

# LANCELOT'S CHALLENGE

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THE KNIGHTS OF CAMELOT

LANCELOT'S CHALLENGE

BY

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The unconventional twist to the Arthurian Legends leaves me open to a great deal of hate. I want to say ‘thank you’ to those who support me when I wilt under the pressure.

Especially my knight, because without him I wouldn’t have the courage to continue Lancelot’s story and it needs telling.

He finds the silver in the darkest of my clouds.

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## CHAPTER ONE

“Bloody hell,” Arthur said. He cursed roundly and for some considerable time.

I didn’t bother speaking. I just looked down at the army walking below us and wondered what we’d done to deserve yet another impossible fight.

“Our tactic is sound, Arthur,” I whispered, fearing enemy ears, although the chances of them hearing me over their own feet were slim.

“I just didn’t want to have to kill this many people,” Arthur said. He rolled onto his back and stared at the pale blue dawn sky. The cool late summer air was sharp in our noses.

“It’s not your fault Lot won’t give up,” I said trying to console him. I wriggled backward off the crest of the hill before standing.

“Everyone else has stopped this insanity, why won’t he?” Arthur asked, following suit.

“Because he’s a proud old buzzard who hated your father and he wants to punish you,” I said, with more patience than I felt.

Arthur cursed again. He’d been doing a lot of that recently. “On the damned throne for almost twenty years and they still want to pick holes in my bloody leadership and punish me for my father’s mistakes,” he muttered while hauling himself into Willow’s saddle. He’d gone very blonde over the summer and for a moment I glimpsed the young man, not the King.

I stared up at him with Ash’s reins loose in my hand. The old warhorse tended to fight me less these days. I guess we’d both mellowed with age. “Maybe we should try to sue for peace again?” I asked.

Arthur threw his hands up in the air. “If I thought it would do any good I would, but the old goat wants me dead. Aeddán might not be funding our enemies any longer but Lot still isn’t giving up and I don’t understand where he’s getting the money. His barony isn’t worth enough.”

“Bloody big army for just his purse,” I agreed, mounting Ash. He pirouetted but didn’t buck.

“I think he’s ransomed Camelot in the hope he wins against me and can pay off the mercenaries.” Arthur walked Willow through the narrow valley running parallel to the wider one Lot and his army occupied. We passed makeshift camps, with simple canvas tents and just a few small fires. Our troops were stirring and for some this would be their last morning, their last meal. I shook my head trying to rid myself of these thoughts; they wouldn’t help me fight.

“There are a great many more of them than us,” I said.

“They don’t know Camelot’s bankrupt,” Arthur said. His unhappiness made his face as miserable as his tone.

“You aren’t bankrupt, Arthur, you are merely without funds until the harvest and those who owe you pay you,” I tried to reassure him.

“I thought we’d know unity and peace once Aeddan had gone.” Arthur kicked Willow and we began to canter into the main part of the camp.

I had naively thought the same thing. No Aeddan and all our enemies would vanish over night. Unfortunately, we were wrong. Some vanished, it was true. We’d lost enemies who were directly controlled by the fey but others still pushed, thinking Arthur remained weak. Since we’d come home the previous autumn we’d been in a constant state of negotiation or war.

Arthur finally lost his temper and declared war on Lot, no longer prepared to compromise or concede land. I stood by his side at all times and in the end, I realised we had no option but to fight. So, here we were, just before harvest, heading up a small army because we couldn’t afford to buy in help and once more facing overwhelming odds.

Some things never change.

Arthur rode straight into the middle of our army. Only two thousand strong but the core consisted of his own men and my Wolf Pack. Since our return from Albion I’d retaken possession of the Pack and Captain Moran helped the transition, muttering about retirement. I feared the day I would lose him. My new sergeant, Helis, proved a good man but he’d



never replace Tancred. One of the other new additions to the Wolf Pack came as a surprise. Captain Moran agreed to allow Kadien to join our ranks. After a few initial hiccups and some unfortunate conflicts, she'd passed the necessary tests and became a cadet. This meant she was supposed to stay out of the fighting but we needed every man we had on the battlefield. Half the army were in love with her, half feared her and I just tried to remain professional toward her. Something I found increasingly difficult.

My eyes found her among the guards outside Arthur's command tent. It wasn't as grand as it sounds. We didn't have time for the bells and whistles, a flag with a table under it and a large bivouac. A fire grate, able to cook half a side of venison, with a heavy black skillet and cooking pot, sat cold and empty. We wouldn't be eating this morning. Arthur slid off Willow and I dismounted more slowly. He started telling his commanders about the size of Lot's army and pointed to a map. We were going to shadow the slow moving mass of men until they reached a point where their valley joined another, two rivers combining into one. At that point, the army would stop and be surrounded by hills. We'd destroyed the bridges of Watersmeet, making life more difficult for Lot. Once they were penned in, we'd sweep around from our valley and attack. The opposing forces would be kettled in the valley and against the rivers. It would be a blood bath and one I wished we could avoid.

"Sire," I interjected quietly.

Arthur turned to me instantly, "What is it, Lancelot?"

I gazed at Kadien, who chatted amiably with some of the other guards. I'd given her guard duty over Arthur in an attempt to keep her out of trouble. And now, "I have an idea," I said. Arthur raised an eyebrow. I continued, "Give me ten of the Wolf Pack including Kadien and allow us to push for Lot independently of the main army. If we kill him, or ideally capture him, the fight will end and lives will be saved. We can't sneak in and kill the man, we've tried, his personal guard are too good." I'd almost lost Gawain and Yvain on that foray. "But we can become the arrow that strikes to the heart of the enemy."

Arthur frowned. “What makes you think such a venture is viable?” he asked. I understood his careful tone. He asked why I had to place my life in such danger. Since our return from Albion, we had been given the space to let our love breathe. I often found myself alone but I’d grown used to isolation, and it didn’t stop Arthur from loving me. It also gave him a voice whenever I suggested doing something dangerous.

“If we can protect her long enough, Kadien can and will reach Lot,” I said with absolute confidence.

My protégé had some remarkable physical strengths that came from her full fey heritage. Her acrobatics in Albion were the least of her abilities. She climbed, ran and jumped better than anything other than a cat. I’d tested her one day, to see which of us could race around Camelot’s walls first, me on Ash or her bouncing from walls and rooftops. Kadien won. She’d bought me a small dagger with her vast winnings to say thank you for her rescue. I carried the knife with me everywhere. Being lighter and smaller, she also had her own fighting style, using finer blades than most of us. Yvain trained with her most often because his own quicksilver forms were closest to those Kadien found natural. Captain Moran made her learn the traditional training with the Wolf Pack but those that wanted to could also learn from Kadien. I caught him writing down her methods and encouraged him to improve her abilities with his own pragmatic approach. Almost nine months later Kadien, near the end of her cadetship, had been forged into a formidable weapon.

“What is the plan, in detail, Wolf?” Arthur asked, clearly very unhappy.

While I’d been thinking, the scents on the air grew sharper. Horses, leather, body waste and sweat. I heard the birds, some distance from the camp and the coolness of the morning felt wonderful in the shadow of the hills. “We form a basic arrowhead. Kadien rides with me. The team engage Lot’s guard and Kadien breaks through. You know she can do it, Arthur and you know it will save lives,” I said.

“It is a good idea,” Gawain said, knowing why Arthur scowled but pushing for my side regardless.

“Yes,” said Arthur, “it is but it doesn’t have to be you.” He

pointed a finger at my chest.

I grabbed his hand. "Yes, it does," I said. I tried to be kind. "There are only a few horses she's trained with that can perform tricks like this, Ash being one and I am not prepared to send her in without my back up."

I saw in Arthur's eyes he wanted to accuse me of loving the girl too much and he was right, I did care more than I should but I wasn't going to back down to save his feelings. I wanted to save lives.

"If you must, then do it," he conceded and his shoulders slumped slightly. "Go find your arrowhead while I finish up here. We'll place you at the head of the army, go into attack en masse, then you and your team break off and head for Lot."

"Thank you, Arthur," I said.

"Don't thank me, just come back to me in one piece," he said.

I smiled slightly to myself and strode into the mass of people moving quietly through the trees. The sharpness of the world did not fade, I moved with fluid joints and a sense of dislocation. The calm before the storm of battle. We had our own sentries posted in various places in case Lot sent men to seek Arthur. We were not expecting him to do so, as Geraint led his own men into acting as a decoy. They sat in the middle of a large heath, pretending to be the King. When the time came, they would sweep down toward us with readymade bridges and rush to attack Lot's army. It would be a dangerous gamble. If Geraint didn't make it in time, Arthur would be wiped out.

I forced my fears back and focused on my plan. "Kadien, with me," I shouted.

She broke off from the men she spoke with and said, "Yes, Sir." She instantly came to my side.

Her long hair, braided back tightly then covered with a scarf which she wound all the way around the long length of the plait, made her face appear even more beautiful. The hair emphasised her blue eyes, but the black scarf just took the distraction of the hair away. Her flawless pale skin and bright smile made my skin feel hot and tight. I wanted her so badly but I had promised myself I'd never touch the girl. She

deserved someone better and younger and not in love with their King.

“We are going in at the head of the army, then breaking off and I’m sending you in to kill Lot.” I spoke quickly and didn’t look at her so I could hide my fear and longing. I did hear her swift intake of breath.

“That is a great honour, my Lord. Are you certain I can do it?” she asked.

I stopped in my tracks and finally looked into her blue eyes, so like Arthur’s. Her strength and utter faith in me made me flounder. She stood only a few inches shorter than me and far too close. I wanted to reach up and trace the strong line of her jaw. Instead, I smiled. “Kadien, if I didn’t think we could do it, I wouldn’t be sending us in there.”

She nodded and all her doubts instantly fled. “Fine, Sir, we will do it.”

Her attitude toward me had changed over the months, from cheeky comradeship to deference, as she learnt exactly what I was capable of as the leader of Arthur’s armed forces. I missed the cheeky version.

I spotted one of the Wolf Pack I wanted in our arrowhead. “Lionel,” I called, “Find William, we have a job to do.”

I reached down and offered Kadien my arm to help her up behind Ash. He stood still and sighed heavily as her weight joined mine. He’d grown used to her acrobatics over the time we’d been training together and he allowed her to move smoothly around me. I think, to be honest, the old tart enjoyed being taught something new and being the centre of attention.

Within a short time, nine of us were on horses at the head of an army only two thousand strong to face over ten thousand men. Geraint had another thousand and a huge quantity of men stuffed with straw to look like a fighting force sat on a hill. The odds were interesting.

With Kadien, I rejoined the King’s company, my chosen few arrange behind us. Arthur sat on Willow for a long time surveying the men around us. When he spoke, the world held still to listen. The sun’s rays, just cresting the hills, no longer cooked us in our armour. The breeze grew quiet and the horses still.

"Soldiers of Camelot, today we are facing the impossible. I won't hide it from you. I've seen the army over that hill," he gestured behind us. "It scares me, so I dread to think how you will feel when you see it and I'm supposed to be the brave one." He laughed and a chuckle spread through the ranks. Then he became silent and pensive. Finally he spoke again, "I will not lie to you either, I never have, we are going to be lucky to survive. But we will," he raised his eyes and his voice. "We will survive because I have the best damned army at my back and I have the best men at my side to lead us to victory. We will survive and win because we are the finest of men and we deserve peace. We've fought a long and bitter war of attrition these last years and we are all tired. But this," he pointed with savagery at the hillside. "This is it. I have drawn a line and we will stop them from crossing it. Do you know why? Because I want all our families to be safe, happy, well fed and content. Because the Pendragon family includes you and your families. We are one and I will fight by your side today to ensure Camelot is not auctioned to the highest bidder. Lot has betrayed us and me. He has bought in troops he will have to pay with our blood and sweat. They will strip your lands, steal the food from your children and I will not be able to stop him. Don't let it happen. Focus on your enemy and take them apart, one at a time. Together we are unstoppable."

Willow reared perfectly at this point. I watched men draw themselves straighter, grip their spears more tightly and continue watching their beloved King.

Arthur projected his voice but made it sound conspiratorial all at once, "I am sending our greatest knight and a handful of others into the centre of this fray. Lancelot du Lac will see to it that we face a leaderless army, a rudderless ship, and when that happens, let loose men, let loose the passion in your hearts and fight for your families, your land and your homes. Let us, together, smash that ship on the rocks of our determination, pride, skill and honour."

"Good speech," Yvain murmured quietly. The men reacted well. Spears and swords banged softly against shields and the ground in acknowledgement of their King's words. Arthur rode forward into the ranks and began shaking the hands of his men,

Willow stepping through the crowds carefully. The men touched him as if he were divine and could protect them from the spear, sword, arrow and armoured knights of Lot's army.

"It makes me want to throw myself at the castle walls," I said watching him with great pride.

"He could tell you anything and you'd throw yourself at the castle walls," Gawain said on my other side.

Once that would have been true, now... Well, now I knew the truth but I consciously allowed his words to stir my soul, readying me for battle.

We would have cheered but to do so would be to give Lot's scouts a target and we couldn't be the target. Not with the odds this bad. I turned Ash and signalled the order for the ranks to form up. Arthur returned to my side.

"Be careful," he said. He held out his hand and I gasped his forearm as he grasped mine.

"You to," I ordered.

We nodded. Not a moment for sentiment to weaken men's hearts, but a moment for bravery, for war.

## CHAPTER TWO

Kadien wore light leather armour and carried two short, light swords. We'd argued for hours about her using heavier armour and wearing a helmet but she wouldn't cave in and almost resigned her commission over the right to wear her own design of protection. I'd spent many days training with her lean hard body moving around me as I controlled the horse and we'd finally developed a fighting style which suited us both. Now, she sat behind my saddle and lightly rested her hand on my armoured thigh. I couldn't feel it but somehow the heat of her hand made my cock start to twitch. With the rest of us in our traditional armour, mail, plate and surcoats, with thick layers of padding underneath, I wished the sun would vanish behind a cloud. We'd all be cooked long before we reached Lot at this rate.

I used to feel excited about facing an enemy with Arthur at my back but now I lacked the spirit for such warfare. I felt solemn, not excited about this fight. I no longer suffered the nightmares and my adoptive daughter, Rhea, ran rings around me, giving me a focus when I struggled with life. My love for my friend meant I coped well enough with living in Camelot, though I did escape into the wild wood at every opportunity. Now, though, I thought Arthur had made a mistake in challenging Lot and, although I understood why he'd done it, I didn't like it. This was about men's pride, not a noble awareness of what was right, the protection of our society and those within it.

Kadien interrupted my sad thoughts. "How do you want this to happen, my Lord?" she asked.

I sighed. "Please, Kadien, Lancelot is my name." I hated the formality of our new roles and wanted her to relax around me.

She perched her chin on my shoulder. I couldn't see her clearly through my helmet. "What do you expect from me, Lancelot?" she asked with emphasis.

"I expect you to live," I said and reached back with my

gauntleted hand to hold her thigh where it sat tucked under mine. I twisted in the saddle so I could see her clearly with my visor up. "I want Lot stopped but not at any cost."

She smiled. "I can do that." She bounced slightly and her smile turned into a hungry grin. I had learnt a great deal about Kadien over the months. Arthur's mother and her own were half-sisters, so she and Arthur were half-cousins. Nice and complicated. She'd been raised on the great plains sweeping through Albion. The tribe she'd been a part of didn't like her heritage. Her mother had been used by a fey from another tribe, making her a mixed race child. She'd been trained by her people but with resentment. All the women fought and rode among her people and Kadien wanted to prove her worth from an early age. She didn't suffer fools gladly and when one of the older boys tried to use her young body she'd killed him; with that and the family debt, her fate was sealed. Her kin sold her into slavery and she'd been bought by Nimue. The fey queen knew her relationship to Arthur, distant as it was, and felt it would be usable to an arch manipulator.

When I'd found her and she'd chosen to help me defeat Aeddan, she'd been a slave for ten years but had lost none of her spirit or fighting talent. Since she'd been in Camelot she'd bloomed into a strong, beautiful woman, but she remained carefully distant from all men and did not welcome casual contact from anyone. I respected her privacy, knowing her slavery must have been very hard on the free spirit she represented.

My hand still on her thigh flexed and I smiled in return. "Just be careful," I said.

"You worry too much." Her hand sat on mine, and for the first time she didn't fight the contact. Her other arm circled my armoured waist and she leaned into my body. "I'll come back to you, Lancelot. I promise."

My heart rate trebled but she melted from the contact and dropped her gaze.

I wanted desperately to explore that one small intimacy we had shared but I knew if I pushed she'd bolt, so we rode in silence.

The army slowly moved into place behind us and the men



I'd chosen fanned out either side. We moved far more quietly than Lot's men and with so many professional soldiers rather than mercenaries, we were a better team. The odds were bad but under Arthur's inspired leadership, our men would prevail. I hoped.

I flexed my fingers, curling them into a fist. The damp nights sleeping outside did nothing for my old wounds. "I'm too old for this," I groused.

A small chuckle behind me caught me off guard. I'd forgotten Kadien. I felt myself flush with embarrassment. "Shut up," I grumbled.

"I didn't say a word," she chirruped happily.

"Just wait until you break a few bones."

Kadien reached forward and took hold of my right hand in her own. "You are not too old, my Lord, you are just tired." Her voice softened and her long slim fingers, in their heavy leather gloves, pushed between my own.

My breath hitched and my pulse raced. "Kadien," I began. I wanted to babble at her, I wanted to take advantage of this strange moment and tell her she moved my heart. I wanted to tell her I had room for both her and Arthur if she'd just give me a chance.

"My Lord du Lac," an outrider galloped toward me on a foaming horse, cutting through my thoughts. Kadien faded from me without actually moving anything other than her hand.

The horse, trembling with effort, skidded to a halt beside me. The man wore Geraint's colours. This could not be good news. "My Lord Fitzwilliam sent me. Lot has reinforcements on the way. They are coming down behind our forces. He has to come off the hill far more quickly than planned. You need to move up your own attack."

"Fuck," I reviewed Arthur's plans and made some adjustments. "If we go around this valley at double time and join with Geraint we can face Lot head on inside the hills but the rivers will be at our back, not his."

"I don't think we have much choice," Kadien said. She instantly understood the threat we faced. From a slim chance to no chance in heartbeats. The fortunes of war.

"We should run," I said.

“If we do he will just come for Camelot and the city cannot survive another siege,” Kadien reminded me.

“Then our mission to take Lot down is even more vital. I will not lose this day.” I squared my shoulders and spoke to the messenger. “Go to the King, tell him what you told me and tell him we are moving up the pace and heading for Lot. He needs to divide his forces when Lot is pressing hard into our ranks and chase them toward the river. We need to take chunks out of his army and dispatch them. Strike fear into the enemy.”

“Yes, my Lord,” the scout said, saluting.

I shouted orders to pick up the pace. Those with horses, the Wolf Pack and knights, began a slow canter. The regular soldiers and auxiliary started a loping run. The noise increased but not by much. Pennons snapped in the breeze and the spears of the foot soldiers bobbed behind us like a moving forest of wood and steel agony.

“Lancelot,” Kadien said so quietly I barely heard her through my coif and helmet.

“What is it?” I asked sharply, my mind already in the midst of the battle I was about to face.

“I’m scared,” she said and her body leaned into mine for the first time in months.

“I know,” I replied, “but you must banish your fear and live just in the moment. Empty your heart of everything but the fight you will face. You exist only for this, for war. Nothing else in the world matters and you face a glorious death if he chooses to take you.” Over my own dead body, I thought. I’d fight Death for Kadien as hard as I would for Arthur.

“Is that how you do this, over and over? You live only for death?” she asked.

I pushed my visor up and smiled grimly. “I am trying hard not to but when I find myself surrounded and forced to fight, it is an easy path for me to take. I am a warrior. I am resigned to dying on the field of battle but I won’t make it easy and I will fight for those I believe in and love.”

“Like Arthur?” she asked.

I nodded. “Like Arthur. Focus on your goal, Kadien, and allow nothing to distract you. Remove all who would prevent you reaching Lot.”

“Thank you,” she whispered close to my face and I felt her lips press briefly to my cheek. “Even if I do die today, I want you to know, you have given me a better life in the last few months than I’ve ever known.”

She couldn’t see it, but her words made my eyes swim with unshed tears. I wanted to pull her off Ash and force her to return to Camelot, to wear dresses and learn to make embroidery. I also knew she’d never forgive me for such chauvinistic cowardice. There were no words of love I felt able to give in that moment without giving her more to fear.

In the end I simply said, “You are one of the best cadets the Wolf Pack has ever had, you will do this and we will win.”

I sensed her arms tighten around my breastplate but couldn’t actually feel the hug through the armour. I patted her arm and wished I could kiss her lips and eyes to take the fear away.

A messenger returned from Arthur. “My Lord, his Majesty has asked that as soon as we sight the army we charge into the attack. We are not to give them time to prepare.”

“Inform him we will do everything he needs us to do,” I said.

I forced my mind away from Kadien and concentrated on the upcoming fight. There would be knights leading Lot’s army, just as there were for Arthur. We would engage the knights and then slide around the side. Lot would sit somewhere in the centre of the army. We would be fighting against men on foot and those who served the pretender to Camelot’s throne on horseback. If we managed to carve a hole in those ranks, Kadien would be able to move through the men like mist and reach Lot. The weapons we’d face would be spear, hauberk, sword, archers, shields of the good fighters and possibly some more basic weapons such as staffs. Many of those Lot controlled were his levied men, farmers and herders, no real threat to us. The archers would not shoot into their own ranks and the mercenaries should be focused on Arthur, not protecting Lot.

Arthur, damn I wished he’d let me do this alone. He might be one of the finest warriors I’d ever known, but whenever he rode into a fight, he frightened the life out of me.

Once more, I fought for control and chased my thoughts back to the fight. For once I felt the fear curl in my stomach, the same nerves which attacked Kadien. I did not want to die today. I wanted to love my new life. A life where I saw the colour of the sky and smelt the scent of roses. I wanted peace and time to explore the world around me and those I loved. My heart had brought me at last to a place where I understood war and death were not the path to strength and greatness. I could be more. I wanted to be more than Arthur's weapon of choice.

The hills we followed started to peter out and I saw the rivers glinting in the distance. Rosebay willowherb sprouted tall and pink but we were forced to squash it flat as we rode on. My breath sounded harsh inside my sallet and I watched young birch trees shiver in the summer wind as we galloped toward the confrontation. I knew we would soon face Lot's men. I gave the final orders to those around me, the young knights formed up tight around the ten of us from the Wolf Pack and we prepared to circle the final hills.

Everything calmed. Ash carried Kadien and I around the final ridge and the ranks of our enemies spread out before us. Just as I knew we would, we faced the finest knights of Lot's army. Fortunately, they wouldn't be a match for Camelot's. No orders were necessary. We moved as a single organism and picked up our pace to a full gallop. I carried no lance. With Kadien on Ash the manoeuvring would be too hard, but I did carry a spear. Every other member of our advance party also carried long range weapons. The smell brought with it so many memories. Horse sweat, churned earth, fear and strangely, joy. The noises around me were of more than one hundred hooves hitting the dry soil beneath our onslaught. The harsh breath of the horses and the prayers of men who used them. The chime of metal against metal as men set themselves deeper in their saddles and the sound of wind rushing, exhilarating me.

I released a great whoop of joy. My fears were now a desperate memory as I swooped toward my foe. No matter how I loved life, I loved the challenge of war. It lived in my blood and bones. My vision closed down to those I faced and Geraint's men rushing over another hillside toward the rivers they needed to cross to reach us. I felt all those men, all those

souls around me and my brain started negotiating the path before us, which would lead us to Lot.

Twenty paces and the horses would engage. Orders were being screamed. Bows strung in panic. Ranks trying to change formation from marching to fighting. Ten paces and I saw the eyes of the foot soldiers who would die when we crashed into their ranks. Five paces and I marked the knights I'd take down first. Ash plunged, his head down, his own armour adding to our weight and protection. Suddenly we were there in the centre of the battle lines. My spear snapped on the first engagement, tearing into the chest of a horse and catapulting both the beast and his rider back onto others. My sword, already drawn in the left hand, changed sides and I engaged a man wearing Lot's colours. I felt Kadien shift behind me and knew she now had her back to mine, a simple loop of leather the only thing other than the strength in her thighs keeping her on Ash's back. She screamed her own battle cry and we started to carve into the heart of the army. My sword smashed into arms, faces, chests and legs. It cut where it could or broke the bones lying under inadequate armour. Ash snapped at the horses who drew too close and kicked out at any men foolish enough to attack from the ground. He became a living weapon, as did I. The rest of Arthur's men now joined the slaughter and I knew we needed to peel off and head for Lot.

"Wolf Pack, to me," I bellowed, doing my best impression of Captain Moran. My men disengaged from the chaos and we fought our way free of the front ranks.

The valley, the widest in the area, contained the only road, along which Lot obediently marched his troops. I forced us onto the rough verges, which still remained bizarrely free of the enemy, and charged along the ranks. A few arrows spat towards us but hit nothing. We drew level with the flags surrounding Lot. I heard his mighty voice ordering his men into tight ranks, preparing for our strike. The sun froze above my head and the wind stilled. The clouds ceased their journeys. Kadien moved behind me, her legs shifting over Ash's back as she readied herself. It felt like she moved through treacle. My right hand flexed on my sword and I felt the sticky mess of blood and guts covering my blade and hand. I carried a shield

on my left side, its weight a comfort, the wolf's head emblazoned on the front was now chipped and scarred by fresh blade cuts. My breath sounded loud inside my helmet and I smelt Ash's sweat. I saw everything in those slow moments. I watched four loyal knights lowering their visors and turning their horses to face us. I saw Lot's hard face, his faded red beard and long grey hair spilling out from under his coif and helmet. His pale blue eyes focused on mine and I saw rage. No fear - Lot had never been a coward - but I did see recognition of a pivotal moment in his quest for Camelot.

Those frozen moments ended when Ash threw himself into the foot soldiers trying to protect their Lord. The world sped faster than before, compensating for those slow breaths and my body fell into the patterns of death dealing. Five of us reached the knights protecting Lot, they turned to hold our backs and flank. Kadien screamed her strange war cry and Ash shift his hindquarters around. She rose behind me, a deadly angel in black leather and launched toward the horses of the enemies. Using them to spring forward, her short light blade slashed even as she fought for her balance before lunging toward Lot's great bay horse. I watched him slash at her and she twisted in mid air, thrown off her target. She landed among the frantic legs of the horses and I bellowed in fear, slashing through my opponent without even glancing at him so I could reach her.

I shouldn't have allowed fear to control me. Kadien pirouetted where she crouched and used the long slim muscles of her legs to power herself upward. It looked as though she flew for Lot, like a great cat landing on the back of a horse. Her feet touched the bay's hindquarters and he froze in confusion. Lot twisted to rid himself of the pest at his back, but his armour prevented the movement. He tried to drag his horse's head around, to turn and force her off. He gave his back to me. Kadien slipped her blade into his neck, between the joints of his armour. I plunged my sword between her legs and under his back plate. Kadien shifted and threw herself at Ash, landing lightly enough and slipping back into her original position before I even managed to draw my sword from the pretender's back.



## CHAPTER THREE

Lot slumped forward, great gouts of blood pouring from his neck and back. Now was not the time to celebrate, we needed to move.

“Retreat,” I ordered loudly.

I saw one of my men slumped over his horse, another under the hooves surrounding us. Three of the four of Lot’s knights were dead or dying. William grabbed the horse of our wounded comrade and we carved a path out. An easy task now the word began to spread of their leader’s death.

Kadien whooped and yelled calling out her victory as we galloped back down the ranks toward our own men. I looked for Arthur. His flag should be somewhere near the front. The fight remained fierce and I couldn’t find him, but I did spot Geraint’s tall form and his red hair.

“What the hell?” I asked myself. Why was Geraint fighting without his armour? I caught sight of Willow. He stood still, riderless but attacking anyone that came close.

I forgot everything else. “Arthur.” I kicked Ash and joined the fight, trampling many under his hooves. I focused only on Willow. Geraint carved his own path from the other side. We reached the great war horse at the same time. Kadien shifted off the back of Ash and landed beside a bloody, mud splattered body. Golden tangles and finely engraved armour peeked out from the mess. Bile rose in my throat and my vision darkened. Were clouds covering the sun?

Willow, his flanks heaving and sweat foaming on his thick neck, blew hard but calmed the instant he recognised Ash. Men were fighting in a circle around the horse and his fallen rider. The Wolf Pack fought tooth and claw against the press of men trying to reach Arthur and finish the job.

“Geraint,” I yelled over the noise.

“Move him, Lancelot. I’ll hold your back,” he bellowed, swinging his mighty broadsword into a hapless mounted soldier.



“He’s alive,” Kadien called, her fingers pressed to his neck. I almost tumbled from Ash in my desperation. Now I felt the hands of fear on my neck, tightening their grip and shortening my breath. Anything, I could face anything but losing Arthur. Not like this, not when we’d killed Lot and peace was just moments of insanity away. I knelt by his side, now protected by Ash and Willow.

I didn’t bother to call his name. His eyes were closed and his cheeks grey. Blood covered him, flowing from a deep wound in his chest, the hole in his armour ragged, the metal torn and twisted. I hooked an arm under his neck and another under his legs. He would only be slightly lighter than me but I rose in one movement and cradled his still body.

“Kadien, get on Willow,” I ordered. She nodded briefly and leapt up onto the huge warhorse. I lifted Arthur as high as humanly possible but couldn’t place him in her arms. Kadien leaned outward and down. She wrapped her arms around Arthur’s chest and pulled back, grunting with the effort. I managed the final push and he lay against her body, bleeding everywhere.

“Ride.” I smacked Willow hard on the rump. He turned, Geraint went with them and I set to, against the enemy around me. I don’t know how long I fought, or how many I killed and maimed. The man who loved his King to the edge of obsession wept and took his rage out on all those around him. How dare they try to extinguish the sun and leave the moon without the grace of reflective light?

“Lancelot,” a voice yelled. “Lancelot, for God’s sake man, you’ve killed them all. Stop. It’s me, it’s Gawain.”

My arm ceased its circle and pulled the strike aimed at decapitating my friend.

“We need you.” Gawain approached slowly, hands down, sword pointed to the ground. “Arthur needs you.”

I blinked, light blinded me. I didn’t have my helmet on and the air stank. Ash walked among bodies, snorting, his sides dark with blood but not his own. It did not flow. Blood did flow from several wounds in me, my armour appeared to be littered with holes of various types and something warm trickled down the side of my face. My hands and arms were

drenched in sticky redness. Bodies, dozens of bodies lay around me.

“Arthur.” I turned and ran. I held my sword at its mid length to keep it from tangling with my legs. A body rose from the mass and I simply smacked the pommel of my weapon into his head. He wore the russet colours of Lot’s men. I felt no pity as his scream choked off when he realised his jaw was broken.

I found the medic’s tent, pulled by the strings tying my heart to Arthur’s. The white canopy sat near the smaller of the two rivers. Men littered the ground, some acting as nurses, others groaning in their agony. Some very still and some already lost. I’d given my share to Death this day, but Lot’s men also gave their own bounty.

Geraint stood, a pale sentinel outside one small tent. He, Kadien and others from the Wolf Pack were silent, sombre and unwilling to look at me as I charged toward them.

I didn’t pause and no one stopped me. I strode into the small canvas space and stopped. Neither Merla nor Merlin were with us on this trip. Merla sat in Camelot, heavy with her first child and unhappy with Gawain joining the fight. Merlin said he would not be needed, so refused to come despite Arthur’s threats. We’d taken it as a good omen. He kept making some vague comments about the fates of gods, but to be honest I hadn’t understood and thought he might actually be losing his mind.

Arthur lay on a table. His armour cut from his body and the mail shirt also in tatters on the floor. His gambeson acted as a blanket to soak up the blood. A man, Willard of Malmsbury, crouched over his chest muttering.

“Well?” I asked. My throat wouldn’t allow another word out.

Willard actually jumped and dropped a fine needle in the process. “My Lord, I didn’t hear you,” his myopic expression didn’t inspire my confidence. With not a hair on his head and far too many out of his nose, he looked more like a diseased mole than a medical man versed in herbs and surgery. Merlin had informed me repeatedly that Willard could do anything that was necessary. I’d gut the old wizard if he was proved wrong.

I tried to remain calm and keep my tone measured. “Tell me of the King’s condition,” I said. My right hand began to cramp around my blade. It started to bite into my hand, through the gauntlet.

“He is gravely wounded, my Lord.” I grabbed his throat with my left hand and he gurgled, “if you could wait outside.”

I pulled him half way across Arthur’s inert body. “Just fucking tell me if he is going to live.”

“He...” the man squeaked.

“Lancelot, put him down. If you break him he can’t work and he can’t work if you scare him so much his hands are shaking.” Geraint stooped slightly in the dull, hot interior.

I dropped Willard of Malmsbury. “What happened?” I did not move from Arthur’s side. I asked the question of both men. Geraint answered and waved at the medic to continue work.

“From what I’ve been told, Arthur raced into the fight. He tried to engage as many men as possible to keep them from turning to fight you and the others.” Geraint ran a hand through his greying red hair, his expression grim and skin taut.

“He led the charge himself?” I asked. Geraint nodded. I breathed deeply, “That was not part of the plan.”

“I didn’t think it would be,” Geraint agreed. “Anyway, some freaky lucky shot from a boy holding a dropped lance took him in the chest. He never saw it coming, not on his left side and from the ground. It’s carved a line through Willow’s shoulder too. The broken tip went straight through his amour and into his chest.”

“His heart?” I asked quietly, my own growing cold.

“Missed, just,” came Willard’s assessment. “We have a messy hole in his chest and wood splinters everywhere but the heart appears undamaged. I’m having trouble with his lungs and one or two of his ribs are badly broken. I’m trying to find a way to hold them in place before I stitch him up.”

I didn’t understand his words. How the hell you held bones in place under the skin I couldn’t imagine. “Will he live?” I asked, forcing the words out.

Willard did peer up at me then. “Honestly?” He glanced at Geraint assuming he’d be safe with the bigger man in the tent. “I don’t know. I will do everything I can, but it is a killing

blow. His chest is a mess. Even if he survives this, there are countless other things that might finish him off, fever being the real problem. Right now, though, I need peace and quiet. I'd also like a steady pair of hands. Send the girl in," he said bending back over his patient. I caught a glimpse of white bone and metal inside Arthur's broad chest and bile rose in my gullet.

The day wore on and grew old around us. I sat outside Arthur's tent. At some point someone brought me food and water. Someone else insisted I remove my armour and they dressed various wounds. Yvain sat near me, also wrapped in silence. Kadien joined us when the medic finished but soon found the stress of remaining still proved too great. She vanished to find Ash, to clean him off. I waited. I waited to hear Arthur's voice querulously ask for my presence, so I could tell him Lot would no longer be a problem. That we had peace in England. We could unite Britain under his leadership and hold her course steady against all comers. We'd defeated men and fey alike, now we could rest. We could hang up our swords and spurs and grow old and fat in each other's company. I'd sacrificed everything to be here with Arthur, I couldn't lose him now.

Instead I just watched the river, and the crows gather over the field of battle. I heard men's screams and moans. I smelt smoke and death on what was once clean pure air, rushing through these hills and valleys. It crashed into this massacre and carried the stain for leagues.

Dusk started to rise majestically from the east, sweeping over the sky to give the sun its last glorious display of the day. Night would plunge headlong through the heavens releasing its panoply of stars and the moon. I would sleep at some point. I would sleep and the wolf would be alone. No white hart.

I wondered about that. Whenever Arthur's life lay in the balance, I'd dreamt of the threat and prevented it, so why not now? Why had I not woken last night in a cold sweat knowing what danger lay ahead for my King?

"If he dies, Merlin," I muttered, cursing the old man in my head.

"If I understood that bonding the two of you went through,

if he dies, so do you,” Gawain said referring to our strange connection forged when we were last in Albion.

“Perhaps, no one is certain,” I replied, half wishing it would happen. A life without Arthur didn’t feel like a life at all, merely an existence. Only one other thing gave me true meaning and I’d thrown that away.

“Lancelot.” Gawain moved to crouch in front of where I sat. “Merla has taught me a great deal over the time we’ve been together. We might be able to help Arthur.”

“There is no one here of real power,” I said. “Kadien is full fey but her gifts are not healing or summoning. They are physical. Merlin, Merla, even Else cannot help from Camelot.”

“But you can,” he said, placing a hand on my arm. As Gawain grew older he looked more like his uncle every day. It made my heart ache to see Arthur shadowed in my friend’s earnest expression.

“What are you talking about?” Yvain asked drawing close.

“Merla says Lancelot has real strength and talent from Aeddán. No one has thought to teach him because he’s already one of the most powerful men in the country. He can’t heal Arthur but he should be able to call someone who can,” Gawain spoke with some excitement and I had the feeling he’d been trying to find a way to tell me all day.

“You want me to summon fey who can heal Arthur?” I asked.

“It can’t hurt to try,” Gawain said.

“Hurt? They are fey, of course it will hurt,” I snapped. My grip on my temper and my patience started to fray.

Willard chose that moment to leave the tent. He straightened his back and I scrambled upright. I ached all over from the fighting, then all this time of tense stillness.

The bald, small man peered at me through the growing darkness. “I have done all I can, it is now in God’s hands.”

I swallowed. “God has no business on the battle field,” I said. “Just tell me if he will live.”

Willard blinked rapidly and his stooped shoulders slumped further. “I think, if I am honest, you need to prepare yourself for the worst.”