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AND THE
SWORD

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THE KNIGHTS OF CAMELOT

LANCELOT AND THE
SWORD

BY

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As always my love and gratitude to my knight.

CHAPTER ONE

“Well, there she is,” Arthur said as he leaned on the pommel of his saddle. “My curse.”

We finally crested the hills that peered down over Camelot. Rain started to spit from the sky. We were all cold and tired. We’d been riding hard since just before dawn and we’d missed lunch.

“That’s a fine way of talking about your home, Arthur,” Merlin snapped. They hadn’t managed a civilised conversation for sometime.

“Do you blame me?” he griped. “I have a wife who hates me and might just be responsible for trying to kill me. I have enemies who I counted as friends. I have the possibility of war hanging over my head. And you want me -”

“Arthur,” I interrupted, cutting off his growing rant. “This isn’t helping.” I’d grown weary of this conversation over the last ten days of travel. I ached all over, my hand hurt in the splints and bandages Merlin fashioned to hold it still and nightmares dogged my sleep.

He scowled. We’d argued about how to deal with the consequences of my place in his life. He wanted to keep the passion alive. I knew we couldn’t afford to be idealists. The arrival of the herald in Avalon to summon us to Camelot, scared all three of us. The exhausted man didn’t have much detail but Arthur’s Seneschal, Kay, wrote and his panic rose off the parchment. He’d been circumspect because of our enemies, a worry this deep inside Arthur’s lands.

“Whatever we face, Sire, you are not alone,” I said trying to tell him so much with such a simple statement. “Besides, you have a wife and crown to save,” I said quietly. His duty lay heavy over our shoulders.

His eyes swivelled to take in the city swarming down toward the river and the sea. “I know, Wolf, but I don’t want it.”

There we had the final confession. Arthur Pendragon, King of Camelot and England, wanted to throw his crown into the sea. When the herald handed over the parchment, with its heavy red wax seal, I actually watched Arthur close down before my eyes. When it had just been the two of us in the Abbey, we'd grown so close and we were so happy, we'd both forgotten the real world waited to close its jaws on us once more.

"They need you, Arthur," I said gesturing to the city and meaning the people.

He nodded, his clear eyes darkening. He fought his desire to run and pushed Willow forward. I wondered if I'd ever understand how much it cost him. Merlin clucked his shaggy mountain horse, Daisy, into a walk, and I gave Ash his head. If I were honest, I didn't want to return to Camelot any more than Arthur did but that was not my decision. Where my King went I followed, always would.

As we rode into the city, during the busy afternoon rush in the markets and around the inns, Arthur kept his ears open. We walked a circuitous route and he maintained his anonymity, deep inside his hood. Our shields were covered hiding our heraldry. Merlin watched and listened just as hard. He'd not been in the city for more than five years. I rode behind them, hand on my sword, ready. Even having been in prison for almost a year and then banished, didn't make me ignorant of the problems we faced. I knew how restless and unhappy Camelot had grown over the months. The evidence of Arthur's neglect lay everywhere.

The city guard were not guarding, they were chattering with whores. The women in question offered themselves on the streets, rather than quietly in the houses, which made ignoring them impossible. Litter, mud and shit covered the paved roads and we heard endless arguments about prices and guilds taking advantage of the power vacuum. There were more beggars, more obvious hunger, more poor. We found an area of the city which didn't even have houses, just shacks thrown up against each other, streets too narrow to ride through. We witnessed crime, cutpurses, the illegal sale of narcotics, unlicensed

alcohol, and theft. Merlin bought some of the drugs we found and almost choked on the foul smell.

“It’s psilocybin and amanita muscaria. It’ll kill in these doses if someone doesn’t know what they’re doing,” he groused.

I looked at him blankly.

“Mushrooms, Lancelot. Poisonous psychoactives which will make you mad eventually, if they don’t kill you first,” his contempt dripped acid.

Having brushed madness myself on occasion I didn’t understand why anyone would want to seek it out voluntarily.

“I had no idea it had become this bad,” Arthur said.

“I told you, if the king is sick the land is sick and Camelot is the first place to turn bad when the king is bad,” Merlin lectured for the hundredth time.

“It wasn’t exactly my fault,” Arthur snapped.

“You didn’t have to drink the poison, Arthur,” the old wizard snapped back.

“It seemed like a fine idea after I almost killed my,” he paused and bit back the word he wanted to use to describe me. “What do I do to fix it?” he asked instead.

“Rule, bring leadership back to Camelot. Stop the fey from poisoning our people, in mind and body. These people would welcome Stephen taking the throne from you if he promised them health, wealth and happiness. So, you need to give it to them but make them proud of it, make them work for it. Don’t just hand over money to the churches to care for them in their sickness. Make them proud to belong to Camelot by forcing them to invest in their city, in you. They are your greatest defence against Stephen and the fey. Use them, Arthur. Woo them. You know how to do it, you’ve just lost the common touch because you’ve been in pain for too long. Now, you are free of that pain, so help them help themselves.” Merlin’s green eyes shone as he guided Arthur. I remembered watching almost exactly the same scene when Arthur had just gained the throne all those years before. Merlin had told him exactly the same thing to help him become the great king I loved.

“We need to start with the guard. We give them back their

pride, give them something worthy of the uniform,” I said. “Give them a reason to police their city.”

Arthur nodded and I knew as we walked through the city toward the great keep, he already had a list of orders a mile long to give us all. He’d always held to the law and maintained a tight rein on the detail of his government. I had the feeling any slack which may have occurred would be quickly gone.

The walls to the entrance of the keep rose clearly at the end of the road we rode up. Arthur stopped. We stopped. Merlin looked at him, “What is it?” the wizard asked in that voice I’d grown wary of over the years. It meant Arthur tapped into a part of himself connected to another world.

I watched Camelot’s King draw in a deep breath and close his eyes, “There’s something wrong in there,” he said quietly. He turned to me suddenly, “We go in there armed and we stake our claim to my city.” His blue eyes shone with an inner power.

I grinned, “Yes, Sire.” My right hand groused that fighting didn’t seem a sensible idea, I ignored it.

The three of us turned the horses and rode back to a nearby inn we’d all been drunk in at one time or another. I slipped off Ash and entered through a discreet door at the back. I spoke with the innkeeper. He came out, bowed briefly before Willow and Arthur before taking us to a small set of private rooms he kept for his more illustrious patrons, when they were doing something they shouldn’t.

We piled into the rooms and I found myself alone with Arthur for a second. I looked around. “I should keep these rooms on retainer for us to enjoy privately,” I joked.

Arthur tried to scowl but gave up and laughed. “Think I’m becoming your whore?” he asked.

I frowned, considered and said, “More like mistress.”

Merlin walked in, “You are quite correct, Arthur.” His presence dominated the room. No mean feat with two huge warriors there as well, “Camelot is sick and the sickness is at her core. We are going to have problems, my friend.”

Arthur, his moment of jovial silliness fleeing before the wizard’s unhappiness, said, “Tell me.”

“There have been countless arrests throughout the city. Men are being held without charge and decent women are avoiding the keep. Those that work in the castle but live in the city are scared. There is foulness in the stones.”

“I haven’t been gone that long,” Arthur complained. “How can things be as bad as that?”

“Your spirit has been gone from Camelot for a very long time,” Merlin stated.

Arthur glanced at me. “My spirit almost died in Camelot,” he spoke so quietly and with such emotion, my own heart ached in sympathy for the golden young man who had to become king.

“Well,” I said, trying to control Arthur’s anguish, “it doesn’t make much of a difference what kind of malaise is in Camelot’s walls, we have to stop it.” I grabbed my breastplate and began buckling it on. “If we are facing an enemy in Camelot, whether it can be defeated with a sword or with our spirits we need to put on a display of victory and that means looking shiny and fierce.”

To be honest I had no idea if I were right but I’d far rather face anything with a sword in my hand than complicated politics. Displays of strength I understand. In the end, Arthur helped me into the armour, the fingers of my right hand too damaged. I worried I’d never be able to function as a warrior properly, but Merlin seemed convinced I’d heal given time. Something of a luxury.

When Arthur finished dressing he turned to me, “What do I do about Guinevere?”

The question came from nowhere and I had nowhere to hide. My heart plunged. We’d not spoken of Guinevere for weeks. I’d shied away from thinking about her and the consequences of finally caving into Arthur’s desire. Correction, our desire, I couldn’t blame Arthur for this mess.

“I’m not certain I’m the person to ask,” I said carefully.

Arthur’s eyes narrowed. “I want your opinion not a tactful withdrawal from the field,” his tone hardened.

“Arthur,” I tried to escape but the look in his eyes gave me no retreat. I puffed air out and stared at the beams in the ceiling

looking for inspiration. “Alright, if you want my honest opinion here it is, don’t fight her. Find out what she wants. Find out why she is so angry. Talking, not screaming or fighting. One day at a time and give her space to be angry with you.” I grabbed Arthur’s steel shoulders, “You need to try to save your marriage, Arthur. You loved her once and you need a Queen, a wife and an heir.”

He nodded silently and turned away, burying whatever conflict he suffered under the armour of a king. Wearing my own armour made me feel invincible. Merlin returned, dressed in his formal black cloak rather than riding leathers, with his silver hair gleaming in the light. The three of us walked from the inn and I revelled in the feeling of being at home with my King at my side.

I’d buckled my sword onto my right hip, ensuring I’d have a clean draw with my left, but it made an untidy remount of Ash. He danced and pranced around the inn’s yard, the armour and Willow’s company making him think we were in for a fight. Arthur grinned at me, “I have the best at my side once more, Wolf.”

“I will always be at your side, Sire,” I smiled in return.

We clomped from the yard and into the streets of Camelot. All three of us had our heads bare, no great helm or coif. Each of us instantly recognisable. As one unit, we returned to the curtain wall of the castle and followed it around toward the main gate.

The sun sat low and squat in the western sky on the short winter day but people suddenly realised their sun rode the streets. Arthur sat, straight, strong, proud and the epitome of knighthood. Damn it felt good to be home.

News of Arthur’s appearance in the city spread more swiftly than fire, water, or air. People filled the streets in moments and the cheering started. With bare heads, we watched the people and they watched us. My name rushed from lip to lip as Arthur walked ahead, my face as familiar to the people as the king’s because we were so close and I won the tourneys making me instantly recognisable. Arthur smiled and waved to those he recognised of the traders and craftsmen. People adored him and

he adored them back. A king is his people and the people are their king.

By the time we reached the keep's outer walls, a surging living tide of humanity cried out our names. Except for Merlin. Mother's invoked his name to scare their children but I felt their relief at his presence as much as my own. The old team were together, now all ills would be cured.

I only had to hope they were right. The welcoming committee at the gates made me think they might be proved wrong.

CHAPTER TWO

The bridge over the deep moat leading from the main part of the city to the keep itself should have two men guarding it. As we rode up, twenty men stood on the bridge and none of them in Arthur's colours of blue and gold. Merlin and I moved up and flanked him. I heard a low growl come from his throat.

The colours the men wore were also an unwelcome sight. Turquoise and yellow, far too close to Arthur's colours. They lined each side of the bridge and only one person stood in the centre.

Stephen de Clare. The man I loathed more than any other breathing in our world. I felt my teeth grind and my desire to kill instantly translated itself to Ash. Up until that point, he'd simply enjoyed the pageantry, the old tart, but now he knew we faced an enemy. His hind quarters twisted outward and he gnashed his bit.

"Calm down, Lancelot, you aren't helping," Arthur said quietly while he focused on de Clare. He knew Ash merely translated my own mood.

De Clare walked toward us, the crowd of Camelot hushed. I watched and realised he hadn't changed at all in the year since we had last met. Not as tall as either Arthur, or myself he nevertheless stood as stout as a tree. Older than me by ten years, his brown hair not yet touched by time. His face though, betrayed his temper as a man. A large head, flat face, small eyes, thin lips and a harshness which brooked no sentiment. I had never worked out what colour his eyes should be, they sat too deeply in his head and he scowled too much of the time. De Clare did not forgive those who failed in his eyes and he punished wherever that gaze fell. When his eyes saw me, riding beside Arthur, they fairly glowed with rage.

He bowed low. Arthur muttered, "Well, that's something." I snorted. Merlin rode forward and spoke.

"My Lord de Clare," he said clearly for the crowd. "We are

well met by you having returned from our pilgrimage to reunite old friends. But this rich display of force,” he swept his hand toward the bridge, “is hardly necessary to honour our King’s return. You have outshone the stars in heaven by such a demonstration.”

Damn, Merlin was good. I’d have gone in there and hacked his head off. Which is why Arthur sent me to kill and others, usually Geraint, to negotiate with his enemies. I weakened them; Geraint talked them into final capitulation. I hadn’t thought of him for days. I wished he flanked Arthur’s other side. I wondered how his marriage was working out for him.

“Merlin, what a surprise, we thought you’d abandoned Camelot. Given up on your King,” de Clare’s voice boomed making my ears ache already. “These men are here for the protection of Camelot while the King is indisposed. They are also here to aid me in protecting my sister from any who would harm her,” his eyes fell on me. For the first time I was very glad we had Else safely tucked away in Tintagel.

Merlin paused for dramatic effect before saying, “But, my Lord, why would Camelot need protecting? The King has been gone just a few short weeks, what could have happened that the Seneschal needed armed men other than those of the King’s for Camelot’s defence? We saw no enemies on the plains around our fair city.” The wonderful teasing tone of Merlin’s words made Arthur chuckle.

“Camelot needs a noble able to defend her at a moments notice,” de Clare announced. “I feared the King had been taken from Camelot in a moment of,” he paused so the audience could make up its own mind.

Arthur didn’t let that happen, “Moment of what?” His voice rang out with the clarity of the sweetest bell. “Moment of madness, my Lord de Clare?” he laughed and slapped me on the back, “Well, if it is madness to be grateful for the return of old friends such as Merlin and Sir Lancelot du Lac, then I am sore mad indeed and still rage in my madness.” His voice invited the crowd to roar and laugh in approval, which they duly did of course because Arthur has that effect. When he talks, he controls the people around him.

“Sire,” de Clare announced, “The traitor -” he never had a chance. Arthur rode Willow forward hard, the dying light of the day catching his armour and burning it red. His golden curls morphed to flame as he turned his huge black warhorse, his back now to de Clare and the men on the bridge. I heard Willow’s rear hooves hit the wooden slats and knew I couldn’t reach Arthur in time to defend his back. Merlin realised the same thing and pushed forward as Arthur cried out.

“I have been on a quest. A quest for the heart of Camelot. My heart. I have been rudderless, my people. I have been lost in a mighty sea unable to save myself or you,” Willow reared at this point, Arthur artfully emphasising his words. “I found my heart when I reclaimed it from my lost friend,” he leaned over as I reached his side and grasped my shoulder making our armour chink. “My people, you know of the crimes my friend is supposed to have committed and you know I had him punished according to the rule of law, but I ask you this, when your heart is torn from your still living chest and sent away, how is a man suppose to survive the ensuing sickness?” he asked the crowd and a soft murmuring breathed over them.

One voice, a woman’s said, “You cannot, Sire. You are our heart.”

“Indeed I am,” Arthur replied. “I am your heart and you are mine. My friend, my Wolf, my Champion,” a nice way to announce my new title, “protects that heart and I would not be parted from him. Not when he rode to save my heart despite my blind stupidity.” He paused, “Yes, my people, even a king can be stupid,” his rueful tone brought laughter. “How could I not forgive such bravery? We are sick, Camelot. We are weak. We have been torn asunder, you,” he swept his arm over the crowd, “and I, ripped from each other.” I could feel their sadness. “But now,” his voice rose, “Now, we are strong. We have sought forgiveness and we have gained it. We have managed to heal the broken heart and we will become strong again, together for all time. You and I are Camelot,” he told the crowd. They roared. Willow reared and screamed a challenge to the sky.

He looked magnificent and he bloody knew it. As they

quietened, he said softly, "Go home, people of Camelot. Go to your loved ones and heal the wounds, which might lie in your hearts. For tomorrow, we will celebrate the new life of Camelot. We will feast and holiday. Then we will begin our world again and make it stronger than ever." They roared once more. Arthur turned Willow and galloped over the bridge with the two of us half a pace behind. Stephen de Clare flung himself into his own men to avoid being trampled to death.

We raced through the killing fields behind the curtain wall, through the mighty gate and into the inner courtyard. Once there, Arthur pulled Willow up and began laughing.

"Oh, that was fun. I really enjoyed it." His eyes shone with tears as he laughed.

Stable boys appeared and we slid off our warhorses congratulating ourselves. I chuckled but Merlin sat quietly on his scraggy mountain horse.

"Arthur," Merlin said quietly. "Wait," his voice sounded as though it came from a wisp of wind travelling over death on a battlefield. We both stopped and turned toward him. He crouched like a bird of carnage on the back of the mare.

"What is it, Merlin?" asked Arthur, walking to the wizard's horse. Merlin's green eyes shone in the dying light like old copper pennies.

"Feel your home, Arthur. A single speech is not going to force the darkness from these walls. It wants your blood," Merlin peered around him as though the golem were living in our halls.

The horses were led away. Arthur paused and closed his eyes. I heard de Clare and his men walking back over the drawbridge and through the killing fields. Arthur's eyes snapped open and his face paled horribly. I thought he would faint, so I moved toward him when I heard him whisper, "Guinevere."

He turned without seeing me and raced for the steps.

Merlin looked at me, "Don't just stand there. He needs his Wolf by his side."

I didn't need telling twice, I raced after Arthur.

CHAPTER THREE

The castle, which should be alive to the sounds of preparations for the evening, seemed eerily quiet. Or maybe the noise of two men in full armour sprinting up stone stairways drowned out everything else. Arthur, having been training against Geraint and I for weeks on the road had hardened, his fitness increasing to the point we both bounded two steps at a time without effort. Servants flinched and hurried away or stared at us as we rushed past, there were no guards except a pair in Stephen's colours on Guinevere's door.

Her suite of rooms were next door to Arthur's. Mine had been the other side of hers with Kay's also on the same floor. Geraint, when he came to Camelot usually shared with me. Guinevere's suite had one door from the main hall of entry. A door also privately linked her rooms to Arthur's and mine, both of which became an open secret. With the main keep being a huge square structure, Arthur and half of Guinevere's rooms looked over the river and hills of Camelot. While the other half of her rooms and mine, looked over the largest proportion of the city. Arthur and I could both see into the inner and outer baileys from different perspectives.

When we saw the men on her door, Arthur froze. I did not. I had no idea what they were doing there, but Guinevere lay behind that door and Arthur knew something was wrong. They were not heavily armoured but they had heard us coming. When they recognised Arthur, they instantly looked confused which gave me the opening I needed. I back fisted one with the mailed side of my left hand. Smashing his face, but making certain I didn't break anything obvious. The other moved his halberd to stop me entering the apartment but nowhere near fast or firm enough. I knocked it aside and punched him in the guts. He wore mail under his tabard and I'm never certain if that's worse because of the metal or helps because of the protection. Regardless he doubled and dropped as intended.

Arthur strode forward and tried to open the door. I heard noise and turned to the end of the corridor, Kay rushed toward us and Merlin appeared from the same direction we had taken. The door didn't move, someone had locked it.

The King stepped back and aimed a kick at the lock. It didn't give, so he did it again, the sound of his heavily armoured foot connecting with the metal and wood of the door sent shivers of fear through me. I remembered seeing in my dream, Guinevere dead on the antlers of the white hart. The lock smashed and the door flew open. Various young women squealed and dashed around the large anteroom like startled chickens. Arthur strode through the room. I walked at his heel.

The door to Guinevere's bedchamber opened. Elaine, Kay's wife stood there. A small round matron, who could fight like a vole when trapped by a cat. She would howl the place down before giving into the inevitable. She'd provided Kay with five children in the time they'd been married. Just a year longer than Arthur and Guinevere. Her black hair now contained streams of grey, while her round face had wrinkles which didn't detract from her inner beauty. I'd always liked Elaine but the Queen never favoured her as a lady in waiting. I often wished Guinevere had more sense. Elaine would have been a calming influence.

"Arthur," she gasped in shock. Then she dropped to a curtsy still in the doorway and said, "Sire."

"Guinevere," Arthur said and tried to push past.

"Sire, wait," Elaine didn't move an inch despite being over a foot shorter than Arthur.

Kay rushed into the anteroom. "Everyone out," he ordered. I peered at him and realised he'd aged in just the few weeks since we'd last met. He looked so thin and worn, like a misspelled word scraped off a piece of vellum. The young women all babbled.

"Out, now," I bellowed. Women vanished. De Clare's guards vanished with them, doubtless to report our arrival.

"Arthur, Sire," Kay said in a rush. "Please wait, we need to talk. I need to tell you what has happened since you've left."

Merlin placed a hand on Kay's arm. I watched the tension

and stress in him dissolve but the sadness remained. Arthur stared dumbly at Elaine until she moved. He walked like a wooden man into Guinevere's bedchamber. I followed, drawn by his pain and so many memories.

The large bed, which sat central to one wall, lay crumpled with sheets of linen, fur pelts and wool blankets. The colours were bright, almost garish in the dying light of the day. They contrasted with the heavy wooden bed and its four great posts. Everywhere lay cushions and pillows. Where Arthur's rooms were simple, these were opulently dressed in tapestries and rugs. Small tables and chests, with delicate chairs sat against the walls, somehow looking forlorn in the firelight. There were candles too, as though Guinevere ordered the sun to remain in the sky.

Our star, the star of Camelot, which ruled our world, both Arthur's and my own for so long, sat in the centre of the bed. Her long blonde hair lay in a tangled mass around her body. Her ice blue eyes were huge as they peered at us from dark circles on her pale skin. The long fingers, once elegant, looked skeletal as they plucked at the cloth on the bed. She sat in a simple shift of pale cream silk and rocked backward and forward, staring at us. I saw her mouth move but no words, just a whisper of sound. Arthur stepped toward the bed.

His jaw moved and I saw him try to speak, but he seemed as stuck as Guinevere. Her eyes focused on him for the first time.

"Arthur," she whispered and I watched huge scalding tears fill her eyes, only to fall like drops of mercury on the blankets.

He whimpered, stepped to the bed and in one fluid movement swept her into his arms. She made no sound but clung to his chest her eyes wide and staring at the floor over his shoulder. The pain deep in my guts flowered like a poisonous black rose. I was too horrified for rage, too shocked to think about vengeance.

"Lancelot," Arthur said, his voice as fragile as the creature in his arms.

"Sire," I managed.

"Everyone out," he said. They too were stupefied with shock. Elaine moved first, shaking herself and turning to herd

people out. Merlin had tears coursing down his cheeks, as did poor Elaine. Kay took his wife by the shoulders and led her out. They returned to the anteroom. I found my legs still functioned in this strange new world, so walked after them.

“No,” Arthur said. “I need your help.” The words flowed as they would for a dying man giving his final speech. I moved to the bed. Whatever orders Arthur gave I would complete with gladness in my heart.

His blue eyes were dark, rage filling them. “I don’t know how to deal with her,” he said.

She whimpered like a puppy.

“Just love her, Sire,” I said confused by his anguish. I wouldn’t need to ask how to feel or what to do to help. Hold Guinevere safe, then slaughter everyone involved in her pain.

His arms flinched and I feared he would crush his Queen. I reached out my hand and suddenly he released her, I sat on the bed and pulled her against my chest, the armour hard against both our bodies. Guinevere curled up into my lap.

I finally heard the words she’d been whispering. An old nursery rhyme. I held her close. Gently, I rocked like a mother with a babe. She had no weight and a scent of sickness came from her but I kissed her bowed head and whispered soft words. The cooing noises calmed her while Arthur just sat beside me, staring into the distance as night claimed day.

“Arthur,” I finally said gently. “You need to take off the armour. You need to be softer. She needs you to be kind with her.”

“She is my Queen, how could this happen? Who could do this?” he turned toward me.

“Those are questions which can wait,” though I knew exactly who had hurt Guinevere. I just needed confirmation, “Your priority now is helping your wife survive this horror.”

He moved, rising to strip his armour. Guinevere cried out at the sudden shift. “Lancelot, help me,” she said, acknowledging me for the first time. “I need my Champion. I’ve been hurt,” her voice a quiver of fear.

I grunted as though she’d felled me with a mighty blow. When I could draw breath and speak I said, “I am here, my

Queen. I will protect you. I will keep you safe, my love.” The endearment was a reflex habit but it brought a wave of grief from Guinevere. Arthur turned at the sound. His armour and mail stripped from him in moments. He moved toward me and I stood, his focus only on his wife. I held her in my arms and passed her toward him, a broken doll. She wept noisily as she turned toward Arthur and buried herself in his sweaty shirt. I relinquished control. He held her, turning toward a window seat and sitting. I watched them for a moment, then unable to deal with their private grief, I left the room, closing the door quietly.

“Lancelot?” Merlin asked, as though checking I was still me when I walked into the antechamber.

“They are together,” I said dully. My fists were clenching and releasing. My shoulders felt as though they had been welded to my armour as a solid mass. “How did this happen?” I asked, my head swinging toward Kay and Elaine.

“Lancelot,” Kay rose, “I know you are anxious, but I should speak with Arthur first.”

I growled low in my chest, “How did this happen? It is my duty to protect the King and Queen. I am King’s Champion, Kay, how did this happen?” I stepped toward him. Kay blanched and backed off. Elaine stood and stepped calmly before me.

“Lancelot,” she said placing both palms on my armoured chest. “The Queen has suffered quite enough for the moment, she doesn’t need your rage flattening her as well. There is nothing any of us could have done.”

“And you know that do you?” I snarled into her face. Right then I could have ripped her head off just for breathing Guinevere’s name.

“Sadly, yes, I do,” Elaine said. She sighed and stared at the door to Guinevere’s bedchamber. “If I don’t tell you, you’ll do something stupid won’t you?” she asked but didn’t really seem to need an answer. Elaine just kept talking while we all listened. She turned from me and returned to the fire. Merlin began removing my armour, in the hope I think I might not kill anyone if I weren’t dressed so aggressively.

“It began as soon as de Clare arrived,” Elaine told us. “He was furious that Eleanor had vanished into the night with the three of you to go on this pilgrimage.” She made it plain in her tone she also thought it a stupid idea. “But Kay managed to deal with him and said Arthur would explain on his return. The days rolled by and no Arthur, no message. We sent people to look for you, but they didn’t find any sign. Stephen began spreading poison through the court and the factions became restless. It doesn’t take long. Then the Queen decided to have some fun. She decided to make much of your return to favour, Lancelot. The factions started to grumble about slack leadership and Arthur’s grip on reality. When Stephen and the Queen sided against Arthur using you as the weapon of choice, they found fertile ground.” She paused and sipped some wine, “They met in private. Kay did all he could to stop them, but Guinevere and Stephen between them outrank him too much. Without Arthur we couldn’t do much.” She paused.

Merlin, now sat quietly in the corner, said, “Speak the words, Elaine. If you speak them they cease to have power over you.”

A tear slid down her round cheek. “The night of the last full moon,” she said and I felt my heart squeeze tight in shock. That night I’d dreamt of Guinevere standing, knife in hand, ready to kill the white hart. I had killed her instead. I forced myself to focus on Elaine, “They met in private. In the morning Kay came to her rooms to ask her to attend to some household matter he needed her advice on, or at least that was the story. He really wanted to check de Clare had left her apartment. He found her, on the floor of her chambers, bloody. Beaten everywhere but her face and hands. The rape clear.”

It was the first time any of us had used the word. We all flinched. Elaine continued heavily, “He called for me. We knew how difficult it would be if others knew so we kept the circle small, but when she woke it became clear that the Queen’s mind had been affected. She’s hardly eaten or slept since. Sometimes she is lucid and that’s how we found out what happened. But most of the time she is elsewhere, waiting for you and Arthur to come home.”

“De Clare’s men were on the door when we arrived,” I said.

Kay said, “I couldn’t stop him. He hasn’t been back but he’s made his intentions clear. When he destroys Arthur, he’s taking the Queen as his wife and his men were here to ensure she didn’t leave. Because of her state of mind and the huge quantity of men he has, I couldn’t declare openly what he’d done to her. Not without Arthur. It would have caused a war, which I can’t declare. So, Elaine agreed to stay with the Queen and keep her safe. We haven’t left her alone for a moment and we haven’t allowed anyone else to see her but Arthur’s steward.”

“So,” I said, “de Clare has been running Camelot? Usurping you?”

Kay hung his head, “Pathetic aren’t I? Arthur trusted me with his wife and Camelot and I’ve lost him both. You’ve only been gone five weeks.”

It felt like years to me so much had happened. Then I realised I had a focus for my anger. I’d listened to all this and missed the point. De Clare had raped Guinevere. I moved without thinking. I picked up my sword, which Merlin had just removed from my hip and walked to the door. I knew how to solve this, I knew how to end Guinevere’s pain and Arthur’s. I knew how to protect him. Kill Stephen de Clare.