use speaking to Raymond about it; he’d call it a woman’s foolish worrying and tell her to put it aside. Thankfully, the Abbess of Saint Lucy’s had been willing to listen, reminding her of a woman’s intuition and the many ways of the Holy Spirit. Remember who always has an open ear for trouble, she’d counseled, glancing up at the Crucifix in the little chapel.

Aude let the door to the monastery close behind her, and took a deep breath, letting the city's noise come back to her and her eyes search the street for Aymer, the soldier who was escorting her today. She didn't usually bother with the business of bringing someone with her into the city, but there had been some crimes of late that made Raymond and the King nervous, and so, to silence both of them, she'd taken one of Raymond's men at arms with her, leaving him to wait outside while she conducted her business in the cloister.

Today had been an unusually fruitful day, speaking with the Abbess, and then the pilgrims in the hostel - a few scraps of news from Paris about the royal court, confirmations of conditions along the pilgrim road and at least one reliable report of bandits that Aude knew would be useful to Raymond. And there had been a new song, sung for her (and the rest of the sick) by a sad-eyed young man who'd come all the way from Brittany on pilgrimage and had broken his leg climbing on a wall a few days earlier. It had been just the thing to lift the spirits of the rest of the ward, filled with knights and disguises and a treacherous wife, and Aude was looking forward to returning to the palace to write it down and share it with Baldwin - as soon as she could find Aymer, that is.

A statue of house’s patroness stood by the door to the hostel, the martyr-saint with her palm and her plate of eyes staring gently out into the street, inviting passerby inside. Aude touched the feet of the statue for a moment, her usual prayer silent on her lips. God grant that my eyes see what is hidden, and my ears hear what is unspoken, and my heart grace to understand always. Today the prayer was a little more desperate than usual - where had Aymer gone? He'd made no secret of the fact that shepherding a lady around the city was not his first choice of duties, but Aude was well-used to surly soldiers. She'd given him a coin to buy a cup of wine while he waited at the tavern at the end of the street and told him to come back when the bells were ringing for Nones. Raymond's men weren't paid themselves for another three days; it seemed unlikely he'd have more than Aude's coin to drink with.

Well, it was little use waiting for him. Aude checked her pursestrings and the catch on her writing tablet, and wrapped her cloak a little tighter before stepping out into the street. The press of people didn't worry her particularly - her dress was modest and if someone were to take her purse they'd get only a few small coins, the rest of the alms she intended to give today. On this street she was just one more woman doing her daily shopping, unworthy of comment or concern to anyone.

Someone stepped out into traffic, blocking her way, and Aude looked up into the face of an unshaven and splotchy sergeant, eyes glassy from drink. Confound all soldiers and their idle hours - was there no work in this city for them to do? "Fine loaves you have there, mistress," he said, leering at her bodice. "Need someone to knead them for you?"
Ah, such poets, drunkards. Nothing new under the sun. "Please excuse me, my husband's expe-"
Aude put on her best rushed and harried goodwife expression, the one that tried to say 'in the
middle of errands, pot on the stove, husband expecting dinner, must go' and tried to nudge past -
but it was no use. His friends had joined the sport, and there was now a wall of flesh (hot,
sweating, paunchy flesh) between her and the way forward.

"Is he now? Come and stay a moment with us, sweeting, he won't miss you." "Yeah, while the pie
bakes," said another, laughing. "Here's a pestle needs use in your kitchen."

Aude stepped back blindly - and ran into another man, standing square behind her as cold as a
pillar of ice. *Ice!* Almost afraid to take her eyes from the obstacle in front of her, Aude glanced
over her shoulder to catch a flash of a blue surcoat with a crescent and star.

What on God's good earth was Mathieu Saint-Clair doing here?

"The lady said to leave." What kind of fool was he, when there were three of them and one of him?

But the sergeant remained undeterred. "You the husband, then? Or this your mistress? Pretty piece
you have there."

But Saint-Clair, it seemed, was done with talking. Stepping closer to Aude's shoulder and standing
toe-to-toe with the leader, he drew up his considerable height, hand to his sword, looked the
ringleader in the eye, and, with every line in his handsome face promising violence, snarled.

The effect was immediate. The three men fled like a pack of chastened dogs frightened off a kill,
stumbling back with tails obviously between their legs. Aude was rooted to the spot, keenly aware
of how close he was to her and wondering if she was next.

It wasn't a moment later that Aymer appeared from the back of the wineshop, huffing as though
he'd just run from some backroom or alley, his face red and his surcoat rucked up - ah. So perhaps
she had her days wrong and they *had* been paid recently. "Milady! There was a -"

"Save it," Saint-Clair snapped. "You left your lady alone and at the mercy of the city, and if you
were one of my soldiers I'd see you out on the street."

"Thankfully, however, he is not," Aude said quickly, having recovered her breath and enough of
her wits to speak. Truth be told, she would have liked to say the same, but it wasn’t Saint-Clair’s
place to do it, and she wanted him to know it. "I will let you tell Prince Raymond of this, and he
will give whatever punishment he feels necessary."

"And I will escort the lady back to the palace," Saint-Clair announced, before Aude could decline.
Aymer stepped back, head bowed in submission, and Aude wrapped her hands tighter around her
writing tablet, hugging it to her chest like a breastplate and, conveniently, keeping her hands
occupied so she would not have to take the Knight’s arm. "Shall we walk?"

Aude took another breath, nodded, and took hold of her cloak, ignoring Saint-Clair’s outstretched
arm. The peace of the monastery garden seemed impossibly far away now, and everything in the
city seemed too loud.

Besides, she didn’t much feel like talking to him at the moment. His snarl was still ringing in her
ears.

She let him stay in step with her, though it seemed he was only taking one step for every two of
hers, following easily on his long legs while she scurried along, anxious to be back home and out
of his company. They carried on like this for a while before he let out a little laugh and observed,
offhandedly, “You don't much like me, Lady Audemande.”

_and here I thought it should be obvious._ “No, Messire Saint-Clair, I don't.”

“May you do me the honor of telling me why?”

Aude sighed, considering her options. Well, what was it to be - a clever lie or the truth? Somehow she felt he’d find her out eventually. She stopped walking, moved to the side of the street, and looked up at him, remembering his earlier snarl with a small bit of fear. But what use was there in playing safe when the hawk already had you in his talons? _Nothing is certain but death._ “You say you are here on the advice and orders of your father to found a monastery, but I've yet to hear of you visiting any of the dozen already in Jerusalem, or taking advice from their patriarchs and abbots. You say this is your first visit to the Holy City and that you're here to make pilgrimage, but Raymond says you’ve visited none of the holy sites, nor asked to do so. And you navigate the lower city like a native,” she observed. "For not once while we've been walking have you paused for directions nor asked where we are." She stopped and looked up at him. "I don't like you because I don't like liars, Messire Saint-Clair, so while we’re here where no one else can hear us I may as well ask you - why are you here?"

Mathieu Saint-Clair looked at her for a moment in stunned silence and then laughed. "So this how Raymond uses you, Aude of Vinceaux!"

_It is not only Raymond who uses me thus_, Aude thought to herself, feeling as though some great and bewildering weight were off her shoulders as she watched him laugh, trying to steady her breath. _But that is for me alone to know._ "I am a woman, my lord, and easily ignored."

"And here my brother thought you were his mistress. Well, serves him right. Such talent for observation deserves some truth," he admitted. "So - you are correct. I've not sought out abbots because my father intends to make my brother Baldwin head of the order. This is not my first visit to the Holy City, and I do know exactly where I'm going. Shall we?" He offered her his arm, and she, a little stunned by his sudden turn towards geniality, took it.

There were easier ways to return to the Palace than the route they took, but Mathieu Saint-Clair really did know the city as well as she’d supposed, though once or twice he did pause, finding a wall or door where, it seemed, his memory had served him ill. It took Aude some four or five turns to realize his methods - he was avoiding the main pilgrim streets, just as the longtime inhabitants of the city did. Had he lived here for a time? They were just on the outskirts of the Christian Quarter when he turned a corner and ventured down another side-street, very much in the wrong direction from the palace. Aude thought to speak, but restrained herself, wondering where his mind was taking them.

He paused in front of a house and looked down at her, his expression pleased - joyful, even. But seeing Aude beside him brought back to himself, his face moving softly into grief. _Who lived here?_ Aude wondered silently, looking back up at the facade. The shuttered windows offered few answers. It was a merchant’s house, well-built and well-maintained, a small battered plaque indicating a sack affixed to the doorway. A wool merchant - English, perhaps? They were famed for their wool. But the house gave no more clues - and Mathieu Saint-Clair was as silent as the grave, his hand rising, almost unconsciously, to an amulet on a cord at his neck.

Had he been wearing that before? Aude couldn’t remember seeing it. It was not one of the usual badges, the olivewood crosses or the stamped, flat tokens that could be sewn to a robe, but a little, long, raised object - a vial, perhaps? There were clay vessels sold at Bethany to take water from the well, or crystal, if you had coin enough for it, but those were larger - and this was silver, and tarnished, too, an object of repeated devotion.
“I’m sorry,” he said, after a time. “Old habits.” But he did not offer her his arm again, and his hand remained at the neck of his tunic and the little badge there.

In a moment they were in sight of the back gate to the Palace's kitchens, voices busy within. “I’ll leave you here,” the Seigneur announced, bowing gracefully. Aude found herself suddenly wishing that the road were longer. He hadn’t spoken again since stopping at that house, and the silence felt...burdensome to her.

“One question more, my lord!” He turned back to her, confused and angry. “Were you following me?”

He smiled, sighed. *He thought I was going to ask about the wool merchant.* “No, Lady Aude, I was not. I was in the Armenian Quarter looking for books.” She gaped at him - was he truly serious? She’d thought his comments in the King’s rooms to be a jape, meant to prod her pride. But there was truth in his eyes - and was that sadness, too? “My father pulled me away from my studies in Paris to send me here,” he added, in answer to her unasked question. “He may speak well about men of learning, but he’d rather they weren’t his sons. To his great despair I’ve proved a better scholar than a knight. I was hoping to continue my reading while I’m away. A sentiment I’m sure you’ll understand.”

She nodded. “I...know something about demanding fathers, too.” It had been three years since she’d seen hers, standing on the front step of their house with her mother and brothers. Was his hair graying? Had the De Lusignans given him the preferment he’d been promised for sending her to the ends of the earth to serve Princess Sybilla? She’d never once received a letter from them.

And she knew what it was like to keep a secret you were afraid of, and Mathieu Saint-Clair, it seemed, had plenty. “Would you like...to come with me?” She wasn’t sure why she was offering this, perhaps as repayment for the kindness of his rescue earlier. He’d as good as kept his secrets, answering her question - but he’d shared one, too, though he’d not meant to do it, the house in the Christian Quarter with the sign of the wool-sack at the door, and the business with his father and his books. The sadness in his eyes as he’d looked at the empty house had been no lie, and she did not want him to be alone with it. “The Princess loves hearing news from France. And...you’ll need her ear, if you want anything from the King.”

Saint-Clair looked impressed. “You’d do that for a liar you don’t like?” he asked, a smile playing at his mouth.

Aude swallowed, sure that she’d find reason to regret this when her reckoning came. “You were kind to my lord, when you were playing chess with him. And you have been kind today to me.” *That, at least, is debt enough for what I offer.*

Mathieu Saint-Clair nodded, and let her lead the way upstairs. *Who knows,* Aude thought to herself, *perhaps Sybilla can make him give up his secrets better than I.*

Chapter End Notes

There are several principle gates leading in and out of Jerusalem; the Zion gate lies to the West and sits between the Christian Quarter and the Armenian Quarter.

Though there are plenty of convents, monasteries, and abbeys in Jerusalem, to the best of my knowledge there is not one dedicated to Saint Lucy, a 4th century woman who
was martyred after refusing to renounce her faith and having her eyes gouged out. (She is traditionally depicted, as here, with the palm, for martyrdom, and the plate of eyes - though hers are still usually in her head.) She is the patron saint of diseases of the eye, glass-workers, and - perhaps surprisingly - writers, which makes her an ideal saint for Aude to support.

England was famous for its wool in the 12th century. Since literacy was not widespread at this point, it was more common to hang a pictorial sign outside your house rather than give it a number. (We still see evidence of this today in the naming of pubs - the Crown and Anchor, the Saracen's Head.) Having made your money in such a trade, it was not uncommon, if you were ennobled, to add a blazon to your coat of arms indicating the source of your family's wealth.

Speaking of blazons and heraldry, the title of this chapter is a fabrication. I don't think Harkness ever gives us the colors in which Matthew's coat of arms should traditionally be depicted, though she does say his 'colors' are black and white, or, to use their heraldic names, sable and argent. I liked the imagery of blue too much not to use it.

One final fun note: While we don't know much about her, historians do think that Castelloza, the trobaritz who wrote this chapter's poem, was from the Auvergne. Perhaps she wrote it after running afoul of one of the De Clermonts?
A Charge, Argent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rosin, digatz m'ades de cors  
Cals fetz meills, car etz conoiisssens:  
Una domna coind’ e valens  
Que ieu sai, a dos amadors,  
E vol qu’uesquescs jur e pliva  
Enans que ls vuoll’ ab si colgar  
Que plus mas tener e baiser  
No.lh faran; e l’uns s’abriva  
El faig, que sagramen no.lh te,  
L’autres no.l ausa far per re.

Rosin, tell me from the heart  
Which one did best, for you’re an expert:  
I know a lady who’s both charming  
And distinguished, who has two lovers.  
And she wants each of them to swear  
And pledge, before she’ll let him near  
That he’s not planning to do more  
Than hug or kiss her; one immediately  
Does it, for oaths are meaningless to him;  
The other doesn’t dare.

-Anonymous Lady, 12th century, translated by Meg Bogin


Sybilla was laughing.

Unlike her brother, there was nothing wrong or untoward about the Princess of Jerusalem’s laughter. Like all women of her class, she had been trained from birth to be an ornament of state - witty, amusing, beautiful, and perfectly capable of making a man feel as though he were the center of the world. And like all princesses, when she did not get what she wanted, she found ways to take it for herself. When politics decreed that she marry, she had cozened with her mother so that her husband was at least good to look at, and then fell in love with him despite herself. And when he died, and politics declared that she must marry again, and that her second husband be half as amenable as the first, Sybilla found ways to find her pleasures elsewhere. Her first husband William had given her the son the Crown demanded, but for her second, Guy, she had produced girl-children only, one tiny dagger-thrust against his formidable pride. He might have married a
princess, but his children would never rule.

And so Sybilla laughed.

It perhaps went without saying that theirs was an unhappy marriage, but the Princess, at least, was discreet about her paramours, rarely meeting with them in the palace unless there were some number of her ladies present. The same could not always be said for Guy, who was also less...discriminating in his tastes.

They could hear her, even out in the corridor, an undercurrent of talking voices and the soft plucking of a lute and Sybilla’s laughter in the midst of it. Aude paused at the door, trying to think of some advice, some quick lesson she could imprint upon Saint-Clair before he went inside. “The Princess jokes that she is unpredictable,” she said, looking up at the knight, “but that’s not always so - she likes a...a pretty face, and she likes to get her way. Let her have it.” I could tell you more, she thought silently, pushing open the door, but that's at least enough to keep you safe.

Neither the music nor the laughter stopped as they came in, but that was hardly surprising - unlike her brother’s rooms, which were a place of quiet study, Sybilla’s apartments were full of light, and color, and women, too, the daughters and sisters and wives of the great men of the kingdom, vying for her attention in the hope of earning preference their husbands and brothers could not get from the sovereign. Aude did not, as a general rule, spend much time here - the ladies bored her, their view of the world often depressingly small, pieces on a chess board content to be moved by others, and not be the one doing the moving.

But not Sybilla. For all the trouble it gave her, Sybilla moved herself.

“We missed you this morning, Lady Aude; I was telling a guest about your poetry and you were not here to oblige us.” The Princess gestured them to her seat amidst the ladies, collecting her purple robe around her as she stood up, every inch a queen in state receiving tribute. “We sent to my brother’s rooms, but I see perhaps you had better business elsewhere.” She gave a frank glance over Saint-Clair’s long frame, clearly liking what she saw, her eyes demanding a further introduction.

The poet tried not to look discomfited by the suggestive smile on her mistress’ face. (She’d readily admit that Saint-Clair was rather nice to look at - but Sybilla hadn’t just stood in a crowded street an hour since and listened to him snarl.) “Princess Sybilla, this is Seigneur Mathieu Saint-Clair. He and hi-

But the Princess’ eyes lit up before Aude could finish. “So this is the Saint-Clair brother about whom I’ve heard so much! Your brother Baldwin has been telling us about your time in Paris.” Sybilla made a gesture towards the man sitting with the ladies on the other side of the room, who stood up at the sound of his name and made his way towards them. What - was Mathieu’s brother here? She’d heard the man spoken of several times in passing since Mathieu had arrived in Baldwin’s rooms to play chess, but he always seemed to be elsewhere - elsewhere, apparently, being here in Sybilla’s solar. Aude felt cold again, suddenly in mind of a fox amongst the hens. Am I going to regret this?

No, not a fox, though his coloring suggested it. As he came to stand by his brother, Aude decided if Mathieu Saint-Clair was a hawk, then Baldwin Saint-Clair was most certainly a wolf. Broader-shouldered and self-assured, he had a kind of rugged handsomeness to his face that reminded Aude of a Roman bust she’d seen once at Raymond's house near Galilee, bearded, stern and foreboding, a face that promised dark consequences if you dared to disobey it. It didn't take much imagination to understand him - if Baldwin's first impression of Aude was as Raymond's mistress, it wasn't hard to guess where his mind went upon meeting a woman. Aude felt like shivering. Baldwin looked like
the kind of man who - to borrow a coarse expression that Sybilla sometimes used for Guy - enjoyed eating his meat raw.

Not, of course, that Sybilla looked like she minded that prospect just at the moment. She was eyeing the elder Saint-Clair brother as though she were intent on eating him unprepared herself.

*And this is the man they will make an abbot?* It hardly made sense. *That is a weapon to wage war with!*

“Where were you this morning?” The question was directed to Mathieu, asked as one asks a wayward child. Aude was a little stunned, both at his rudeness and the way he’d ignored her. (Obviously his assessment of her quality had finished to poor effect.) “I promised the Princess news from the court in Paris and you were nowhere to be found.”

“I was in the city - looking for books.” Gone was the confident warrior from earlier in the street, and in his place an overgrown boy, called to accounts for skipping lessons. Aude’s heart went out again. *All he wants is to please you, if you’d let him.* It was obvious, seeing them side by side, who was the elder and who the younger - Baldwin ordered, and Mathieu followed. The Saint-Clair brothers were an ill-matched pair - and seeing them together made Aude wonder more about their father, the shadowy patriarch who played a long game of chess, who’d sent both of them here for the gain of his immortal soul. What sort of man was he? More like Baldwin, she thought - a commander and a leader, used to being obeyed. Indeed, the more she learned about the man the more he puzzled her exceedingly. What was so important about this monastery of his that he’d not only send one son to treat with the King, but a second to speak with - nay, to seduce - the King’s sister?

The news of Mathieu’s morning occupation had not gone over well, and he was now trying to redeem himself with whatever news Sybilla wished to hear. Aude had been at court long enough to know where she wasn't wanted, and retreated to one of her usual corners to leave her princess to the attentions of the two men and the other ladies to their needlework.

She had just opened the catch on her writing tablet and was inspecting her notes when there was a patter of small feet and a sudden, warm body at her elbow. "Is it a new story?" the interloper demanded, clearly having forgotten his manners at the breakfast table this morning.

"Well, hello to you too, young Baldwin," Aude said, with just the tinest bit of censure for the heir of Jerusalem and Sybilla's son. "Now is that any way to greet a lady?" He hung his head, knowing it was not. "Can you go out and try again?"

The prince nodded, turned on his heel and took two steps back before turning straight back around, making a very nice bow, and bending his head towards Aude's hand in parody of a kiss. (There were some things that were beyond the pale for an eight year old, and kissing a girl who was not *maman* was one of them.) "My lady Aude."

"My lord Baldwin," Aude said in reply, inclining her head to acknowledgement. "Much better. Yes, it is - and I'd offer to read you some, but it's not finished yet."

"Where did you find it?" Baldwin’s eyes glanced quickly over Aude’s writing tablet, probably half expecting to see pictures along with her notes.

"At Saint Lucy's, at the pilgrim hostel. A nice young man from Brittany told it to me. Do you remember where Brittany is?"

"The north of France," Baldwin parroted. "They have lots of fish there and they speak funny
French. Does it have knights in it?"

Aude could not help but smile - *God bless the predictability of little boys.* "It certainly does - knights and hidden identities and a wise king. I think you'll like it, when it's done. Why don't you keep your knights and soldiers here by me and stage a battle for me?" she offered, glancing over at his mother, still locked in conversation and unlikely to welcome an intrusion by her son. (And, if his curtness with his grown brother was any indication, what the elder Saint-Clair would do to an interfering boy of eight she did not want to see.) "I think your *maman* is busy."

The prince set to work at Aude's feet by immediately tipping out his toy-chest and dragging out every single soldier and piece of siege equipment he owned - a considerable number, given that he was one day to be king and the staging of mock battles on his mother's floors was considered a valuable educational exercise. When she had fewer places to be and her time was much less her own, Aude had learned to tune out the various and assorted noises of the solar, noisy children being one, and continued working out the rhyme for the story she'd heard at Saint Lucy's.

Here in her work she was safe - no soldiers to hound her in the street, no knights where they did not belong, no princes or prelates to balance. Here on paper, she could steer her own vessel to whatever port she wished.

*In Brittany there dwelt a lord;*  
*Wondrous praise of him I've heard -*  
*A handsome knight, an able man,*  
*He was, and acted like, a noble man.*

*His lord the King held him most dear,*  
*And so did neighbors far and near...*

The next time she looked up, satisfied with the introduction and a good portion of the poem's general story, she found that there was no longer one general on the floor at her feet, but two - albeit one who was well past the age to be playing with toy soldiers. Mathieu Saint-Clair, it seemed, had outlived his usefulness in conversation to his brother, and was now instructing the younger Baldwin in the fine art of constructing a castle, showing him, with infinite patience, how his blocks might fit together so that they might lend each other strength and take the wall even higher than had previously been attempted and the knights under siege could attempt a better defense of the donjon.

Aude set her stylus down and watched the lesson with bemusement for a little while before speaking up. "You seem to have an uncommon number of talents, Messire Saint-Clair. Chess, conversation, philosophy, the arts of war - and now a builder, too?* To say nothing of your patience with children, which by itself is impressive.*

"A passing interest." Saint-Clair tried to keep his voice dismissive, but Aude could tell it was more than that behind his poorly hidden smile. This man deeply enjoyed building castles, not just taking them, but that, she was sure, was something to be *indulged*, like his love of books and his philosophy studies. And that only when his father's orders permitted, she was sure. (She was sure, too, that his father had ordered he give up whatever woman had lived at the house of the wool merchant - love another indulgence in which a younger son could not partake.) What kind of man was the patriarch Saint-Clair, that he chipped passions from his sons like a stonemason until all that was left was a block useful to his design? *What is left in you that you alone love, Mathieu Saint-Clair?*

"I pray I never meet your father," she said tartly. "I feel certain I would not like him."
The knight looked up from his place on the floor, a block loose in his hand. "I pray you never have cause to meet him, Lady Aude," Mathieu said, "for I'm certain he would like you." He smiled sadly at her unease. "He appreciates cleverness in women," he explained, moving another block into place in the wall, "when it suits his purposes for them to be clever. He...he is a great man, but sometimes ...he asks too much. It takes being away from him to see clearly just how much."

“Launch that trebuchet!” Young Baldwin demanded the return of the knight’s attention, and Mathieu returned his gaze to the toy soldiers and, fondly, to the boy.

What have you deemed too much, I wonder? Aude looked at the siege at her feet, watching little Baldwin hunt for another piece, and nudged one near her foot to put it within his reach, her gaze rising across the room to Sybilla and Baldwin Saint-Clair, too closely entangled to be merely trading gossip from Paris. To give up your Englishwoman? To leave your studies and your home? To come all this way to a foreign land and pay homage to a king? What else has your father asked that you’ve found difficult to give?

The more she learned the more it made her wonder. What was she missing here? A man in France has two fine strong sons whom he sends to find land for a monastery. It must be in Jerusalem, and not in France, because prayer is better here, so he is willing to risk the loss of both. They are given the same task, but go about it in different ways. If the younger fails to win the King’s favor by reason, then the elder wins the Princess’s favor by courtesy and charm and...other things, if she allows. The state of Sybilla’s marriage was well-known in Jerusalem, but it was too well-planned, too meticulous. All this for a house of prayer!

Aude tapped her writing tablet and considered the story there, the lord with his hidden identity and his perfect service to the king, given so no one would ask his true purpose at court. Perhaps...perhaps the monastery is but an excuse, and that is the story they’ve told to make it easy to get where they need to go. It’s a foothold into power.

Yes, it would be easy, wouldn’t it, to tell the King a story over chess and the Princess another in the quiet of a lover’s tryst. The elder son will lead it, but he’s no monk for prayer and fasting - he’ll argue God’s truth at the point of a sword. The Saint-Clairs don’t mean for it to truly be a pilgrim hospital at all, and are hoping for a house more along the lines of the Templars. The King wants stability for the pilgrims and the helpless, a legacy for when he’s gone, but Sybilla wants strength to protect her son's rule, which will be here sooner than she wants, and she wants allies to do it. And once they’d helped put Young Baldwin on the throne, how easy would it be to put a knife in Guy’s ribs and wed the princess?

Her hand tightened around her stylus. Yes, that story fit far better than the one that they’d been telling. And of course she’d no proof of it. She was powerless here - one more useless pawn on a larger board, waiting for someone else to move.

And none of this went any distance in explaining the questions she'd been turning over in her head since they'd arrived, what had happened in Jerusalem the last time he was here and what significance the wool merchant had played in it, and why Mathieu Saint-Clair seemed sad to do his father’s bidding.

Then I’ll do what little doves do best, she said. I’ll sit in my tree and watch - and when I’m done watching, I’ll sing the truth for all to hear.
Argent is the traditional name for the tincture silver in heraldry, from the Latin argentum.

In case you are having a hard time keeping track of all the Baldwins in this story, a scorecard:

-King Baldwin IV - Leper, King of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem, soon to be succeeded by his nephew
-Young Baldwin, or Baldwin V, the son of Sybilla of Jerusalem and William of Montferrat. Both uncle and nephew are being visited at the moment by
-Baldwin Saint-Clair, better known to readers as Baldwin Montclair or Baldwin de Clermont, the third of Phillipe de Clermont’s vampire sons. Could I have picked one of his other names for this story for narrative clarity? Yes. Do I kind of like having three characters running around with the same name? Also yes.

One of the things I really wish the series explored more is the relationship between (vampire) Baldwin and Matthew - they're half-brothers, and from the little we see in the show, Baldwin finds his younger brother really annoying, which is kind of the vibe I was going for in this chapter. In the books, Harkness describes Baldwin as being much like his father, Phillipe, fond of wine, women, and war, and I've tried to convey that here, too. The bust that Aude references is inspired by a piece at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accession 13.227.1.

Throughout the series, we're given a lot of references to Matthew's ease with children and his strong desire to be a father, and I thought the image of this tall, usually serious knight sitting on the floor building castles with blocks too good to pass up.
The Crescent

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ailas, com mor - Quez as, amis -

Eu sui trais -
Per cal razo -
Car anc jorn mis m'ententio
En leis que.m fetz lo bel parven. -
Et as per so to cor dolen -
Si ai. -
As enaissi to cor en lai -
Oc eu, plus fort. -
Est donc aissi pres de la mort -
Oc eu, plus fort que no.us sai dir. -
Per que.t laissas aissi morir -

Ah, I’m dying! Why, my friend?
I’ve been betrayed!
And how, pray tell?
Because I put my faith in one who seemed to welcome me.
Is that why your heart is broken?
Precisely.
And is your heart there with her?
Indeed it is.
So this is why you’re near death?
Yes, more than you’ll ever know.
But why did you let this happen?

-Giraut de Bornelh, translated by Anthony Bonner

Crescent. One who has been honored by the sovereign; hope of greater glory. A revelation or revealment.

Overnight, the Princess found herself in possession of a perfect servant.

Was that a rip in Messire Saint Clair’s surcoat? Aude would see to it that it was mended. The wine in their apartments was not to their taste? Aude would go to the market and make an appointment with the merchant to see it was remedied. A clerk was needed to go take measurements of the site they were considering for the monastery? Aude would secure one and see him safely on his way.

Any service she could render was as good as done, and all the while Aude listened - it was hard to
keep the Saint-Clair apartments in wine, the both of them drank so much, though it never seemed to show, and Messire Mathieu could be careless with his clothes and his penknife, they were forever finding bloodstains on his cuffs, and it was a miracle the two men hadn’t killed each other at their sword practice, they were always getting cuts and bruises and wasn’t theirs a miraculous family who never needed an apothecary for their wounds?

What was more curious, perhaps, was that as she became as indispensable to Baldwin Saint-Clair as he would let her be, his brother stood by, knowing full well what she was, the Little Dove who watches the hawks, and, let her do it without a word to his brother.

Of course, some of her helpfulness was to his benefit as well - for how else would he have gained a commission from the king to study the city wall, which left him as many hours as he pleased to sketch stonework and study the old city? Or to begin a tour of the city’s monasteries and their libraries to find books he wished copied?

Or to simply run away from all of it and find time for silence?

Today, for instance, they were running away. “Have we got time?” Mathieu asked, dismounting from his horse and helping Aude do the same, his squire Alain standing by to hold the the reins and keep the horses still. “My brother -”

“What your brother doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Aude said with a conspiratorial smile. Making the younger Saint-Clair brother satisfy his indulgences was becoming one of her great joys in life - one more way to make his unfriendly elder brother scowl. “We’ll join them in plenty of time for their hunt.” They were expected with Sybilla and the others on a hawking party, an entertainment the Princess had arranged when Baldwin had made some mention of missing such things at home. But Aude was going to make sure Mathieu had some fun of his own before they spent all afternoon coursing hawks.

She still knew so little about him, but what she did gave her a better idea now of why he and the King had gotten along so well, during that first meeting - both of them men held prisoner by the circumstances of their birth and lineage, trapped in roles they had never wanted to play, Mathieu the dutiful soldier-son who longed for peace, the King the infirm, impotent monarch who had his peace but wished for glory. She would not yet call him a friend - the word presumed too much - but an ally, perhaps, to both their benefits. She allowed him a measure of freedom he would not have found otherwise, and his presence had provided a temporary stay in amorous interest from other members of the Haut Cour - an occupational hazard to being part of Sybilla’s circle and writing love poems. And when we keep our friends close, we keep our enemies even closer.

“Today I want to share somewhere special - somewhere that has brought me much peace.” She touched Saint Lucy’s feet and knocked on the door, waiting for an answer while he lingered behind her, a calm, cool presence. A small window opened in the door, and a crinkled, suspicious face peered out at them. “Hello, Sister Jutta.”

“Oh, Lady Aude!” The little window closed, and they could hear the sounds of a door being unbarrred before it swung inward, the doorkeep in her dark robe and wimple welcoming them in, kissing Aude as thought she were a favorite niece coming to visit. “We were so distressed to hear about what happened the other day - and on our very doorstep! It's sad days indeed when there's so much unrest in the streets that you've need to bring a knight with you to guard the way.”

"The Marshall's well aware of it," Aude acknowledged. "He's meeting later today with the master of the Hospitallers - they've been reported in some brawls and it's a place to start."

"I hope you're better than the last man the Prince of Tiberias sent," Sister Jutta said testily, eyeing
Mathieu with a gimlet eye as he stooped through the low doorway. "Not an ounce of sense on him, leaving his post in the middle of the day."

Mathieu was trying hard not to let his amusement show, and gave a very serious (and silent) bow instead.

“I think Mother Gerarda’s expecting me,” Aude told the doorkeep, who nodded and bustled off to find the abbess.

“You’re quite important around here,” Saint-Clair observed with a wry grin, when the sister was far enough away not to hear. Was he laughing?

“I have a little income from the king, and I’m generous here with my almsgiving,” Aude explained, looking around the courtyard with a smile. In the middle of the cloister was a little herb garden, in which one of the nuns, an ancient little birdlike figure, was sitting with a book - her spiritual reading for the day, no doubt. “In exchange for my patronage, I’m included in their daily prayers and I have free and full access to their garden, and the hostel that they run here, on the other side of the wall. I can get news from home, and a quiet place to write - and a dozen doting grandmothers besides,” she added with a grin. “It’s not a bad arrangement.”

“I see you’ve brought your man-at-arms with you so he can’t wander.” A strong voice was speaking from the other side of the courtyard. Jutta was coming back, hiding in the wake of a much taller woman whose impressive bejeweled cross marked her out as a woman in charge.

Aude tried hard not to smile, suddenly remembering that she hadn't told the abbess that Mathieu had been the one to rescue her from that unfortunate episode. "This is the Seigneur Saint-Clair, Mother,” she said, letting Mathieu bow. “He's the one I've asked you to copy that book for. Messire, this is Mother Gerarda, the abbess here.”

The Abbess’s expression moved to confusion - and after all she'd told Gerarda on her last visit about her annoyances and suspicions with Saint-Clair, Aude was sure she richly deserved it. She hadn’t taken time to fill the abbess in on the smaller details of their newfound truce. "Interested in medicine now, are you?"

"It's for my brother's monastery," Mathieu said with a short bow. The abbess nodded, glancing between the two of them with a skeptical glance.

"Saint-Clair was studying philosophy in Paris before he took the cross, Mother," Aude supplied, trying to look as sincere as she could. I’d tell you later, but I’m afraid I haven’t time now. "I thought he might enjoy seeing your scriptorium, and the progress you're making. He has a great love for books. I may not know much about him, but that I know to be true."

The Abbess studied her a moment longer, and, convinced that Aude wasn't being forced into this meeting against her will, lead the two of them deeper into the cloister, away from the sounds of the street towards the library and the scriptorium, pushing open a heavy door so the smell of parchment and ink could fill the air, the whole room silent save for the scratching of quills on paper. She turned back to them, a finger held over her lips as a reminder of the silence, and let them in.

As much as Aude loved the chapel, this was as much a holy place to her as the Sepulcre or the Garden at Gethsemane. One wall held the monastery's much-prized books, while around the room, several nuns went about the business of making more, smoothing pages and mixing inks, consulting pages and reading silently aloud as they painstakingly transferred words from page to lips and back to page again. The air fairly hummed with the promise of knowledge, redolent of the
beeswax candles that burned at each desk. A few of the nuns looked up at the noise from the door, one or two smiling as they saw Aude and making some small gesture of acknowledgement before returning to their work. Mother Gerarda lead them carefully through the room before coming to a stop next to one desk, laying her fingers on the edge of the page so as not to startle the copyist and make her blot her page. The sister looked up, glancing at her superior and then at the visitors, a little surprised to see a man in the scriptorium.

Gerarda made a gesture to the page she was working on, and the nun moved her rule and quill away so that Aude and Mathieu could see the page clearly, the little Latin letters marching neatly across the page. Aude watched Mathieu's eyes glance over the text, his own lips moving silently to pronounce the words, mouth moving quietly into a smile. He glanced up, nodded and smiled, and the three of them moved off to leave her, and the rest of the Scriptorium, to their work.

“It’s a work from the Palatinate, near the Rhine,” Gerarda said, once they were outside and the door was shut. “We were lucky to get a copy. The abbess of a monastery there wrote a great deal about the nature of God, and man, and the healing arts. She had visions of heaven, which she drew for some of her books. Hawise is trying to copy some of them for you - they have great spiritual power to them.”

“That was written by a woman?”

“You said you wanted every kind of book for your library, Messire Saint-Clair,” Aude said with a teasing smile. “If my poems are to be on your shelves, they will want female company other than the lives of the saints. And there is plenty of spiritual merit in those pages, as well.”

“On the subject of spiritual merits - will you stay for prayers?” Mother Gerarda asked, walking the two of them back through the cloister. “We’d be happy to have you join us for the midday meal, if you’ve a mind to stay for a while in the chapel - it wouldn’t be much, but -”

“Our time is not our own today, Mother - Sybilla’s organized a hawking party and we’re expected to join them soon. I only wanted to show him the book.”

Gerarda nodded, holding out her arms so that she and Aude could exchange the kiss of peace. “Well, then, another time, perhaps. I’m glad to have -”

“Gabriel?”

The three turned, confused at being interrupted. The cry, so plaintive and so pained, had come from the little elderly nun who’d been sitting in the garden, now standing, unsteady on her feet, the book she’d been reading forgotten at her feet. “Gabriel, is that you?”

Aude looked around in the corridor, but there was no one else there except them. Is she having a vision? But she was staring right at them - at Mathieu. Does she think he’s the Angel, come to pronounce some judgement? Mother Gerarda didn’t seem to know what to do. “Sister Richardis, are you quite well?” She asked, watching carefully.

But Richardis had not heard. “Where have you been, Gabriel? Where is my sister? Have you come for me, now, too? Gabriel, will you not speak to me?”

The noise had brought more nuns, from dormitory and hostel and chapel, and they clustered around Sister Richardis like a flock of compassionate birds, robes and veils flapping as they trying to soothe her, calm her, assure her that there was no angel lurking in the shadows, while Mother Gerarda hurried her two guests away, out of Richardis’ sight and, hopefully, out of her mind.
They stopped in the shadow of the door, Jutta scrambling with her keys to let them back out into the world. “I’m so sorry, Messire - she’s old, and sometimes her mind plays tricks on her. I’m sure you’ll take the compliment that she thought you the messenger of our Lord.”

“Of course, Mother,” Mathieu said, nodding, though his own discomfort was taking a good deal of effort to hide. “I pray the disturbance passes.”

Gerarda smiled. “We would be glad of your prayers, but please don’t trouble yourself further. Put it out of your mind and enjoy your hunt - we’ll see to it she’s taken care of.”

It was not an auspicious way to end a visit; there was still a lingering sense of unease as they stepped out into the street, and Aude caught the Seigneur looking back at the now-closed door, anxiously tugging on his gloves.

“The nun...who is she?”

He is truly shaken, Aude thought to herself. “Sister Richardis? She’s been here forever; Mother Gerarda thinks she’s nearly eighty. I think I remember her saying she joined the convent after her husband died. She can hardly walk - but she hears more than she lets on, and she’ll let you know she remembers meeting the King when she first came from France. It’s strange - up until today I would have said she has one of the sharpest minds in the cloister.” Aude glanced back at the door. “But age must catch us all sooner or later.”

Mathieu nodded, mounting his horse and trying to put the business behind him. But his face was pale, and his hand was on his amulet again - a sign that he was fretting over something, as he’d been at the house of the wool merchant.

It’s good we’re going, then. A ride outside the city walls will be just the thing to clear his head.

If there was an opposite to the quiet of the cloister, this was it - a dizzying array of people had been up since dawn making preparations for the hunt, pitching tents and lighting fires and transporting the dogs and hawks that would be used for the day's sport - and the enormous amount of food that would be consumed that day, some prepared in the palace's kitchens and some to be cooked at the hunting camp. It was like assembling a small army, truly - a place to water the horses, and grooms to tend them, the dogs and their kennelkeepers, the hawks and their falconers, the huntsmen and his assistants, the beaters and bowmen and spearcarriers, to say nothing of the cooks and servers and, of course, after all that, the nobles themselves, currently gathered in a tight, colorful knot sipping sharbat and exchanging pleasantries amongst themselves like a covey of festive, gaily attired birds.

"You're late." His elder brother greeted them with cup already in hand, grabbing for Mathieu’s reins so he could dismount, a squire following to perform the same service for Aude.

"Lady Aude had business in the city, and we were detained. Where's yours, brother?"

Baldwin's lip curled. "With her husband. The man's like a dog with a bone." Aude would have laughed at the disdain in Baldwin's voice if she didn't share his views on the man - and, true enough, Guy de Lusignan was lingering possessively near his wife, his usual scowl firmly in place, so out of touch with his wife's welcoming smile as she greeted her guests. Still, it took more effort than she could manage to keep from smiling - something Baldwin noticed immediately. "Are you laughing at me, Lady Aude?"

"Not at you, my lord - merely agreeing with you. You should take it as a compliment," she added lightly, taking a glass of sharbat from a passing servant and nodding in thanks. "Guy's only at his wife's side because he sees you as a threat - which must mean she likes you enormously. Ordinarily
he'd be behind a tent swiving some serving maid. He wants you where he can see you."

Was that a grin on Baldwin Saint-Clair’s face? If it was, she’d make a note never to make him smile again - the effect was terrifying - rather like staring down a hungry dog, a barely yoked hunger in his eyes. "Are you always this observant, Lady Aude?"

*Oh, are you just catching on to that?* "I'm of little enough importance to the court, my lord. It gives me something to do. And write about, should the fancy take me."

"Are lords tupping serving wenches the usual subject of your discourse? I should pay more attention, then." His leer was unmistakable. *I should have known better than to talk of sex with him.*

Aude wasn't given a chance to respond, for Sybilla had turned her attention to the three of them, setting aside her sharbat cup to come and bid them welcome. Guy, behind her, was still scowling, his hand possessive on the hilt of his sword. (Did she imagine it, or was Mathieu Saint-Clair close on her heels again?)

“Well, my lord Baldwin, what is your pleasure today?” Sybilla asked her guests. “There are antelope to the north of the park, birds to the east, or, my huntsman tells me, a boar that needs taking in the wood just beyond the ridge there.”

Baldwin glanced around, taking the lie of the land with an experienced eye. "We are too large a party for boar, I think, Princess, though that would be the best sport. Let us have hawks and birds, so the ladies may join us. It is gentler." He gave a small bow in Aude’s direction, leaving her to silently wonder what part of having a bird tear another out of the air was gentle.

Sybilla smiled and clapped her hands, dismissing the waiting crowd to their horses and the huntsman and his men to the front of the party so that they might lead them to the birds. It didn't surprise her at all that Baldwin had wished for boar - of the three choices, it was by far the bloodiest and most violent - and the one that required the most skill. *Of course he’d want to impress her and show up Guy - that’s hardly news.*

"I am surprised to hear your huntsman give us the choice of boar - did not your grandfather King Fulke die on a boar hunt?” The elder Saint-Clair asked.

"His horse turned a leg, and threw him," Guy said dismissively from the other side, still glowering at Baldwin. "But that was at Acre, where the ground is worse. He was an old man, besides - we have no such problems here. Perhaps another day, when my lord is feeling up to it, he and I may hunt one. That is a sport for kings."

The insinuation in his words needed no interpretation - *Let us stand and compare the length of our spears and see which one splits the apple better.* Aude glanced back in her saddle at Mathieu and found the knight smiling to himself. *Oh, leave them be; let’s watch and see which one goes for a throat first,* his smile seemed to say.

"My grandfather used to tell a story his grandfather told him, of hunting with the first King Baldwin in these woods,” Baldwin Saint-Clair was saying. “The King had a great golden eagle, and it was like a puppy for him. Do you not remember, Matthew?”

“Perfectly.”

The head huntsman nodded his head, keeping his place at the Princess' bridle. "Your grandfather’s memory was good. King Baldwin's favorite bird was an eagle - it's well reported in his hunting
books. A very noble bird, bought for him in Kiev. One of his gamekeepers wrote that it was a massive thing, and only the King could handle it well. They're quite heavy, as birds go - and difficult to train. We keep none that large now."

The party quieted as they reached the place where they were to hunt, the falconers moving among the guests distributing gloves and leather pouches filled with meat to tempt the birds back to their masters, taking the birds from their boxes to acclimate them to the air. The whole panoply of the thing was fascinating to Aude, the wild embroidery of the gloves and the elaborate braided jesses, the little sparrowhawks and merlins, and the larger falcons all in their hoods, blindly searching for their next bit of prey. Sybilla's bird was a slim saker, well-trained to her hand and pleasant-natured, a strong contrast to Guy's gyrfalcon, who, like his owner, did not seem pleased to be out of his crate and kept ruffling his wings in agitation, wings beating more than once against the knight's face.

"Why will he not take a different bird?" Mathieu asked, watching Guy struggle with the agitated falcon.

"Because a gyrfalcon is the bird of kings," Aude said with a suppressed smile. "Guy may not be a king - but he takes every opportunity to remind everyone he should be. And he'll take the biggest bird just to show your brother that he can." True enough - Baldwin's saker, a sibling of Sybilla's bird and a good two fingers shorter than Guy's gyrfalcon, was sitting tamely on his wrist eating peaceably, man and bird sharing some understanding of the world the others could not.

One of the assistant falconers came to them, offering the bird on his wrist and a pouch of meat from his other hand. Mathieu shook his head, gesturing the man on, his smile pinched, as if he were in pain. "Are you not going to join them?" Aude asked.

"My heart's not in the mood for sport today," the knight said shortly, his horse taking a few dancing steps beneath him, sensing its master's unease. Was it something about the hawks that unsettled him, or was that business with the monastery still on his mind? "I could ask the same of you," he countered, smiling. "Will the Little Dove not hunt with the rest?"

_A tired jape, that one._ "The others will make their jests; I've no skill for this kind of hunting. Give me a story to find or a lie to uncover, and I'll harry that as well as any hawk. But do not ask me to send another beast to kill for me for sport."

He shrugged, and let her be, the two of them watching the others in silence. There was a certain kind of beauty in it - the way the hawk swept up into the sky, and the line of its wing as it came back to earth, a movement that had its own poetry. It was a perfect day for it, the sky clear and the sun bright, all the better to watch the birds take their flights and return with their prey, dropping the little broken bodies at their feet. (There would be, Aude observed, plenty of rock dove for dinner tonight.) Sybilla looked resplendent in orange and crimson, Baldwin beside her in his family's blue and silver. Watching them course their birds was a thing of beauty all its own, and it didn't surprise Aude that even three generations after Baldwin's family would still have told a story about watching a king hunt with an eagle. It would have been a sight to see, here in the desert with only the wind for company.

Aude moved forward after the first few passes, letting her horse stand nearer Sybilla's to watch. A sharp whistle from its keeper brought Sybilla's saker back to its mistress's glove, dropping its prey at her feet with bloody talons. Sybilla cooed in admiration at the bird as it began eating the proffered gobbet of meat on her glove, glancing up from his meal every few moments with a watchful amber eye, afraid some other bird might take its prize. _Much like Saint-Clair_, Aude thought to herself, looking over at the knight.
But far from looking entertained, Mathieu Saint-Clair now looked...ill. His skin was pale, eyes dark, and like the hawk, his gaze was darting to and fro amidst the party, mouth tense and nostrils wide, looking for an opportunity - to leave, perhaps?

"Messire Saint-Clair, are you well?" The sound of her voice brought his gaze to her as surely as the whistle had the hawk to the glove, and Aude at once regretted it, for now those eyes were fixed on her - and she did not like what was in them.

"No, he’s not." His brother intervened almost immediately, releasing his hawk from his hand without a second thought and leaving one of the falconers to go call the bird back as he bodily grabbed for his brother's reins and turned the animal away, before the two of them galloped off, away from the group.

"Perhaps he does not care for the sport," Guy observed sourly, clearly feeling his own leash a little after his competition had left. His attendants laughed, and Sybilla tried not to look too put out.

"See if we may take him some water, Lady Aude," she ordered, gesturing for one of the squires to hand over his leather costrel. “The day is hot and we have taken no rest.” Aude took it and urged her horse off after them, praying that the ground was even and that they hadn't gone far.

If she’d been Sybilla, perhaps, she might have gone faster - but she seldom rode for pleasure, and the ground was rough. It was easier to take it slowly - though the brothers had gone farther than she would have thought necessary, if a man were about to be sick. Finally, she found their horses tethered to an acacia thicket, lathered from their run but none worse for wear. Why dismount here? Of the brothers, however, there was no sign - until she heard raised voices from another part of the thicket. Tethering her horse, she quietly followed the sound, unsure what she would find.

Mathieu Saint-Clair was sitting at the base of a tree, his body closed and compact, trembling as his brother stood over him, watching him closely. Was he sick? Aude couldn't tell - but it sounded as though the two of them were arguing, and from the way things were going, she didn’t much want to get between the two of them.

"You should have eaten something!" Baldwin was saying testily.

"There wasn’t time before the monastery, and I didn't think -"

"Heaven say me from your not monastery, and I didn't think -"

"Heaven say me from your not thinking! You knew there'd be blood about. Now, take this and sit a while, and we'll go back. We'll say something from breakfast disagreed with you, the ladies will fuss and all will be settled."

And Aude watched, bewildered, as the elder brother reached into his pouch and handed Mathieu a piece of the bloody meat they’d been rewarding the birds with, her bewilderment turning to horror as he, as hungrily as the hawks, opened his mouth and ate the whole thing raw, chin running red.

“Did you find them?” Sybilla asked as Aude went thundering past, spurring her horse as quick as it would go. She shouted something about the heat and did not look back again until she was in the stable, and the sight of Mathieu Saint-Clair with bloody lips and hungry eyes was far, far behind.

Chapter End Notes
You have no idea how satisfying that last scene was to write. :D But what is Aude going to DO with all this new information?

The book that Saint Lucy's is copying for Matthew and Baldwin is Hildegarde of Bingen's Physica, which is a huge catalog of plants, substances, and their uses in medicine. It draws heavily from the 'four humors' theory of medicine, and while today some of the cures sound ridiculous (eating ground gold??) some of them have some medical merit, like eating ginger to calm a windy stomach.

Kestrels, Merlins, and Gyrfalcons are all birds assigned to different levels of nobility in Boke of Seynt Albans, a 15th century treatise on how to be a gentleman. The saker hawk mentioned here is a native Middle Eastern bird, from the Arabic saqr, and is frequently cross-bred with other hawk species by modern falconers. While not common, one can hunt with an eagle, though this isn't common in Western falconry and is more commonly found in Mongolia.
The Star

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

_Anc no mori per amor ni per al,
Mais ma vida pot be valer murir
Quan vei la ren qu’eu plus am e dezir
E ren no.m fai mas quan dolor e mal.
Ben me val mort, mais enquier m’es plus grieu,
Qu’en breu serem ja vielh et ilh et ieu:
E s’aissi pert lo mieu e.I sieu joven,
Mal m’es del mieu, mais del sieu per un cen.

I am not dead through love or other ills,
And yet my life is surely like a death
When I see that the creature I most love
And wants brings me only pain and suffering.
Death is evil, but yet worse is the thought
That she and I will soon be old,

And thus will be lost my youth and hers,

Mine regretfully but hers a hundredfold more.

-Peire Vidal, translated by Anthony Bonner


What was it about a room full of people that made a person nervous?

Sybilla had bid her servants lay out dinner in the garden, as a crowning touch to the day’s efforts at the hunt. The effect was almost magical, a verdant grove with torches and lamps that sputtered and smoked in the evening breeze and cast a golden glow over the low couches and tables, the sounds of the evening city drifting in from over the walls. The festive attitude from the hunt seemed to have bubbled over, the laughter of the guests a pleasant accompaniment to the meal before them.
But Aude was not enjoying the aromatic delights of the dinner, or the clever stories the guests were telling - she was standing in the shadow of the garden wall, trying to judge the right moment to make an entrance... if she dared to make it at all.

She couldn't remember feeling this terrified since Sybilla had first asked her to perform one of her poems in public. Ah, but it's not all of the people, is it? It's just two of them.

Baldwin Saint-Clair was as close to Sybilla as propriety would allow, recounting to the others the story of some fight he'd gotten into once in France - an entertaining tale, to judge from the faces of his listeners. (Sybilla was entranced - though whether that was the story or the teller Aude couldn't say from this distance.) His brother, meanwhile, was only half-listening, picking at his food.

How had she not noticed she'd never seen him eat anything before?

_Steady now, Aude._ There was no use worrying over past mistakes - there was nothing she could do to change that. It was her duty now to act.

*But actions have consequences - are you prepared for those? Will Baldwin Saint-Clair like what he hears, or even sit by quietly to hear it? Or will he set his brother to rip out your throat?*

Aude looked at Mathieu Saint-Clair and shivered, remembering the creature she’d seen this afternoon - the blood on his chin, the deep, unfathomable darkness in his eyes, an animal poised to strike. Until this morning if she’d been forced to chose, she would have trusted him, and feared his brother more. Now she was quite sure she should fear both.

“My Lady Aude!” Too late now - she’d been seen. Sybilla had retired the crimson riding costume of earlier for a gown of purple and gold, her heavy rings and loose hair reminiscent of a Roman empress at her feast. “We missed you this afternoon. Hopefully you are now feeling better. We have saved your place.” She indicated the empty couch, the unused cup.

Was that her heart that pounded so? Against her dress her palms were damp and trembling. _Peace, Aude, peace! _”A touch of heatstroke, my lady. I am much better now.”

The answer seemed to please Sybilla. “Sir Baldwin was telling me that after all this time in the city, he still has yet to hear one of your poems. I have promised him we will fix that this evening.”

The knight smiled, raised his cup, his expression one of patient amusement, a man doing something to please someone else. _If my lady demands it,_ his smile said.

Aude tried hard to make her smile as generous as his was false. “I have a new one ready, if my lady desires it now.”

“I do. We are practically finished eating,” Sybilla made a little gesture, and the musicians in the corner ceased their playing - a sudden cue for the other guests to quiet down. _Well, Little Dove, sing for your supper._ Aude positioned herself towards the edge of the circle of couches, surveying the room to make sure all could hear her. The deep breath she took before beginning was almost like a prayer.

“Long ago you heard the tale told--
And it used to happen, in days of old--
Quite a few men became garwolves,
And set up housekeeping in the woods.

_A garwolf is a savage beast,
While the fury's on it, at least:
Eats men, wreaks evil, does no good,
Living and roaming in the deep wood.
For now I'll leave that matter set -

I want to tell you about Bisclavret."

So she started the story, as she'd heard it from the boy from Brittany, a story she hadn’t known she’d needed when she’d first heard it - of the jealous wife who wondered at her husband Bisclavret's disappearances, and how she wheedled with him the terrible secret that when he disappeared he hunted in the woods in the guise of a wolf. How she betrayed him, stealing his clothes so that he was forced to wander the woods, and took one of his knights as a lover. How Bisclavret the wolf went to the king, and guarded him as a dog would, and saved him from many evils, until the wife who had trapped him came to court, and Bisclavret set upon her new husband and murdered him, and the King, in his terror, took a spear and killed him, and he turned back into a man, and the King reflected upon how he had lied as both a man and as a beast and was therefore doubly bound for hell.

Up and down the story went, the wife's betrayal and the lord's secret revealed, and the king's great anger, while Sybilla smiled and the rest of the court whispered among themselves about the morals of obeying one’s lord, and Baldwin Saint-Clair sat on his couch with a dark, grim scowl that got grimmer and darker with each passing word, his brother beside him like a chastised puppy, ashamed to hear the truth.

"A touch different than your usual," Sybilla observed at the end of the poem. "But entertaining, nonetheless. Well,” she asked, turning to her guest. “What did you think?"

Baldwin put on a benevolent smile. "A prodigious talent, indeed. She will have to tell me where she learned that tale." He rose from his couch, taking his winecup with him. "Will you walk with me, Lady?"

Aude inclined her head, her smile fixed. Have I a choice at all? Baldwin offered his arm, pulling her in close once she'd taken it, his hand like a vice around her own. “Brother, come - you liked the poem. I’d have you hear this, too.”

His brother came to their heels as he was bid, Baldwin leading them away from the gossiping guests and into the cool dark of the garden, the air fragrant with jasmine and tuberose and the hundred little sounds of night.

"And where did you find that choice morsel?" His grip tightened, and she nearly cried out in pain, the harm he promised no idle threat. “The truth, now, Lady or I'll break your wing." A garwolf is a savage beast, While the fury's on it, at least...

"A young man of Brittany, at the hospital of Saint Lucy." Nothing is sure but death. “I thought it was merely a pretty story when I heard it, but he swore he knew a man in France who’d lived a hundred years, who hunted like a wolf and ate raw flesh. And now I’ve seen it’s true.” What could he do - rip her apart here in the garden? She could feel Mathieu behind them, hovering behind as they walked, and she spoke over her shoulder to him, wishing his coldness could be as reassuring as it once had been. “At the hunt - you weren’t sick. The blood...it drove you mad. Sister Richardis said that you were Gabriel - but not because she’d confused you with the angel. I went back, this afternoon, and spoke with her; before she’d entered the convent, her family had been wealthy merchants - English merchants, trading in English wool. A nobleman named Gabriel de Clermont was in love with her younger sister Eleanor, and one day, after going to his house, her sister was found dead, with her throat ripped out. It was thought he was responsible, but he was never found.
That was fifty years ago, and she said you hadn’t aged a day. And you-” She turned to look at Baldwin, accusatory. “You said that your great-grandfather told a story about an eagle, but that was you who saw the hunt.” She took a breath, her heart up in her throat, thinking of that first day, and the chess game, and the handsome knight with the cross and the crescent and the star on his coat who’d joked of never dying, who’d asked her Baldwin what he thought of immortality. “And now you want to...to make the King like you. Undying. Immortal.” A garwulf, like Bisclavret, who turns into a wolf and feeds on blood.

"Well, well, my lady Aude - you cunning little bitch." Was that fascination in his voice? Baldwin Saint-Clair’s smile was still murderous. “My brother said that you were clever - I see now he may have underplayed you. Happily, we may remedy that error soon.” He sneered, teeth glinting in the lamplight. “There’s nothing he likes eating more than dove.”

But Mathieu did not look ready to eat anyone or anything - in fact, rather than resolved, he looked afraid. “Brother, please-”

“She’s forced my hand,” Baldwin said strongly, practically dragging Aude with him down the hall, the sleeve of her gown almost tearing in his hand. “Make our excuses to the Princess - say what you like. I’m tired of these games and tired of this city. Let us ask him now and have done with it.”

Aude did not need to ask who him was - their path was clear. They were going to see the King.

It was not a long walk from the gardens to the King’s rooms, but for Aude, every footfall that brought them closer seemed charged with doom. You fool - what did you think would happen? I’m not sure. But not this.

In moments they were at the doorway, Baldwin pounding with the flat of his fist hard enough to shake the door on its hinges. A servant appeared in the crack of the door. “It is late and my lord -”

Baldwin snarled. “Tell him it concerns the Lady Aude, and she’ll see him now or else die for it.” He forced her upright, much as a messenger might display a writ of passage, and it was all she could do not to cry out, her arm twisting painfully in its socket.

The door was hastily pulled back, the servant shoved aside as Baldwin buffeted his way in, still dragging Aude by the arm, the comfortable pretense of a lord escorting a lady now gone. She was his prisoner, here to serve him as a passport, a thing with which to open doors.

A familiar hooded figure looked up from his desk, his quill stilled in his hand. Could he not sleep, to be up at this hour? But there were many things for him to worry over - and Aude did not like to count herself among them, but here they were. His mask, as ever, was inscrutable.

“I pray you put down my poet, Sir Baldwin, she’s very dear to me. I’ll hear you speak.” He waved the servant out.

Baldwin glanced at Aude, sneered again, and bodily pushed her to the floor, a discarded thing for which he now had no use. The rug under her feet was an old one, but it softened the fall, and offered some protection from the stone below. Not trusting herself to stand, she only sat up a little, wondering what Saint-Clair would do.

The knight made himself comfortable in one of the king’s chairs, sprawling over it as though he owned it - another study in opposites, his hulking wolf and the King’s glimmering, hunched owl. “I’m going to tell you a story, my lord, as I hear you’re fond of stories. It begins many years ago, with a great lord who loved his family very much. They were beset on all sides by their enemies,
and he wished for them to have a place of their own where they could live in peace, and comfort, without fear of harm. So he sent his four strong sons on a quest to find a place that they might call home. They journeyed far and wide, across mountains and deserts, until they at last came to the place of their desiring. But it was at war with itself, and so, to protect it, they took a side, and won great victories, so that when the war was over, the men with whom they had fought proclaimed them kings, destined to rule forever in their promised place.

“The eldest son ruled for a while, waiting for his father, but he found he did not like being a king, and so he went away, leaving the crown with his brother. That son was a good ruler, strong and decided, but he was a man of quick temper, who delighted in making battles, and one day his enemies harmed him greatly, and the third son was set to rule in his absence.” Baldwin paused, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand. “I think you know this story, my lord.”

The King nodded - and well he should; Baldwin Saint-Clair had just re-told the story of the founding of Jerusalem, with a little bit of gilding on it. Godfrey had taken the city, and Baldwin had ruled, and Eustace had been named to succeed him, though the task ultimately came to a cousin, another Baldwin who had ruled in Edessa. But who had the fourth brother been?

“During this time the men who had fought with them grew restless, and took bad counsel from their enemies, spreading evil lies about the great lord, and they sought to overthrow the four brothers. So they set up another lord, one whom they loved, in their place, and returned to France and the house of their father.

“The great lord grew unquiet as he watched the kingdom he had so desired crumble again into ruin, and he sent his sons a second time to save it from itself. But the youngest son, who was still a foolish child, lost his way, and killed a woman of that place, and for a second time they were sent away in disgrace and dishonor. More years passed, and the kingdom slid still further into ruin, and weak men were given charge of her, and the great lord thought there might still be a chance to redeem this place for which he had had such dreams. So he sent again his sons, to spy out the land, and see what could be done to shore up the walls. He bid them make friends among the people of the city, and build up arms and armor to make fast their place, and meet with the man who was now king and offer to him their allegiance and their power.

“A hundred years have passed since that story began - and yet it concerns the same four brothers, the same kingdom, the same crown. Do you know it now, my lord?” Baldwin sat forward in his chair, a wolf poised to strike. The young knight’s smile was glittering, his pleasure at the king’s discomfort extreme. And the King was uncomfortable - Aude had watched him sit back in his chair, and take its arm, a small reassurance that he was still on this mortal earth, and not in some same-seeming nightmare.

When he spoke, however, his voice was calm. “What are you?”

Baldwin Saint-Clair sneered, triumphant. “I have been a soldier of the 14th Legion and a sellsword at the gates of Paris, the hand of the king and the hand of God. I have passed through the gates of death and they cannot hold me. I have been Lucius Oppius, and Baldwin FitzPhilip, and Sigeric Blood-hand, and Baldwin of Boulogne, and I have worn the crown that now sits on your head, Baldwin of Jerusalem, and the reason you bear that name is me, and mine.”

As he said this, a carapace seemed to crack away from him, letting forth some inward power, and Aude wimpered, almost blinded by it. No mere knight, this - nor simple garwulf, either. The armor of his years upon him, he could have lead a thousand battles, and won every one, could have broken her as easily as a twig, could have cleaved Guy in two for all his insolences - and here was her king, her Baldwin, vulnerable before him -- because she’d provoked him and brought him here.
Merciful God, what have I done?

But the King’s mask served him well here, and if he trembled, as Aude did, he did not show it. “My father used to take me to your vault, in the Holy Sepulchre, to ask you to pray for us. The monks opened it up - showed me the bones and their crown.”

Saint-Clair laughed. “Oh, there’s a body in it, but not a royal one. A beggar, killed to make up weight.”

The king looked down at his desk, considering this, and then turned his gaze up to Saint-Clair, eyes bright and blue and ready. “Well, Grandsire, what is your will?”

Another barking laugh, dismissive and impatient. “You’re no grandson of mine, boy - and if you were, I’d have struck you and your weakness out of my line long since. But I’m a good vassal, and I do as my Lord and father bids me - and I’m here to offer you a choice. I can strip your infirmities away and make you the envy of the world if you will but take his instruction. Will you join us?”

Would you take it, if I offered it you? A lifetime spent in the turning of the world? A lifetime spent like...them?

“I told your brother when we first met that I’ve no wish to spend eternity as I am. As you may imagine that answer hasn’t changed. How do I know what you say is true?”

Baldwin Saint Clair considered this a moment, and then suddenly, he was up and out of his chair, his dagger open in his hand. He wrenched his sleeve up and the dagger flashed across his wrist, blood welling in the wound. The King turned towards him, following the blade. He held his arm over a half-drunk goblet of wine, the waiting cup catching a droplet - two, three, four - on its surface. Saint-Clair picked it up, swirled it once or twice -and then offered it to the King in cruel parody of the Mass, the gesture in turn both sacred and profane. “Taste and see.”

The King reached up to set aside his mask, turning away from Aude so he might spare her the sight of his damaged face, and, after a pause, drank deeply from the cup. The moment seemed pregnant with possibility. What madness is this? Suddenly his shoulders dropped, curling in agony with a heavy cry, and Aude surged forward on her knees. She did not get far - a pair of hands dropped heavy on her shoulders - Mathieu Saint-Clair, returned from his errand to Sybilla.

"Peace!” he hissed, his voice heavy in her ears, “I promise you it will not harm him.”

She fell back against his legs, listening to the King’s agony as if his pain were her own, her pulse pounding at her ears. What a strange idea you have of harm!

But Mathieu Saint-Clair was right - for the King's shoulders were relaxing back down, sitting up straighter, the back of the head turning to survey the room with newly-wakened eyes.

Then a hand of fine, long-boned fingers rose up to push aside the bandages and probe its lips, its cheeks. Aude thought of Sybilla's hands, and gasped - what madness was this? The King’s fingers were fused and crippled. Baldwin Saint-Clair produced a mirror from a pouch at his belt, presented it to him, the King’s back still turned to Aude and Mathieu. In the mirror, there was a flash of a familiar blue eye in an unfamiliar face, of thick, fair hair and unscarred flesh. The King moved the little slip of silvered glass to and fro to inspect his newly healed skin, the face that should have been.

"Behold, the man.” Jesu, was even his voice changed, too? (But if that blood had cured him of his disease, then his lungs could draw more breath, his lips move cleanly.)
Baldwin Saint-Clair looked like some young pagan god, standing proudly over his new creation. "This is what we can offer you, Baldwin of Jerusalem. A future. We have arms and armies, and the wealth to raise more. The Egyptians are on your southern border, the Syrians on your west, and your own barons plot and intrigue. We can fight them all - build better castles, train better men. Make the Kingdom of Jerusalem the splendor of the world -and you its envied king, untouchable by death." The mirror shifted, and Aude caught another flash of that blue eye. Saint-Clair's smile became his now-familiar leer, reading the King's face truer than she could.

"Kings must pass and change in the lifetime of mortal men." The eye in the mirror remained constant. "A body in a crypt proclaims it so."

"My father has many sons and grandsons; you would be but one. When a generation has passed some other would come and you would be free to leave and travel the world at your will. Venice, London, Paris, Constantinople, Cathay and the East."

"You seem to have forgotten the throne already has an heir. Where does my nephew fit in this?"

Baldwin laughed. "The boy's sick - the smell of it hangs on him like smoke. A year or three, it matters not - he won't live long. There's many things I'll do for my father, but turning a child isn't one. So, boy, it's really a question of what you're prepared to do. Take the cup I offer, and rise to the heights your forebearers, or die in infamy as the Leper King, the last diseased branch of a dying tree."

If news of his nephew's death troubled him, the King did not give time to it. He was still quietly thinking. His family or his kingdom - which mattered more to him? "And how would you explain such a thing, when so many others have failed?"

"The springs at Bethany have healing powers - and a healed king would be quick to build a great house there, in thanks for his miracle."

"And endow a monastery of knights dedicated to Lazarus, who rose from the grave, which you yourself would quietly lead as Grand Master - an unchanging steward." Baldwin observed quietly. "I see now your design, Messire. A clever trick - well done, indeed."

"You would have a lifetime to see the world and all its wonders," the elder Saint-Clair repeated, trying to tip the King's hand.

Here was the temptation of men - the world he had always longed for just within his grasp. Health and vigor, a chance to be the king he never could have been otherwise, all thing things his leprosy had denied him, a leader of armies and of men, the respect of his soldiers and his peers, the vaunted Peacebringer about whom Aude had written. The mirror quivered, the blue eye weighing and measuring. "You could sample every pleasure, every ounce of joy," Baldwin said. (The emphasis he placed on 'pleasure', looking all the while at Aude, made her shiver.) "Ages will come and go, but you would be eternal."

"But not free of pain." Mathieu spoke up forcefully. Aude looked up at him in wonder. He'd seen where the king's eye rested. His brother hissed in anger, but Mathieu Saint-Clair would not be stopped. "The world will age, but you will not. You'll see the people you love pass away, the things you build crumble and decay. You will leave no trace upon the earth, no children to mark your passing, no loved one left to know your name. It would be an eternity of lonely power."

The mirror trembled. "I...could take no one with me?"

A little sneer from Baldwin. "Allowances could be made."
Now it was Mathieu’s turn to hiss. “You’d sentence the woman you love to such a life?”

The eye in the mirror rested again on Aude, fixed on her through the mirror, and finally, it came to her, a bolt of lightning from a blue eye. *Good God, he means me.* The King, love her? It was unthinkable! That she was his servant, yes, his friend, perhaps, but that he...loved her?

“I lost one such, before they turned me; I lost another after.” Mathieu Saint-Clair’s voice was raw and real. “And that pain no power on earth can take away or heal - not even time.” Still at his feet, Aude looked up in desperate fascination, watching his face for guile - but there was none there - only pain.

The mirror dropped, the King’s head still resolutely turned away from her.

“Leave us, Aude. My ...grandsire and I should speak alone.”

A hand reached out to help her up, but Aude was resolved - she wouldn’t let that creature touch her. She dragged herself upright, making as much of a curtsey as she could manage without collapsing again, and removed herself to the hallway. Mathieu followed behind, closing the door behind them as they went.

And then there was silence. Aude had hoped that she could still hear, but it was little use - the palace had been well-built against spies and intruders. She’d get nothing of their deliberations - or of her king’s cries for help.

"He won't hurt him."

He had taken a place a good distance away from her, standing apart in the way of a slighted friend, timorously trying to return to one’s good graces. But it was hard for her to even look at him. Some of the glimmer of his brother’s power seemed to hang around his shoulders, the promise of that same darkness she’d seen on him in the thicket, the amber of the eagle’s eye, ready to strike.

"Turning is an...intimate act, done only by consent. If he says no, my brother will honor that. To do otherwise would be ...a sacrilege." *Is that supposed to comfort me? Because it gives scant hope. Your brother is a ravenous wolf; he’ll get what he wants and disregard all else. “Nor will I hurt you.”* His face was grave. “I’m not the animal my brother says I am.”

“Tell me a truth, then.” She could scarce believe the sound of her own voice. *I’ve heard too many fantastic things today to count them all. Why should I believe a beast who lies so easily and so well? What could you say that I might possibly believe?*

Mathieu Saint-Clair dropped his eyes and tried to think. *You can’t,* she thought triumphantly. *You haven’t any. You’re just the same as him - a liar and a braggart and a thief."

“I killed her.”

...What?

“Eleanor - the daughter of the wool merchant - Richardis’ sister. I loved her, and I courted her, and I ...I killed her - I, Mathieu de Clermont, the son of Ysabeau, sometimes called Gabriel, sometimes called Philippe. There was a fight, between me and my brother, and she tried to get between us, and...I never meant to hurt her, but there was a rage on me, and ...I took her life. That night I rode out to Bethany and tried to drown myself in the spring there, but my kind can’t die like that. I found the ampulla, and sealed a drop of water inside to remind me of my sin. I’ve worn it ever since.” His hand was at his talisman, the little silver case loose at his neck. “To see her sister again...I’m sorry to have caused her pain, after all this time, truly. The dead should keep company with the dead.”
He smiled, sadly, and a shadow of the old Mathieu flitted across his face - the man who’d played chess with kings and toy soldiers with little princes, who’d saved her in the street and marvelled over a written page.

“No one’s ever heard that story, save those that were there - my brother, and one other of our kind, and me. There is my secret, Aude of Jerusalem, my truth - that Mathieu de Clermont is a monster and a murderer both, unworthy of God’s love, unworthy of the company of men. And I am heartily sorry for having offended you, and broken trust with you, who did no more than offer me friendship, and I beg your pardon for it.”

He looked up at her, eyes deep and penitent, and her heart trembled. You asked! You asked, and you received. Oh, weak-hearted woman, do not listen to him! Be deaf to him. Be cold and cruel and unassailable. “I was my lord’s spy, and no friend to you.”

“But you were kind, and tried to shelter me from my brother, even when there was no profit in it for you. And for that I owe you more than one truth. My brother's many things, but before all else he’s his father's son, and he says what people want to hear. The story he told your king... left some things out.” He took a breath, and sat down on the bench opposite, elbows on his knees, his hands loose and nervous.

“It did not suit my father, to be a king. He likes quiet power, and he wanted a stronghold where the world would come to him to beg for favors - and Jerusalem is the center of the world.” He paused. “When my father sent us, this time, our orders were to stir the city up.” How fascinating his hands were - for he would not look her in the eye, but still went on. “We were to sow discord, start rumor, create unease, until the city began to quarrel with itself. And when it was at its breaking point, when Raymond's troops could do nothing and everyone around the King called for war and Guy and the others started circling, when he was tired and alone and afraid to die and leave his work undone, then we were to come in and promise him the means to peace - his peace, on his terms.”

Was it possible, for this to be worse? For the truth - this whole, vast, sprawling truth - seemed worse than what she’d ever imagined. First he’d just been an opportunist, a fraudster playing her king for his own ends, and then a monster intent on savaging him, and then, if his story was now to be believed, a monster who was intent on slowly destroying the person that she loved just so that he’d be swayed to join their side. And that he was, apparently, sorry for it.

There was too much to take it all in properly, sort out the different cords and knots to see where they led. That young Baldwin would die. That there were undead creatures in the world that walked among the living. That the King could live, and rule in prosperity.

That her Baldwin loved her. That she had been blind not to see it, or else deluded. Loved her so much that he was prepared, perhaps, to forgo all else for that.

The night had been warm, in Sybilla’s gardens, but she was cold now, cold and confused and so incredibly alone. There was too much to think about, and she wished for council, for answers to a hundred questions, for her King, her Baldwin, and for his calm voice, from the time before all this when things were simpler, but there was no one to whom she could turn.

Except for him.

What mattered most? At the end of the day, if she could know one thing, what should it be? “What happens?” She hardly recognized her own voice. “If he says no?” If he dies, will you let Jerusalem burn in this fire that you've started?
He swallowed, nervous. “I will stay. Someone must lead the Knights of Lazarus; my brother’s
made promises to Sybilla and if he doesn’t intend to keep them then I will. A De Clermont honors
his word.”

_Oh, God, Sybilla_. Sybilla, who’d been in love with Baldwin, who’d taken him into her confidence,
her heart, her bed! What would become of her? Of course he’d filled her ears with promises about
her son, and his rule. And all that empty now, and her son dying. “Is Young Baldwin really so
sick?”

Mathieu nodded, his face sad. “It is as he says - the same as his uncle. Guy will take his place, and
you know him - he'll rush to fight a war and prove his name. After he's dead, or the city lost, who
will be left? Sybilla? The barons wouldn’t accept another husband of hers on the throne, after Guy.
Far easier to turn Baldwin, and have him keep his peace than try to put together another.”

An uneasy silence descended between them, two chess players considering their next moves. Aude
wasn’t even sure she knew how to play the game any longer.

“I had no qualms about our mission when we first arrived,” Mathieu said, unexpectedly. Aude
looked up at him, not trusting herself to ask another question and tease out more of the truth. “What
we were to do - to lie, to create disorder - it would be for the good of the kingdom, of our family,
even. But then I met your king. What he is makes him a good ruler, though he doesn’t see it so -
knowing he has so little time, he makes the most of what he has, and that’s made him wise. And I
didn't expect you. You, Little Dove, with your poems and your books, trying to make me be a man
I haven't been in a very, very long time. You're like my father - you see men as they are, not how
they want to be seen.” He sat up a little, looked at her with one of his long, careful stares. “My
brother can bluster all he likes about allowances, but I think if it came to it my father would
welcome such a daughter as you, Aude of Jerusalem - not as an allowance, but on your own merit.”

“Would you do it? If he asked you to?” He nodded towards the door. "If that was his price?"

Aude stopped. To live forever, a perpetual pilgrim through time, destination totally unknown. To
be the pin on which another’s life revolved. How did one do that - embark upon a course like that?
The idea of the King _loving_ her was still new and uneasy in her mind, though if she sat and thought
about it, she could begin to see, here and there among her memories, the faintest glimmer of
longing and desire. As for her own part...she loved him as a servant loves a good master, but as a
wife a husband? _Have you not nearly been his wife? Entertained his guests, helped manage his
house, soothed his cares, prayed when he was sick and rejoiced when he was well? When someone
wishes to know his thoughts, whom do they ask?_ If she said no, she’d condemn him - and if she
said yes...

“Were you sure of your end once?” she asked quietly.

His face was grave. “To die looking at the sky, thinking of the people I loved, and had lost.” His
gaze turned back to her. “Were you ever sure of yours?”

Had she been? Once? Ever? She hardly knew. “Whatever your wish is,” Mathieu continued, “I will
honor it. I swear it, now, before God and all his angels, whatever your lord’s will is, I will not let
my brother try to sway him - or you. And whatever he decides, I will stay here, and fulfill my
family’s promises. I owe him - and you - at least that much.”

Aude’s hands wrapped tightly to the bench, her heart prickling. _I could handle you when you
roused suspicions, and I could hold my own against you when you were a beast, but do not take my
side again, for that I cannot take. You are my enemy, and a threat to my lord, and nothing else.
Tell this other man that I do not know him. That knight who played so sweetly with a child at my_
But try as she might, her mind still stuck upon something - the tall, confident pillar who’d been her 
near-constant companion these last weeks, who’d protected her even when she hadn’t asked for it, 
had not deserved it, even. And something else, too, something she’d left out of the poem, as she 
refashioned it to suit her needs and twisted Bisclavret into a betrayer of the worst degree.

“I changed it!” she blurted out finally. “I changed the poem. It wasn’t - the garwolf…”

“The wolf is loyal, brave, and true, 
Serving his lord as all dogs do - 
Among the knights, close to the King. 
Every man thinks it a precious thing, 
For it’s so gentle, well-bred, polite, 
It never would do what isn’t right. 
Wherever the King might go 
It didn’t want to be separated, so 
It went along with him constantly. 
That it loved him was easy to see.”

*You are that wolf, Mathieu Saint-Clair, or Clermont, or whatever your name is. Not the one I 
wrote, not the one your brother makes you out to be. You protected me, when it was not in your 
benefit to do so - did not give me over to your brother, when it would fitted his plans to do it. You 
played with Young Baldwin, and been courteous to all, never raised a hand against me in anger, 
nor allowed a word to be spoken against my lord. And when your rage was on you, you fled rather 
than hurt me, or any of the rest. “The garwolf wasn’t the villain- his wife was. A disloyal, feeble 
woman, afraid of what she didn’t know.” Much like me.*

Mathieu’s eye was patient and kind. “One understands her point of view. I know I did. And I had 
little say in the matter, when I found out.” He took another breath. “My wife and child died. I 
wanted to die, too, and...the woman I now call my mother had other ideas. She thought it would be 
a waste of a life, a talent. I had no choice in the matter. My brother *did*, and your king still does. 
And you do, too.”

*Do I? She could say yes, and save Baldwin’s life but be yoked in eternity - say no, and end it. What 
kind of choice was that? “Eternity is a long time to write poems.”*

“You could take up some other art. I know I have, countless times.”

“Even when they were not pleasing to your father?”

That made him smile. “Especially when they were not pleasing to him. Though we do share some 
things - a love of stories, for instance. He is an ancient creature, from a time when all tales were 
told aloud.” She must have made a face, for he gave a short laugh - the first expression of joy she’d 
felt all day. The sound made her feel human again - and hopeful. “And he is exactly as you’ve 
thought him - though you’d be a match for him, I’ve no doubt.”

“I thought you said he was like your brother?”

Another laugh. “You’ve already outfoxed Baldwin; I’ve no doubt you could outfox Philippe as 
well.”

The door creaked, and Baldwin de Clermont appeared, looking impatient. Perhaps he’d heard them 
speaking of him? Somehow he didn’t seem as frightening now. “He’ll speak with you.”
Aude rose from her bench, squaring her shoulders. Mathieu laid a hand on her arm. “Remember,” he said, voice quiet. “There are many kinds of immortality. And whatever your wish is, I’ll still save your poems, and remember them.”

“And you’ll remain my friend?”

Another smile, freely given. “If you’ll be mine.”

Aude nodded, and found herself, for the first time all day, nearly perfectly at peace, following Baldwin back inside to hear her King’s decision, her mind, at least, already made up.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this chapter is so long - there was so much I wanted and needed to do here and trying to fit it all in coherently was...a challenge. In the end, I didn't end up doing any world-building around other creatures being in Jerusalem and fighting with the vampires - it was too many new concepts to introduce while Aude was still trying to figure herself out.

The poem that Aude has been working on for the whole story, and which she now tells at the feast (in heavily modified form) is Bisaclavret, one of the Lais of Marie de France, which are historically written a little after the timespan of this story. The translation here is from Judith P. Shoaf. As most academics will tell you, Marie's lais come from the courtly love tradition, and are interested in explaining the proper behavior of lovers. In the original, as Aude explains at the end, it's the betrayal of Bisaclavret's wife that's seen as the greater sin, rather than Bisaclavret's lying to his lord.

The names I gave for Baldwin de Clermont are based on what's given in the books, with a little embellishment. The vampires' reasons for wanting Jerusalem are similarly murky in the books, so I've gone with something I think works here.

In the books, it's implied that vampire blood only has anesthetic properties, but I liked the image of the King drinking Baldwin's blood too much not to use it for the proof-of-concept healing scene. In Kingdom of Heaven, we get so used to seeing Baldwin with his mask that when Sybilla removes it, at the end of the film, and we see his actual face, it's really heartbreaking to see how awful he really looks and how much pain he must have been in. Baldwin knows he looks awful, and he wouldn't want Aude to see his real face - or have confidence in his healed one. On the flip side, I didn't want Aude to see Baldwin's healed face, because she needed to realize that she did really love the man behind the mask, and not because he was beautiful. There's already enough murkiness there without adding 'Oh, no, he's hot' to the list.

Some of you are probably wondering - why stop the story here and not say what Aude or Baldwin decide? Well, that would be a really emotional scene, and I really didn't want to write it. Plus I realized a couple of chapters ago that the story isn't really about that - what I wanted, at the beginning of the story, was to give Matthew someone to confide in - a freind. And that, I hope, has been accomplished by the end of the story. As for what happens - well, there's an epilogue for that!
Epilogue

Sept-Tours, present day.

I shouldn’t have been surprised by anything I found in the library anymore.

First editions, frontispieces with cozy personal notes from the author, one or two works previously lost to mankind - the library at Sept-Tours had them all. A person could go in looking for something to help with a research paper and get side-tracked by some other treasure on the shelf.

Such had been my finding today - but unlike some of my other discoveries, this particular book wasn’t revealing its secrets to me as easily as I’d hoped. I hadn’t gone looking for it - pulling another book off the shelf had dislodged it and sent it to the floor, almost as if someone had hidden it away, hoping not to find it again. A quick magical read of the small volume had yielded the anonymous copyist, a nun hunched over a desk in a honey-scented room, and a woman’s face I didn’t recognize and couldn’t place, smiling happily in a garden.

And I wanted to know who she was.

Matthew was in his father’s office, studying something on his laptop, but looked up when I came in. "I found this fascinating little book when I was in the library today.” I held it up for him to see.

My husband sat back from his computer, a little stunned. He knew it, then. “Beautifully illustrated. I've never seen anything like it. The binding’s a thirteenth century style, but the illustrations are twelfth, I think - I thought it was a book of hours, but I don't recognize the text. It's not in Latin, but it's not French, either."

“You're right,” Matthew said, taking it from my hands and turning it over in his own. His touch was careful - reverent, even. He was more careful with his possessions than some members of his family, but even so, the way he held this book showed it meant something to him. "It's poetry, it's from the late 12th century, this is its second or third binding, and it's in Occitan."

Its third binding? "You must had read it quite a lot, to need to rebind it."

"That I did.” My husband smiled and delicately opened the little volume, turning the pages one by one like he was greeting an old friend until he came to a page that had obviously been very, very well read, the margin begrimed by several centuries of anxious fingers, the spine resting open quite easily. In the page's illuminated capital a man and a woman sat talking, she wearing a gray dress and a gold band around her veil, he a robe of silver and blue with a tiny set of yellow crosses on its front. Who were they?

"Can you read me some?" I asked. I knew Ysabeau and Phillipe had written some poetry like this, and that Matthew, in later times, had done some writing, too, but I’d never thought to ask his favorite poem before - and I felt certain, given the wear on this page, that this might be it.

“It's a conversation,” he paused to explain, “between a man and a woman. The woman has the first part, here, and the man the second.” When he began to read, the language of his human youth was like honey on his tongue. I was right - he had read it a lot. The words came out with a practiced sound, an actor delivering a well-rehearsed monologue, deep with meaning.
“Amics, en gran cossirier
Suy per vos, et en greu pena:
E del mal q’ieu en sufier
No cre que vos sentatz guaire.
Doncx, per que-us metetz amaire,
Pus a me laissatz tot lo mal?
Quar amdui no-l partem egual?”

“Don’, Amors a tal mestier,
Pus dos amicx encadena,
Que-l mal q’an e l’alegrier
Sen chascus, so-ill es vejaire.
Qu’ieu pens, e non suy guabaire,
Que la dura dolor coral
Ai eu tota a mon cabal.”

“Friend,” he repeated, translating now, “I am in great anguish
and in heavy throes because of you;
and I don't think you are at all affected
by the ills I suffer.
Well, why do you take to loving
only to leave all the pain to me?
Why don't we both share it equally?

Lady, Love acts in such a way,
when linking two lovers,
that each feels, in his own opinion,
all the pain and all the happiness.
For I think, and I am no braggart,
that the entire load of this harsh heartache
is on my shoulders."

"That's beautiful." And true.

“It was written by a woman named Audemande. She was a trobaritz, famous for her lais, and a...a
good friend of mine. No, not like that,” Matthew hastened to reassure me with a smile. "She was
in love with the man in that poem, though it was forbidden them."

This was the stuff of paperback romance novels, and by the tilt of his smile, he knew it. The urge
to make fun of him was hard to resist. "Forbidden! How romantic. Who was he? Was he famous?
Would I know his name? Was it Richard the Lionheart?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "You'd have to ask my brother Hugh about Richard the Lionheart's taste
in women, mon coeur."

I snorted. Hugh's taste in men had been the subject of several family squabbles back in the dark
ages of de Clermont history - it wasn't hard to imagine that he'd also fallen for the famously sensual
(and probably bisexual) king of England.

"He was famous - he was the last true King of Jerusalem. And he gave up immortality for her. My
father'd sent Baldwin and I to turn him to our side - make him a vampire. He'd been afflicted with
leprosy since he was a boy - see, there, in the capital? His hands are bandaged.” I looked at the
illustration and saw that it was true - the man’s hands were bandaged and his face splotchy. “He
wasn’t expected to live much past thirty, and when he died the whole country was going to
collapse, everyone knew it. It was the perfect time to try and bring some stability to the region. My
father’s dream of a vampire state could be realized. She was his confidante, his spy, and his friend,
and Baldwin thought to tempt him with the chance to finally be her lover.”

“And?” This was too good a story not to hear the end. Was there some other de Clermont brother I
didn’t know about, living quietly in the mountains listening to poetry with his immortal lady?

He shook his head. “He refused the offer, not wanting to condemn her to eternity, nor wanting to
see eternity without her- and he died later that year.” His eyes skipped down to the end of the page.

“Dona, aissi m'auretz leyal
Que ja mais non pensarai d'al.
“Lady, you will have me so loyal
that I shan't ever think about anything else.”

The words sounded different after you’d heard the story. “And you saved her book.”

“It was a challenge, when we first met. She looked me in the eye and said nothing was sure but
death. I don’t remember if the world ‘fiesty’ was in use then, but that was her. Everyone attributes
her poems wrongly, nowadays, but in her time everyone knew her name. The Little Dove - see, there?” He pointed to the corner of the capital and the little white bird, flying in the corner. “That
was the name they called her.” He looked fondly at the little image, which could hardly have
captured the true image of this woman - the woman I had doubtless seen when I’d magically read
the book. “She was one of the first humans I told about my past - one of the first people outside of
my family who became my friend. And she reminded me I wasn’t just my blood rage - that I was, and could always be - more.”

*In other words, I thought to myself, I owe her a great deal.* “What happened to her? When her king died?

“She married a great Syrian lord, another poet, and remained in the Levant until her death. I was always welcome at her estates, and when I could not visit, she would send me wine. It’s still one of my favorites. Some of her descendants still make it.” He looked up from the book with a fond smile. “What are you smiling at?”

There was, in fact, a very large and very silly grin on my face. “I’m just thinking of you as a knight, that’s all - jousts and waving flags and all that.”

My husband gave me a gentle shove. “She wrote a poem about me, too, you know. It’s in this book.” He began flipping pages, trying to find it.

“Of course she did.” It didn’t take much to imagine the kind of man my husband had been in the twelfth century, when the cult of chivalry had been king. A knight, a courtier, a poet - a handsome face. The historian in me loved it - not that he was old, but that there were things still to be discovered about him.

I pulled a stool to his side of the desk and settled down to listen.

*In Brittany there dwelt a lord;*
*Wondrous praise of him I’ve heard -*
*A handsome knight, an able man,*
He was, and acted like, a noble man.

*His lord the King held him most dear,*
*And so did neighbors far and near...*