

LANCELOT
AND THE
GRAIL

Also available through Mirador Publishing:

The Prophecy
Vampire

The Knights of Camelot Series:

Lancelot and the Wolf
Lancelot and the Sword
Lancelot and the Grail

Coming Soon:

Lancelot's Challenge
Lancelot's Burden

THE KNIGHTS OF CAMELOT

LANCELOT AND THE
GRAIL

BY

SARAH LUDDINGTON

Mirador Publishing
www.miradorpublishing.com

First Published in Great Britain 2012 by Mirador Publishing

Copyright © 2012 by Sarah Luddington

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission of the publishers or author. Excepting brief quotes used in reviews.

First edition: 2012

Any reference to real names and places are purely fictional and are constructs of the author. Any offence the references produce is unintentional and in no way reflects the reality of any locations or people involved.

A copy of this work is available through the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-908200-68-6

Mirador Publishing
Mirador
Wearne Lane
Langport
Somerset
TA10 9HB

I wanted to dedicate this book to some new and special people in my life, those who have taken to time and effort to leave their thoughts with me about Lancelot's world.

Many people find my subject matter entertaining, some find it controversial, some find it liberating. I want to thank those who have supported me so far on Lancelot's journey, both on Facebook and Twitter.

Without you I'd still be writing into the void.

Special thanks must also go to Bradley Blackthorn.

And as always my love and gratitude to my knight.

PROLOGUE

The moon shone down on a tall broad man, turning his golden hair silver. A beautifully crafted sword hung from his left hip and his hand flexed on the pommel. He stood on the highest point of the wall surrounding his city, Camelot. An army spread out over the valley, cutting off supplies from the land and the sea, bringing anger to his spirit that he turned inward. Thousands of men camped down there, the lights from the fires, mirroring the stars in the night sky.

The people of Camelot were beginning to starve. The war machines, trebuchet mainly, loomed dark and silent in the night, but their devastation during the day made widows and orphans of his people.

“Arthur,” Geraint said, his voice tentative.

“What is it?” Arthur asked. He fought for a neutral tone.

“You need to sleep, Sire,” Geraint said, placing a hand on his King’s shoulder. “Staring at them won’t make them go away.”

The tension in Arthur’s shoulders fled and his back seemed to collapse. The proud man became broken in the space of a single breath.

“Come, you are exhausted, you need to rest.” Geraint turned his King gently away from the vision before them.

“My people cannot rest with this army on our doorstep,” Arthur said.

“No, but they don’t have to make the decisions you do and they don’t hold the lives you do, so you need to rest. Killing yourself through exhaustion won’t help any of us survive. Eleanor has a draft of something which will help you sleep without dreams.” Geraint guided Arthur into the main keep.

“You drugging your King?” Arthur asked.

“Whatever it takes,” Geraint said.

“I don’t know what to do,” Arthur admitted.

“I know.” Geraint led his King into his apartment. Sparse candles flickered but barely held back the night. Everything was now rationed.

“We have to survive,” Arthur said while Geraint unbuckled Excalibur.

“We will, Arthur.”

“How?” the King asked.

Geraint paused. Only one other man in the world had these conversations with their Sovereign, but now it all lay at Geraint’s door. “Right now, I don’t know,” Geraint said. “But we will survive, Arthur, because we have to and this is Camelot. Lean on your Knights, Sire. We can help you with this burden.”

“I fear there is just one man I can lean on,” Arthur muttered. Geraint didn’t reply.

CHAPTER ONE

We leaned out. “Come on, ducky, quack, quack,” we coaxed quietly. We thought about wriggling off the bank further but all our muscles ached from the tension of holding still for so long. Our fingers brushed the soft feathers of the duck’s tail. “Dinner ducky, come on, dinner ducky,” we muttered almost silently.

“Hello?” said a loud burning voice.

Our arm jolted and hit the duck hard. We grabbed but the thing squawked, flapped and shot off her nest into the water. Ducky gone. We lost the ducky but we tried to reach anyway.

I overbalanced and slid off the bank. If the water gave me a nasty shock, the loud people voice behind me shocked me more. I caught sight of a man, deep in the shadows of the summer trees.

We’d been playing with the ducks too much, we’d let a nasty man thing catch up with us.

I swam into the river, turned onto my back and floated with the current. I’d join the fish for a short time.

We liked fishy. We liked to eat fishy. Maybe we’d catch fishy tomorrow.

I’d go hungry unless my rabbit traps did something useful.

The water held us in its cold embrace.

I knew how far I could travel down it before finding myself caught up in the rapids. The trees were beautiful in their summer clothes, full green and reaching over the river, sheltering the banks.

We stayed in the centre of the river for a long time, the sun warm on our face.

I knew the winter would be harsh, last year’s nearly finished me off, so I ought to be gathering more stores.

We liked the sun though and in this moment, we were all happy, so long as we didn’t remember about the nasty loud voice. We tipped ourselves over and began to swim through the

river.

But the event swam with me and I ended up thinking about the voice. How had it found me? I lived so far away from any of the villages and the roads. Occasionally, I went into the smallest of the villages which scratched a living from the forest, but not often and none of them knew where I lived.

We didn't like being found, we didn't want to be found. It made us angry to think we were found. We needed to build a wall between us and the rest of the world. We lived in our den, safe, warm, we didn't want anything else.

I came out of the water, pulling my naked body effortlessly from the river's embrace. My hair dripped water and tickled the top of my backside. I grabbed the mess and wrung it out, shaking water from my beard before leaving the riverbank.

We ran through the forest, trying to leave the fear and anger behind at the riverbank. We often ran from the fear and anger. It made us sick.

I found the world so hard to deal with, the last thing I needed was interference.

Gradually, our anxiety receded and we found a nice fat rabbit in a trap for supper. We cleaned it, cooked it and lay the skin out to scrape and dry. It would help keep us warm this winter.

I watched the sky through the tree canopy and thought about my friend, the brown wolf.

Sucking on a leg bone, we tried to remember what it was like to run with a pack mate. The memories were a long way away and they made us feel prickly and made us feel restless. We ran from those thoughts, we were alone and we were together, we'd stay like that forever.

I nodded my head at the stars as though sealing a pact between us, no more thoughts about that voice. No more thoughts about the past.

We found the next few days were busy. We collected more dry wood and hid it in the back of the cave. That spring had been blowy so many of the trees shed their branches for us to use, we often said thank you. We also tripped over a stag when hunting for bird meat.

I rose from the forest floor. As I took aim with my simple

hunting bow, he turned his mighty head toward me. His great liquid brown eye stared right into me and I found tears coursing down my cheeks. He shook his head and took off, long before I managed to focus well enough to shoot.

We did find some nice fat birdies though so it turned into a good hunt.

On a wet day, we don't like wet days, we sat in our den eating day old meat and picking at sorrel. We watched the slithery rain fill our river, when something caught our eye. A shadow flickered in the wind, hanging from our favourite oak tree.

I squinted and pushed hair off my face. Something black? Why would there be something black hanging from my oak tree?

We thought we knew and it made us squirmy inside. We thought we knew and it made our skin itch bad. We didn't want to know, we didn't want to think about the nasty voice which made us remember.

I rose from my nest of fur and fern inside a shallow cave. The rain felt cold on my bare skin, though the wind wasn't sharp, just a dull kind of effortless affair. The place I called home, a dell inside the mighty forest, lay cluttered with my belongings. Furs were left out to dry on stretching frames, arranged around a large fire pit, and carvings were scattered about, which I made when I grew sated with hunting. I crossed the hollow and walked up the bank at the front of my home. I squatted down, making a smaller target for whatever fluttered in my oak tree.

We didn't want this, we wanted to run, please let us run from this. It's a nasty bad itchy squirmy horrible fluttery thing. It will haunt us; you do know that, it will haunt our nightmares. You hate nightmares. They come all the time. When was the last time we slept through a night?

My heart raced and my body sweated even as I sat in the rain. I, we, rarely connected so succinctly. Even as we did, I knew my own sickness would grow worse if I went to the tree and retrieved the black cloth. I knew what it was; I saw the silver reflect the light. I saw the emblem on the chest. A wolf's head surrounded by oak leaves.

We ran. We vanished into the trees for days. We lived away from our den. Its disturbance made us nervous of return. Someone knew we were here and that meant trouble. If they found us, they wanted us and they only ever wanted us for one thing. We whined. They wanted us for Death. He chuckled. Only ever death. He laughed. We hunted people so Death could feed once more on our soul. That's what people wanted.

Nights and days moved and He lost interest once more. Soon, when the moon became a slither of newness, we returned to our home.

I approached slowly, wary of potential visitors. I came in from the east, so I could pass the oak tree before approaching my home.

We sniffed the air, letting it roll over our tongue to see if we caught something extra.

No rain had fallen since the day I'd found the cloth on the tree and I sensed nothing stirred in the area but birds and squirrels. The black cloth remained on the oak tree. I stared in disbelief, having half convinced myself that my sickness made the thing real.

We also saw something else. A gift? A large wooden barrel hung from the tree. It had a tap in the bottom. A trap maybe? An ale barrel, hung from our favourite tree. Perhaps they were gifts and we'd been worried for all the wrong reasons. Gifts from the forest rather than warnings from Him.

"Why would the forest give you gifts?" I muttered aloud. The first true sound I'd made since the last full moon took more of my grief from my soul.

The voice was rough, deep, horrible. We didn't like it, we shook our head, we needed to find a new home. We keened in fear. We liked this den we'd been in it a long time. We were safe until now. But now we had ale. We thought for a long time. In the end we chose to climb the ash which grew near the oak. We climbed high and moved carefully into the oak. If it were a trap, it would be on the floor because the nasties were not clever. They did not know we could climb. We scrambled down the oak's trunk, checking the ground all the time for the nasties to appear. Nothing happened. So, slowly we reached the branch with the ale. And the cloth.

I reached out, stretched along the branch and pulled at the rope holding the ale. The barrel came up, as did the black cloth. There was the trap. I could not have one without the other. I considered dropping the ale but it had been so long since I'd had a drink, my mouth watered at the thought. I could throw the cloth away once I'd taken the ale. I'd do that, throw it into Sister River. I nodded vigorously.

I caught the ale up in rough hands and pulled the black cloth off the branch. With my arms full, I almost fell out of the tree but slowly wriggled backward onto the hollow created by several branches in which I slept some afternoons. The black cloth felt soft and smelt good, despite it being outside for days. The silver twinkled in the light making me smile.

We held up the ale barrel and opened the tap. Warm amber liquid filled our mouth up quickly. We choked at the strange taste, but swallowed gratefully. When we finished guzzling, we switched it off and lay back to watch the sun. The nice fuzzy feeling in our head made our limbs tingle and tongue go numb. We giggled, surprising us with the sound.

I drifted, lying in the arms of my tree. I found the cloth, the black and silver tabard lay over my chest and I stroked it, tracing the embroidery of the wolf's head.

Nothing else happened for several more days. I finished the ale, having fallen into the water twice after imbibing said brew and burnt the barrel. I meant to burn the cloth to but it felt so soft.

We decided we could keep it if we didn't look at the wolf's head.

It made the nightmares easier when I woke sobbing because as I held it to my chest and buried my face in its softness. It reminded me of strong arms protecting me.

After a day picking berries, a long way from the den, I returned to find a haunch of meat hanging over my fire dripping fat into flames I hadn't created. I stopped, stunned and just watched the deer cook. Something, someone, wanted my attention.

We stepped into shadows and lay our berries down. Our beard felt sticky from juice as we tugged on it and our fingers were stained red. We smelt the meat when the wind changed

direction. We were so hungry and here was free food. We shifted from one foot to another trying to figure out the game the nasties were playing. We heard a whine and realised we made the noise. As we watched, the fire died and the meat stopped cooking. A figure, dressed in green with dark brown hair and pale skin came out of another set of shadows to our left and slowly approached the fire. It placed more branches in the flames and fed the monster so it would cook the deer. Then it vanished back into the trees.

The man held no knife or sword at his belt. He held no bow and did not acknowledge my presence in the trees, though he knew I watched. He now stood closer to my den than I, which meant he owned it, unless I killed him.

NO! We screamed altogether. WE DO NOT KILL THE NASTIES. The voices screamed so loudly we covered our ears and hid our eyes so we didn't have to listen.

They calmed as I reassured them I would not kill the invader, merely watch and wait. The day grew old and a fine summer dusk coloured the sky. The fat dripped into the fire and soon the flames completed their work, a cooked meal with berries for afters sounded so nice. The man only moved to tend the fire and the meat. He did not touch my things or touch my black cloth, which sat in the front of my cave to say hello to the sunshine. He did leave a barrel of ale by the fire though. A barrel of ale and a haunch and my berries.

When the meat finished cooking, the nasty sat on a log, not ours, its own, and began eating. It pulled strips off with its fingers and we heard it sucking the juice. We crept forward with the roughly woven basket in one arm, full of berries. We smelt the air. We crept closer. Our stomach growled so loudly the nasty froze having heard us behind its back. It didn't stay still for long, it kept eating, just more slowly. We realised half the meat sat by our log. We circled the campfire and came up slowly. It didn't look at us. We sat on our log and picked up the hot juicy meat.

The man and I ate. He used his foot to push the ale closer to me. I used mine to push my berries closer to him. I didn't look at his face. I didn't want to know. I wanted him gone but having him here made things feel different. Odd. Scary but

nice. It made my chest hurt in a funny way. He and I shared the meal, until full dark came.

He finally stood up, slowly and wiped his fingers on his leather clothes. I wiped mine on my naked thighs.

“I hope I’ll be welcome tomorrow, Lancelot,” he said, with a soft voice. He walked slowly away from the camp. I watched him vanish into the night and realised I wept again.

CHAPTER TWO

He did come back, late the following morning with bread, cheese and more meat. Sheep this time. He approached slowly and I saw a black horse poking through the trees behind him. He shooed the beast back and lay the offerings on the floor a long way from my camp. Then he retreated.

We watched it, the nasty and then we left the camp. Maybe we would return later, maybe we wouldn't, it would depend. The nasty brought gifts, but the nasties are a mischievous bunch who like to trick us if they can, we would go looking for fishy alone.

I returned late in the afternoon to find everything where I left it and the sheep cooking. The man sat near the fire on his log. I carried the gutted fish and placed them on the large flat stone I used to cook them, shifting it into the fire. A hunk of bread and cheese sat on my log. I hadn't eaten bread in forever, or cheese. I wolfed these down. I glanced at his face, he didn't watch me, but I did see him smile. His lips were soft, his brown hair long at the back. It looked thick and warm, wavy like mine but softer. His kind eyes were brown, almost luminous in their clear intensity. They were watery now, even though he smiled, he cried like I did and I cried a lot. Didn't see the need not to and if I didn't weep the pain became so intense I'd hurt myself to make it go away, so I cried when I wanted and laughed when I wanted. I cried more often than I laughed.

We sat in silence, he fed the fire, I watched.

We know it. We know the nasty. Just say it, say what it is, tell us what it is, say it, tell us, say it, tell us.

The nagging voice became very loud and I wanted silence. I put my hands up to my ears. I didn't want this, I didn't want this noise in my head. I began to rock. For the first time he looked up startled, as I keened to try to drown out the insistent nagging.

"Lancelot? What's wrong?" he rose to come close.

We panicked and fell backward off our log, sending leaves into the fire. We scrambled to our feet, ready to run.

“It’s alright, please. I’m not here to hurt you and I’m not a ghost. Please, wait, let me help.” His voice came quick but quiet as though he knew I stood on a blade’s edge, ready to run and never return.

I had to calm the voices or I’d never get my fish to eat, or the mutton, or the rest of the bread. They wanted me to use my out loud voice. I opened my mouth but nothing came out. He approached slowly, his right hand open in peaceful offering. I reached out my left hand and our fingers touched. He was warm as his palm slowly slid into mine, fingers embracing.

My stubborn tongue moved painfully, “Tancred.” The alien essence of his name closed my throat.

“Yes, love, it’s me. I’ve found you,” he whispered and I watched great big tears fall out of his eyes to splash on the ground. I traced them with my right index finger. It made him laugh a little. I liked that sound. Another person laughing in my den sounded odd but I liked it a lot.

We calmed as we heard its name and knew we would not have to kill to stay safe. This was not a trap. This was a kind dream.

Tancred led me back to the camp and I sat, he returned to his log, so I moved mine closer. I liked feeling his hand in mine. I grabbed it and held it. He sat still and just let me sit with him. When the fire needed tending, I let go and he put on logs, then we held hands again. When the meat and fish were cooked, we ate in silence and I watched the stars begin their dance over my head. I liked the stars, so cold and far, far away.

“I should return to my own camp,” he said. “There is enough moonlight for me to see.” These the only words we’d shared in a long time.

I grabbed his hand tightly. I didn’t know if he would return the next day, so I didn’t want him to leave.

We were not letting it leave. The nasty, or the nice as it brought us gifts, would not leave. Not now. It would stay with us. Help us catch fishy.

“Oh, whoa there, Lancelot, you’re going to crush my sword hand. It took a long time for that to heal, go steady. If you

don't want me to leave, I'll stay, but I need to see to the horses," he tugged at my hand, trying to escape.

We let it go, it squirmed and we didn't want to break it. We liked it. Made us feel warm inside and filled our belly. It walked into the night and we followed. It walked a long way, much closer to the road than we usually went and then we saw it find a small camp. A big black horse stood there and a skinny grey muddy thing with a black mane and tail.

"Let me deal with the horses and we'll go back, or perhaps I can move my stuff to your camp, bring the horses too?" he asked. A smaller brown horse stood some distance away, also in a very sorry state of repair.

We stopped dead when we saw the grey horse. We stopped and we considered. The horse looked at us and snorted. We walked away, uninterested in what happened to the horses or its camp. We returned to our den and sat in the mouth of our cave waiting for our nice to come back. We liked the nice and we didn't care about the beasts. They meant things we didn't think about, we didn't like to think. We just wanted the nice to come home.

I watched as Tancred walked into my dell with the three horses, tethering them to a tree. The grey and the brown just had ropes around their necks, the black a fine leather halter. When he finished with the horses, I watched him take his bedroll and lay it before the fire. He sat on his log and looked at me, "Are you certain you are happy with this?"

We looked at it and thought about its question. If the nice were here, the nice wasn't at home, did that mean the nice came looking for us to take us back? Did we have to face Him again? We were nervous but we so wanted the nice to stay. We nodded and vanished from its sight into our cave, settling into our nest and holding our black cloth to our face. We also realised we were hard in places we hadn't been hard for a long time. We giggled and slept with our hand holding us tight.

I jolted awake, hearing the scream but it not coming from me. I slept lightly, so as the scream ripped through my home I dived out of my nest and looked for the danger. The moon sat over my camp and I saw the scream emerge from Tancred.

It thrashed like we did. It couldn't wake. We knew that fear.

Trapped inside our head, unable to escape. We didn't like to think about how much that hurt the nice, we needed to help. Rescue. We could rescue.

I raced to his side and touched the twitching shoulder. He jerked under my hand. I shook him, he felt hot. "Wake, Tancred," I said.

He took a deep breath, short and hard into his lungs as he sat up, almost knocking me over. He clasped my arm to his chest. "They never become any easier," he whispered.

We heard his fear and pain. We carefully pulled it against our chest. We knew how much the nightmares hurt. We sat like that for a while. It lay its head against our shoulder and we stroked its hair. We smiled, it felt as soft as it looked. He smelt warm, horse, leather, sweat, but also something indefinable, slightly sweet and spicy all at once. The smell made us want to lick its skin. Its breathing calmed. We thought it wanted to sleep. We never slept after we dreamed, we hunted or we cried.

I gently guided Tancred down to his bedroll. He murmured something. I didn't let him go, I just lay down behind him and curled into his body. I held him as he slept and watched our fire slowly die.

As the sun began to stir in the east, I took my arm out of his grasp. He stirred, trying to keep us close. I kissed his brow and he settled. I wriggled free and quietly left my camp. I walked to Sister River and squatted on the bank thinking. I forced myself to think, not too much, but I needed to know what this was, what was happening.

We didn't want to think. When we think we remember and become angry and cold, death cold. We don't like it when He takes over. He is bigger than us and we are bullied, we try to stand up to Him but He is too strong.

I forced my breathing to calm, stopped my hands from crushing each other. "Tancred. He is here for us," I shook my head trying to gain control, "for me." Did I want him here? Did I want the things he would demand from me? Could I do it? I began to panic and had to force the thoughts away. I slid into the river and let the external cold take the cold in my belly.

We swam until we found a nest of ducks and stole their eggs. They should not have eggs this time of year. The

ducklings would not have lived through the winter. We slipped from the river and wandered back to the camp.

I roused the fire just as the sun began to grow strong enough to warm us during the day. Tancred woke slowly, focused on me and smiled. “God, I haven’t slept that well in years. And here I thought I was to rescue you but you are once more the saviour.”

I tried to return the smile. “Eggs,” I held them up. I didn’t want to be a saviour. I didn’t want to be rescued but I didn’t want him to leave me either.

We ate. We both enjoyed the treat. I’d boiled the eggs, and we finished the unleavened bread. Tancred wiped his mouth. “I’ll need to bake more today. I don’t have much food left. I’ll ride to the village and fetch some flour,” he said.

“Leaving me?” panic shot through me.

He laughed, a gift of sound to join the birdsong. “No, I’m not leaving you, Lancelot. I will never leave you, even if we end up living here forever. I’ve been looking for you for five years.”

I watched his eyes as he spoke and realised he wanted to explain but he also knew I couldn’t hear any more, not yet. Sooner or later he’d have to tell me everything and he would need to take me back. I didn’t want to go back.

He allowed patience to guide him, “I will be riding to the village though, if we tidy you and Ash up we could ride together.”

We frowned hard and stared at the great grey horse. He nibbled the black one’s neck. “No,” we made a firm decision and left the camp. We needed to find more wood. The fire was being greedy now it had to feed two.

When I returned, Tancred stood beside the grey and was trying to brush his coat clean of mud. Unfortunately, the horse had other ideas. I laughed as the beast aimed a stamping foot at Tancred’s leg. “Fuck, Ash, calm down.”

I joined them without thinking and grabbed the leather halter the grey now wore. The black stood still with nothing holding him. Sleek and perfect I knew him almost as well as I knew the grey.

“Stop, now,” I said. The grey pushed hard against my chest,

his nose soft and he breathed into my face. “Stupid horse,” I said as he buried his head against my belly.

“Lancelot, you’re crying,” Tancred said.

We didn’t want to know or think about why we were hurt. We wanted the horse to feel better. It wasn’t the horse’s fault we found it hard to see him. We knew we’d chased him away and now we felt bad. His mane and tail were full of burrs and mud. His hooves were unshod and split. We whispered our sorrows in his ear and then began to help clean him.

Tancred handed me a brush and I worked on one side as he did the other. It took the rest of the day but Tancred finally declared the horse clean. He walked from Ash’s side. “Well, now I need a bath,” he tried to brush the dust off his own clothes.

I’d spent the day naked as normal but I agreed. I didn’t like to take this much dirt into my den. “Come,” I took his hand. I pulled him and he came, laughing at me. He’d been talking on and off all day but only about general things, safe subjects.

We walked deeper into the woods, along the river. He finally pulled me to a stop. “Lancelot, where are we going?” he asked.

“Come, please.” I pulled back. A few more trees to pass and we were there. A cliff face of some thirty feet faced us, covered in moss, trees and ivy. My Sister River also ran down forming a perfect waterfall, the last of the sunlight turned the mist into a rainbow. A large, crystal clear pool lay beneath the cascading water. A perfect spot. I smiled at Tancred and pulled at his shirt. “Swim with me.” The longest sentence I’d uttered for years.

Tancred took my hand. “I would love to but I can’t swim with you.”

I frowned, “Swim.”

“No, Lancelot. I’m clothed and I just need to wash, really.”

“No, Tancred, swim.” I tugged at his doublet.

Tancred sighed, clearly exasperated. “I’m not going to win this am I?” He checked the sun for some reason. “I guess it will be dark soon. If you go to the river, I’ll join you shortly. I’ll change here.” His voice sounded strange.

I didn’t know how to find out what concerned him about

swimming. I shrugged and did as he asked, diving into the river from a large rock. I changed direction under the water and came up close to the bank near the waterfall. I pulled myself out of the river and scampered back to where Tancred would be standing. He'd begun to strip. I planned on pushing him into the water for being difficult. It would make him laugh and I liked hearing him laugh.

As its shirt came off, we caught sight of its back and chest. It turned when it heard our cry. Its soft skin was covered in scars, small round scars, some deep, some shallow, some thick and joined together in chains, others almost invisible. Its shock at seeing us made it move and shout. It pulled its shirt on and ran toward us. We didn't like it, we didn't want to know what happened to make the bad marks, we didn't want to think about the pain it took to have such terrible marks. We ran. We ran until we couldn't breathe. We thought it had been a dream, all the bad, all the nasty, just a dream. But no, it wasn't. The screaming, we remembered the screaming and we remembered the pain and shame.

CHAPTER THREE

I hurt my leg in my mad dash from the river, so the journey back to my camp took a long time. The dark came and remained while I tried to reach the den. I limped badly, my knee screamed. I did not want to go home but I couldn't hunt in this state. My survival instinct took over. I needed help. The moon gave up lighting my way just as I reached familiar territory.

We saw it, the nice, in the camp. It had wet hair, it was clean, it looked sad but so beautiful.

I needed it, "Help."

Tancred's head shot up. "Thank, God." He ran toward me. His strong shoulder pushed itself under my arm and suddenly I carried very little weight. I groaned in relief. "I didn't think I would ever see you again. I am so sorry, love."

I wanted to reciprocate his words, "Love." I looked down at my leg. My right knee looked a great deal larger than the other one.

"Yes, you daft bastard, love." He sat me down. "Why do you think I've been looking for you for five years?"

"It hurts?" I needed to know, to stop the pain in my head.

"What? Your knee?" he held it gently, "I'm not surprised."

"No." I tapped his chest. "This hurts."

"The scars?" He looked down. "No, Lancelot, they don't hurt, not now."

"Your dreams."

His eyes clouded, "Yes, they do give me nightmares."

"In here." I tapped my head. "Bad, loud noise."

He nodded. "Yes, Lancelot, it does become bad sometimes. But I have found you and that will make it easier."

"What happened?"

He smiled a little lopsidedly, "I don't think you really want to know." He looked at my face and recognised my expression. "Alright, here are the facts of my life from when you last saw me. Aeddán kept me for a year and a day. He also kept Merla.

He released us as a warning to other fey who might think of betraying him. We still haven't found Nimue."

"Kept you," the tears seeped down my cheeks. I swallowed hard, "I tried to find you but the fey vanished."

"They all fled for fear of Aeddan. I know you sought me, he taunted me with it."

"What did he do?" all this thinking made my head hurt.

The look in his eyes became defiant. His words were sharp, "He realised I have an extreme reaction to iron, so he had it stitched into my skin. Single pieces of chainmail gradually became a shirt."

"Did he take you?"

Tancred tried to soften the bitter expression with a smile, "I guess you don't mean, 'take me for walk.'" He sat quiet for a long time. "He made de Clare mad you know. That's why he attacked Guinevere. And yes, he raped me and Merla, many times. She's off men forever," he tried to laugh.

I touched his face. "And you?" snakes wriggled in my belly.

He did laugh then, "Oh, I wish I could show you your face. You are a picture. No, not me, but I do need them to be clean and well brushed."

I grinned. "Friend," I caressed his jaw lightly.

We thought about its pain and we mourned for it, but we also knew our own pain and knew that it would recover with time. We did after our own wounds tore our body. We didn't want to remember what caused those scars but we know we did recover.

I stroked my beard and tugged my hair. Then I looked at the horses, settled and dozing away from the fire. "Hmm, cut this off then?"

Tancred lay a hand on my shoulder. "I think you ought to consider the consequences." His brown eyes were shadowed with his back to the fire, so I couldn't see his expression but he sounded worried.

We shook our head. "We don't think, we like, we have," we stroked its chest.

He laughed again, "You really have changed."

"I told you I loved you, then I lost you," the words burst out of me. I'd waited so long for this conversation, had it so many

times in my head.

“I know, I heard you. It kept me alive. I knew Aeddan would have to release us if we survived. It is our way, our law.” He caressed my hands and arms, stroking me repeatedly.

The tears came again, “I would have died for you.” This came out as the clearest thought and sentence I’d managed since his arrival. I felt my eyes clear, the fog between them and the real world dropping away for the first time in years. I touched his lips and a brief flash of someone else’s face came to the fore, I pushed it back. Tancred kissed my fingers.

“I am glad you didn’t. If Arthur had surrendered you, Aeddan would have killed you. As full fey I am harder to kill in Albion than you would have been.”

I nodded, my mind fighting to stay clear. “I need help.” I banged my head.

He frowned, “Help?”

“In here, Tancred,” the fog began to rush forward and I panicked, banging my head harder.

“Whoa, don’t, you’ll hurt yourself,” he grabbed my hands. “I understand. It’s alright, I understand. I know how sick you’ve been. We will work hard to bring you together. You are strong, Lancelot, we can do this.”

“Not strong now,” misery dripped off my words.

“You’ve gone through so much, brother. But trust me, you are stronger than all of us. I saw what happened to you at de Clare’s castle. I saw the madness steal you away from us, just as it did when Stephen threatened Arthur at Avalon. I know how vulnerable you are right now,” he drew me into his embrace and we held each other for a long time.

When I moved, to pull him closer, I yelped. My knee screamed loudly. Tancred jerked back and looked at my leg. “We need to strap this up and keep you still, which will be a challenge. How did it happen?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Don’t remember. Fell over.” I didn’t want to tell him I’d fallen down a badger set and landed badly.

He rose, gave me some food and found some leg bandages that should be used for the horses. He began strapping my damaged limb, it hurt but I held still and made no noise. “I wish I had Merla’s gift for healing. This could take months.” When he

finished, I slid onto the floor and used his log by the fire to prop my leg up. Tancred sat behind me and I leaned into his body, his arms around my chest. I dozed for a while, the night growing older all the time.

“Hey, sleepyhead, we should go to our beds,” Tancred stroked my forehead. “It will be dawn soon.”

I stood with his help and we wobbled to my cave. “You have a true home here don’t you,” he said, helping me lay down. The pain in my knee throbbed in time to my heartbeat. He moved back and I settled in my furs. I caught his hand.

A great urgency overcame me, “Stay, just stay, more comfortable for you.” Neither of us could see clearly in the dimness of the cave. He turned his head briefly toward the fire and nodded. He came into my den and lay next to me in my nest. I wrapped my arms around him and instantly fell asleep.

Tancred and I roused late the next morning. We both woke with erections, his trying to poke out of his hose. I wanted him, ached for him and I felt his willingness but I also felt his fear.

“Food,” I said to give him a way to escape.

He nodded and rolled from my arms. He chattered and sounded nervous. It took me a long time to find a way to stand and move. Tancred vanished for a while and returned with a small branch to serve as my walking stick. We ate and I wondered what to do with another warm day. He talked about returning to a village for food.

“Please, don’t leave.” I didn’t want him out there alone.

“I’ll be home by dark,” he said. “You can’t hunt and I need more than berries. You should see how thin you are, Lancelot. Fit, perfect, but there is not an ounce of fat on you.”

I shrugged, not overly bothered. “Nasties live in the village,” my certainty made me stubborn.

He blinked in obvious confusion. “Nasties?”

We began to panic. We rocked slightly and pointed at it, no longer able to explain, “Nasties.”

“Oh,” Tancred’s confusion cleared. “It’s alright, Lancelot, calm down. I understand.” He took my hands and smiled. “It can wait a day or so. I could do with a diet of fresh berries and I can catch fish just as well as you.”

We doubted that, we’d practiced a great deal but we nodded

and the rocking grew still at its words. "Fishy food good."

He smiled but I recognised his fear, "Yes, fish is good."

We worked on the bay and I realised it was Tancred's old horse, Echo. When we were once more covered in dust and horsehair he helped me limp to the river. This time he stripped off without hiding his body and I saw the damage close up. His beautiful skin looked as though someone had branded it dozens if not hundreds of times. I touched them. He watched me take it in and gently grasped my hands. "Come, we need to clean you up to if you want to be well again."

I smiled, knowing I might be able to feel his skin next to mine if I let him cut my beard and hair. He picked up his sharpest knife and a rough bar of soap. Tucking his shoulder under me, we made our slow way into the water. The cold soothed the heat in my leg as it soaked into the bandage. I instantly began swimming, enjoying the pain free sensation of sculling in my river.

"Come here, you fool." Tancred grabbed my strong leg as I circled him. Once he had me stood still and facing the sun so he could see, he took hold of my beard and simply cut through the tangled mess. He dropped the mass into the water and I watched the life I'd been living for the, apparently, last six years float down the river. He cut, rubbed and eventually scraped for a long time. My skin grew sore but he finally stopped.

"There, you have a face again," he smiled, "but you have a line from the sun. Half your face is very pale."

"Do I look better for you?" Spending so much time watching him in the water, close but not touching made me desperate to feel his body tight against mine.

He caught my tone and coughed to cover his confusion. "Yes," it came out on a sigh.

I lay my palm on his chest and his breath caught in his throat, I moved toward him. The heat of his skin burned my hand.

"Wait, Lancelot, please," he pushed against me and pulled his head back.

Confused, I stopped and watched his face as he fought with something I didn't understand. "I need to tell you something

before we do this,” he said.

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do. Arthur...” he began.

“Don’t care,” I said roughly, trying to pull him toward me.

“I do,” he pushed more firmly, forcing us apart.

I fought for patience. He breathed more calmly and said, “Arthur and I have been lovers. It has not been anything serious. It happens when his sorrow over your loss becomes too much to bear and he drinks too much. He does not love me. I am a consolation. I am safe for him. But that doesn’t change the fact that it’s happened.”

“Don’t care about him,” I fought the rising panic at his name.

“I do,” Tancred looked at me. “He wants me to bring you home, that is why I’ve been looking for you. He sends me out twice a year to look for you, every winter and summer for five years. This season is more urgent than any other, Camelot is...”

We growled, unhappy with this news. We didn’t want to go back. We didn’t like back. We didn’t want the nasties in our life, we liked the nice, we wanted the nice but we didn’t want the nasties. We didn’t like the nice enough to live with the nasties.

A lie, I screamed inside my mind trying to stop the chaos. I gave up fighting the noise, turned in the water and swam off. My knee protested the strong strokes and I heard Tancred trying to come after me but I knew my Sister River and he’d never catch me. I ached to stay with him, to love him, to forget the past inside his body but it wouldn’t happen, one person would always stand between me and peace. Me and my ability to heal. Me and happiness.

I found my voice and screamed aloud. Crows launched themselves into the sky matching my desperate cry with their own alarm. The scream helped, I grew calmer, more centred and my knee reminded me it didn’t want to bend. I swam to the shore and hauled myself out awkwardly. Sitting in the last puddle of sunshine I could find, I tried to consider my options. I knew, in what remained of my rational mind, that Tancred would want me to return to Camelot. He couldn’t stay here

with me in my wood. He had a job to do and a life. My mind ached with the effort it took to stay on course. I loved him. I wanted him. Could I give up my life to be with him, to become what he wanted me to be, the great Knight of Camelot?

I pulled my good knee up to my chest and buried my head against it, a single word leaking out on a single breath, "Arthur."

"Can't get far on that leg, can you?" Tancred approached my spot. "Just as well, I need you too badly to let you vanish for the rest of the day." He settled down next to me on a large flat rock.

We sat quietly for a while, not touching. I organised my thoughts with care, "I love you. I don't want anyone else. I don't know if I can leave here."

"I will never leave you, Lancelot." He rubbed my back. "I will have to return to Camelot to tell Arthur I've found you, but I will come back to you."

I looked at him, "Why tell him where I am?" I still spoke slowly but longer sentences helped him understand.

"He would send men out after me if I don't report back. He knows vaguely where I am and he deserves to know you are safe and alive. He's heartbroken."

"I don't care," my jaw tensed. "You are my life now. He took everything from me and now he wants you back."

Tancred laughed, "He doesn't want me back, he wants you." He considered me carefully. "You are really angry with him aren't you?"

I shrugged.

"You are such a child sometimes," Tancred didn't hide his exasperation. "I want you, Lancelot. I've no intention of leaving you. I want you to come home to Camelot because I don't want to be separated from you, but I know how hard that would be and I think I understand why you can't come back. I can see how broken and shattered you are and I don't want Arthur to hurt you."

I studied him. He picked at moss covering the rock as he spoke, the light shone on the long brown hair and his pale skin. The sun clearly hadn't touched that skin since his return from Aeddán's prison. The muscles moved smoothly under the

damaged surface.

“You took all this because of him.” I touched a scar on his upper arm.

Tancred shrugged. “I am sworn to serve you and you serve Arthur. I just had to endure.”

“It is you I want, Tancred. Not him. Whatever I felt,” this was hard work and made my brain ache. “Whatever there was has gone. It is dead. I will not return to Camelot for him. I love you.” I hadn’t said so many words together for a very long time. My companion looked at me in astonishment.

“You don’t love Arthur?”

I shook my head.

“But I have to return to him. I am the King’s man.”

I smiled, a little sad because his words. “You sound like me.”

“Can you forgive me? For being with him?”

“I know how addictive he is,” I touched his neck. “There is nothing to forgive.”

Tancred’s eyes closed as my fingers caressed his neck. I watched him, pleased with the effect my simple touch had on his body. He moved, uncurled, came toward me. I gazed into his perfect deep brown eyes and watched his full lips. We finally came together tentatively. Our first true kiss. His lips were soft and he had no real stubble. His hands held my head and I felt them tremble. Small animal sounds came from him as we gently explored each other’s mouths and faces. I wanted to devour him, I had not held another person in my arms for six years but I sensed his need for me to be tender.

He finally laid me on the rock and I allowed him control. The confusion of his relationship with Arthur faded for the moment but I didn’t know how much damage Aeddan might have done, so I reined back my desire.

“This is exquisitely painful.” He lay over my chest and gazed down at me.

I smiled in return and ran my fingers through his hair. “We will take it as far as you wish.”

For answer, he bowed his head slightly and kissed me. I held him and forced the kiss to grow. In moments his control slithered away. With my arms locked tight over his back, I felt

our heavy erections touch each other. A groan escaped me and Tancred ground his hips into mine. My good leg rose on one side of his body, my hands grasped his firm, strong backside and held us so close it hurt. He attacked my neck and chest, biting me hard. I cried out and writhed under his hands. No longer tentative, he took possession of my body as well as my heart. He slid quickly down my chest and belly, licking my skin and hair. Long before I prepared myself, I found his mouth plunged over my aching body. Hot and wet he moved with great skill and his fingers explored every intimate part of me. I realised the forest echoed with my cries of ecstasy. My body began to lock rigid, ready to explode, but my lover removed the stimulus and replaced it with his hand moving too slowly for me to finish.

“Please, Tancred, I need you.” My hands flexed in my delirium. I sat up, pushed him to stand over me and I found my mouth could torment him in similar ways if he lowered his height a little. His fingers dug into my hair and I took all I could manage into my mouth. He cried out and bucked against me, I grinned and worked my own magic with lips, tongue and teeth.

He finally pulled my head back. “God, stop, I’ve wanted you for too long. I can’t hang on.” He breathed deeply seeking control. “We don’t have anything to soften our journey.” He crouched over my legs and kissed my lips.

I thought of something and licked my fingers, challenging him to say no with my eyes. “I don’t think I care if it works or not,” he said. He pushed me back, my knee unable to cope with any other position and slowly lowered himself onto my body. His experience showed. He moved gently but firmly, confidence clear. I held his hips and watched his face as he took all of me.

He breathed rapidly, “You are perfect.” His fingers found my mouth and I sucked on them as my right hand grabbed his phallus and my left cupped his balls. Tancred, his thigh muscles working hard, rose up and down. He sweated as he concentrated on our pleasure and I felt him build toward his orgasm quickly. I released the chains on my own and suddenly I felt it growing, seeking release inside my beautiful lover. He

cried out my name as I pushed up into him and forced him to move faster. We both rushed toward the inarticulate joy of release, hot liquid spilled over my hands and belly as I bucked hard and felt my body flood my lover. Tancred rocked, taking all of me as I cried out his name and wrapped my arms around him. He folded over and we kissed, I realised we both wept. We wept and we laughed and we were together for the first time. It was perfect, wonderful, graceful and powerful. He disengaged from me and helped me slide back into the water. We kissed and caressed and made love again in Sister River.