

Fae Attorney

Zoe Storm

(Based on a prompt by Bobbi)

With a shout, Debbie swings her sword: it connects squarely with her opponent's, who loses the already tenuous grip he had on his blade, which goes flying, landing a few metres away as he falls backwards on his behind, barely managing to cushion his fall with his hands.

Gene looks up at Debbie and smiles, inclining his head slightly. "I yield, my lady."

"Art thou sure?" Debbie replies. "I have not yet taken the flower at thy breast."

"It is a foregone conclusion," Gene says, plucking the rose from his chest and holding it aloft for Debbie to take, which she does after a moment. "Thou art clearly still the better warrior, the effort I spent in training over the past twelve months notwithstanding: I am certain thou will triumph in the battle royale yet again this year. That will be the fourth victory in a row, will it not?"

"It will," Debbie says, offering a hand for her friend to take; Gene grasps it and, helped by Debbie, gets to his feet.

"I shall locate an umpire forthwith and announce my defeat," Gene says. "A word of warning, however, my lady: I have heard there is a dark conspiracy brewing against thee."

Debbie's eyebrows rise. "Oh?"

"Ron, Rich, and Ralph have teamed up against you."

"Of course they have." Debbie sighs and shakes her head. "They never could stand the fact that I'm simply the best fighter, could they?"

"Nope," Gene says with a laugh. "I've heard them talking while we were getting changed: two of them are going to distract you while the third sneaks up behind you and hits you with a lightning bolt."

"Which will paralyse me long enough for them to take the rose."

"And then they will duke it out among themselves for the victory. Knaves, the lot of them," Gene says, slipping back into character. "Of course I despise such tactics, so I thought I better warn thee of the danger which lays ahead in thine path."

"I thank thee, Lord Eugene," Debbie says. "Once the battle is done, I shall offer thee a flagon of ale as recompense."

"I would never dream of accepting a reward for simply doing what is right. Now go forth, Lady Deborah, and defeat those treacherous dogs!"

He thrusts his fist into the air, and Debbie laughs. "I shall return victorious," she says; she starts to move away, but after a few steps Gene calls back to her, and she turns back. "Yes?"

"Thou makest for a very beautiful lady, my friend," Gene says, "but it is indeed a marked change from thy usual appearance. What hast brought this about? Is there something thou must tell me?"

Debbie hesitates for a moment; but then shakes her head – this is simply not the right time to come out to her friend. "I shall tell thee at the victory feast."

Gene nods. "I shall look forward to it."

And then Debbie rushes away through the Central Park bushes, seeking out her enemies. As she stalks the undergrowth she smiles to herself: this is going well, even better than she'd anticipated – everyone seems to have been accepting of her showing up as a woman for the yearly tournament her LARP group puts on. True, that doesn't mean they *will* be accepting when she comes out as trans at the party, but it gives her reason to be hopeful. And Gene, at least, seems to have gleaned something, and he will likely take her side when push comes to shove.

She doesn't think push will come to shove, however: she's been in this roleplaying group for seven years now, and everyone in it is good people. True, a few of them can be a bit dickish – Ron, Rich, and Ralph, for one – but she's never heard any of them say anything even remotely bigoted.

She just has to win this, and then she will announce her true identity from the winner's podium, a bottle of beer in her hand, and there will be much rejoicing. She hopes.

Still a bit lost in her thoughts, she rounds a tree, and there Ralph and Ron are, a dozen metres away, squaring up against her advance. "Halt!" Ron calls out. "They who would fight me must answer the questions three, ere our blades crossed they see!"

Debbie can't hold it in, and chuckles a bit. "Ask thy questions, Lord Ronald, I am not afraid!" she calls back, walking towards the duo.

"What... is the average airspeed of an unladen swallow?"

"Dude, what are you doing?" Ralph says, slapping Ron lightly on the shoulder. "You can't ask the final question right away!"

"I can and I will!"

"It's the questions three, not the question one, you dumbass!"

Still chuckling, Debbie steps forward, but she keeps a watchful eye and a keen ear out for anything which might signal an ambush; and indeed, she hears a twig snap behind her, and she whirls around to see Rich step into view, arm cocked back to throw the foam ball

which represents a lightning bolt spell – every player gets one, and every player knows they’re supposed to stop moving as if paralysed for twelve seconds if they’re hit by one; Debbie has already used hers.

“Lightning bolt!” Rich shouts, letting the foam ball fly; but he’s no baseball pitcher, and it moves towards Debbie in a slow arc: she has all the time she needs to bring her arm up to parry the attack.

The ball hits Debbie’s shield with a soft *thunk*.

There is a thunderclap, and her world goes white.

Ron, Rich, and Ralph blink rapidly to clear the afterimage of the bright flash from their vision, and find themselves staring dumbfoundedly at the spot of charred, smoking grass where Debbie had stood just a few moments before.

Debbie blinks rapidly to clear the afterimage of the bright flash from her vision; her ears are still ringing from the loud noise, so she doesn’t hear the soft thud of the foam ball falling to the ground.

No, not to the ground, to the *floor*: as she looks around, Debbie is startled to realise that she’s no longer in Central Park, or any park for that matter. Instead, she’s standing in the middle of a wide, circular hall, the walls hewn stone, interrupted by five doors and rising in a dome above her; the floor is likewise also stone, but dark basalt instead of the light limestone of the walls, with a circle drawn in white chalk all around her, decorated with runes and other marks and glyphs she doesn’t recognise. A short distance away, a few feet out from the edge of the circle, are two women, one about her age, tall, with long, flowing blonde hair and dressed in an elaborate purple gown trimmed in silver, and the other shorter, wearing a much plainer dress, her face marked by the years, white hair held back in a braid.

As Debbie watches, the younger woman smiles. “My compliments, Damhnait,” she says. “The summoning was very successful.”

“Summoning?” Debbie says, lowering her shield and sword. “What do you mean?”

“Thank you, my lady Niamh,” the older woman says, apparently choosing to ignore Debbie’s words. “I am glad the champion seems to be to your liking.”

“Indeed she is,” the younger woman says, lips curling into a smile.

“Champion?” Debbie repeats. “What’s happening? Where am I? Why am I here?”

“Yes, this will take some explaining.” The woman steps inside the circle, stopping in front of Debbie, and continues, “And some introductions are in order. I am Niamh, Princess of the Silver Throne and of the Seven Winds, first daughter to King Odhrán.”

Niamh holds out a hand, palm down, and Debbie boggles at her, bewildered, but soon realises what is happening: this is all part of the roleplay session! She'd heard rumours that the president and vice-president of her LARP guild had been setting up something special this time around, and this is clearly it – she's in the middle of it because she's the champion three years running, soon to be four, so they're... setting her up as a kind of final boss for the rest of the group, maybe?

But to even go so far as to hire professional actors and set up special effects and everything... They're clearly pulling out all the stops!

But Debbie realises Niamh's been waiting for her move, so she lets her instinct as a role-player take over: she sheathes her sword, falls down on one knee, takes Niamh's hand, and kisses it lightly. "Hello and well met, Princess Niamh. I am Lady Deborah of the Crimson Rose, at your service."

"And your services are what I require," Niamh answers. "Rise, Lady Deborah." Debbie complies, and as she gets to her feet, Niamh turns to the older woman, adding, "You have served me well, Damhnait. You shall be generously rewarded. Go, and speak of this to no one."

"Yes, my lady," Damhnait says, nodding her head and making her exit through one of the doors, shutting it behind herself.

Niamh turns back to Debbie. "Well then. Lady Deborah," she says, bending over and picking up the foam ball, squeezing it slightly, looking at it as if it were an exotic curiosity. "You might be wondering why I've brought you here."

"Indeed I was, my lady," Debbie says.

"Walk with me." Niamh makes a beckoning gesture as she turns around and walks towards a door – not the one Damhnait had left through, a different one – and pushes it open; Debbie hurries after her as they walk over the threshold and into... a long hallway? Where did *that* come from?

"You said you require my services," Debbie says, keeping up with Niamh, one step behind and to the right of the princess.

"Indeed," Niamh says, idly kneading the foam ball. "Surely you know the current situation in the Realms."

"I do not. I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage."

Niamh inclines her head as she walks, and even from behind Debbie can tell Niamh is puzzled; but then the princess explains, "The position of the Silver Throne has been... fraught, as of late. My lord father, King Odhrán, has recently taken ill, and is probably not long for this world."

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It cannot be helped. The best healers from throughout the Realms have said that it is simply that his time has come to an end. The main issue with that, however, is that upon his passing, someone must inherit the Throne. And as his first-born child, I am of course first in line to succeed him.”

“Naturally.”

“But my younger brother, Prince Finbar, has accused me of... impropriety. Of consorting with the lower classes.”

Debbie’s eyebrows pinch together. “Consorting...?” she mumbles.

Niamh stops walking and turns towards Debbie. “Yes. Consorting. In the carnal sense of the word.”

“Oh.”

“And, as you certainly know,” Niamh continues, turning back around and resuming walking, “it is forbidden for the royal family to consort with someone of lower rank without the express permission of the sovereign; anyone who does such a thing will find themselves excluded from the inheritance.”

Oh! So that’s the angle! “So you are in need of someone who will defend you against this accusation.”

“Precisely.” Niamh nods without breaking stride. “I am in need of a champion for the forthcoming trial.”

“Well then, I am certainly your man, my lady.”

Niamh keeps walking, but turns back and arches an eyebrow at Debbie. “Man?”

“Woman. I meant woman,” Debbie says, cursing herself for the mistake: she’s been so used to interact with clients as a man in her day job, that her usual behaviour has come out naturally – she’s yet to come out at work, of course; no one knows, or even suspects, that Donovan Summers, ace public defender, is in reality a closeted trans woman. Coming out to her LARP guild was supposed to be a test run: if that goes well, her other friends will be next, and then she will contact HR at her office and start arranging for her coming out. “So. Did you do it?”

The eyebrow arches even further. “I beg your pardon?”

“Did you do what your brother has accused you of doing?”

“What business is it of yours?”

“I should know if you’re guilty of what you’re being accused of, so I may mount an appropriate defence. You know, question witnesses, prepare arguments, and such.”

“I hardly see the point. Whether I have actually engaged in forbidden relations with someone of lower birth is of no real consequence.”

Debbie purses her mouth as Niamh pushes a door open and starts climbing a flight of stairs – hold on, *stairs*? Weird. “It’s of very real consequence, my lady,” she opines. “After all, if your opponent brings forth some proof, or a witness, I must know if they’re real or if they’ve fabricated them.”

“Whatever they bring forth will be most certainly fabricated, for there is no proof and there are no witnesses.” Niamh reaches a landing, pushes another door open, and steps through. “If there had been, they would have been disposed of.”

“Uh.” Debbie steps over the threshold into a large room, the walls and floor blindingly white marble, richly decorated with tapestries of gold and crimson and silver and ultramarine; as she looks around, taking in the opulence – Jesus, the guild’s leaders went all out, didn’t they? – she continues, “Are you saying what I think I’m... saying...?”

“And what exactly do you think I am saying, Lady Deborah?” Niamh asks, turning to look at her, but Debbie isn’t paying attention to Niamh any longer: instead, her gaze is fixed out of the window, staring over vast fields of yellow-green at the tall, imposing mountains, rising towards the vibrant indigo sky far in the distance and painted in golden colours by the twin setting suns.

Debbie blinks. Slowly. Then, just as slowly, she turns to look at Niamh. “Uh,” she repeats. “Um. Er.”

“Is something the matter?” Niamh asks.

“...Where am I, exactly?”

“My lord father’s realm, of course. I have told you as much, have I not?”

“And where is this realm located?”

“It is one of the Nineteen Realms of Tír Tairngire, of course.”

“Right.” Debbie gulps, and she pinches her hand hard enough to leave a painful mark: it hurts, so... “This isn’t a dream, is it?”

“Whyever would you think you were dreaming?”

“Because if I’m not, it means that I’m really here, that I’m not in Kansas any more, and...”

Niamh inclines her head and gives Debbie a curious look. “Kansas? Is that a place? I thought the place you hail from was called Nīewe Eoforwīc.”

It takes Debbie a few moments to parse the seemingly alien name, but then she nods. “New York, yes. Uh.” She pauses. Licks her lips. “Could you please, maybe, send me back there?”

“And why would I do that, pray tell?”

“Because... Because you’ve all but abducted me without asking me if I wanted to come along, and once you realise that what you did is wrong, you will rectify your mistake right away?” Debbie says, looking at Niamh, who is looking back in ever increasing amusement, signified by the corners of her mouth curling upwards in mirth. “Yeah. I thought not.”

“And you thought well. I do apologise for the sudden summons, really, but I am, as I said, in need of a champion; and seemingly the entire realm has sided with my brother, so there are none to be found here. Plucking a worthy soul from the mortal realm was an unfortunate necessity.”

“But why me?”

“I asked Damhnait to locate the reigning champion of the largest knightly tourney of your age, and her spell located you. Or was it mistaken?”

Debbie closes her eyes, pinches the bridge of her nose, and sighs deeply. “No. No, it was not,” she mutters. “But, wait,” she adds, realising something, “why did you want a knight? And one who is good at fighting, even? I thought you needed a lawyer.”

“I do not know what that word means.”

“You don’t... An attorney?” Debbie tries, but Niamh is still puzzled. “An advocate?”

“Oh! You mean someone who would argue on my behalf?”

“That’s what I meant, yes.”

“Whyever would I want a... lawyer?”

“Well.” Debbie pauses, gathering her thoughts. “You said you need someone to defend you against your accuser, so I thought...”

“And a knight will do that, sword in hand.”

Debbie looks at Niamh with wide eyes, realisation dawning. “Wait, hold on. You mean that the trial you were talking about is... a trial by combat?”

“Of course it is, what other kind of trial is there?” Niamh says, smiling mildly. “I have told you I was in need of a champion, have I not?”

“Yes. Yes, you did tell me that,” Debbie replies as a cold, sinking feeling settles deep in the depths of her belly.

The footman beats his heavy staff twice on the floor, the loud, clanging noise resounding through the hall. “Her Highness Princess Niamh of the Silver Throne and of the Seven Winds, and her champion, Lady Deborah of the Crimson Rose,” he calls out at the top of

his voice; all noise in the room ceases as several dozen pair of eyes turn to look at the two of them as they step through the door.

Niamh stops just inside, Debbie again just one step behind and to the right of her. “As you were, my friends,” Niamh says, and the hubbub of conversation resumes almost instantly; Deborah sees several people point to her before turning to speak with those standing closest to them.

“I feel like an animal on show,” Debbie comments under her breath.

“Of course you do,” Niamh says mildly. “It is the first time my loyal subjects have seen you after all, you are bound to be the subject of their conversation. Not to mention that the fact that you’re so unusual has certainly piqued their interest.”

Debbie raises an eyebrow. “Unusual?”

“Yes, I mean,” Niamh replies, turning to her and gesturing at Debbie’s body, outlined by the finely tailored gown she’s wearing, “it’s not every day they see a woman as solidly built as you are.”

“Don’t remind me,” Debbie says, grimacing. True, as they were getting ready for the grand ball which, according to Niamh, is held the evening before each trial by combat, Niamh herself has said she doesn’t mind Debbie’s unusual anatomy, saying that the soul is what is important and not the body; but Debbie still doesn’t like everyone gawking at her, clearly appraisingly and probably judgmentally.

She looks around, still keeping pace with Niamh as the princess makes her way through the crowd: besides the richly-dressed people milling around, her eye is drawn by the mountain of food arranged on several tables against the far wall, and her stomach grumbles – she suddenly realises it’s been a long time since she’s eaten anything: she was so busy fighting in the LARP battle royale she’s skipped lunch, and she was too nervous because of her upcoming battles and her incumbent coming out that she’s skipped breakfast, too. And she needs to eat if she wants to keep her strength up, especially since at noon the following day she will have to fight Finbar’s champion, whoever they turn out to be.

And, speak of the devil: just as she looks around searching for someone dressed as richly and being treated with as much deference as Niamh, the footman once again bangs his staff against the floor. “His Highness Prince Finbar of the Silver Throne and of the Night Sky, and his champion Sir Gáelas of the Greal,” he calls out. Debbie watches as a tall man dressed in light leather armour and wearing an ermine cape strides in the room, with a shorter, blonde, bright-faced young man dressed in a simple tunic, at his heel; after a

moment, and after spotting Niamh, Finbar makes his way to her, stopping a couple feet away.

Niamh glares at him, and he smirks at her. "Sister," he says lightly. "I am glad to see you."

"I am glad to see you too, brother," Niamh replies, standing tall, shoulders thrown back, hands folded together – and gripped tightly, Debbie notices. "As I am glad that tomorrow we will put all this foolishness behind ourselves."

"Indeed," Finbar says. "I am relieved you seem to have found a champion; I was afraid you would have to square off in battle yourself." His eyes move suddenly and now he's looking right at Debbie, piercing her with a stare. "This is her, is she not?"

"Uh... Yes," Debbie says, and she dips into a bow. "I am Lady Deborah of the Crimson Rose, your highness, Prince Finbar." She straightens up and adds, "I would say, 'at your service,' but right now my services are reserved for another."

"Well spoken," Finbar's champion says, nodding in approval before bending into a bow of his own. "Hello and well met, Princess Niamh and Lady Deborah. I am Sir Gàleas of the Greal."

"Well met to you, Sir Gàleas," Niamh replies. "Would the two of you excuse us? My lord brother and I have to meet with the chamberlain to define the final details for tomorrow's combat."

"I've told you, sister, it will be I who will sit on the High Throne during the battle," Finbar says.

"*Father* will sit on the High Throne," Niamh rebuts. "He is still king. And if he is not well enough to attend, then the High Throne will remain empty."

"The chamberlain will decide," Finbar says; he turns around and strides away, cape flapping behind him, followed by Niamh, leaving Debbie and Gàleas standing alone.

"Cur," Gàleas spits out under his breath as soon as the two royals are out of earshot. "A thousand curses upon him."

Debbie looks at him, eyebrows raised. "Are you not his champion?"

"I am, but I wish I weren't. I believe you were summoned here from elsewhere, much as I was?"

"I was," Debbie confirms with a nod. "It was the work of an old sorceress. Damhnait."

"So you know how things are. When I arrived in this realm, Finbar spun me a tale of injustice: he said he had been unfairly passed over for succession in favour of his sister, and he required a champion to win back his birthright. Eager to set a wrong right, I swore an

oath to fight for him; only later I learned the truth – that the Lady Niamh is the one who actually has the birthright, and that Finbar is nothing but a pretender and a usurper. But by that point, my word had been given, and I cannot, by honour, take it back.”

“I understand,” Debbie says. “I too am bound by my promise to fight for Niamh. Though I’m not so sure she is innocent in this matter.”

“What do you mean?” Gàleas says, looking at her curiously.

“I mean that she has asked me to fight in trial by combat to defend her against the claim that she has consorted with a commoner. But in truth, I believe she actually *has* consorted with a commoner.”

“And what would the problem be?”

“That it is against the law of Tír Tairngire.”

Gàleas scoffs. “My Lady Deborah, what is right and what is wrong depends not on the laws of men; one must choose what the correct path is in their heart, and act accordingly, even if it means going against what is considered good and proper.”

“Huh,” Debbie muses.

“What?”

“Nothing, it’s just that I happen to agree, Sir Gàleas.”

“I’m glad you do. You seem like a good woman, Lady Deborah. Whenceforth do you hail, if I may ask?”

“Queens,” Debbie says; seeing the non-recognition in Gàleas’s eyes, she explains further, “New York.”

“I have heard of York, to be sure, but I was not aware there was a *New* York,” Gàleas says. “Where is this town located?”

“In the United States. America?”

“Armorica?”

“No, *America*. It’s...”

Debbie hesitates, seeing that Gàleas is still puzzled, and considers the situation: they are clearly very far from their homes, having been brought there by a summoning spell. Well, the spell has made them travel through space; what if it made them travel through *time*, too?

“What year is it, Sir Gàleas?”

“What do you mean?”

“What year is it where you come from?”

“It is the year of our Lord five hundred and ninety-eight, my lady,” Gàleas says. “Why do you ask? Is it not the same where you are from?”

“No, it’s not,” Debbie says, gulping. “I come from the year two thousand and twenty-five.”

Gàleas blinks. “Indeed?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“Huh. Well, I am glad to see that chivalry has survived for nearly fifteen centuries, then. And that explains why a lady such as yourself has been allowed to become a knight, does it not? In my time, women wielding weapons is seen as improper.”

Debbie smiles. “There are many people who would not consider me a woman, though.”

“Are you referring to the shape of your body?” Gàleas asks. “If so, forgive me, Lady Deborah, but I do not think that matters.”

“You don’t?”

“I don’t. One’s birth does not define them, only their life and deeds. I myself was able to become a knight despite being a bastard son; such things are usually not allowed. So why would someone who was born a man not be able to become a woman?”

“You would be surprised at how stupid people can be, even after fifteen hundred years. Who are your parents? Since you mentioned them.”

Gàleas straightens up. “I am honoured to say I am the son of Sir Launcelot du Lac and of the Lady Oisine du Cobrenic.”

Debbie blinks. “Wait, hold on, what? You’re the son of Lancelot? Hold on a second... Gàleas... Wait, no...” She blinks again, colour draining from her face. “Are you *Galahad*?”

Gàleas inclines his head. “That is one of my names, yes. You have heard of me, I gather?”

“Galahad of the Grail? Knight of the Round Table? Ally to King Arthur?”

“Yes, you have heard of me,” Gàleas chuckles.

“*Of course* I’ve heard of you,” Debbie says. “You—”

“We are done here,” Finbar says, stepping up to the two of them along with Niamh. “Come along, my champion.”

Gàleas exchanges a glance with Debbie, but then nods. “Yes, my lord,” he says, and he takes up position behind and to the right of Finbar.

“See you tomorrow, sister,” Finbar says, smirking at Niamh; then he whirls dramatically about and, followed by Gàleas, walks out of the room.

“Well then,” Niamh says, looking at Debbie. “You will be happy to know that everything is set for tomorrow.”

“Uh...” Debbie says.

Niamh inclines her head. "Are you quite alright, Lady Deborah?"

"...No, I'm not alright. I think I'm dead."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because... that was *Galahad*."

"What of it?"

"Galahad is, like, the best knight ever. Perfect, pure, undefeated, a master of the sword and other weapons, incredibly skilled. There is simply no way I can hope to beat him."

Niamh sets her jaw. "Lady Deborah, need I remind you that you promised to be my champion? You promised to fight for me," she says, voice hard. "You're not going back on your word, I hope. Remember, I am the only one who can send you back from whence you came; and, should you refuse to fight for me tomorrow, I will simply not do that. And I don't think my brother Finbar will look kindly upon you once he takes the throne."

"No, I guess not," Debbie murmurs.

"Come along, then. We should go back to our chambers so that we're rested for the coming day."

Debbie nods and takes her place, trailing Niamh, as they make their way out of the room and down the hallway.

It's been a while since Debbie has been this dejected, this scared; but she simply sees no way out of this. Tomorrow she will have to face Gàleas – Galahad – in battle... and die, probably. There is no escape, no alternative: after all, she's given her word that she would fight for Niamh.

Debbie blinks, and then inhales sharply as she stops walking.

Right, she promised *that*, didn't she?

Niamh, hearing Debbie stop dead in her tracks, turns back to her. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Debbie replies. "Nothing's wrong."

She looks up into Niamh's eyes.

"I think I have found a solution."

Debbie's eyes meet Gàleas's as the drums roll and the curtain draws open; they nod to each other, then turn to face forward and stride out into the arena, walking forward until they're standing before the royal box, looking up on Niamh and Finbar, sitting in identical, high backed chairs, which have been placed on either side of an elaborate throne, sitting empty on a raised dais.

“We are gathered here for the trial by combat of the Lady Niamh, Princess of the Silver Throne and of the Seven Winds,” the chamberlain says from his seat just below the royal box. “She stands accused of consorting with a commoner, and has chosen Lady Deborah of the Crimson Rose as her champion.”

Debbie draws her sword and holds it out in front of herself, the sharp edge glinting in the sunlight: definitely an upgrade over her old blade. Maybe she can bring it back with her when she goes home?

“The accuser is Lord Finbar, Prince of the Silver Throne and of the Night Sky; he has chosen Sir Gàleas of the Greal as his champion.”

Beside Debbie, Gàleas unsheathes his own blade – the one he told Debbie he brought with him when he was summoned, the one he’d drawn from a stone much like Arthur had drawn Excalibur – and brings it up in a salute, mirroring Debbie.

The chamberlain waves his hand. “The champions will now do battle until one stands victorious; let fate decide who is right.”

Debbie and Gàleas turn to face each other and cross their swords before stepping back several feet. There is another roll of drums, and then the chamberlain calls out: “Begin!”

The two knights step forward, slowly approaching each other. Debbie surges forward, swinging her sword in an arc, and Gàleas responds in kind; their blades meet once, twice, thrice, the clanging noise resounding through the arena, which is perfectly still and silent.

When their swords touch for the fourth time, the fighters stop; they lock eyes with each other.

Debbie nods.

Gàleas nods back.

He lowers his blade, takes a step back, and in a loud, clear voice, calls out, “I yield!”

There is another moment of silence; then the arena erupts into clamour. It takes several minutes for the chamberlain, shouting at the top of his voice, to bring a semblance of order back to the assembled people, and as soon as he does, Finbar, who has leapt to his feet, shouts, “What is the meaning of this!”

“It is exactly as you see,” Gàleas shouts back. “I yield. I surrender. I will not fight any longer. Lady Deborah is the victor.”

“You traitor!” Finbar says, levelling a finger at Gàleas. “What about your oath? You swore you would fight for me!”

“I did swear such an oath, and the oath was fulfilled. Have you not seen my sword crossing with Lady Deborah’s?”

Finbar pauses, taken aback. “That is not–”

“Don’t even *try*,” Debbie calls. “I’ve asked Sir Gàleas about his oath, and the exact words he said were, ‘I shall fight on your behalf in the trial by combat against your sister’s champion.’ And he did. Any judge would hold the contract... I mean, would hold the oath fulfilled. To the letter.”

“That is *not*—” Finbar tries again.

“I’m afraid it is,” the chamberlain cuts him off. “That is how a reasonable person would interpret the oath, at least. Your recourse right now would be to accuse Sir Gàleas of breaking his vow.”

“And I warn you, if you do that I will demand trial by combat,” Gàleas says. “And I will fight whatever champion you may pick personally.”

“I doubt he will be able to find a champion after this,” Debbie comments. “He will probably have to fight you himself. And you *do* know Gàleas is one of the best knights who have ever lived, don’t you, Prince Finbar? That’s why you’ve picked him to be your champion in the first place, isn’t it?”

Finbar visibly hesitates. “I...”

“What will it be, brother?” Niamh says, voice even. “What do you choose? Admit Lady Deborah is the victor, and that I have prevailed in the trial by combat, or refuse, and fight Gàleas yourself.”

“I...” Finbar says again, gritting his teeth. “I... Accept the result of the trial by combat. Lady Deborah is the victor.”

“Very well,” the chamberlain says; he stands up from his chair and loudly intones, “The charges against Princess Niamh are thereby dismissed.”

The audience devolves into clamouring again as Gàleas turns to Debbie. “You did good, my lady,” he says. “I’m glad you managed to convince me to trust you.”

“Hey, I did tell you I’m a good lawyer, didn’t I?” Debbie replies with a grin.

Gàleas chuckles. “Yes, you sure do have a way with words.”

Damhnait finishes drawing the circle on the floor, then stands back and inspects it carefully. “Yes, it’s ready. We can proceed.”

“Very well,” Niamh says, looking at Debbie. “Are you ready, Lady Deborah?”

“I’m ready,” Debbie says, fastening the last strap on her armour: she’s doffed the burnished steel plate she’d been given for the trial, instead opting to return home in her own lighter one, to avoid any uncomfortable questions. “I would like to say it was a pleasure to be here, but I’d rather not do this again, please?” Debbie replies.

Niamh smirks. “I shall not make any promises, but hopefully I will not find myself in need of a champion again any time soon.”

Debbie doesn’t respond to that except by giving Niamh an unsteady smile; instead, she turns to Gàleas. “In your case, however, I must say it certainly was a pleasure to meet you, Sir Gàleas.”

“And the same to you, Lady Deborah,” Gàleas says. “And, if you’ll allow me...”

He holds out his sword, hilt-first, to Debbie, who blinks in surprise. “Oh, no. No, I can’t.”

“You can and you should,” Gàleas insists. “We have only known each other for a very short time, but you have certainly won my respect. You are a true knight, my lady, and you should bear a sword worthy of that title. Please accept it.”

Debbie hesitates for a moment longer, but then takes the sword with a nod and fastens it to her belt, then holds out her own blade to Gàleas. “This is nowhere near as good a weapon as the one you have gifted me, Sir Gàleas, but I pray you take it. As a token of my respect, and as a memento.”

“Gladly,” Gàleas replies, taking the sword and then grasping the hand Debbie is extending toward him. “Have a safe journey home.”

“You too,” Debbie replies. She grips Gàleas’s hand a bit tighter, then lets go and steps into the middle of the magic circle. Without waiting even for a second, Damhnait intones a chant in a language Debbie can’t understand; after a moment, Debbie’s hair stands on end, and there is a flash and a thunderclap.

Debbie blinks rapidly to clear the afterimage from her vision, and suddenly she’s standing in the exact same spot she’d disappeared from, the smoking grass sizzling around her feet; she looks around and sees Gene, Ron, Rich, Raph, and several other members of her guild just standing there, looking bewildered at her. “Uh... hi?” she says.

“What the fuck?” Gene says in return. “Sorry for breaking character, but *what the fuck?* Where did you come from?”

“It’s kind of a long story. How long was I gone for?”

“Like ten minutes. Those guys were just telling us how you’d been hit incinerated by lightning, and here you are again. What happened?”

Debbie purses her lips. “Tell you later. Because if I was gone for just ten minutes, it means the battle royale is still on, isn’t it?”

“...I guess it is? But—”

“Great.” Debbie draws her sword and takes a step towards Ron, Rich, and Raph, who take a step back in response. Then she glances at her blade, sees the sunlight glint off the

edge, and hesitates. “Uh... could I borrow thy blade, Lord Eugene?” she asks. “Mine is a bit too dangerous for a friendly duel.”

Gene hesitates for a few long moments, then draws his sword and offers it, hilt-first, to Debbie; she takes it, passing him her blade instead, and tries the edge with his thumb. “Ow,” he complains, sticking the finger into his mouth. “This is really sharp. Where did you get it?”

“I’ll tell you later,” Debbie replies. “I’ll tell you all about it. And some other things, too. For now...”

She raises her sword and smiles at the trio squaring off against her.

“En garde!”