



Blessed is he who stands at the beginning,
That one will know the end . . .

- The Gospel of Thomas

County of Foix, Occitania



April 1194

To be in love is to reach for Heaven through my lady.

Lounging *deshabille* on her bed, Esclarmonde de Foix whispered those scandalous words again. The troubadour's flirtations in the sitting niche had been harmless enough, but his singing of such verses to her in the square, only steps from the church, placed both their souls in jeopardy. The parish priest usually paid scant attention to wandering singers, dismissing them as a notch above half-wits and barking dogs. Yet Folques de Marseille was no common minstrel. If reports of his latest *chanson* reached Toulouse, the bishop might construe it as a declaration that she, not the Almighty, would lead the bard to eternal salvation. Still, to be courted by the most celebrated—

"Again you're not listening to me!" screeched Corba de Lanta.

Flipped pages fanned a rude breeze under Esclarmonde's nose. She snatched the codex from her irksome friend and thumbed through its myriad prescriptions for love compiled by Andreas Capellanus, a lecherous old cleric who clearly knew nothing about women. She recited the next maxim to be memorized from the *De Arte Honestae Amantiae*: "Thou shalt not indulge in gossip of love affairs." She flung it to the floor in exasperation. "What amusement is left us? We might nigh well enter a nunnery and take vows of silence!"

Horrified, Corba ran to rescue the precious tome, the only one of its kind in Foix, copied on linen palimpsest and stitched between leathered boards. “If you keep complaining, we’ll never learn them all in time!” She forced the book back into Esclarmonde’s hands and returned to the maddening task of adjusting a barrette in her unruly red hair. After several attempts, she gave up in tears. “We’re to be judged in two hours! How can you be so calm?”

“You fret enough for both of us.” Esclarmonde soothed Corba by fixing her friend’s mussed bangs. In truth, Esclarmonde was more anxious than her feigned nonchalance revealed. After turning twelve, she and Corba had been required to focus their scattered attentions on a year-long study of Romance and its dizzying maze of protocols. Now their long-awaited day—the most important in the life of an Occitan lady—had finally arrived. Foix’s fabled court of love would convene that afternoon to determine if they had attained the refinement necessary for admission. Corba’s mother, the Marquessa de Lanta, would preside, and their training had been in accord with the matriarch’s first commandment: If a gentleman is expected to expose his heart on the ramparts of Eros, he is entitled to the assurance that the combat will be waged under the Code of Courtesy and its duly promulgated precedents.

Esclarmonde could not fathom why an emotion so natural as love required education and litigation to flourish. Unlike Corba, she drew courtiers with ease, having inherited her father’s fiery Catalan temperament and her mother’s luscious sable hair, dark Levantine features, and lithesome grace. So striking were her luminous agate eyes that a spice merchant from Outremer once christened them the Jewels of Kaaba, marveling how they reflected the sun like the polished celestial cube said to mark the center of creation for the infidels.

The Marquessa always nullified such protests to the study with a warning that love becomes more complicated as one grows older. Its dispassionate analysis, the grande dame insisted, was as essential as theology and rhetoric: Knights carried their blades, troubadours their verses, and ladies their maxims. None should travel the world unarmed.

Esclarmonde emerged from the wardrobe wearing her favorite kirtle, an emerald damask woven with gold thread and lined with slashes at the hem. She cinched its waist with an opal-studded belt to reveal her budding figure.

Corba was aghast. “Your brother will never allow *that!*”

Esclarmonde struck a seductive pose. “It’s the new fashion. The Saracen courtesans girdle their seraglio raiments to draw their master’s eye.”

“How would you know?”

“I heard it in a song.”

“From that Marseilles troubadour again? He follows you like a stray cat!”

Esclarmonde twirled to test the silk’s sway. Although she’d relish Corba’s reaction, she dared not divulge Folques’s latest tribute. “Mayhaps I heard it from a knight in Mirepoix who croaks like a frog.”

“Lord Perella? You saw him? Tell me!” Only then did Corba register the slander of the man she loved from afar. “And he does *not* croak!”

Esclarmonde cocked her head in affected rumination. “So many men seek my attention. Impossible to keep them straight.” Suddenly, she bounced with excitement. “I do remember!” When Corba came rushing up, Esclarmonde pushed the page in question under her friend’s nose. “Rule Forty-eight. A lady shall not engage in gossip of love affairs.” She danced off with a lording smirk.

Corba reddened in anger. “I can’t wait until Mother interrogates you!”

“Folques will love me even if I fail the examination.”

Corba sighed as she curled up in a ball on the bed. “No one has ever sung to me.” Ruddy in complexion, freckled, and a bit awkward, she was always being eclipsed by Esclarmonde’s radiance. Her hips and calves tended toward plumpness and her lips, the shade of plums, were in constant flux, pursing and smacking in betrayal of every feeling. Her intellect could be charitably described as deliberate, mirroring the languid pace of her movements and mannerisms. By her own admission, she was no match for Esclarmonde’s ripostes.

Despite such perceived faults, Esclarmonde secretly envied Corba’s innocence and pureness of heart; her own lacerating wit and mordant tongue often erected unintended barriers to genuine affection. Regretting her cruel quip, she smothered Corba with a hug. “Raymond offers more in virtue and steadfastness than any lady could—” Her nose wrinkled from a whiff of cassia.

Before the girls could alter their diversion, Corba’s mother invaded the room a step behind the vanguard of her Genoese perfume. “Continue to dally and you will both end up emptying chamber pots for the Benedictines at Fabas!” The Marquessa examined Esclarmonde’s choice of attire with her usual endearing scowl. “Have I not told you that connoisseurs of fine wine distrust a fancied bottle? Now quickly, prepare yourselves!”

“Tardiness is an arrow in Cupid’s quiver,” reminded Esclarmonde. “Those were your very words when—”

The regal doyenne of the chateau was already off to attend to the hundreds of details that had established her reputation as the wisest arbiter of Courtesy in Occitania. She might have become a queen had the right eyes met hers in one

of the many courts she had attended as a maiden. Instead, she fell in love with a Scots knight on his way to the Holy Land. He had stayed long enough to wed and give her Corba, then had revived his sacred mission, never to be heard from again. The Marquessa's broad shoulders and flaxen hair came from her Iberian forbears who had inhabited the Pyrenees long before the Romans arrived. Her innate air of authority gave credence to the legend that those mercurial, fiercely independent Fuxeens—the name given to the ancient natives of Foix—were once ruled by women. She had raised Esclarmonde and her brother, sixteen-year-old Roger, after their mother died in childbirth. Ten years later, Esclarmonde's father, Count Bernard-Roger, had been killed in a hunting mishap.

The loss of both parents at such a young age filled Esclarmonde with an insatiable desire to learn more of her family's glorious past. The Marquessa was one of the few who could remember when the troubadours had first arrived in Foix. She said that the goddess Venus, desiring a more potent argot for the casting of her spells, invented their Occitan tongue—called Provençal by foreigners—from an alchemy of Latin, Catalan, and Arabic. Set to flight by the dulcet dialect, so many poets began expounding on love's conundrums that people became hopelessly confused. Having been the subject of many a competing verse herself, the Marquessa had decreed the creation of an orderly system to resolve disputes of the heart without resort to violence. After all, as she was wont to prophesy, this was the dawning of the thirteenth century, a new age when ladies were to be heralded as the true guardians of haute wisdom and culture.

The two girls hurried down the tower stairwell and made their way along the battlements. The attendees were already queuing up at the garlanded entrance to the great hall. Esclarmonde lingered at the crenellations to take in the color-splashed tapestry and listen to the musicians tune their rebecs. The first blooms of the pink oleander had opened with fragrant fanfare along the conflux of the Ariege and Arget rivers, which wedged the lower town like a pair of St. Blaise's candles at the throat. Their currents raged from the spring melting of the snowcaps. On the lush banks, the high-booted orpailleurs sifted their trough chutes in search of gold dust.

Esclarmonde's father had often held her aloft on these vine-trellised walls, telling of Visigoth battles fought in the bracken-choked elbows of the surrounding peaks. She could twirl in any direction and face lands strikingly different in people and custom. From the west, across Aragon and Catalonia, had marched Hannibal and his man-crushing African elephants. North, beyond Aquitaine, sat

Paris and its dour Franks, as foreign to her as Greeks. The Languedoc's verdant vineyards and arid limestone plateaus were spread out toward the northeast. On clear days, she conjured up hazy images of Saracen sails entering Perpignan on the Mediterranean. Her home stood at a crossroads of many worlds, a launching point for knights and holy men on their way to gain glory and God. Eyes closed, she leaned over the parapet and exclaimed, "Isn't it breathtaking?"

"Indeed, I may expire from such rarefied beauty."

She turned with a start—her hand had been taken captive by the Marseille troubadour. Corba had rushed on into the hall without her.

Esclarmonde's neck tingled from Folques's mint-tintured breath. Everything about the bard was as sharp as a serpent's strike. His penetrating copper eyes hovered like fangs and a pointed beard punctuated his words with manic flourishes. Lacquered black locks danced above his two thin lines of brows, enhanced with a mummer's pencil. He was forever in agitated motion, leaving the impression that he had been gifted with more brilliance than his slight body could contain. As if his poet's effusive nature were not outlandish enough, he had designed the coral reds and jonquil yellows of his garish tabard to test the limits of the local sumptuary laws. He descended to a knee and, lifting his gaudy gaze like a saint's to Heaven, said with a wistful sigh, "Sweet look of love encouraged."

Esclarmonde's mind went blank until—*say nothing*—she remembered one of the maxims. *Silence is the kindling of passion.*

Folques resisted her half-hearted attempt to pull away. "My lady continues to leave me without means of navigation. Pray advise, am I off course?"

She cast her gaze down—a tactic said to be potent in stoking a gentleman's interest—and took the opportunity to admire his maroon buskins stitched with the finest Cordwain leather. Her discreet inquiries had confirmed the rumors: Folques had left his father's shipping business at the age of twenty and was paid handsomely for his poesy by barons from Italy to Ireland. Although not of high pedigree, he counted both England's King Richard and Count Raymond de Toulouse as drinking friends. There were also whispers of an abandoned wife and child, but she dismissed these as slanders propagated by jealous rivals. A natural cynosure of the fair sex, he traveled with a host of musicians and doggerel scratchers, who roamed from court to court with him seeking some explanation for their existence. Drawn like pigeons to a crust, his fawning entourage rushed up in the hope of hearing some new inspiration from his lips.

Surrounded, Esclarmonde played coy. "Sir, your words are so leavened with erudition, I fear they transcend my modest understanding."

Folques curled a seductive grin. “After this day, my shy fledgling, you’ll not be allowed to hide behind that shell of innocence.” He circled her and sang:

*Good lady, if it please you, suffer that I love you
 Since it is I who suffer therefrom, and thus
 would I be unharmed by pain,
 but rather we would share it equally.
 Yet if you wish me to turn elsewhere,
 take away that beauty, sweet laugh, and
 charming look which drive me mad,
 and only then shall I depart.*

Dozens of moist eyes turned on Esclarmonde pining for an expression of requited love. Singed by the heated scrutiny, she managed an awkward half-courtsy. Being chosen for adoration in the troubadour’s chansons was indeed exhilarating. Her name was even being mentioned in the royal courts. And Folques *was* persistent, having ensconced himself in Foix for a month to woo her. But she had never been in love. Was this what it was supposed to feel like? She proceeded to do what she always did when flustered—she fled the scene.

Abandoned, Folques bounded to his feet and recovered his swagger. He reassured the vexed crowd by producing a scarf kept hidden in his sleeve for just such exigencies. “The lady has left me a token of her heart!”

Esclarmonde slipped furtively into the great hall through the servants’ postern. Hundreds of nobles stood admiring the architectural renovations with their heads upturned and mouths gaped like goslings. The Marquessa had transformed the once-stolid chamber into a temple of lucent conviviality by replacing the sinking rafters with stone arches and studding the melon dome with golden flecks to mimic a starry night. The new bas-reliefs and lozenged wainscoting drew murmurs of a Moorish influence. Fresh rushes had been strewn and cloves were roasting in the warming kettle to chase the winter’s mustiness. Yet the matron’s proudest alteration was also the most miniscule: In the niche above the dais sat a stunning triptych of the Adoration of the Magi, painted in tempera by an Italian monk named Master Esiguo. The artist had portrayed the Holy Family with such shocking realism that the Cardinal of Padua was threatening to launch an investigation. The Marquessa relished the brewing scandal as only adding to the work’s virtue and value.

While the attendees pressed up to see the icon, Esclarmonde covered her head and eddied against the flow in the hope that her tardiness would go un-

detected, but the flash of her gown's sheen gave her away. Her brother captured her arm and pulled her into an alcove.

"Do nothing to disgrace us this day," ordered Count Roger de Foix.

She fought off his rough hold. "I'm old enough to manage my affairs!"

Roger's face was shadowed in the grisaille monochrome that mirrored the morose state of his soul. He bored in upon her with his smoldering gray eyes so bloodshot that his veins seemed on the verge of overflowing. "Keep away from those scheming minstrels. The Bishops of Toulouse and Narbonne will be in attendance. I warn you. Give them no reason to find you licentious."

"I am *not* licentious!"

Roger's unchecked inspection alighted on her revealed waist. "Then dress yourself accordingly. And speak only when addressed. There are those here whose alliance would do much to ensure our survival."

"I'll not be dangled as bed fodder for some greased pig!"

"The churchmen will seize upon any excuse to annex our lands."

"If Father were here he would—"

"Your provocations will not return him from the grave!" said Roger. "No matter how much you would benefit from the back of his hand!"

Esclarmonde escaped Roger's clutches and huffed off. She had suffered too many times the Marquessa's apologia for her brother's brooding temper. Nicknamed "Wolf" because of his predilection for prowling about in search of affronts, he had been forced to take charge of their remote province while still a callow boy. The burden had filled him with a simmering, melancholic rage, and when taunted about his immaturity and stunted height, he was quick to remind anyone at the point of his dagger that the Lionhearted had dispatched ten thousand infidels before turning twenty. She was about to round back and lecture him on her own rights as a viscountess when the Marquessa caught her eye.

Corba enforced her mother's silent command and pulled Esclarmonde to the seat beside her. Corba frantically scanned the hall for the knight to whom she had secretly vowed her heart. "Lord Perella is not here."

"I'll never give myself to a man!" vowed Esclarmonde. "They are brutes!"

"I must announce your decision at once," said Corba.

"You'll do no such thing!"

Corba clamped on Esclarmonde's hand. "My prayers are answered!"

Raymond de Perella, the vassal who maintained Roger's chateau at Mirepoix, stood at the entry. Bearded and auburn-haired, he was stout and bowlegged from a life in the saddle—an eligible seigneur, Esclarmonde conceded, if not

particularly comely. Only eighteen, he had already grown the bountiful girth of a man twice his age, the fruit of an almost-religious devotion to never missing a feast. Jocular and sanguine, he regaled all he met with rippling jests and slapped backs as he made his way to the next round of salutations.

Esclarmonde's attention swiveled to a tall, lean-boned knight accompanying Raymond. The stranger possessed a mutinous jaw and a narrow Nordic face that was fair and devoid of beard. His chatoyant eyes, permuting from azure to gray with the light, swept the hall as if assaying the order of battle. A thin scar—the remnant of a blade wound, she suspected—marred his right cheekbone. The imperious manner in which he carried himself brought to her mind the ruthless discipline of a caliph's shakiriya bodyguard. When he removed his riding mantle, the nobles hushed and backed away as if visited by the Devil himself. Underneath he wore a white habit emblazoned with a splayed red cross.

What is a Knight Templar doing here?

Esclarmonde had heard stories about the secretive order of celibate monks recruited by St. Bernard to protect pilgrims in Palestine. The Templars had grown so mythic as a fighting force that they were widely regarded as a species of exotic beast, half lion and half lamb. They answered only to the Holy Father, an accommodation that made them suspect with both clergy and royalty.

Raymond spied the girls from across the hall and wedged a path through the crowd. “My fond demoiselles, I’d not miss your initiation into the mysteries.”

Freckles flaming from blush, Corba fluttered her fan awkwardly. “I pray, sir, you’ll not be too harsh in your judgment.”

“I will always appear harsh next to *your* beauty, Lady Corba.”

Esclarmonde rolled her eyes at their palaver. She studied the Templar, who lingered two steps behind Raymond, equally disgusted by the cooing. He discovered her locking stare on him and blinked in a moment of disrupted concentration. She smiled in conquest; her beauty had discomfited a warrior who spent years disciplining his mind to focus only on God and the flash of scimitars.

Raymond detected their silent exchange. “My ladies, may I introduce Guilhelm de Montanhagol, most recently of Caesarea.”

Esclarmonde extended her hand. “You are a first for us, sir. We have never enjoyed the attendance of one of God’s chosen warriors at these proceedings.”

Not one to stand on ceremony, the Templar did not reciprocate the warm welcome. “I am here on a charge more pressing than this frivolity.”

Esclarmonde retracted her hand as if it had been bitten. “Frivolity? What could be more important than defending Love from its detractors?”

“Well struck!” chortled Raymond. “On your guard, Montanahgol. The Viscountess has bested many a knight errant in a joust of wits.”

Unimpressed, the Templar maintained his defiant stance. “I have been summoned to this god-forsaken wilderness to apprehend heretics hiding in those mountains.”

Esclarmonde cocked her head in a parry, loosing a strand of hair. When the Templar tired of their sparring and moved to depart, she stopped him in mid-step. “Why not save yourself the effort and arrest everyone in this hall?”

“Esclarmonde!” scolded Corba.

“Seeking God’s grace through the intercession of a lady is heresy in the eyes of the Church,” said Esclarmonde. “Is that not so, sir?”

The Templar turned on her with a glare of withering scorn. “I never discuss blasphemous matters, particularly with credulous fillettes who have never stepped beyond the boundaries of their own shadow.”

Esclarmonde’s chin recoiled. *Tactless knave! How dare he?*

The Templar lorded over her his spoils—her flabbergasted silence.

Raymond broke up their standoff. “We must take our leave and allow you ladies to prepare for your shining hour.” He kissed Corba’s hand and whispered, “You shall pass the test with banners flying.”

When the men were out of earshot, Corba spun on Esclarmonde and berated her through set teeth, “Must you antagonize every man that has the misfortune of walking within bow shot of your mouth?”

“Do you think he despises me?” asked Esclarmonde.

“Of course not. Raymond knows your flighty moods.”

“I don’t mean Raymond.”

A moment passed before Corba realized Esclarmonde was referring to the Templar. Flushing, Corba nearly shouted, “Why not just seduce a priest?”

The girls were burned by surrounding stares. Esclarmonde acted as if she had not heard Corba’s outburst. When suspicions were finally allayed, she said sotto voce, “He wasn’t honoring his celibate’s vow when he looked at me.”

This time, Corba channeled her outrage into a quivering whisper. “You are insufferable! A blind beggar could stumble over your feet and you’d be convinced he’d just swooned. This very morning you professed devotion to—”

A bell rang the session to order. On the dais, the Marquessa called the docket. “Our first case is brought by Pierre Vernal. State your dilemma, sir.”

A rakish poet bedizened in a side-pointed *au courant* cap and crimson silks came to the fore with a mincing step. “May it please the court, I and another

gentleman vie for the affections of the same lady. She first deigned a held glance upon me. Not until the day after did she touch the hand of my rival.”

Esclarmonde paid no attention to the pompous cad. Instead, she monitored the infuriating Templar who stood with folded arms at the rear doors, shuffling impatiently as if planning his escape.

The Marquessa detected her distraction. “May I introduce one of this season’s initiates? My goddaughter, Esclarmonde de Foix.”

Corba kicked under her gown at Esclarmonde’s ankle.

“Stop your fidgeting or I will—” Esclarmonde discovered all eyes riveted on her. Lashed by Corba’s irritating smile, she stood slowly.

“My dear, you have studied the Code,” reminded the Marquessa. “What is your proposed ruling? The glance or the touch?”

Esclarmonde saw that the Templar had delayed his departure to witness her comeuppance. She blistered him with a pinching sneer. *Apparently you’ve not taken a vow against snickering. I’ll wipe that off your face soon enough.* She straightened her posture as she had been taught and replied, “The glance is the more profound gesture and must therefore be given precedence.”

The Marquessa betrayed no hint of her opinion. “Your deduction, please.”

Esclarmonde aimed her answer at the Templar. “For some, the caress is forbidden. For others, it is easily avoided. But Love will not be denied the eyes.”

“Continue,” said the Marquessa.

“One alone can steal a touch. Two must conspire in the shared glance.”

Impressed by her cleverness, the audience gave shouts of *bon travail*—all but the Templar, whose wry smile was transmuted into a frown of disappointment on finding that Esclarmonde had turned disaster into victory. Yet she was afforded no time to enjoy the triumph—her attentions had alerted Folques’s honed intuition of what passes between a gentleman and a lady. Before she could disarm the bard’s suspicions with a reassuring glance, he shot to his silk-hosed feet and stood between her and the monk.

“Madame Justice,” said Folques. “I would pose an interrogatory.”

“Good sir,” said Marquessa, “It is to *you* that inquiries about Romance should be addressed. Many believe you have crafted the art to its highest form.”

Folques paused to bask in the admiring nods. “Lady Esclarmonde displays wisdom equal to her beauty. I would be remiss if I did not seek her counsel. May I ask her: Is it possible for one to be married and still be in love?”

Esclarmonde’s mind raced. What could he intend by such a strange question? After a hesitation, she replied, “Not to the same person.”

Folques held the confident look of a fisherman reeling in a catch. “No? But what if one is wedded to God? Shall he be allowed a lover outside his sacred betrothal?” He punctuated the question with a spearing glance at the Templar.

Esclarmonde had expected a more difficult query. “But of course.”

The assembly murmured its surprise. Folques came to a jangled halt, eyeing Esclarmonde with one lid raised and then the other. He had not expected *that* answer. “I am certain, my lady, that you do not mean—”

“God Himself wishes it,” insisted Esclarmonde.

Folques was thrown on both heels. “Of course you’re not suggesting that you have firsthand knowledge of the Almighty’s intentions.”

“Did He not tell the Israelites that ‘I am a jealous God. I shall have no other gods before me?’”

“So I am told,” said Folques, his voice tentative. “Though I hasten to advise that neither of us are studied in theology.”

“Rule Five,” explained Esclarmonde. “Love exists not in the absence of jealousy. If God loves us, He must be jealous. By divine law, then, we must have other lovers. For God is all-knowing and would not be jealous without cause.” She waited for the applause, but a dangerous silence rebounded on her. Too late, the Marquessa’s stricken look informed her of the grave error: She had forgotten her godmother’s admonition against revealing her covert instruction in Latin. Lay reading of the Vulgate, particularly by women, was viewed by the clerics as evidence of possible demonic seduction. Roused from their lethargy, the Bishops of Toulouse and Narbonne conferred in susurrant exchanges and ordered their scribes to retrieve their pouches. Folques paced with an inward gaze that suggested he was weighing a gambit of great import. He stole an sobered glance at her, one so out of character yet mirroring her own throbbing angst. Had he been trying to dissuade her from the very line of questioning that he had initiated? Why had she not decoded his warning sooner?

After a pensive circumnavigation, Folques turned to the Marquessa and said, “I wish to make a legal proclamation of love.”

The matriarch lurched forward. “Sir?”

“To Lady Esclarmonde.”

The proclamation—Courtesy’s equivalent to a thrown gauntlet—set off a clamor of excitement; a singer’s immortality could be set by such bold tactic.

The Marquessa gripped her armrests in barely suppressed vexation. “I trust you understand the full import of this request?”

Folques preened with confidence, but the worry crinkles and labored

breathing divulged his recognition of the proposal's gravity. Yet if he did not divert the clerics, and quickly, Esclarmonde might be called to answer for heretical utterances. Worse even, his own reckless verses could be drawn into the inquiry. "If the lady accepts, I shall forever forego singing to other ladies."

"And she in turn would be required to decline the advances of other gentlemen," cautioned the Marquessa.

Esclarmonde sat in a fog. She had never learned the defense for such a motion. Yet this much she did remember: The Rules required a lady to present an answer forthwith, for to delay or seek counsel was tantamount to an insult. If she refused, no troubadour would ever again attempt her heart for fear of suffering the same indignity. If she accepted, her name would be immortalized. Yet she would be tied to Folques in a kind of monogamy, banned from accepting the verses and flirtations of others. His proffer was more binding than a betrothal; a married lady could still be courted in matters of a chaste heart. She had always dreamt of such a moment. Why was she paralyzed with indecision? She scanned the chamber—the Templar held her in his inscrutable gaze.

He is your champion.

She searched for the source of that discarnate command. From a high pedestal, a statue of the Blessed Virgin looked down on her with serene ebony eyes. Waves of light and shadow flickered across the icon's glossy face, imbuing it with changing expressions. She heard another voice—was it her own?—announce:

"I wish to invoke the Beloved's Prerogative."

Never in this august assembly had such reckless words been uttered. The air was so volatile that a single spark threatened to ignite a conflagration of protest. The Beloved's Prerogative was an arcane procedural tactic that permitted a lady to challenge the worthiness of a professed lover.

Esclarmonde knew at once that she had panicked. The desperate legal maneuver would only delay the inevitable. There were several talented word-smiths in attendance, but none had come close to besting Folques in competition. As the troubadour searched for some hint of her intention, she prayed he would divine her disinclination and retract his motion.

Like a wilted lilac in sudden bloom, Folques reclaimed mastery of his insouciant air and met her challenge with a speculative smile. "I am grateful for the opportunity to prove my good faith."

The Marquessa had no choice but to allow the motion to proceed. "The lady must appoint an advocate to test the affiant. Each gentleman shall address

a verse drawn on the spot. Judgment shall be by acclamation. Should the advocate prevail, the lady shall remain unfettered, with no mark against her honor.”

Esclarmonde glared at the contemptuous crusader-monk who had caused this catastrophic cascade of events. If she had to forfeit her freedom to be courted, at least she could require him to share the humiliation. “I choose the Templar.”

The astounded audience turned toward her unlikely selection.

For the first time, the Marquessa saw the Templar standing behind the others. Dubious of the choice, she asked, “Sir, will you accept the charge?”

The crusader shot a quick glance over his shoulder, making certain that a path to the door was cleared. “I am a contender for faith alone.”

“In this domain, a man of arms serves both God and Courtesy.”

Folques dismissed the proffered opponent with scowl of hauteur. “My lady, I implore you to choose an advocate from my profession. The monk is illiterate. It is beneath my station to contend with one so poorly armed in the agon of verse.”

Before Esclarmonde could rescind the cruel appointment, the Templar marched up and removed his gloves defiantly, making no attempt to hide his contempt for the syrupy Marseille popinjay. “Am I permitted the use of Latin?”

“You will be at a disadvantage,” warned the Marquessa. “The language of scholars is bereft of sentiment. But the Code permits it.” When the Templar did not waver from his request, the matriarch reluctantly relinquished the dais—but not before scathing Esclarmonde with a chastising glare.

Shaken by the confrontation that she had spawned, Esclarmonde reluctantly took the high seat facing the assembly. Below her, Folques warmed his voice while stealing glances at the suspicious bishops. The Templar had more reason than any to be nervous, given his lack of experience in such a venue, but he stood stoically, a fixed planet in a tempest of agitated anticipation. He stared down the swishing troubadour who orbited him like a dazzling comet.

The sun had eased into early evening, benighting the hall in a trail of occult shadows. When the audience came to order, Folques beckoned his retinue of lute and harp players, then bent to one knee and sang:

*Since Love so wishes to honor me
As to let me bear you in my heart,
I beg of you to keep it from the flames,
Since I fear for you much more than for myself.
And since, Lady, my heart has you within,
If it is harmed, you, inside, will be harmed as well . . .*

Esclarmonde shuddered from the effects of the troubadour's mellifluous voice. If he moved the audience with such force, the Templar stood no chance. She was roiled by confused emotions, riven as to which man she would have prevail.

*Do with my body what you will, but keep
My heart as if it were your dwelling place.
Since each day you're more lovely and charming,
I curse the eyes with which I gaze on you,
For their subtle contemplation can never be
To my advantage but only cause me pain.
Yet in the end I know I'll be more helped
Than wounded, my lady, for I should think
That you'd get little joy from killing me,
Since the pain would be yours as well.
Lady, I cannot fully tell you of my loyal heart,
Out of fear of seeming foolish, but I hope
Your wisdom will perceive the words unspoken.*

Folques lowered his chin to his chest in a dramatic coda. He had conjured up a magnificent performance, excelling all of the renowned troubadours who had preceded him in this hallowed court. Triumphant, he arose like an unfurling swan and swept his hand to offer the position.

The Templar removed his sword from its side harness with a chilling sang-froid and placed it on the dais. Tousled shocks of lichen-blond hair unfurled to his shoulders as he lowered his mesh coif. The musicians moved to his side, but he motioned them away. He looked up at the Virgin and, eyes shuttered, whispered a prayer, "Lady of Heaven, use me as thine instrument." After nearly a minute of meditation, he looked directly at Esclarmonde and chanted:

*I am of low birth, untrained in the art of verse,
Nor have I studied the ways of women.
But I have dedicated my life to the Virgin,
Who resides at the right hand of the Lord
And has never failed to protect me in battle.*

*I can offer you, my Lady, little else but the promise that,
Should you ever be in need of a defender,
You may call upon the services of one
Who has fought a path to the rock where
The Holy Mother knelt before her dying Son.*

Not even a cough broke the punishing silence. The audience seemed to be waiting for something more, another stanza perhaps—until a sharp crack of embers startled them from their stupor, drawing gasps and muffled snuffles. Someone dropped a goblet; its rattling clank echoed across the flagstones.

Esclarmonde cast her gaze down.

The Templar retreated a step, convinced that he had offended her.

Folques kept his back to the audience with his head bowed in the artifice of humility. He could not deny himself a congratulatory smile. Just as he had predicted, the monk's unskilled maundering had insulted all in attendance. Sure-footed, he prepared to come forward to accept the judgment—

The assembly shot to their feet in frenzied applause.

Folques milked the triumphant moment. Nodding at the popular confirmation, he rehearsed a few words for a victory speech. A second round of applause grew louder. The audience had no doubt witnessed Esclarmonde's confirmation. He allowed the adulation to continue a few beats more—timing was the art superlative of his profession, after all—and then he turned with an akimbo pose to acknowledge the accolades.

The assembly's collective gaze was trained beyond him.

They are cheering the monk.

Staggered by the incomprehensible sentiment, Folques silently begged Esclarmonde to countermand the popular verdict.

Only then was Esclarmonde assessed with the true cost of the dalliances in which she had so cavalierly engaged during the past weeks. The Marquessa had been prescient in her admonitions; there was indeed a vital purpose for these Rules of Love. Esclarmonde now understood, too late, that the capricious glance or wanton touch could prove more lethal than the sharpest weapon. If a woman held the power to lift a man to Heaven, she could also cast him into Hell. She had not been in love with the troubadour. She had only craved only his attentions and the fame that had accompanied them. Ashamed, she turned her eyes from Folques in rejection.

Voice cracking, Folques allowed, "My lady is freed of the offer."

With that concession, the troubadour managed an unsteady bow and walked from the hall through a gauntlet of judging glares. He paused only once—to memorize the face of the Templar who had eclipsed his reputation.