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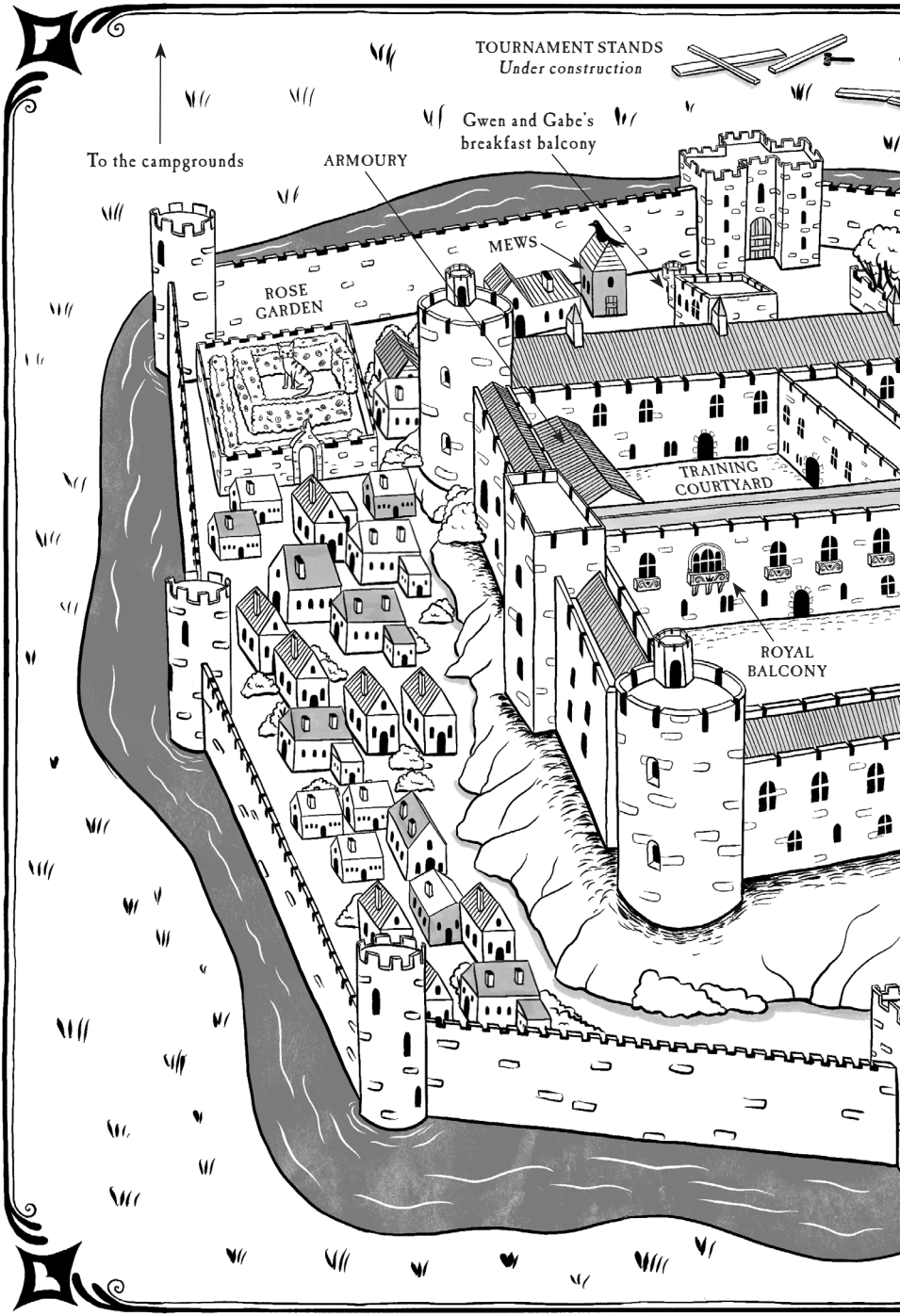
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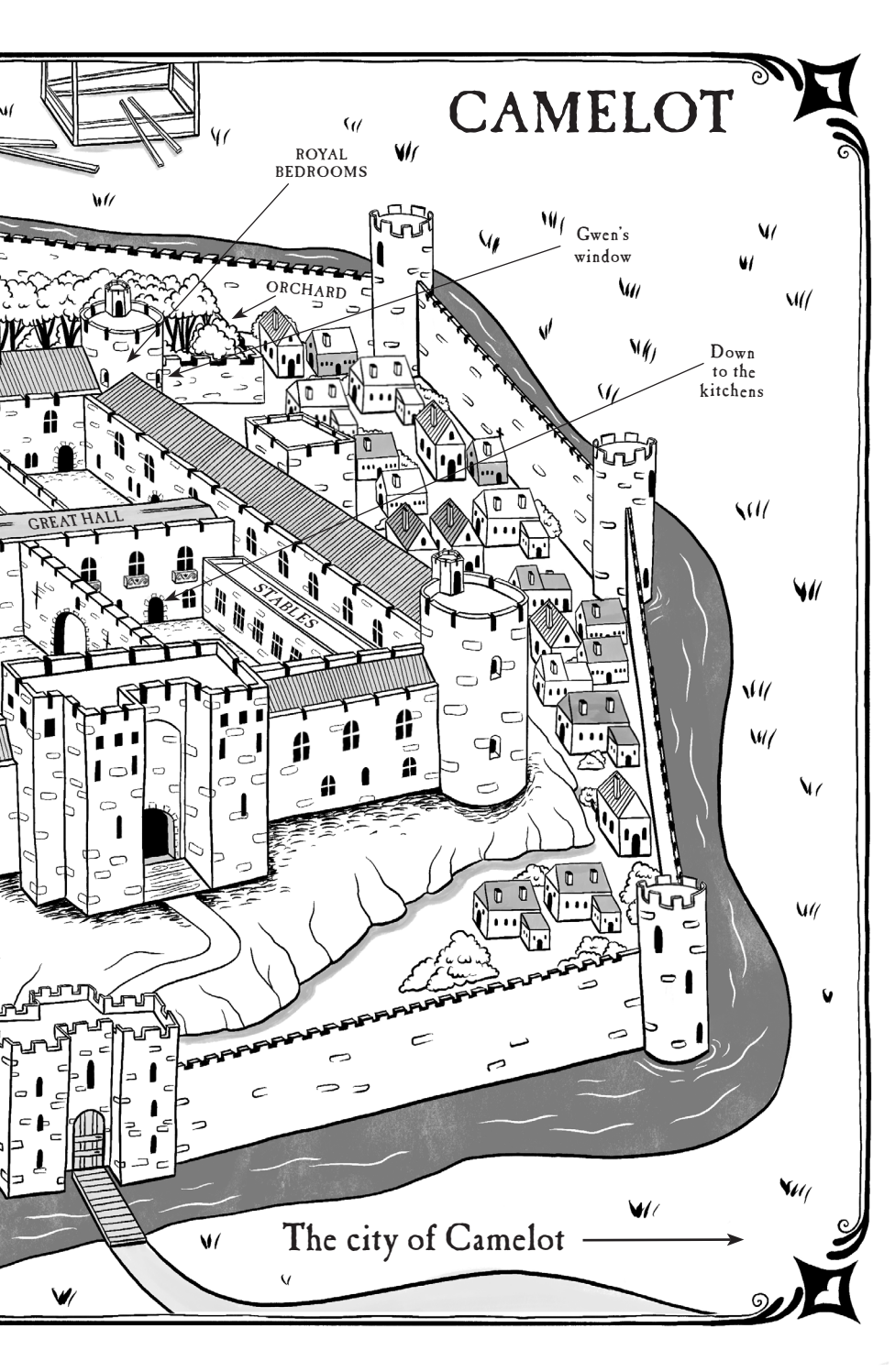
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TOURNAMENT STANDS
Under construction
To the campgrounds
ARMOURY
Gwen and Gabe's
breakfast balcony
MEWS
ROSE
GARDEN
TRAINING
COURTYARD
ROYAL
BALCONY


CAMELOT
ROYAL BEDROOMS
Gwen's window
ORCHARD
Down to the kitchens
GREAT HALL
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His royal highness King Allmot of England hereby declares that the royal tournament at Camelot will commence on the first day of Whitsuntide.

(Please disregard dates announced in previous declarations. Construction will be completed by Whitsun.)

Knights of daring and valour who embody the chivalric spirit are encouraged to fight for their king in the lists, at archery, in single combat and the melee, until a victor is proclaimed on the nineteenth day of August.

Please bring your own swords, maces and morning-stars, as none will be provided.



When Gwen woke up, she knew she'd had the dream again – and that she'd been *loud*. She knew she'd had the dream because she was feeling exhilarated, loose-limbed and a little flushed in the face; she knew she'd been vocal about it because Agnes, the dark-haired lady-in-waiting who slept in the adjoining chamber, kept biting her lip to keep from laughing and wouldn't look her in the eye.

'Agnes,' Gwen said, sitting up in bed and fixing her with a well-practised and rather imperious look. 'Don't you have water to fetch, or something?'

'Yes, your highness,' said Agnes, giving a little curtsy and then rushing from the room. Gwen sighed as she stared up at the bed hangings, lush velvet heavy with embroidery. It was probably a mistake to send her away so soon – she was young and flighty, and would likely be off gossiping with anybody she encountered. At least Gwen's nocturnal exploits wouldn't stay top billing for long. Today was no ordinary day; tournament season was finally upon them. Any mortifying morsels Agnes slipped the other ladies-in-waiting would be forgotten in all the excitement by noon.

When Agnes came back with a pitcher of water Gwen stepped out of bed, raised her arms above her head so that Agnes could remove the thin tunic she slept in, and then stood yawning and blinking in the early morning light as she was scrubbed and oiled to within an inch of her life. Agnes was just easing a new shift over Gwen's shoulders when the door was nudged open and a tall, pale, copper-haired young man walked in, his head buried in a stack of parchment.

'Have you seen this?' he said, not lifting his eyes from the page.

'Er. Gabriel,' Gwen said, looking at him incredulously. 'I'm not dressed.'

'Aren't you?' Gabriel looked up and frowned at her briefly, as if she had removed her clothes just to inconvenience him. 'Oh. Sorry.'

'The Greeks wrote a lot of plays about this sort of thing,' Gwen said, as Agnes rushed over with a dress to cover her, her fair skin flushing a delicate pink. Her blushes were probably less to do with the impropriety of the situation and more to do with the fact that almost every woman at court harboured a persistent crush on her brother. Many had tried to catch his eye, and so far, all had failed. He wasn't really one for talking at all, unless it was to Gwen. She had always held this as a point of pride.

'The Greeks wrote a lot of plays about putting on dresses?' he asked now, brow still furrowed, as Agnes yanked the dress inelegantly over Gwen's head.

'No,' Gwen said, emerging with quite a lot of her hair

stuck to her mouth. 'You're missing the . . . Are you even listening to me? You walked into *my* room, you know.' He turned over the piece of parchment he was reading to peruse the other side, not acknowledging that he'd heard a word. 'Gabriel. *Gabe*. Can you hear something? The sound of a spectral voice upon the air? It almost sounds like I'm talking.'

'Hang on, G,' he said, raising a hand to indicate that he needed a moment. Gwen considered this, and decided he hadn't earned it. '*Ow*.'

Gwen had taken one of the brocade slippers Agnes had offered to her and thrown it at him with considerable force.

'Please arrive at the point with haste.'

'Ah – fine,' Gabriel said, still rubbing his head. 'Father is having me look at the accounts with Lord Stafford – costs for the tournament season mostly, but I also saw *this* and I thought . . .' He trailed off, handing her the parchment so she could read it for herself.

Agnes started expertly weaving Gwen's long red hair into braids as Gwen's eyes skimmed quickly down the page, taking in an extensive list of assets. Chests full of silks and damask, an ancient jewelled dining set, endless porcelain vases; all marked to be leaving the crown's coffers in the coming months. Comprehension dawned as she reached the end of the page and the entry denoting the enormous Biblical tapestry of Ruth and Naomi that currently hung in her chambers.

'This is my dowry,' she said slowly. 'Gabe. My *dowry*.'

'I suppose it's that time already,' Gabriel said, with a sympathetic grimace.

'Shit,' said Gwen, sitting down heavily on the end of the bed.

'Shit,' Gabriel agreed.

In theory, being betrothed since birth could have been a comfort to Gwen, especially as it was to somebody so close to her own age. It meant there would be no nasty surprises; no new political alliances to forge with elderly, ornery nobility through marriage. Better the devil she knew, et cetera.

Unfortunately, this was encapsulated far too literally in the man she had been sworn to marry. Arthur Delacey, heir to the title Lord of Maidvale, was – in Gwen's opinion – the devil incarnate.

They had met for the first time on the day she was born, barely more than a shrimp and already promised to him; he'd been two years old, shuffled into Camelot along with his parents and hundreds of other families courting favour with the crown. She could just picture Arthur's affronted little face, scowling down at her in her cradle, disappointed already. She had often wondered if her parents had considered committing wholly to the bit and calling her *Guinevere* to match him, but had chickened out just in time and chosen *Gwendoline* instead, the uncomfortable legacy of the former's extramarital affairs with roguish knights staying their hands.

Her first true memory was of Gabriel giving her a piece of warm, fragrant honey cake, sneaking it to her outside the kitchens before dinner to calm a tantrum.

Her second memory was of Arthur taking it from her. It had been sixteen years, and she was still angry about that honey cake.

Among other things.

He had pulled her hair at mass. Mocked her relentlessly at feasts. Tripped her in the courtyard in front of every petty lord and lady of the realm, and then stepped smugly over her as she lay sprawled on the cobblestones with a skinned knee. The first stirrings of summer meant that a visit from Arthur was nigh, and so she learned to dread brighter mornings and hawthorns in bloom. On her ninth birthday, she had tried to get ahead of him by setting a trap outside his chamber, enlisting Gabriel's help to stretch a thin length of twine across the doorway; he had stumbled spectacularly over it and broken his wrist in two places. The guards had apprehended him a week later trying to push a feral cat through her bedroom window one-handed.

That September, the queen had politely suggested that it might be best if they were separated for the time being. Gwen had been so happy when she heard the news that she had skipped around the castle all day, buoyed by the prospect of Arthur-free summers. Her skipping had ended abruptly that evening when she heard her father refer to Arthur as her 'betrothed'.

'Gabe,' she had said, seeking him out in his favourite corner of the library. 'What's a *betrothed*?'

'It's the person you're going to marry,' Gabriel replied, looking up from his book.

'I was afraid of that,' she said glumly. 'Who's your betrothed?'

'I don't have one.'

'That's not fair.'

'No,' Gabriel had sighed. 'I don't suppose it is.'

★

Family breakfasts, which had once been a constant in Gwen's life, had become rarer in recent years. The carefully curated work–life balance that used to allow the king to linger to discuss economics with his son or to play a rapid-fire game of chess with his daughter had disintegrated as tensions grew throughout his kingdom; he and the queen now had daily schedules packed from dawn until dinner with council meetings, public audiences and conferences with diplomatic envoys that lasted long into the evening. Gwen and Gabriel had adapted; they usually breakfasted alone on the covered balcony, an oasis of calm in the busy castle.

The rest of Gwen's day followed a strict schedule of her own making. After breakfast she went for her morning walk, with Agnes plodding silently at her heels; lunch was usually taken in her chambers, followed by reading and harp practice. The late afternoon was always dedicated to her embroidery. Gwen had been meticulously stitching sprays of white roses and blue forget-me-nots on an enormous blanket for the past three years, at the behest of her mother, who had said something about 'marriage beds' and 'wedding nights' that Gwen had immediately chosen to forget. She liked embroidery – liked the certainty of it, the soothing repetition and symmetry – and with a needle in her hand it was easy to still her mind and wilfully disregard the issue of the blanket's intended destination.

Supper was sometimes a family affair taken in their own private dining rooms, but more often than not her father would insist that Gwen trudge down to the Great Hall with him and eat with a hundred eyes on her, the room packed

to the rafters with courtiers and squires and various other shades of hangers-on.

She treasured these mornings, when it was just her and Gabriel on the balcony under a thick canopy of clematis and honeysuckle, and she could push aside the remnants of her breakfast and while away half an hour thrashing him at chess before she fell back into the familiar weave of her day.

Gabriel was in particularly bad form this morning; even still reeling from the shock of her dowry, she had him cornered in ten short minutes.

'Are you playing poorly on purpose because you feel bad for me?' she said, as he frowned down at the pieces.

Gwen loved chess. It flexed some hidden muscle, some part of her mind that usually lay dormant; as a result, she was calculated and ruthless, and left little room for her opponent to enjoy himself for even a moment.

'Not everybody lives for the triumphs and defeats, the epic highs and lows of the little black and white squares,' Gabriel said, ineffectively pushing a rook right back to where it had been two turns ago. 'Sorry. I'm actually just *this* bad at chess.'

'Your *cat* isn't this bad at chess,' Gwen scoffed. 'And also, checkmate.'

'Well. Very good. You've thoroughly obliterated my tenuous sense of self-worth.'

'Don't try to make me feel sorry for you just when I'm warming up to a nice gloat, it's not sportsmanlike.'

Gabriel just sighed, sat back in his chair and squinted out over the battlements. Gwen followed his gaze. The view from the north side of the castle, which housed the royal

quarters, wasn't cluttered with the chaos of the city; from here Gwen could see the orchard and the mews, and, in the fields beyond the outer wall, the top of a large wooden structure that had been slowly growing in size for the past few months. Workmen scurried around it like ants, making everything ready for the tournament season ahead. The sky was a hazy blue, the weather already hot for late spring, blossom falling in drifts from the trees and gathering in the moat. Under different circumstances, this would have been a thoroughly delightful day.

'He might be better,' Gabriel said eventually, knowing precisely what she was thinking about without needing to ask. 'You haven't seen him for years.'

'I saw him last year,' Gwen countered. 'From a distance. At the Feast of St Michael, when that horrible earl hosted us and you were home with the grippe.'

'And?'

'*And* he sneered at me from across the room and whispered something in a page's ear and they both laughed so hard they almost fell over.'

'You don't know he was laughing at you.'

'He pointed. He smirked. He did . . . an impression.'

'Of what?'

'My dancing.'

'Oh,' said Gabriel. 'Well . . .'

'Be helpful or be quiet,' Gwen said, slumping forward on to the table.

'Sorry,' said Gabriel, reaching over to pat awkwardly at her hair. 'I really am. You know I'd help if I could.'

Gwen did know. He was far too soft-hearted; *he* wouldn't

ever force her into a marriage for political gain, no matter how much he needed it. Some day he would be king, and those decisions would be his to make. Gwen knew he dreaded it more than anything. There had been rather loud whispers over the years that he was too weak – too gentle – too *quiet* to rule, and their father was trying without success to encourage him to conduct himself with more mettle and conviction; Gabriel dealt with all of this by retreating into books and ledgers whenever possible, seeming to hope that if he disappeared into the furthest and dustiest reaches of the castle, then everybody might forget about him and crown somebody else instead.

Gwen thought this relatively unlikely.

'What did he look like?' Gabriel said, and Gwen was confused for a moment before remembering that they were discussing her least favourite subject.

'Like the squire to Satan,' she said. Gabriel raised an eyebrow. 'Oh, I don't know. Smug? Conceited? Abrasive? He's grown his hair very long, kept flicking it about to try to make all the ladies blush.'

'And did they?'

'You know they did,' Gwen said crossly. 'Agnes let slip that he's been leaving a trail of devastation across the countryside.'

'I heard that too, actually. Maidens deflowered. Inns drunk dry. Trees uprooted.'

'Do you think Father's heard?' Gwen said hopefully.

'Maybe mutterings,' Gabriel said, leaning back in his chair. 'But nothing substantial. Not enough to make him renege on a decades-old agreement.'

Gwen sighed. 'Gabriel. How much gold would I have to slip you to murder me?'

He gave her a sad sort of smile. 'Gwendoline. It's nothing personal, but I just don't have it in me. It'd kill two birds with one stone though, wouldn't it?'

Gwen laughed darkly. 'I wouldn't go so far as to presume that they'd let you off your royal duties for a little thing like sororicide.'

'No,' Gabriel agreed. 'But they might think twice before putting a sword in my hand – so that'd be something, wouldn't it?'

The door to the balcony opened so suddenly that they both jumped; Lord Stafford, their father's very pompous steward, was standing there looking exceedingly harried. He was wearing stockings in such an aggressive shade of chartreuse that Gwen had to blink a few times to regain full range of vision.

'Your royal highness,' he said to Gabriel, sounding desperate. 'The ceremony.'

'Oh, Christ,' said Gabriel, getting up abruptly and knocking the chessboard to the floor. 'Sorry! I forgot. I'm coming, I'm coming.'

Stafford stepped aside to let Gabriel pass, and then glared down at Gwen, who had knelt to pick up the chess pieces.

'You're expected too.'

'Well, when you say it like *that*,' Gwen said, making a point of getting very slowly to her feet, 'how could I possibly refuse?'

Tournament season didn't actually start for another week, but the opening ceremony brought all the knights and

noble families together early so that they could size each other up, plan courtships and start betting their money, livestock and wives on the outcomes of the events. The huge stands to the north of the castle, set around one large arena that could be configured to host the joust, melee, single combat and archery contests, were built anew every year; they had once again experienced construction setbacks, and wouldn't be complete until right before the first event, so the opening ceremony was to take place in the castle's largest and most southerly courtyard. Gwen would be expected on the royal balcony that overlooked it, used for speeches and appearances and inexplicably popular group family waves.

She had never been particularly interested in tournament season as a child; she was happy with her routine, loved plans repeated to satisfaction every day, and the tournament disrupted her so thoroughly that she sulked about it every summer, often attempting to read a book in her lap while knights grappled for her father's favour just a few feet away. Over the past few years, however, she'd found certain aspects of the tournament to be worth the change of pace.

When she reached the balcony, her mother and father were already seated on the wooden thrones that had been dragged out for the occasion. Gabriel was straight-backed and attempting to smile in the chair next to her father. She crossed to her mother's side and sat down, giving a half-hearted and informal sort of wave at the crowds gathered below as she did so.

'Whatever you are doing with your hand,' her mother said out of the corner of her mouth, 'cease immediately.'

The courtyard was large, cobblestoned and rectangular, with the entrance to the Great Hall at one end and an archway that led to the smaller yard containing the stables at the other. Courtiers were packed around the edge, dressed in their finery, and knights were being announced one by one as they trooped in under the arch with their households and sponsors, to cheers and occasional boos.

It seemed to stretch on for hours. Gwen felt her interest waning, her posture wilting in the hard-backed chair.

'An unusually high cultist turnout among the competitors,' said the queen in a low voice, as somebody entered to less than enthusiastic applause.

'Unusual but welcome,' replied the king, his gaze following this latest knight as he rode briskly across the courtyard. 'I asked Stafford to ensure we were making an effort to bridge the divide, and it seems his hard work has paid off.'

'Well, your cousin is not here,' said the queen. The next competitor was introduced, and she narrowed her eyes as she watched him. 'Ah – but I see he sends his dog.'

Gwen watched as the pallid, translucent-looking Sir Marlin entered the courtyard, unsmiling. He was more commonly referred to in whispered gossip as 'the Knife', due to the fact that he was short, thin and uncommonly bloodthirsty. Relations between the king and the Knife's sponsor and liege, Lord Willard, were somewhat strained, to say the least; when the last king had died leaving no direct heir, there had been a brief skirmish for power that had seen Willard throw his hat into the ring despite the fact that the throne had already been promised to Gwen's father. Willard had been bolstered by the backing of many

Arthurian cultists – those who believed wholeheartedly in the magic of King Arthur and his enchanted sidekicks, the stories that good Christians had long decided were simply fables and legends – and had been working his way up to being quite the legitimate threat. The potential for a real battle had been quelled by the timely invasion of the King of Norway, who had fancied a stab at England himself but had been chased away when most of the nobility united behind Gwen's father to keep him at bay.

It did not make for happy family reunions. In fact, Gwen had only met Lord Willard once before, and had not liked the look of him one bit; he was very tall, grim-faced and brusque, and the enormous dark cloak he wore, sewn all over with various cultist symbols, had made him look like an ill-tempered bat.

Sir Marlin crossed the courtyard to only scattered applause and more than a few low hisses. A set of stout and jovial-looking twins was announced next, Sirs Beldish and Beldish, and then there was a pause before the next burst of fanfare; Gwen heard a ripple of interest move through the crowd, and her ears pricked up.

'For God's sake, not this charade *again*,' her mother sighed. Gwen leaned forward, straining to see past the crowd obscuring the archway into the courtyard. This charade was the highlight of her summer – no, her *life* – and frankly the only thing that made the tournament worth attending.

'Lady Bridget Leclair,' shouted the Grand Marshal, a bearded man called Sir Blackwood, a little reluctantly. 'Of House Leclair.' The crowd erupted into jeers and laughter, jostling each other to get a better look. Lady Leclair ignored

them all, face impassive as her enormous horse carried her into the yard under a banner sewn with what looked like a golden wheel on a background of deep maroon. Her straight, black hair was cut bluntly across her forehead and above her broad shoulders; she should have looked ridiculous, like an overgrown pageboy, but somehow it suited her perfectly. Even from a height Gwen could see her steady gaze, her lashes dark against the golden brown of her skin. Thanks to meticulous eavesdropping, Gwen had learned that Lady Leclair was one year her senior and that she was Tai, her line hailing from the Sukhothai Kingdom. Gwen had tried to ask Gabriel about the place as nonchalantly as possible; he had reached for a book and responded with a detailed and entirely useless speech about trading ports.

As Gwen watched, somebody threw a coin at Lady Leclair's head. The knight didn't even flinch, her hands sure at the reins as she leaned forward and steadied her horse, her lips moving ever so slightly as she murmured something in his ear. The only female knight in the country – probably in the whole world – and she bore all the shouting, excitement and ridicule as casually as if she were going for a countryside hack.

'I don't know why we have to put up with this ridiculous spectacle—' the queen started, but the king cut her off with a raised hand.

'She has the right to be here, Margaret. Weather it another year, and perhaps she'll give up.'

Gwen barely heard them. Last night's dream was suddenly coming back to her in vivid colour.

It had been the first day of the joust, and Gwen had been

sitting in the royal stands; her parents weren't there, but Gabriel was, wearing a hat with an enormous feather in it and reciting Chaucer incessantly in her ear. It was customary for knights to show deference to the king before their event began, approaching the royal stands to bow and receive royal assent, and in the dream Lady Leclair had come riding right up to Gwen on a unicorn to present her with a single, soft pink rose. When Gwen had reached for it, Bridget had instead given her a roguish smile, reached over with one gauntleted hand to tilt Gwen's chin towards her, and then kissed her so hard that Gabriel had stopped reciting poetry and muttered 'Crikey!' as he tumbled off his chair.

'Your highness,' Lady Leclair had said, her voice dipping dangerously low as her fingers tangled in Gwen's hair.

'My fair knight,' Gwen had whispered huskily in reply.

She knew that she often spoke aloud in her sleep; knew upon waking that she had certainly done so again this time, and that Agnes had heard her say it. Perhaps repeatedly. She could only hope that it was all she had said.

Gwen didn't even realise she had risen up out of her chair, her hands gripping the edge of the balcony as she drank in the sight of Lady Leclair's approach, until her mother cleared her throat pointedly; she looked over to see her entire family staring at her. She loosened her grip and glanced back down at the courtyard at the exact moment that Lady Leclair looked up; their eyes locked, and the knight gave an almost imperceptible nod of greeting before urging her horse on.

Christ, Gwen thought as she sat back down, blushing furiously. *Not all this again*.