

LANCELOT
AND THE
WOLF

THE KNIGHTS OF CAMELOT

LANCELOT AND THE WOLF

By

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To the story tellers, musicians and artists
who inspire me.

Also my own knight in shining armour.

CHAPTER ONE

Lifting my shirt over my head caused me to wince. The muscles still sore and the skin still ravaged. If I dressed as I should, the gambeson then the hauberk would rip the scabs off my back.

I sighed heavily pulling the flesh taut over my ribs. I had to leave today. The nuns protecting me healed all they could and if I stayed, I may endanger them. At least they managed to remove the worst of the blood from my clothing. I rolled the padded undergarment and mail up, moving slowly. The dull steel sucked in the early morning light. Arthur's mail shone with the light of his soul, he seemed to glow from the inside out every time he went into battle or tourney.

I forced the memory away. I forced Arthur away. I swallowed my need to weep and tried to relax my clenched jaw. A gentle knock at the door focused me on the present.

"Come in," my voice sounded the same even if I felt different. Deep, rough, heavy with unspoken emotions.

The door opened and a nun stood in the entrance of the small cell. She looked at me and then at the small amount of things I owned and packed. "So, you are leaving us," she said.

"Yes, Sister Eliza," I straightened. "I think it's for the best."

"You are leaving too soon, those wounds will become infected," she told me firmly, her hands sitting on her considerable hips. As the one to dress them, clean them and stitch them where necessary, I guess she felt a kind of perverse ownership.

"I promise I will keep them clean and I promise not to do anything too stupid until they are healed," I said, dredging up a smile for her.

She blushed, her round face in the nun's wimple all too obvious with no hair to hide behind. My smile can open doors for me in the most frigid of hearts.

"Humph, I don't believe that promise for one bloody moment," she cursed, then crossed herself. I realised quickly that the world of a nun didn't come naturally to Sister Eliza. "But if you are going to leave then at least let me help you pack."

She hustled me out of the way and began organising my few possessions. She did a better job than I could have done. My pack and saddlebags were tidy in moments.

When she finished she asked, "So, do you have a plan?"

I laughed, a bitter, brittle sound making her flinch. "No, what is there to plan for? I am dishonoured. I am exiled. I have been thrown to the dogs by my King. I have no plan beyond the nearest tavern over the Channel."

She sighed. "This self pity doesn't suit you, Lancelot."

I opened my mouth to snap back at her when I saw the deep well of compassion in her blue eyes. I dropped my gaze. "No, I know. I need God's Grace but I don't know how to ask."

She laid her hand on my bowed head. I stood almost as tall as she could reach, I felt her fingers nestle close to my scalp burrowing through my thick black hair. "You just have to ask, Sir Knight," she said softly as a way of benediction.

"I cannot ask for God's forgiveness when I cannot forgive myself," I said to the stone floor.

"And you won't forgive yourself until you have your King's forgiveness," she said sadly. Over the last three days, she managed to prise my story from my reluctant lips. A farmer found me in his field, bleeding to death and carried me in his cart. I'd been lucky apparently. The wounds, though open, were treated when I'd been cut down from the flogging post. No infection, no fever, beyond the one in my heart.

In those three days, I'd only really seen Sister Eliza and the Mother Superior of this small community near the monastery at Sherborne Abbey. I'd been deemed a dangerous influence on everyone else. They were probably right. Sister Eliza, after informing me confession would be good for my soul, proved a patient and sympathetic listener. I thought the only thing, which would be good for me, would be an arrow to the heart. I refrained from saying it aloud though; I didn't want to shatter her illusions.

"Arthur can never forgive me and I don't blame him," I said. "I earned every lash of that whip."

She opened her mouth to argue, realised how futile it would be and snapped her mouth shut. "Well," she said more briskly, "you need something more positive to do than wallowing in a tavern

for the rest of your life. I suggest you find a cause or a war to keep you entertained.”

I smiled again and caught her fingers to my lips. I kissed them fondly. “Sister, I will do as you command. I shall find a war and fight until I’m done, then perhaps I shall have some peace.” I’d meant the words to be funny, but her eyes filled with sudden tears.

“I wish you well, Lancelot du Lac, but I fear the darkness in your soul will never see you happy.” She turned away quite suddenly and left me alone, without as much as a backward glance. My last true friend in England.

I took the horse Arthur left me for my ‘escape’, saddled him and walked from the small community heading toward the coast. I wanted to avoid notice at the nearby castle, so I rode through the back lanes until I’d travelled several leagues. It took a day of hard riding to reach the port of Keyhaven. I sold the horse and carried my things to the nearest cargo ship heading for the mainland. Arthur had his wish. I was leaving English shores for good. I stood at the stern as the ship left the harbour on the evening tide. I watched my home for the last twenty nine of my thirty six years, fade under the light of the moon. A washed out shoreline in shades of grey and black with torchlight flashing like fireflies.

My throat tightened. “I will always love you, Arthur,” I whispered under my breath. I closed my eyes and turned my back on England.

The crossing proved quick and easy, the wind kind in our sails and the swells gentle. I’d had some bad ones over the years when I’d been travelling to and from various courts and wars, but this voyage at least proved painless. We arrived late the following day. I stood on deck watching the sun descend behind the headland, the deckhands tying us to the shore.

I disembarked quickly and breathed in the stink of Le Havre. For the first time in weeks, I felt alive and grateful for the privilege. The shock of my time in England slipped into the sea to be borne away on the tide. Having been in this town many times, I quickly wove through the docks avoiding the fish guts, grubby children and the cheapest of whores, to find my favourite tavern.

The recent rain meant the mud stank strongly of human waste, horses and rotting food. More than a little fastidious I tried to pick my way through the worst of the muck. The streets were busy, noisy and ignorant of my crimes. Although a man of my height is hard to miss, I felt anonymous. Le Rex, my favourite inn, stood in the centre of the merchant’s quarter of the town, so it made good money. Most of it was built of stone, except for the upper level. Its tiled roof rose like a beacon of hope. The rooms had fresh sheets and the whores were clean. The door stood open as I approached. A welcoming noise and light burred into the street.

Hours later, I found myself with a beautiful woman in one hand and a bad hand in the other. “Well, play or fold you fool,” came the gruff voice of some sea captain. We’d been playing primo vista for hours and I held most of the coins.

I squinted at the cards once more, they were slightly fuzzy, I then peered up at the woman on my knee. Her fine blonde hair snagged me immediately, that and her beautiful smile. “What do you think?” I asked, “Play or fold?”

She smiled back. “If you play and win this hand, as I know you will, I will earn more of your money. So, I say play,” she winked.

I laughed. “The lady says play, so I will play. All in,” I said and she pushed everything I had left into the pot.

She knew her own game well this one. If I won with her help, she knew I’d pay her more of my winnings and the pot had grown large. I looked forward to the challenge of burying myself in her body and fucking until the sun came up.

The gruff sea captain studied us. He’d think I was too drunk to make a wise choice and he might be right. He looked at his own cards, looked at the pile of money in the pot and the pile beside his elbow. He weighed the risks and finally said, just as I’d grown bored and my fingers explored the whore’s cleavage, “Fold.”

“Really?” I asked surprised. “Great.” Before he could do a damn thing about it, I folded my cards and hid them in the deck. The whore scooped up the horde and we left the table. The sea captain’s curses made us both giggle.

I followed the woman. Her hips swayed and I watched her tight waist in the unforgiving bodice. We walked upstairs and she led us to a room off the main corridor.

She dumped the winnings on the bed and lay back, the coin jingling as it and she landed, making a

pleasing sound. I watched her, amused as she wriggled around in the money. I walked to a table. Wine sat warming by the fire and my belongings in a pile alongside. I poured myself a large glass and one for the woman. She'd told me her name but for the life of me I couldn't remember. It didn't matter, I need her warmth, not her heart.

I heard her rise from the bed and come to join me. Soft lips brushed my neck and soft hands pulled my shirt from my sword belt and hose.

"Hmm," she murmured, "I don't get to play with men as well built as you very often. The finest room, with the finest whore and you are fit enough to fuck into next week. I can't wait," she purred, kissing under my collar length tangled hair. "Those dark eyes of yours speak of promises you can do to women most men consider too terrifying to contemplate."

I turned in her arms and looked down into clear blue eyes. "You are a bad girl," I told her firmly.

"You need me to be very bad and very wicked so I wouldn't complain," she kissed my mouth.

My desire exploded. I dropped the glass and spilled the wine pulling her hard against my body. She yelped in surprise but reacted as only a professional can and gave back as good as she got. I didn't have to ask permission or fear rejection. I pushed her back against the bed and had her skirts up before she fell backward on the covers. The coins chimed cheerfully. Her deft fingers undid my hose with wonderful efficiency. I moved from her mouth to her neck. My hands wanted her full breasts but I didn't have the patience to wait so I just licked and bit the parts I could reach easily. Once she freed me, she raised her hips and opened her knees as wide as they'd go.

"You need a woman," she gasped. "Take your fill. We'll have time for games later."

I didn't answer, I just grunted and held myself, pushing into her warm willing body. For a long moment, I held still. Many women need time to adjust to me and I always pause to enjoy their shock. She cried out, her fingers digging into my backside.

"Oh, bloody hell, I knew you'd be worth the effort," she grinned. "Fuck me."

I did, hard. I knew I pushed too hard for her complete enjoyment but I needed England out of me. I needed something simple and uncomplicated. I needed to rut like an animal. It didn't take long, heartbeats before the final rush hit me, I pulled out of her and she deftly flicked herself over to take me in her mouth. I came hard, crying out loudly and trying not to choke the poor woman. When the hurricane ended, I looked into confident, happy blue eyes.

"That was kind of you," she said. "You didn't have to pull out."

"I know the risks you girls take. I have no wish to add to your problems by getting you pregnant," I told her, brushing tangled blond hair from her face.

She kissed my lips, gently this time, a brief peep of the woman not the whore showing through, "It's appreciated and whoever let you go to make you that desperate in my bed, was a fool of a woman."

I laughed. "Is there no way of hiding a broken heart from a professional?"

She pulled my shirt over my head and kissed my chest. "No, no way, but with a body this fit I'll take a broken heart and work hard to mend it." She licked from my belly button over my tight stomach and up my chest. I climbed onto the bed and she turned to attend my back.

"Oh, my God, what happened to you?" she gasped. I froze. For one blissful moment, I'd forgotten the healing scabs on my back.

I found words, they were rough, "I paid for sex not a commentary on my body."

She recovered, "No, sorry, Sir, I had no right. We all carry scars, one way or another."

In that moment, I wanted to run. Every muscle tightened to flee this damned woman and her prying eyes. What the hell must she think of me for looking like this?

Ever the professional and knowing she'd ruined the moment, the doxy rose from the bed and poured more wine. She smiled as she approached. "You look as though you are going to kill me," she laughed. "Don't be angry. It makes no difference to me what you've done or who you are. Just help me out of this damned dress and I'll make you forget you ever had a life before this one."

I drank the wine in one and the dress seemed to melt of her soft body. I soon found myself enveloped by long legs, warm breasts and a firm arse.

CHAPTER TWO

The sounds of a scuffle drifted through muddled dreams of deep green woods and white stags with wolves running as a pack alongside.

A small voice choked back a cry and a rough one snarled an order. I found myself unencumbered by my companion who snored softly on the edge of the bed. I rolled and came up on my feet. My head throbbed painfully at the sudden change of direction and my stomach rolled. My mouth felt like a leper's armpit and I decided I didn't need to know what happened outside.

A whimper and squeal had me reaching for my clothes, even as I told myself this was not my job. I opened the shutters over the window and peered out. I groaned at what I saw. The dawn just brushed the sky. I couldn't have slept more than two hours. A boy, almost man sized stood with his face pressed into the wall of the tavern's stable while two men held him still. One of the men fumbled at his crotch.

"Shit," I cursed and pulled on my boots. I opened the window wide, not wishing to break any of the expensive small glass panes and peered down. A wagon full of old laundry sat below me.

I turned, grabbed my sword and a knife before simply diving out the window. I didn't even think, just twisted in the air and landed on my back in a woof of sheets. It protested madly. I grimaced and struggled out of the suffocating fabric. I fell to the floor and then scrambled upright.

I saw the glimpse of a blade at the boy's throat and the wide eyes of panic as the man finally freed himself so he could make use of his tiny dick. I needed to distract them.

"Hey, is this a free ride or are you charging?" I asked in my friendliest tone.

Both men turned to me and the knife dropped from the boy's throat. All the invitation I needed. I wanted them done quickly and quietly before they woke the town, so I used the hilt of my sword to smash one in the face while I cut the throat of the other. Blood washed from the large gash but the man dropped without a sound. The boy twisted away, his legs tangled in his torn clothes and he dropped, huddling over himself instantly. I took the potential rapist by the hair and simply ran the knife over his throat. Done in seconds without a sound. My heart beat a little fast. I swallowed my need for more death, coming back from the edge of the battle frenzy slowly.

Arthur told me I killed too easily. He said I would go too far one day and lose myself to the death call. A small sound made me rush back to the real world.

The boy crouched in a heap, staring up at me in fear. He'd managed to dress. He had short scruffy warm brown hair and terrified brown eyes. He looked older than I first thought but didn't seem to be shaving. His face all angles and he was skinny.

"You all right?" I asked.

He blinked. "Yes," he said. Although his right eye started to swell and I could see blood on his lips and down his chin. There were bruises colouring his neck and wrists.

I held my hand out to help him up but he ducked away and scrambled upright alone. His eyes were averted from me and the bodies. "Thank you, Sir."

"You the stable boy?" I asked.

"I was." He did look at the bodies then, his expression grim. "I guess I won't be now, they are the sheriff's men. I've been avoiding them for weeks." His eyes suddenly filled with tears and he folded in on himself. My heart melted.

"Damn it," I said softly. I knew, whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter, when they found these bodies, which they would, they'd find the boy and he'd give them me. He was alone and scared. As a stranger in the town carrying scars on my back, evidenced my bed warmer and looking like a fighter, I'd draw all the wrong attention.

"You know this place inside?" I nodded at the tavern.

"Yes, Sir," came a soft reply.

"My room is the one above the cart, go and find everything. The girl is not to be disturbed. The coin on the floor and in the bed..." I thought about it for a moment. "Find as much as you can but leave a fair share for her. Then meet me at the horse market. If you aren't there by the time the town gates are open I'm leaving alone and you can shift for yourself. Understand?" I had no idea what the

hell I thought I was doing. The last thing I needed was another problem in my life.

I turned to move the bodies and I heard a sharp intake of breath. I'd forgotten about my shirt, again. "Get a fucking move on," I snapped.

The boy glanced at my face and ran to the tavern. He'd know how to enter the place quickly and quietly. I reached down, grabbed the ankles of one of the stinking rapist bastards and hauled him into an empty stable. His friend followed. I pulled a coat off one of the bodies, shook out the lice and hoped my wounds were still closed. I didn't feel blood whispering down my skin so I assumed I wouldn't pick up an infection. My arms were too long for the coat, but it would do for the few minutes I needed to reach the horse market. With the streets still quiet in the pre dawn light, I ran to the edge of the town, just inside the walls.

A small wooden house sat surrounded by horse pens and everything associated with horses. I banged on the door. "Dillon, you old horse thief, wake up," I yelled as loudly as I dared. Mumbled curses, several loud crashes later and the door opened.

"What the bloody hell," came the angry voice from an angry face.

"Dillon, I need Ash and I need a good safe gelding," I said point blank. "Oh and it's great to see you."

"Lancelot?" he rubbed sleep from his one good eye and stared up at me. He smiled, the mouth full of gold. I wondered how many of those teeth I paid for over the years. "What do you want that beast for now? It's still dark."

"It's not dark, you just drank too much," I told him, encouraging him out of his small house and into the yard. I knew how he felt.

"Ha," he said, "And I thought for sure you'd died this time and I'd get to sell that monster of yours."

"I gave you gold for at least a year of keep and it's only been ten months, don't exaggerate," I said.

Dillon the horse trader grinned. "You certain it was a year's keep? You are in an awful hurry for a year's keep." He eyed my clothing.

I groaned, "Fine, but the gelding better be good."

Dillon, his beady eyes shining with a new deal, stomped off on his short fat legs to find a stable boy to help with Ash. I followed him, if I left Dillon's boy to attend the horse alone I'd be waiting another hour at least. No one should have to deal with Ash but me, so the least I could do was try to saddle the brute.

Just as we reached a stable yard, I heard a scrabbling behind me. I turned with my hand already on my sword hilt. The boy from the tavern appeared with my things.

"Here, Sir," he panted. My saddlebags and bedroll were all in perfect order, with my shirt, doublet, cloak and a bag I didn't recognise slung over the boy's shoulder.

I blinked in surprise, "That was quick."

"I am, Sir."

"Can you manage a warhorse?" I asked.

"Yes, Sir," came a confident reply, just as a yell issued from the stable and I heard Ash's trademark neigh, or snarl, if horses could snarl.

"Find that horse and saddle him," I said, taking my belongings from the boy. His right eye had almost swollen shut but he ran for the stables.

In no short order I'd bought a fine looking chestnut gelding with saddle and bridle all in. I'd also bought equipment for the road, such as cooking pots and something to put in them. The boy appeared with Ash, my horse, whom I left with Dillon every time I travelled to England for a short time. This trip had meant to be short but my arrest kept me occupied for quite a while. I hated forcing the crossing on my equestrian companion. It seemed however, that I now travelled with a boy dedicated to the dark arts of horse management. My foul tempered stallion followed the lad meek as a lamb. Dillon stared in shock, as did his stable hand.

I handed the reins of the gelding to my boy and said, "This is, Mercury."

My stallion gnashed his bit in protest at the company. Ash had belonged to me for five years. I'd won him in a card game and wondered why his owner didn't seem to mind. The colour of wood ash, with a black mane and tail, he hated everyone. I kept him because he'd given up hating me most of the time and he was the finest damn horse I'd ever ridden. He had my back in a fight and knew exactly how I would move into an enemy when we faced one together. We didn't love each other but

respect goes a long way in my game.

I took my own reins and mounted before the damned stallion nipped my backside. He danced in circles and pulled on the bit. "He's grown fat," I said to Dillon.

"He's the devil's own horse, that one," said the trader, watching the boy mount. The town gates opened. I waved a farewell to Dillon and rode calmly out of Le Havre.

CHAPTER THREE

We hit the open road and I allowed Ash his head. We raced into the morning, the smaller lighter Mercury keeping pace well. The boy did know his horses, he rode strongly. After a league, we reined back the horses, they were sweating hard and my hangover had finally faded. I turned to my companion.

“So, having risked my neck to save your arse, what’s your name boy?” I asked.

“Else, Sir,” came the quiet reply.

“Unusual, but all right, it’s your name and call me, Lancelot. I am not a, sir, not anymore,” I said. Ash shifted under me sensing my sudden tension tighten his reins. I relaxed.

“Thank you, Lancelot,” Else said. My name sounded strange on the boy’s tongue and I glanced at him. I realised someone had done a hatchet job on his hair and his hands were narrow, his wrists small. He looked almost delicate. Beautiful with those long lashes over soft brown eyes. He had full lips under the swelling and slim hips.

I raised an eyebrow. “I can see why you had trouble with those men.”

He glanced at me and I saw the fear instantly flash through his face. I spoke quickly, “No, don’t worry, Else, it’s not my style.” A memory surfaced from my past and I squashed it flat. Thinking about Arthur never helped. “But with a face like that you will need to learn to fight.”

“I can fight,” his light voice trembled slightly.

“Then you will learn to fight better,” I said as kindly as I could.

We rode in silence for a long time before I grew bored with the sound of the horse’s steps. “How long had you been at the tavern?” I asked.

“Three months, Sir,” he paused, “Lancelot.”

“You are good with Ash,” I said.

“He just needs someone to love,” Else said fondly and reached out to pat the warhorse’s neck.

Love and Ash were not two words I’d use in the same sentence, but still. “Can you clean armour?”

The boy glanced at me quickly, eye contact did not happen easily. “Yes, I know a squire’s duty.”

I nodded an idea shaping in my head. A daft one, because even in the best of times I live hand to mouth and this would not be the best of times, but I’d had enough of my own company. Maybe a squire would help me have a plan like the good Sister wished.

“Well, I’m not worth much and my reputation as a man is dirt, but I’m a fine fighter and we might just make some money if you want to join me on that basis then you may,” I said.

“Can I ask what happened to you?”

“No,” I said firmly.

“Those men,” his voice grew even softer.

“Don’t think about it, Else. These things are best forgotten as quickly as you can manage,” I said.

“So, we never talk about either thing?”

“Never,” I said.

“Deal,” Else replied and I had myself a squire.

I pushed us on during the day, going for distance but alternating between walking and cantering, both easier on the horses and us. We’d covered many leagues and I hoped we’d gone far enough not to be worth finding for murder. There were times when I wished I learnt to think before acting but looking at Else’s face as he rode beside me made me glad for my intervention. I’d seen too many innocents hurt to bear it happening when I knew I could prevent it.

I found my favoured spot in which to camp, somewhere off the main road, near a river in a small wood. Hidden shelter. When we stopped for the night I realised I’d taken on far more than I’d anticipated. Else proved to be scarily efficient. I went to find some dry wood, when I returned I found the camp ruthlessly organised and the horses happily tethered and eating. Else took the wood from me and before I’d settled he began cooking. He smiled as I stared around me at the bedrolls and my armour laid out neatly.

“I’ll clean it before the rust sets in,” Else said pointing to my hauberk and plate armour.

“Good,” I said. I’d never kept my own squire, never needed one and could rarely afford the luxury.

I couldn't afford this one and as I was no longer a knight of the English court I didn't think I should have one, but I was lonely. I'd been lonely for a long time.

We ate in silence, I went to the river to wash before bed and watched Else slip away silently to perform similar rituals. He seemed to be a very private lad. Quiet but self assured. The main bonus his ability to make food out of scraps and control my damned horse. This made him worth his weight in gold, I just hoped he'd decide to stay when he realised I would never be able to make him any more than a servant. I lay back and stared at the night sky, trying hard not to think. After the activities of the night before, I grew tired and thankfully slept quickly.

The dream felt more real than any waking moment I'd known, on or off the battlefield.

A white hart and doe raced through a mist covered forest. The sense of panic overwhelmed any sense of reality. We raced together and then I realised I raced with the wolves, or wolf. Yes, just one wolf, dark and silently running with the hart, side by side, racing for our lives. I didn't know what kind of predator ran behind us, but whatever it was we had to run. As fast as we were, I knew it grew closer. I urged the deer on but they were unable to increase their speed. So, I stopped and turned to face my enemy in the shrouded forest. I bared my fangs and growled, waiting. Fear washed through the wood, fear and horror. Whatever approached would kill me, no doubt remained, but I must try, I must try for the white hart's sake.

"Lancelot, please, wake up," small hands shook my shoulders.

My eyes opened, my hands lunged for my enemy and dragged them over my body. I reached for my knife under my bedroll.

"Oh, shit, no," Else screamed and I finally woke completely.

"Else?" Dawn, the sky in the east a little lighter than the moonless rest. I dropped the boy instantly.

"You were dreaming. You woke me," he scrambled upright. "Sorry, but it sounded bad."

I took a few deep breaths to calm my nerves. "We need to move, break the camp." I felt grim, worried about some unnameable threat I didn't understand. I'd been dreaming heavily ever since my punishment. When I'd been pressed hard against the flogging post I had seen in my mind's eye the image of a wolf. A wolf I'd known as a boy.

"Do we have time for breakfast?" came the small voice.

"No, we move now," I rose, still in shirttails for warmth and pulled on my leather hose, then my boots. Else began moving efficiently around the camp and in no time had it packed. I made certain I covered our tracks as well as possible, breaking up the fire and spreading it to make it appear old. Else tacked the horses but found lifting my bedroll with my armour wrapped inside, impossible. He was too short and clearly not strong enough.

"Here, let me help," I stood behind him and took the bundle out of his arms. "You need to grow squirt."

He turned under me and I looked down. Beautiful brown eyes stared upward and he smiled, "Maybe you should buy a smaller horse, or a donkey?" he suggested.

"Or maybe I should get a taller squire," I admonished, smiling. I felt my cock respond to the boy's scent. Warm and slightly spicy. The sensation confused me a great deal. "Get the rest of the things loaded on Mercury," I said as I pushed him well out of my personal space.

He moved away, seemingly unaware of his effect on me. I muttered to the horse as I tightened various straps, "What the bloody hell is going on with me? Am I mad? Is that it? I don't fuck young boys, this is madness."

A memory of my own time as a squire surfaced. Lying next to a tangled blond mop, a firm strong body in my arms. And I in his.

I growled, forcing the reminiscence away. "I don't do this," I told myself firmly. "He needs help not more bloody problems." I promised myself another night in a tavern with a good whore as soon as possible.

The day started cool and dewy but soon turned into a blue sky, fresh breeze day. The kind of day that lightens the soul and makes the birds boisterous. I began to relax the effects of the dream leaving me.

"So, were you planning on staying in that town?" I asked my silent companion.

He glanced up at me, "No, I was just passing through really but needed the money, so stayed a while."

"Where are you from?"

“Here and there,” came the wonderfully evasive reply.

“Okay, Else, what shall we talk about?” I asked.

He considered for a moment. “How about the duties of a squire and where we are going?”

“Where we are going is easy, anywhere we won’t get hanged for killing the Sheriff’s deputy.”

Else grunted at that, but we continued to talk. He proved to have a quick mind. He already knew much of what I’d be expecting from him. He told me he’d picked it up from listening to people in the tavern. I doubted that somehow but didn’t press the issue. As most men do, we soon began talking wars and tactics.

“Phoen, what?” I asked at one point.

“Phoenicians,” Else said clearly. “They fought the Greeks.”

“Well, your education is a great deal better than mine,” I said surprised.

“I just listen a lot,” he mumbled. I declined to comment. We were both allowed our secrets.

My stomach protested loudly. “Time for lunch and your first lesson in looking after yourself more efficiently.”

We stopped, we ate, we sparred, we rode. That night we stayed in a small village with a simple inn. We shared the only room and I slept heavily.

A week passed like this with no sign of us being chased. I allowed us to ramble about and chose not to push our pace. The weather remained kind and I enjoyed Else’s company. He made me laugh and the safer he felt the more he talked. There were times I’d catch him wool gathering and his face would soften, his eyes almost amber in the light. I wondered what he thought about before he slept or who kept him warm in his dreams. My dreams were quiet for the most part. A few I wouldn’t willingly admit to myself but mostly my life felt calm and I began to heal for good.

The eight morning things grew dark and my world once more changed on the throw of the dice, which belonged to the Fates.