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Opening Extract from...

Knight

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CHAPTER ONE

And so it has come to this...

One last challenge, one last joust, one last chance to prove that the glory of all those campaigns, all those years in service to his king, all those wounds taken on the field of battle, all those nights spent carousing in the king's company were not just a dream, but a reality more compelling, more worthy, more sweet than any other choice of life he might have made.

And so he sits; thinking, waiting, reminiscing. The flanks of his horse beneath him quiver quickly, then stop. The sun shines brightly, and the smell of the grass rises sweetly from the turf below. He looks up, and notices how high the blue of the sky seems today; how immense the canopy of air, and sunlight, and soft white clouds appear above him.

His gaze moves slowly around the arena; moving across the crowds, who laugh and frolic and behave as peasants have always behaved; jolly and carefree and immensely happy, in these moments when they are not beating the searing, unwilling metal, nor slaving over raw, angry coals, nor tilling stubborn soil; the peasants, who on these carefree days, when the king declares a carnival or a tournament, seem to portray a profound, simple truth, concerning life lived in the moment, with no worries over property or possessions or power.

And now, with lance held upright in its rest, and visor awaiting closure, his gaze moves to the king's champion, seated on the charger at the opposite end of the course. The champion, whose bludgeoning martial strength has brought him to the front of the battle lines; the champion, whose lineage in the hands of a diplomat has forged an alliance and saved a kingdom in a time of uncertain conflict; the champion, whose smooth, easy charm and overly-good looks have impressed the lords and the ladies, and the inevitable sycophants who inhabit the courts of nobility. And now, here, on this turf, in this tournament, under the king's flag, the champion waits; the villain, the murderer, for whom there will never be any feeling other than hate; the champion, the personification of evil, and the constant reminder of all that was good and lovely and fair until she was cut down; early, violently, unforgivably.

His gaze moves further left, now; finding the nobles, the courtiers and the king himself; the royal entourage, for whom these days are planned and

performed, and for whom the events are merely a pleasant diversion in their affairs, and not, as for him, a testing, a proving, a confirmation of his reason for existence, and once, a demonstration of his love.

And there, the empty box, where so many times she sat, and waved, and smiled, and poured out her love and her strength to him, across the yards between the spectators who watched, and the knights who battled; between those who loved, and those who proved their love; between those who watched and prayed and hoped and loved, and those who challenged and battled and sometimes rose to the occasion and sometimes fell in despair, but always loved in return.

And now he is focusing inwardly; closing his mind to the noise, the babble, the laughter of the crowd; focusing within a sphere growing ever smaller as he separates himself from the outside world and prepares for the challenge; his last tournament, his final appearance, the end of his active days as a knight.

His gaze drifts downwards over his armour. There are tiny spots of rust showing through now. The armour has served him well over the years; has taken many blows which would have felled him, has repelled many arrows which would have pierced him, has clashed and glinted mightily in the sunlight as he stormed across fields in sweating, glorious victory. But now, in the late summer sunlight, it appears as he knows he himself appears; slightly worn, slightly out of place, slightly unequal to the task ahead.

Lifting his head, he sighs briefly, then focuses, as he has been trained to do; focuses, as he has done on so many prior occasions, when the cause was just and the odds were appalling; focuses, and becomes absorbed in the familiar calm which descends upon him, feels the thrill of battle rising, and once more becomes the invincible warrior of his younger days.

Only this time, the limbs are older, the reactions are slower and the cause is a planned entertainment, not a righteous battle. Perhaps, this time, the incentives are not so compelling, the consequences of failure not so traumatic, and hence, the rush of blood will not be so strong. Perhaps, he will not achieve the sublime rhythm and grace, which came so naturally in years past, but, by God, he will put on a show, and if he finishes flat on his back, then what does it matter?

He is an old man now, already in his thirties, and no-one really expects he will be on his feet at the end. And besides, she is not there to watch; has not been there for two years now; is not there to cry out with heartfelt anguish as he is unseated, not there to cradle his head in her arms, and weep tears of disappointment for him at his loss, and relief for herself at his safety. No, it is just another tournament. He will give it his best shot, but in the scheme of things, it does not matter. Tomorrow will be a new day, the start of a new life,

more comfortable, more restrained, more suited to an aging knight, whose glory days are past, and whose back aches in the mornings.

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The heralds, the trumpets, the announcement of the joust, and now, the carefree gaiety of the peasants becomes muted; the babble recedes, the chatter subsides, and the world diminishes until it contains just him and his opponent.

A little tightness in the chest, a little perspiration on the palms, but the vision; oh, the vision is so clear, the focus is so precise. The beast beneath him senses the change in rhythm, in tempo, and her hooves begin to stutter on the firm grass of the track. Left hand up to pull down the visor, which falls into place with a metallic clunk. Breathing amplified now within the helm, deeper and more ragged as the blood begins to pump even though not yet needed. The world has reduced to a slit, yet in that slit, everything that needs to be seen is visible, can almost be touched.

A movement to his left and a hand is raised; a linen pennant rustles gently in the breeze. The mare is eager now; can scarcely be restrained as she paws at the earth, and snorts her breathing in a forceful echo of his own. Fighting now to hold her back, wheeling from side to side, nostrils flaring on both knight and charger, perspiration glistening on the body of the mare, and running down the arm of the knight, hearts pounding, two beings melding into one, two spirits responding in unison...

The pennant falls.

Spurs into the flanks, and body instantly leaning forward to combat the blow to the base of the spine from the high-backed saddle as the mare tears at the ground in acceleration. Lance coming out of its rest as they gain speed: Point of balance always forward, head of the lance coming down and the hilt rotating upward to nestle under the right armpit.

Tension on the reins reduced now as they reach full speed, and shield arm being cocked to take the blow from the champion's lance. Breathing hard now, blood pounding through bodies as the distance between opponents reduces at an alarming rate. Lance locked into place, balanced, unwavering, pointed at the heart of the champion; searching for an opening, the slightest chink in which the lance might find some purchase.

Massive, explosive impact as lances strike shields, splintering wildly and shields crash cruelly into the armoured ribs of the knights. Bodies are flung backward by the enormous impact, knees clinging desperately, and backs buffeted by the high-backed saddles keeping the knights upright, the combatants pull back on the reins, slowing the thundering horses. The first pass is over.

Visor open, he gulps in fresh air. The mare is still eager, and canters with a stutter as he wheels her around. They begin to trot back to the lines for a new lance. The champion passes within yards. Not the time to show weakness, not the time to admit any pain from the battering just received. He looks into the champion's smiling face and sees supercilious pity. His own face shows nothing; no expression, no feeling, nothing to give away the competing emotions of pain and hatred; nothing to tell the king's champion that an old knight will compete until there is no energy remaining, no part of his body left unbruised; nothing left in the vessel but raw pride. And even then, he will go on if the opportunity arises.

He has reached his lines; his squire looks up and asks the question. The knight nods, although he is aware that his right leg is quivering, then, taking the new lance from the squire, he lowers it carefully into the rest and looks up again.

The king is standing, drawn to his feet by the ferocity of the first clash. On other occasions he has bidden his knights desist when the first clash has been so brutal and in the spirit of carnival has awarded garlands to both, as shared victors. He hesitates, looks first to his champion, then to his favourite knight, hesitates again, then, recognising the end of an era, slowly sits again in muffled agitation, offering his faithful servant one last, futile chance at impossible glory.

No tightness in the chest this time, but in its place the steady throbbing of a spreading bruise. The mare, mature and strong, resumes the nervous staccato of her hooves. Her rider, regaining his breath, settles and once again begins to inhabit a world shrinking by degree until it is once again the tight, focussed sphere of battle. Breathing is deep, but steady this time, eyes are bright and vision is as clear as the first time. The lance feels a little heavier, but he knows this feeling, knows it is the after effects of the blood rush of the first charge, knows it will be replaced by another rush when the time comes, and so he remains calm, relaxed.

Although focussed, he allows his gaze to take in the empty box, as he always does; the box from which he drew his strength and his inspiration when tournaments produced formidable opponents. And, just for a moment, he sees her there; sees her long black hair, her smile, her almost imperceptible wave, and feels, once again, the warmth which such a love as hers was able to generate in his being.

The pennant is fluttering in the breeze as he returns his gaze to the champion, and pulls down the visor.

The pennant drops, and he is jolted forward by the eager mare as his spurs rake her sides. Body forward again, he lifts the lance from the rest and begins to rotate the head downward. Lance in place, couched under right

arm, grip on the reins relaxing as speed is reached, left arm coming up to position the shield to parry the blow from the champion's lance. Focussing desperately, searching for the chink, the opportunity, the one-in-a-million chance to make the hit stick. Closing too fast now, no time to think, no time to search, prepare to defend, prepare for the colossal impact about to occur.

A tiny pebble on the track, and the champion's horse skids an inch. Balance upset just a fraction; for just an instant in which the shield arm wavers; an instant in which the champion's defence is momentarily less than rock solid; an instant in which a lance crashes into the unsteady shield; an instant in which the champion's weight is not all directed toward the oncoming weapon; an instant in which the older knight's lance does not splinter immediately, but retains its structure for a fraction of a second before shattering; an instant in which the inertia of the lance defeats the inertia of the rider.

The champion's lance is nonetheless devastating as, in its wayward passage during the unsteady moment, it strikes a sickening blow at the base of the opposing knight's helm, before glancing off, spiralling skyward, then crashing, along with its champion, in a cloud of shredded grass and dust, into the turf.

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Almost senseless from the battering to his armoured neck from the champion's lance, the older knight clings in desperation with knees and hands, roughly reining in his mount; ears ringing, eyes seeing nothing through a dark red mist, up and down indistinguishable from each other, time passing at an unknown rate. The beast beneath him is untroubled, remains eager, and is now a handful to control as he begins to emerge from the cacophony of sounds in his head, back into a world of distorted shapes, and the beginnings of some vague sense of order again.

Unable to remain upright on his mount, he clings drunkenly, then slides in ungainly fashion from the saddle. Leaning heavily on the mare, legs buckling under his armoured weight, he claws at the saddle, clinging upright, breathing in wretched gasps, desperately gulping air and willing his head to clear. Momentarily steadied, he reaches up, tugging at the helm, discarding it roughly, not caring where on the turf it falls, and, for the first time since the sickening impact, begins to find breathing easier again. The horizon steadies but the pounding in his ears remains.

He turns and sees the crumpled heap of the champion rising from the turf; sees the riderless horse at the other end of the course and realises the improbability of what has just occurred. From within his battered and bruised depths a chuckle emerges and a feeling of lightness begins to overtake him.

In this, his last appearance, he has unseated the king's champion. But the instant is momentary: once again the hatred he feels for the man overwhelms him and sanity sharply returns.

The champion is on his feet now. Helm discarded, he glowers at the older knight. Reason has no hold on him as he roars to his squire. Within an instant the champion's squire is lumbering forward, carrying sword and shield.

Now the situation is ugly, desperate, turning impossible again, but this time with malice; the threat of death now hanging in the air. His own squire has also responded and is charging forward urgently bearing sword and shield.

From the vicinity of the royal entourage, knights also run toward the combatants. The joust is over, further action is not necessary within the rules of chivalry and, as often happens, hot tempers must be restrained before knights who fight together on the field of battle, damage each other on the field of sport. Restraining hands, consoling voices, raucous back slapping, and cups of wine will be the order of the day as damaged pride and bruised egos are assuaged.

"Hold." The roar is commanding.

The runners hesitate, then stop. The king's champion, arm outstretched, armoured forefinger pointing accusingly at the advancing knights, snarls his command.

"Come no closer, my brothers; he is mine. His lucky joust may have unseated me, but I am the king's Champion; he who bests me, momentarily, does not walk away with glory; he must see it through to the bitter end, or be bested himself. This taste in my mouth, this taste of – what is it, defeat? – is bitter and unfamiliar. I will be avenged. *Je serai vengé*."

The king, brought to his feet by the staggering clash of wood and steel and battered bodies, stands, feet apart, hands tightly gripping the wooden railing in front of him, and stares painfully toward the two knights and their squires, agonisingly holding the eyes of his favourite knight for a long moment, then straightens with steely resolve. The protocol is clear, the champion knows it and stands, feet apart, both arms outstretched, awaiting the king's signal to unleash him into combat. Still breathing hard, the older knight realises the impossibility of the situation facing his king and slowly turns, then, in one slow, graceful, fatal movement, draws his sword from the scabbard proffered by his squire. The die is cast.

The king turns away, unable to look, then, unwilling to avoid looking, sinks back into his seat, right elbow propped, chin buried in right hand, watching intently, fingers of the left hand drumming in agitation, assailed by memories of a strong right arm slashing through the air, foiling an axe within

inches of his own head; an arm, which older now, but still glinting with unwavering steadiness in the afternoon sunlight, now holds a sword pointed at the heart of the king's champion.

The dance commences.

Averill and Bijou: The one, older and a little slower now, yet more experienced in battle, but still suffering from the lance to the neck; the other, younger, stronger and the king's champion, enraged and dangerous; the slightly out of tune vestiges of the once silky-smooth skills of a hundred ferocious battles versus the raw power and bludgeoning strength of the younger champion. And yet, within the mind of Averill, there is no fear. The earlier resignation of an aging knight in his last appearance is forgotten now. There is no world outside of this small circle inhabited by the combatants; no distractions, no thought of tomorrow. There is only here, only now.

A lunge, a strike and Averill's shield shudders as it parries the champion's ferocious opening blow. Such strength! Head still not clear, sharp pain in neck, throbbing pain in left ribs; need to be careful; need to fight intelligently or be overwhelmed by sheer brute strength. Bijou follows up immediately, in no mood to waste time, intent upon vengeance; pride bruised and hurting. Another crashing blow, parried again, Averill retreating; wary, watching, seeking desperately to clear the muddled brain.

Averill lunges. The movement is slow, seen early by the champion and disdainfully brushed aside. The champion immediately launches his own counter-attack, and Averill is again forced back a pace. Bijou's face alternates between the grimace of effort and anger as he strikes, and the cruel smile of supreme confidence in combat.

Both strike. Swords clash and bodies tremble, but the advantage is clearly with the champion. Averill stumbles, but regains his balance before the champion can capitalise. The king watches with foreboding, acutely aware of the prowess of his champion; aware of the humiliation to which his favourite knight is now consigned, yet unable to shake away the images tumbling through his mind; images of far-off fields of battle when two brothers-in-arms fought side-by-side through mud and rain and blood, through treacherous marshes and bristling undergrowth, and charged in screaming unison across wide fields of early morning mist and sunshine, hearts racing, blood pounding, wind whistling through visors and flowing locks, crashing with unshakable confidence into the oncoming hordes. He wishes, even though knowing the futility of the wish, that the relentless march of time did not have to be so uncompromising, and that today, for just one more time, just a little of the grace and skill of those former years might be granted to the old hero now struggling to make an impression below, and given the ugly mood of the champion, perhaps even battling for his life.

Another blow, and Averill staggers again.

The champion is smiling more now and grimacing less. The confidence, bruised by the ignominious and premature end to the joust, has returned. He is the king's champion and no-one deprives him of that. No-one takes more than a momentary advantage; and whoever dares do so pays seriously for such precociousness, such foolhardiness. The rage has subsided, replaced by supreme confidence and disdain, but the savagery of the attack remains undiluted.

The older knight's head is clearing now; horizon no longer lurching, legs no longer dismembered appendages beyond the reach of willpower. The ground is firm underfoot.

Another blow launched, but parried successfully, and this time, no stumble. Feet remain planted firmly, body sways at the hips, shield rises to meet the onrushing sword, but continues its motion, diverting the energy of the blow into a glancing slice, which, finding no resistance, causes the champion to lurch forward under his own momentum, at which point Averill's sword begins its own downward motion towards Bijou's exposed shoulder. But too slow, and the counter-blow misses... but not by much.

Bijou roars in anger. Averill watches, waits and feels the balance swinging. The champion's strength is his power, but therein also lies his weakness; for power must be countered by balance, lest it be exploited, and the returning rage is not conducive to restraint or to balance.

Another lunge, another slash, another miss, another stumble. The king is alert, upright, no fingers drumming now; both hands are gripping the arms of the royal seat; he is half-risen, for he too has sensed the swing; has fought beside Averill too often to not notice, to not share, to not understand what is happening.

Both men breathing heavily; the one carrying slightly more grimace than smile now, but arrogantly confident that victory is but a few slashes of the blade away; the other wary, steady-eyed, focussed.

Averill feints a thrust, Bijou parries upward to where the sword was expected, the delayed stroke now slashing cruelly across the exposed upper arm: sharp pain, but no damage; protective armour saving the champion's arm from more than a serious bruising. Averill nods minutely; the image of the raised arm with the exposed armpit now burned into his mind; the chink, the weakness, the target.

Another roar from the champion, but no delay this time as he launches a mighty strike against the older knight, who drifts sideways, avoiding much, but not all, of the blow; reeling drunkenly backwards from the sheer power of the attack. Bijou follows up with another mighty blow and again Averill parries much, but not all, of the blow, and once again stumbles backwards.

The champion senses victory now, and begins stalking the older knight: pace, slash, pace, slash. Each monumental blow crashes into Averill's shield, but the rhythm is familiar, and although being forced backward at each stroke, the older knight is no longer off balance.

Another pace, arm rising for another blow. Averill feints. Bijou counters with raised shield, then excruciating, agonising, searing pain. The champion's face contorts and the guttural roar of a wounded beast vomits from his mouth, as Averill's thrusting sword buries itself into the unprotected armpit of the champion, then rips free in one sublime, fluid motion, arcing up before slashing down upon the gloved right hand of the champion, severing metal, crushing fingers and shredding flesh. The finger plates of the shattered right glove drip blood, as does the left side of the champion's breast-plate, from armpit to waist.

The champion falls to his knees in agony as the point of Averill's sword reaches his throat. The shield drops. Bijou's sword lies where it was plundered from his shattered right hand.

"Yield."

CHAPTER TWO

A sudden draught of cool air as the wooden door opens, and Averill rises, with difficulty, from the warmth of the wooden bath in which he is soaking his wounds, and attempts a stilted bow.

"Majesty."

"I was sure I would find you here," smiles the king. "Be seated my old friend, be seated. May I?"

"Of course, Your Majesty, please sit wherever you wish."

Averill lowers himself gingerly back into the blessed warmth of the bathtub. Silence; the familiarity of old comrades.

"You look like shit."

"Yes, Your Majesty." A pause. "But so does he!"

The king erupts into laughter and the formality of the occasion is broken; banished from the intimate camaraderie which envelopes the two old warriors. Averill attempts to join in, but instead issues a groan of bruised agony and settles for a small chuckle and a very broad grin.

"You had us worried there, for a time, my friend."

"I had me worried there, for a time, my Lord. Much as I hate the man, he is still formidable."

"He's not your favourite person, is he?"

"Indeed, sire, he is not. Would that the rules of the tournament allowed me to take his life, then I would have slaughtered him on the spot and felt nothing of it, my Lord."

The king looks long and hard at Averill. "I know, my old friend, I know." Then quietly: "Do you think you will ever be able to forgive?"

"Ah, my Lord." A long pause as Averill thinks, and slowly shakes his head. Then looking up: "I believe I am an honest man, my Lord; and a fair man, and a man who holds few grudges. But there is a hatred burning in my gut that I cannot extinguish."

A pause, a shudder, an anguished look. "You knew her, my Lord. You loved her as everyone loved her. There is not a day goes by when I do not miss her; not a night when I do not weep for her; not a minute when her absence becomes tolerable."

The king holds Averill's gaze, then replies, softly. "I know, my brother; I know. Yours is not the life that any of us would have chosen, nor would we

have lived it as well as you have done. She was divine. She was everything a man could want, and more. She was the angel for whom you had waited so many years. I cannot even start to imagine how you live each day; and yet you do."

Abruptly the knight looks away, fighting to regain control of his emotions. "And I have a daughter, my Lord, who reminds me, constantly, of her. A beautiful daughter, now forced to go through life without her mother. Was it not enough that she spent her recent years in poverty, running from marauding brigands, living on the dregs of campfire waste? Is it right that now, just when she gained the family she had, for so long, been seeking, her suffering should return in this most sad and unexpected way?"

The king kneels down beside the bathtub, placing one arm around the shoulders of his greatest ally, and with gentle strength, draws the head of his old friend to his breast.

"She is young, Gregory; and strong. She will survive. And, she loves you dearly; almost worships the ground you walk upon, although you do not see it. She is the greatest reason you have for carrying on, my friend."

Looking up again, the knight smiles wanly, then tries earnestly to give voice to his feelings. "I know that a knight's vow requires forgiveness, my Lord, and I have tried, all these years, to behave as a true and worthy knight. I have run when you have said, 'run', I have fought when you have said, 'fight', I have sung victory songs with my brothers-in-arms, I have bedded women and enjoyed the lust of those fiery nights. But now, there is always emptiness; always the longing for what cannot be; for the life and the love I knew for so short a time. And, try as I might, my Lord, I find I cannot forgive. And I feel certain that the anger, the emptiness, the hopelessness that I feel, shall be my penance for the rest of my days."

Thus they remain, knight and king; the one nursing bruised and aching body, the other with head bowed, embracing his battered ally of a lifetime's battles. No words; no need; until the king slowly releases his comrade with a gentle, "Take some time, then come and join us in the Pleasaunce. We have a banquet to conduct, and I need a hero."

CHAPTER THREE

Such a meal, such a feast, so much laughter, so much raucous singing, so many very bad jokes.

But, as he had entered the banqueting hall, there had been a sudden hush, as no-one quite knew how to handle the situation. How does one greet the knight who has defeated the king's champion; especially given the ferocious manner in which today's contest had taken place?

The king, equal to the task, had, within seconds, recognised the potential for the celebration to turn ugly, and acted decisively.

"Sir Gregory, come sit with us, for we are celebrating the triumphant end to the days of my favourite knight."

Averill had bowed, rather stiffly and a little painfully.

"Your Majesty does me a great honour, and I humbly accept your invitation."

"Sir René Bijou is unable to attend this evening," continued the king. "The pains of combat, as we all know, can often be unexpectedly severe, even when the event is sporting. Nevertheless, his faithful brothers are here and we all welcome you to our table, for this day is yours. You have shown us all what it means to be a knight of this kingdom; what it means to carry one's pride to the end of one's days of active service, and not one of us would begrudge you the victory so richly deserved and so valiantly earned this day.

"My Lords, my brothers; join me in recognising the years of valiant service, the courage, the heart, and the steadfast refusal to acknowledge odds which were too high for average men to contemplate.

"To Sir Gregory."

The assembled company had enthusiastically joined in the celebration. Even Bijou's closest friends had acknowledged Averill's achievements this day and had commented that Bijou himself should be proud to have shared the arena with Averill in this piece of history.

But Averill's instincts had told him a different story; a story he knew was not yet finished.

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Now that the feast is over, he has withdrawn to a quiet corner, resting on beautifully embroidered cushions, observing the merriment around him, but too tired, too bruised to take any further part.

"Goodnight Daddy."

He gingerly looks up and finds the beautiful, smiling, oriental face of his daughter. "Goodnight, my Odelia."

She leans down and tenderly kisses his lips. Almost a woman now; fourteen years old, and fourteen years young; at the stage where one never quite knows who is going to speak; the little girl or the young lady. She leaves, stops, turns, blows him a kiss, then continues on in animated conversation with her maid. He gazes after her, remembering that walk, those delightful, unpredictable surprises, that sparkle in the eyes.

He closes his eyes but the tears still escape.

He opens them again, looking around for some distraction; something to take his mind off the pain of his loss; something to focus upon; something to bring him back to the here and now, and leave him to visit his private world of grief another time, when he can close his eyes, and rest his head, and be absorbed into that sad, private world of memories which he inhabits from time to time, re-living the beauty, the happiness, and all that was good in the world for a time; for such a brief time.

His gaze wanders, slightly unfocussed, around the hall, where the revelry is becoming fractured as groups seek out their like-minded companions, to carry on the high spirits and bonhomie established earlier during the banquet; the boisterous group in the middle, engaged in serious arm wrestling; the quieter quartet above them, who Averill knows will be earnestly debating some quite philosophical elements of life; the various individual knights pursuing their romantic encounters with the many beautiful ladies who make up the softer aspect of the court; the larger group, mixed knights and ladies, who, as yet, have not established any pairings, but who, in the course of this night, might well do so; and the other large group, the recently-graduated squires who, wide-eyed and youthfully clumsy, are taking in their first court banquet as knights, some becoming exceedingly drunk, others bashfully clinging to the edges of the group, observing, and drinking in the intoxicating atmosphere of this night.

He notices her now, auburn hair, dark eyes. She is standing some few yards away, looking at him; looking at him as if not quite able to believe what she has seen this day; not quite able to accept that this slender man, whose hair is showing the first wisps of grey, whose face carries the lines and scars of battle, whose stride today no longer carried the spring which must surely have been present in youth, had walked from the field of the tournament victorious; had ultimately despatched the champion, even though he himself had been battered and bloodied in the process.

She looks away, and walks towards the king, nodding courteously as gentlemen of the entourage offer their compliments. And then slows, turns, and looks once again, directly at him; quizzically, uncertain, perhaps unable to push aside the prejudices which say he should not have been able to achieve this victory today; that it had most likely been a fluke, a once-off, an event not to be counted in the list of significant events, or of things upon which a life, or a love, could be based. She turns away again, and walks on.

He realises he is standing now, watching after her, his breath catching a little in his chest, his gaze following the sweep of her departing back, his heart slowing again after the initial lurch, his face slowly colouring as the feeling spreads; the feeling he had experienced, once, long ago, when an angel had looked up at him with terrified eyes when he stood, sword raised, feet planted firmly in the stirrups, and roared out his challenge to any who remained willing to fight.

A hand slaps him roughly on the back; the moment splinters into a thousand pieces, and the good humour of the night's revelry imposes itself upon him.