

BRIDGET &
GABE
**ARE NOT
OKAY**

LEX CROUCHER



**WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK**

Proposed Autumn Tour for THE ORDER OF THE ROUND TABLE

Knights present at meeting:

Arthur Gwen Gabriel Bridget

- ♦ Depart upon the first week ^{king} of October 

Gabe you know
this isn't your
private copy
right? This is the
one we're using in
council meetings

I did not
know that

Loving the
confidence
here

Arthur don't
be rude

I was being
nice. If I was
being rude
I'd have
written
'ha ha'

- ♦ First, a tour of one of the king's
new schools, an encouraging and
auspicious start
- ♦ Visit Batstoke, feast at the table of
Lord Fentman and speak wisely to
the people there *ha ha*
- ♦ Travel north to seek the Questing
Beast, to assuage the fears of the
locals and bring the Beast into
our custody
- ♦ Further north and west, to find and
best the Green Knight as his bridge

Isn't this just
going to be
a local's dog
attacking
sheep? Are
we arresting
a dog????

*Note to self
- speak to
lady Oakley
about the
optics of
arresting dog

Check archives for
best practice here

I think you'd best
practise ducking to
avoid an axe



Bridget do you think the Lady of the Lake will be pretty?

Leave me out of this.

Wait, who drew this?? It's so good



- ♦ Hosted by the Baron Hayes, regale the town with a speech telling of our great deeds Wonder if mediocre deeds will do
Council please disregard! It's going to be great!

- ♦ Tour the school in his barony and delight the children

- ♦ Travel to Wales

- ♦ Commune with the Lady of the Lake, to discover the truth of her intentions

- ♦ Visit the Prince of Wales at Harlech Castle to improve relations between the two countries YAY!!!

- ♦ A third school visit for more delight, wisdom, etcetera

Arthur I know you didn't write anything but that doesn't mean I don't know what you're thinking. Stop.

- ♦ Journey to the coast to meet with the fisherman who is in possession of the Holy Grail

Live forever, the end

This is too much.

We're going to have fun!

Arthur.

I didn't even
say anything
Gwendoline

It was unkind
underlining
So now a man
can't even
underline!!

This is an official
court document
Arthur please do
not say 'yay'

Okay, huzzah!
Glory be!!!

*Note to scribe: please reproduce ten of these without the additional notes, and burn this copy - Lady Oakley, Steward to the King

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This book takes place in an alternative fantasy timeline, so please don't be startled by tea drinking and other less delicious inaccuracies, as they are entirely intentional. Also a word of warning: Our characters struggle with some difficult emotions on their quest, including grief, post-traumatic stress, and anxiety. Please guard your hearts wisely.



It befell in the days of King Allmot of House de Gray, when he was king of all England, that his cousin Lord Willard did rise against him in rebellion, with some unhappy traitors of the cult of King Arthur behind him, in order to take his throne by force.

King Allmot fought well and nobly as a king should, and cut many a deadly stroke. But Lord Willard's man smote him with his sword, and he swooned to the ground, and the boy who was to be Lord Delacey, sworn to marry the Princess Gwendoline, held him up until his life was spent.

Then the Lady Bridget Leclair, sworn knight and very good friend to the Princess Gwendoline, took up the sword Excalibur, and struck down the traitor Lord Willard. So it came to be that King Allmot's son, Gabriel, was to be king.

—FROM AN EARLY DRAFT OF THE QUESTS OF KING GABRIEL
AND HIS ROUND TABLE BY SIR FLORIAN ARDEN

One

In one of the many anterooms that surrounded the royal council chambers at Camelot, there stood a large, ornate wardrobe that was rarely ever touched. It had apparently once been used to house cloaks, because somebody had left one behind, its scarlet velvet now webbed and pilled with ashy dust. The rest of the wardrobe was empty. It smelled like camphor and rodent, and the door didn't quite shut properly, letting in a thin, gold line of candlelight.

King Gabriel knew all of this because he was sitting inside it, having a panic attack.

It had become his preferred location to panic, if he was unable to retreat to his own bedchamber. The darkness quieted his mind, and the fragrant wood against his back was soothing. He hoped, one day, that he might see a mouse. Nothing could be better for a panic attack than the appearance of a lovely mouse.

Somebody entered the anteroom.

Gabriel lifted his head from where it had been resting on his upper arm, and slowed his breathing to a steady shudder.

"Your Majesty?"

It was Lord Ali Das, one of his councillors, the Master of Trade. He had a very relaxing voice. Gabriel enjoyed listening to it during long meetings. He didn't waste words, like some of the other members of his council. He was also the youngest, except for Gabriel, who often felt like a silly boy king, surrounded by giants.

"Sire," Lord Das said gently. "I saw you walk in here, and the guards didn't see you leave. The most logical explanation is that you're still somewhere in this room, but as that seems unlikely, I'm going to keep looking for you. I imagine I'll be back here in about . . . ten or twenty seconds."

Footsteps, as he walked away.

Gabriel sighed, banged his elbow on the door, and unfolded himself out of the wardrobe. He had grown somewhat used to compensating for the loss of the lower half of his left arm—a battle wound that still felt fresh some days, thirteen months after the amputation—but could never predict when the scattered pinpricks of pain might strike along the scarred tissue, white-hot like bolts of lightning.

The candlelight felt too bright out here, the air too close. His heart was beating at a heady gallop. Could you die of panic? Probably. He'd have to ask the castle Wizard.

"Ah," said Lord Das, re-entering the room and smiling pleasantly. He had moat-green eyes, rich brown skin, and thick, black hair that curled down to the nape of his neck. Around five-and-thirty, and soothingly handsome. "Your Majesty. I must have just missed you."

"I was hiding in the cupboard," Gabriel said miserably.

"I know," said Lord Das. "I was giving you the opportunity to pretend that you were not . . . hiding in the cupboard."

"Thanks," said Gabriel. "Sorry."

"Her Royal Highness was under the impression that you might have slipped away to attend to other matters, and that we should continue without you."

"I wasn't attending to anything."

Lord Das smiled again. "What you get up to in the cupboard is your own business."

"Do you think it's all . . . in hand?" Gabriel waved toward the door, in the general direction of the council chambers. He was thinking longingly of his bed, his cat curled up on the other pillow, the blankets piled up and the window cracked to let in the last summer breeze.

"I think we can get through one day of wildly improbable conspiracy theories without you. It is not the best use of an agile mind anyway."

"Very good."

Gabriel was halfway out the door when Lord Das cleared his throat. "You know, you don't have to hide in cupboards. You're the king. If you don't want to do something, you simply don't have to do it."

What he didn't understand was that Gabriel actually *wanted* to be in the council meetings, in theory; he wanted to be on top of everything, to have something wise and clever to add to every discussion, to solve the problems that felt unsolvable. For a while, he'd felt good at it. Getting on with things. Making decisions. The aftermath of his father's death had filled him with a strange sense of calm—the worst had happened, and here he still was, running a country. Putting one foot in front of the other, one matter of state after the next.

Whatever that strange magic had been—shock, or perhaps denial—it hadn't lasted. Lately, it often felt like his head was full of flies, and his tongue was the apple they were filling with worms. Today was a worm day.

Back in his chambers, he found Merlin Lucifer the ginger tomcat curled up on the end of the bed with his front legs sticking up at odd angles, asleep with his eyes slightly open in a way that was very unnerving. It was a relief to lie down, not bothering to remove his jacket, and place his hand on the cat's back so that he could feel the gentle rise and fall of his ribs, his fishy breath soft and grounding.

An hour later, he awoke to the sound of his door crashing open.

Princess Gwendoline, scourge of the privy council, came stalking into the room. She was a little more solid than she'd been this time last year, secretly muscled in the shoulders, less pointy-faced, and even more freckled. On her nineteenth birthday, she'd cut two feet off her flaming red hair so that it fell to just below her shoulders. Agnes, her lady-in-waiting, had begged her not to do it with tears in her eyes. The queen mother had almost fainted. To be fair, it didn't take a lot to get Gwen and Gabriel's mother to faint these days.

"Have you seen this?" Gwen said, flopping onto the other side of the bed, accidentally dislodging Merlin Lucifer, who made a disgruntled *ek* of a noise and escaped to a nearby armchair.

Gabriel took a crumpled piece of parchment from her. It was a notice proclaiming the results of a competitive tournament in Kent.

"What am I looking at?"

"Just read it, please, preferably before my head explodes."

Gabriel read it thoroughly, looking for clues, ignoring Gwen's pained sighs as he did so at his own pace. At the very end, he found a single line that informed jousting enthusiasts: *Lady Bridget Leclair forfeited second round, withdrew from lists.*

Ah. Gabriel was beginning to see the problem.

"It just doesn't sound like her to me. Does it sound like her to you? Forfeited? Second round? Withdrew? From lists? *Again?* That's the fourth time this season."

"You know her better than I do," Gabriel said, closing his eyes. "You spent all that time in the spring . . . knowing each other."

"Don't be vulgar, it's weird on you," Gwen said, before snatching back the notice. "I wish I knew what she was thinking."

"Why don't you ask her?"

Gwen screwed up the parchment and threw it across the room, igniting Merlin Lucifer's interest and sending him careening after it; he managed to get it stuck on one of his claws, became very frightened of it, and tried to run away, unable to understand how it was keeping pace.

"It's not that simple. Things are so much easier when we're . . ." Her fingers twitched, like she was reaching for something physical. She sighed. "If she wanted to talk, she'd have responded to my letters. I'm not going to push her. I just wish I knew why."

"I'm sure she misses you too, G. Perhaps you ought to try again."

Gwen fixed him with a very penetrating look. "I'm not going to take advice on this from the idiot prince of terrible communication."

"Actually," Gabriel said, wondering if his sister might go

away if he simply put a pillow over his head and stopped replying, "I'm the idiot *king* of terrible communication now."

"That you are," said Gwen. "And long may he fucking reign."

One year and one month ago, almost to the day, Gwen and Gabriel's father had fallen in battle so close to Camelot castle that Gabriel could see the exact spot from his old bedroom window. He hadn't thrown his mother out of the king's chambers upon his coronation—that would have felt weird and mean, despite precedent that insisted on it—but he had moved to completely new quarters: renovated guest rooms that didn't treat him to a vista of ghosts or the joys of reliving the most horrible moments of his life every time he fancied checking on the weather.

Now his chambers looked out over the orchard and the gardens, and he could torture himself in an entirely different way.

Every morning, Lord Arthur Delacey liked to walk the grounds. Sometimes he was accompanied by Gabriel's sister; sometimes he walked arm in arm with his body-man, Sidney Fitzgilbert; other times, he made the journey alone. It had originally been part of his Wizard-ordered rehabilitation, a way of regaining his strength after being attacked by his own father's hired henchmen and then almost finished off entirely during the battle for Camelot, but Gabriel suspected it was necessary for other reasons too.

Namely that he no longer reached for a drink to dull the sharp edges of life, or to bolster his courage, or even to relax on a fine summer evening. The change had come about after his head injury, and while Gabriel got the impression that *this* might have something to do with Arthur's father too, he'd never been brave enough to ask.

Arthur liked to smell the flowers these days, even if he did

suffer from allergies, so that every flower-sniff was followed by hours of complaining. His hair, which had been butchered that summer along with the rest of him, had grown out so that it brushed the top of his shoulders again, although it seemed shaggier now than it had been, prone to waves instead of lying flat and glossy.

Gabriel knew all of this because he'd been wildly and painfully in love with Arthur Delacey until February, when he had abruptly decided that it was more sensible for all involved if he tried not to be.

He'd almost asked to change chambers again, or at least for new furniture, so that he could avoid looking at the empty armchair Arthur had liked to sprawl in, with none of his limbs contained to the parts traditionally used for sitting—or his bedside table, where Arthur had taken to leaving notes tucked into the books that Gabriel was reading, finding little ways to speak to him when Gabriel was too deep in his own head to hear him. The less said about his bed, the better—not because it had been party to countless nights of unfettered passion, but because he'd spent quite a lot of time crying in it after his father died, jolted from nightmares by the pain from his amputation, and Arthur had usually been there to scratch soothingly at Gabriel's curls and hum nonsense until he fell asleep.

It wasn't like theirs had been a long and storied romance; a reunion last summer for the first time since they were unfriendly children, a slow circling, a few stolen kisses, and then a tragedy that had thrown everything into sharp relief.

Unfortunately, when you were the king, people had certain expectations about whom you'd bed and wed—and when you were a king who'd decided just a few months into your rule to reveal historic letters of a romantic nature between King Arthur and Sir Lancelot, your personal relationships were

inevitably subject to the sort of scrutiny that made Gabriel want to lie down and die.

The people of England had been shaken by the coup that had killed Gabriel's father and needed a strong, stable leader who spent his time giving encouraging speeches, untangling messes, and reforging stronger alliances, not a boy of one-and-twenty who spent half of his time silently vibrating with panic and the other half crying into his secret boyfriend's shoulder.

Gabriel had thought that he might be able to be both. He'd briefly clasped that dream, and then let it slip away, lost in the maelstrom of too many hard things happening all at once.

An autumn spent by each other's sides and a tentatively happy Yuletide had turned into the coldest winter Gabriel had ever known, and he had warmed himself by the fire in his study until three o'clock in the morning reading reports on civil altercations and declining public approval rather than seeking out a friendlier embrace. When it snowed in February, blanketing Camelot in hushed white, Gabriel didn't notice for two days; when Arthur left him a note on his bed asking if they could talk, he didn't find it for almost a week.

Eventually Arthur had discovered him early one morning standing in the kitchens eating freshly baked bread directly from the cook's paddle, and Gabriel had said, betraying his own heart, "I think I need to focus on being king right now," and Arthur had looked at him for a very long time, and then said, "Okay."

Gabriel relived it all the time in his head. *Okay. Okay! Okay? Okay.*

The one thing it wasn't was okay.

Two

In that time there was a knight of great renown, Lady Bridget Leclair, who had taken up the sword Excalibur and done great deeds with it, though she protested it was but a replica. All who rode against her in the tilt were sore afraid, and so many ladies of the country loved her passing well, on some days she could hardly move for gifts of tokens and fine flowers.

—FROM AN EARLY DRAFT OF *THE QUESTS OF KING GABRIEL*
AND *HIS ROUND TABLE* BY SIR FLORIAN ARDEN

I could put a cloak over you,” Neil the squire said, peering out of the window with ill-disguised excitement. “Or we could find a double. Someone who looks exactly like you, to use as a distraction.”

“A double,” Bridget repeated, frowning down at her vambrace and tightening the strap until the leather creaked. “And how many six-foot-tall Tai women knights do you know, Neil?”

“You are nowhere near six feet tall,” Neil said derisively, still gazing out at the crowds. “But point taken. Stop fiddling with that, you insufferable pedant. I already fixed it.”

Fair. Neil *was* a fastidious squire. He was sixteen, but wise beyond his years in a way that was very wearing, as it mostly seemed to manifest itself as a lack of proper deference to

seniority and a world-weary bitchiness that the other squires found very inspiring.

Still. Her vambrace had felt loose last week, and it had been very distracting, and the distraction had led somewhere . . . worse. Had Neil been lax when he armored her? Head elsewhere? He did seem to be enjoying all the attention they were getting—he'd been padding his breeches and adding extra feathers to his hats, so she often felt like she was following a well-buttocked goose out into the lists—and maybe it was impacting his duties. An expression her mother loved to repeat, which roughly translated as *To make a mess and blame the toilet hole*, came to mind before she dismissed it.

"Ready?" Neil cracked open the door, and a cheer went up. It set Bridget's nerves jangling like jester's bells. Neil winked, and she fixed him with a withering look.

"Stop enjoying this."

"Shan't," he said, and then shoved the door fully open.

There was perhaps nobody as ill-suited to minor celebrity as Lady Bridget Leclair. She had built her life around self-improvement and routine; she didn't compete at tourneys to bolster her ego, but because she liked to, and because there was always something to learn, so that tomorrow she would be better. Win or lose, she put in the work. It didn't matter when the crowds booed, and it didn't matter when they cheered.

Many were cheering now. They wouldn't bloody stop. She couldn't entirely blame them. The story that had spread the length and breadth of the country was this: When the royal tourney had been revealed as cover for a cultist coup, the kingdom's only lady knight had valiantly thrown herself into battle to protect the king, and had managed to draw Excalibur from the stone before using it to slay Lord Willard, the pretender seeking the throne.

It sounded impressive, obviously. Bridget could see that objectively. But it was all in the telling. It didn't seem to matter to anyone that Bridget had been one of many to leap to the crown's aid, nor that she'd only grabbed Excalibur (ninth edition) because it was the nearest spare blade to hand, nor that she'd spent half the battle unconscious and had barely been able to see straight when she'd put an abrupt and bloody end to the uprising. She'd been sick in her mouth a bit, afterward. If they added that to the retellings they'd somehow manage to make that heroic too: *Lo, the chivalrous containment of puke behind tongue and teeth, so as not to sully the ground where so much royal blood was so recently spilled!*

These same people had thought her a joke when she'd first hit the lists. Some of them hated her even more, now that she was popular. To them she was a Topic of Discussion, not a person. The fickle nature of public opinion only made it clear how right Bridget had been to pay no attention to it in the first place.

The clamor of the crowd hit her with full force when she stepped out into the September sun, along with the smells of trampled straw and spilled ale. Someone had had the forethought to erect a barrier, so that knights could walk from the little staging huts to the lists relatively unmolested, but people were still reaching their arms over the sides to try to touch her armor as she set her shoulders and marched grimly on.

Hard not to notice that it was mostly girls. Women too. When it first happened, these unexpected crowds outside her tent and lining the fences, she'd accepted the favors from the little girls with starstruck, gappy smiles, even a few handkerchiefs from hopeful teens a few years her junior. Now she avoided making eye contact; kept her focus hovering

somewhere above their heads, and tried to ignore the mutterings of disappointment that followed when she entered the stands without signing a tourney poster or kissing so much as a single baby.

She could feel Neil watching her as she checked her vambrace again.

"If you'd just—"

"No, Neil," Bridget said, and it came out somewhat softer than she expected. "Not today."

Neil rubbed his mustache—it was a mustachlet, really, the pale promise of future facial hair—and sighed.

"Go on then. At least strike a few heroic poses, so they've got something nice to draw if they want to etch you."

Sometimes Neil was like a petulant and overconfident cousin who'd decided he had more friends than you and therefore got to be in charge, and other times he was like a fussing stage mother. Neither was preferable.

Bridget pulled on her helm, mounted her horse, Fiona, and rode out into the lists.

Cheers and boos. The low grumble of every man in the stands turning to his neighbor to opine about her prowess and legacy. A baby crying somewhere, wailing up an octave to an ear-splitting crescendo.

Bridget looked at her gauntleted hand on the reins, noted a wispy grass seed stuck to one long, dark strand of her horse's mane, and shifted her weight so that she might sit up a little straighter.

Over by the fence, the marshal was grandstanding for the crowd. Bridget took a deep breath in and out, rolled her shoulders back in their sockets, and felt the familiar, slightly concerning crunch of what she could only assume was her bones meeting discordantly.

She didn't need to follow the tilting rail to its conclusion to size up her opponent; she'd had Neil do it already. Sir Grant was an eager young knight in his first year of the tourney circuit, so green he made Bridget feel decrepit at nineteen. He was strong, and he used it to his advantage. He probably weighed a third more than Bridget, all in, but that was to *her* advantage.

A flock of pigeons wheeled around the top of the stands, turning to dive in perfect, graceful synchronicity—and then the sudden, strangled burst of the starting trumpet sent them panicking in ten different directions.

What was it that made them risk the chaos of the tourney anyway, when surely a quiet perch somewhere far from here was a safer bet?

Approaching hoofbeats. The swell of the crowd. And Bridget was still watching the birds. *Shit*. She hadn't even had time for her usual ritual: a wai to her opponent, a bow of respect, and the signal to her body that the fight was about to begin.

Too late, she snatched the lance from Neil's outstretched hand and urged her horse onward, her haste sending her slightly off balance. The lance was couched too loosely under her arm. She bit down on her lip as she struggled to adjust it. This moment had always been an oasis of calm before, the quiet before the storm, the only noise she registered the sound of her own even breathing inside her helm. Now, everything was just so *loud*.

She could feel her fingers pressed uncomfortably into the joints of her gauntlet, the angle of her wrist not quite right, her seat on the horse unsteady. There was hot sweat prickling at the nape of her neck. Her boots were chafing, or on the verge of chafing—and now a sharp, undefinable pain somewhere

in her ribs, a rhythmic stabbing, as if she were the victim of a mouse with a splinter-sized sword. Her lance was slipping, and it meant that the coronel wasn't set firm, her aim drifting. She looked up at Sir Grant as he approached. He had mud splattered up the flanks of his horse like wild sprays of blood.

It was too late; she wasn't going to land a hit at all. She closed her eyes—*coward*—and had only taken half a readying breath when Sir Grant's lance hit her so squarely in the chest it was as if her heart were a target, painted in livid scarlet on her breastplate.

It was like being struck by lightning. She was thrown clear of her horse, hitting the sand at an angle that sent pain rattling down her spine, blood on her tongue. She lay there, breathing hard as the horses moved away, watching the pigeons pass overhead as they took another lap. The crowd was making some sort of noise, but for the life of her, she couldn't tell which.

She was back on the battlefield at Camelot, sprawled in the dirt, thinking of how strangely alike the screams of battle sounded to the happy roar of spectators. As she'd lain bruised and bleeding with her back pressed against the still-warm body of a fallen soldier, her eyes impossible to open, she'd pictured the flags flying above the tourney stands and told herself that it was all still a game they were playing. When the trumpets sounded, everybody would grumble and dust off their armor and get back up to shake hands and accept their failures and victories.

She could see the flags now. This was no battlefield. Her mind knew that; her racing heart did not.

"Leclair?" Neil said, out of breath as he leaned over her, his face pink. "Alive?"

It was just a bit of bruising. Perhaps a muscle wrenched too

far. In the old days, she would have shaken it off; even smiled about it, later, when the pinch of pain reminded her that she'd ridden hard and taken her knocks.

"Leclair, are you *crying*?"

"No." Bridget exhaled, gingerly heaving herself into a sitting position to see if it hurt. It did. "I'm sweating."

"You're sweating a lot. From your eyes. Is that usual?"

"Well," Bridget said, wheezing slightly. "Now I feel self-conscious."

Neil grabbed her by the pauldrons and dug his heels in to help haul her upright.

"Back on the horse?" he said hopefully. Bridget swallowed the blood in her teeth and bile in her throat, and was suddenly overtaken by a violent nausea, the black tickle of unconsciousness threatening the corners of her vision.

"No," she said, taking off her claustrophobic helm—horrible thing, who'd invented it?—and handing it to Neil. "Withdraw."

"Bridget—"

"Withdraw," Bridget said again, only a slight tremor in her voice. "I forfeit."

The tilt was already lost to her. She would not be a worthy competitor to anyone today.

Sir Grant was riding toward her, in a chivalrous and probably quite genuine display of concern, but Bridget took her horse by the reins and walked away, back toward the competitors' barracks, hoping that from the stands nobody could see how much she was shaking.

The boos were nothing compared to the rush of blood still pounding in her ears.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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