

## A Fey's Love And Life

I breathed in the sunshine, the air rich with the scent of hay and warmed earth. Light danced behind my closed eyelids and I stretched my long limbs, my bare skin loving the fresh wind and graceful sunlight. I opened my eyes and watched the swallows over my head, dancing and swirling. I smiled at their antics and half wished I could join them. So much freedom.

I sighed and sat up. The hilltop overlooking our village sat far enough away for no one to be able to see me by simply looking out of the doorways. They'd actually have to come and find me. I only wished I could go further but my sister would know and she'd made me promise. No wandering today, stay with the sheep and don't let the lambs be taken by the less desirable wildlife.

We needed the money. I knew that, but damn I was sick of living like this, I wanted to do more with my life than spend it in some backwater. I wanted to see cities. I wanted to learn to fight, to be a man, to write my name across the sky like the greatest of Camelot's heroes. Whenever bards, minstrels or storytellers came to our latest home, I begged them to give me news about Camelot and King Arthur. I craved knowledge of a world my sister would keep from me forever.

I never understood why, but Merla wanted me wrapped in sheep fleece for protection, far from anything. Life still had moments of interest. A few months back we'd come to this village because a man of the new religion arrived in the last one. He roused the villagers against us. He said my sister was a witch. Which was true but made the village people fear our small family. We'd moved on during the night while the villagers were voting on whether to actively drive us from our home with sticks and stones. I wanted to fight. Merla said our duty was to live, which meant running. We'd run from so many villages and towns over the years. I'd grown heartily sick of our cowardice.

We stayed in the next village for a few days and Merla vanished for a night. The next day we moved on with strange looks following us, apparently the man who hated our kind had become very sick all of a sudden and it looked like he'd be dying fairly soon. Merla whistled and sang all day as we trudged through mud, forcing our mule and cart along rough tracks heading north. She hiked her skirts and petticoats high, tied her long russet hair back which shined in the sun with the silver clasps glinting, and actually chatted to me about nonsense. My dour sister never chatted.

On and on, from village to town and back to village. Sometimes Merla would allow us to join others and I'd learn from the men how to fight. I also learnt I wasn't like others in more way than one. This village was just one on the long road of my life but I liked it, despite the boredom.

"Ho, Tancred," came a yell from below.

I sat up and squinted into the light. A familiar figure strode up the steep rough sheep track. I waved a welcome.

"Jacob," I called and a swirling feeling began in my gut.

He ran up the last few yards and collapsed next to me, huffing loudly. "That's a cruel climb," he complained, brushing unruly blonde hair out his blue eyes.

I lay back down and closed my eyes trying not to think about him sitting just a little too close. I knew I should pull my shirt back on but the day proved too seductive.

Jacob sat quietly for a long time, not unusual. Since my arrival in this isolated farming community he'd proved a good companion. His long rolling vowels, slurred those words he did use into a lyrical dance. I finally opened my eyes and watched him lazily. He looked tense and I sat up, my shoulder brushing against his. He flinched.

"What's happened?" I asked. "I know Merla is helping with your sister's baby but she said it would be smooth birth and she's never wrong."

Jacob rubbed his eyes and I realised tears threatened. I lay a hand on his back and he stiffened under my touch his blue eyes turning to me in shock. "Don't, don't touch me, please," he said.

That awful sinking feeling I'd grown so used to, burned through me. "Sorry," I mumbled and shifted sideways, giving

him more space while reaching for my shirt.

He choked and I paused, frowning. "Don't do that either," he said very quietly.

I stopped and just sat. Jacob and I spent whole days together where we'd share no more than a baker's dozen of words, but we performed our work smoothly and quickly. The days off we shared, we hunted and moved as a seamless team.

"I am to marry, Matilda," he said finally.

"Oh," I replied.

"Mid summer's day," he said.

"Right," I replied. "Congratulations." The word tasted bitter. I knew Jacob was to marry the girl sooner or later, they'd been betrothed for years. The blacksmith's son and the clan leader's daughter. A fine and prosperous match.

"I don't want to marry," Jacob said, his voice almost unintelligible the emotions burned so deep.

"No?" I asked and tried not to think too deeply. Was there another girl he cared for I didn't know about?

"I'm only seventeen winters old," he said.

"It's time then," I said.

"You are nineteen summers and you aren't wed," he said accusingly.

I laughed, I couldn't help it. "Married? Me?" I asked the heavens. "I'll never be married, Jacob. I don't want this life," I said waving toward the village.

"There is many a girl in our village who would mourn that statement," Jacob said.

"I will have more than this and there isn't room for a wife in the plan," I said evasively.

"So, what is the plan?" he asked.

"Camelot," I said. "I want to go to Camelot and become a squire for the greatest knight in King Arthur's service."

Now Jacob laughed. "You don't want much then," he said.

I blushed. "I know it'll be hard."

"Hard? To be a squire you need to come from a titled family."

"Not always," I said defensively. "I'll prove to Sir Lancelot I am the best for the job and he will take me on. I

just know it.”

“Is this one of your prophecies?” he asked, picking at shepard’s purse in the short grass.

I kept my mouth shut. I knew I’d be going to Camelot. Merla knew I would be going to Camelot. She just wanted to delay the inevitable.

Despite the change of subject, Jacob’s misery swept back over him and I felt his heart lying heavy in his chest. “Marriage isn’t a bad thing,” I said, “and Mattie is a good girl. She obviously cares for you.”

“She knows I care for someone else, she just doesn’t know who” Jacob said very, very quietly.

My throat closed and my heart pounded. I’d dreamt of this conversation far too often and Merla had been warning me for weeks to leave Jacob alone. We were always moving because one of three things. Either Merla or I would do or say something to betray our heritage by saving a life or healing a wound no one else could help. We’d be recognised by a man of the new faith and driven out, or I would end up in a compromising position with someone and have to leave. The latter had occurred in many different ways but the results were always the same, I’d be threatened and beaten for my feelings. I’d learned to be very careful.

“That makes life difficult,” I said. “Have you told your family? Maybe you can marry this other person.”

He choked on his emotions once more. “Marriage isn’t really an option,” he said.

I wanted to reach out and touch him but I knew if I did, we’d kiss and within a matter of days I’d driven out once more. Jacob would either change his mind, give away the game or make some mad declaration.

He turned his blue eyes to mine, they were red with unshed tears and his tanned, freckled cheeks were flushed. “Help me,” he said.

I opened my mouth and snapped it shut. I didn’t know what to say. He reached out and touched my long dark hair, tied like my sister’s with small silver clasps in various long sections.

“It’s so soft,” he said eventually. “It always smells of lavender.”

I didn't speak and I didn't move. My cock ached. His hand brushed the smooth skin on my back. A small sound escaped me and I trembled.

Jacob shifted, taking my stillness as acquiescence. He placed his soft lips against the skin on my shoulder. Air exploded from my lungs and I moved with a swiftness which made him gasp. I grabbed his face, turned into his body and kissed him full on the mouth, pushing him back into the soft mountain grass. His hands wrapped around my back and despite his inexperience his instincts made the kiss both passionate and deep. I lay tight over his body and realised he grew hard under my weight. It drove me to more kisses. Reining in my passion for months at a time burdened my young body.

The soft stubble of his beard felt so wonderful against my own skin, though I had yet to sprout much facial hair myself. I finally released my captive. He looked up at with such shock, confusion and desire, I worried for his mind.

"Are you alright?" I asked. I tried to move off him.

"Don't, don't move," his hands roved up my back and down my arms. He explored everything he could reach, then wriggled slightly and his hands crept under my hose. He wasn't as big as me and his wriggling freed him of my weight. Those strong blacksmith's hands were rough and I curled my back so I could kiss him as he grasped my buttocks.

"I've wanted this for so long," Jacob admitted.

"Me too," I said but already feeling the pain of the inevitable separation.

"Touch me," he said. "I want to feel all of you against me." His voice and eyes mirrored his vulnerability.

"Jacob, I don't think you've thought this through. You are going to marry and I am going to move on," I said. I wanted him so desperately I wondered how long I'd manage to hold off his desire.

"I know," his eyes filled with tears but he fought them and won. "Just once. I want to feel alive just once, before everything is taken from me and I have to live here alone."

"There are many different ways men can express their love, it doesn't have to be like it is with a woman," I said

trying to be delicate and tactful.

“I want everything,” he said.

I laughed and finally rolled off his body but he came with me and I found his mouth and tongue exploring my chest and belly. I let him, it felt so damned good. When his hands began to undo the laces of my hose I stopped him and called a gentle halt to proceedings.

“We are too vulnerable here, Jacob. We’ll be seen and we can’t afford to ever be seen,” I said firmly.

“I don’t care,” he said.

“You will.”

A week passed and Jacob became a constant in my life. We laughed, we played and we made love. We tried to be careful and I think we were successful. One day we were sent out by his father to find and drag back a cart stuck in some mud. We grabbed a couple of mules to replace the ponies and happily trudged off to find the recalcitrant vehicle.

We changed out the ponies for the mules, touching and kissing far too much and began to push the cart while the stronger mules pulled.

“You are covered in mud,” Jacob laughed.

“I’m not the only one,” I said.

“Kiss me,” he ordered.

“We need to get to the village by dark you know,” I pointed out.

“Don’t care,” he said.

“Jacob, we can’t keep doing this,” I said between his kisses.

“Why?” he asked.

“You are getting married in a less than a month,” I pointed out. “And I am leaving for Camelot.”

“I’m going to come with you,” he announced. “I want to go to Camelot. I can become a soldier and help you become a squire.”

I stopped, truly astonished. “You’ll leave your life here to follow me to Camelot?” I asked.

“I love you, and I’m not following you, I’m joining you,” he said.

I should have stopped him. I should have told him no, I

should have walked away. I cared for him deeply but I did not love him, I already knew the difference. Instead, I grabbed him and kissed him deeply. He pushed me against the cart and his hand grabbed my balls, rolling them against his palm driving me into a frenzy.

“Jacob?” a short, sharp cry. He froze. I snapped my eyes open and saw Merla with Matilda, my lover’s intended.

Merla’s eye shone deep green, she was angry. Jacob turned and as Matilda raced off sobbing, he cried out and raced after her. Merla walked toward me, somehow avoiding all the mud and slapped me hard across the face.

“You stupid prick,” she said.

“He loves me and we are leaving for Camelot,” I said refusing to rub the terrible sting in my face.

Her hand snapped out and the second slap hurt even more than the first. “You fucking stupid prick,” she snarled. “You’ve destroyed his life.” She turned on her heel and raced after the distraught couple. I caught up with them all too soon.

Jacob stood looking stunned as Matilda filled the air with a tirade of hurtful accusations. Everything from “consorting for the pleasure of the devil”, to “how can you do this to me? We are going to be married and you’ve defiled me.”

“He’s a witch, he’s bewitched you,” she screamed.

“No, Matty, I love him and I started it,” he said.

This set off a wail of genuine grief. Matilda’s heart broke. I almost heard it and her distress finally shifted me into moving. “Matty, I’m sorry, I never meant to hurt you,” I tried to place a calming hand on her back.

“Get off me, you filthy evil creature,” she hissed, her brown eyes distorted with hate. “I’ll see you hang for this.” She turned and raced away.

“After her,” Merla said, “before she reaches her father or worse Jacob’s.”

We ran but somehow that damned girl evaded us and we found a waiting committee in the village. Jacob’s father and Matilda’s moved toward us, with her brothers coming up from behind. Jacob tried to explain, he begged to be listened to, pleaded with his father. When I saw his father’s fist rise against his son, I shifted to intervene but something smacked

me around the head and the last thing I saw was Jacob being smashed in the face by his own father.

Everything hurt. I puked before my eye opened. The right wouldn't move. I smelt piss and shit. I shifted and realised I lay naked. I forced my hands under my torso and tried to lift myself off the floor. It took a few attempts but I made it and sat up. In doing so, I also discovered I'd not just been beaten.

I whimpered. I'd been raped before. I pushed the knowledge away, knowing I would have to face that demon later.

The darkness made it harder to focus and when I managed I wished I hadn't. Jacob lay in the blackest corner of the pigsty we'd been thrown into. I crawled to his side, already knowing the horror I'd face.

I rolled him onto his back and into my arms. His head lolled to one side, his beauty distorted by broken bones, spilt skin and blood. He felt cold.

"I am so sorry," I begged for his forgiveness. A thing forever denied me. I cried. Long and hard, I wept and cradled my dead lover.

"Tancred?" Merla's voice penetrated my grief and a soft hand lay on my shoulder. "Let him go, little brother."

"I can't, this is all my fault," I said brokenly.

"I've drugged the water of the village, we don't have much time. They'll kill you when they wake. Move," she said trying to pull Jacob out of my arms.

"No," I said hugging him tight. "They won't give him a proper burial. We must take him with us."

Was I surprised Merla had saved me? No, she'd broken me out of more prisons than I should have seen in my young life.

She sighed. "Alright, little brother, you win," she said. "But you have to carry him."

I nodded and despite the pain, I lifted Jacob gently in my arms and stumbled out of the pigsty. They'd nailed it shut, I noticed in the slowly dawning light of a new day. I shuffled after my sister, once she'd covered me in a blanket, and I lay Jacob's body inside our small caravan.

We left the village, travelling steadily with Merla driving our horses and me huddled in the back. At dark we stopped and she led me to a river. She helped me wash both myself and Jacob. We wrapped his body in linens.

“We’ll continue tomorrow and then commit his body in the old way, to our gods,” she said.

“And what gods are these?” I asked. “The ones who allow such death and suffering for the sake of love.”

“Tancred, you made his life so bright, so perfect for the few months you knew each other and this last week was the happiest of his existence. Sometimes all we have is a short flare of existence. You taught him much, little brother, you should be proud,” she said while stroking my hair.

“I got him killed,” I sniffed.

“He died for love, there is no better sacrifice, the gods will honour him for it,” she said.

“But I never told him I loved him,” I confessed.

“Did you?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then you were honest and the gods will honour that equally.”

“I will love another.”

She sighed. “How much have you seen?” she asked after a long pause.

I stared up into her green eyes. “I know I will love a man worthy of the utmost sacrifice,” I said with great pride.

“It will be a dark and dangerous path and he will not love you the same way in return. I fear it will mean great suffering to us both, but how it is resolved I cannot see. He is a good man though. A man who needs you very much, even if it takes him far too long to understand,” she said.

“He will understand. I just have to trust him,” I said.

“So, we send your friend to the gods tomorrow and you leave for Camelot the next day,” she said.

“I think it’s time,” I said.

“I’ll miss you,” she said.

“Are you going to tell me everything now?” I asked. “Everything you’ve kept from me all these years.”

She laughed. “I guess you’re old enough to know at least some of the truths of our lives.”

It took a long time to explain the secrets of our existence and I wasn't overly surprised by most of her revelations, though finding out our big sister used to be a goddess of war is a little overwhelming.

She told me that as a fey, raised among men, I'd have little of my own power but she felt confident I'd be able to become a strong healer in time. I wanted more, I wanted to make a difference, to be seen by the great men of Camelot and admired for my courage and honour. I wanted the life of a hero.

We reorganised our caravan and split our belongings. Merla offered me one of the horses, but they were a team and to split them up would be a crime. Besides, I didn't want to arrive at Camelot on a carthorse.

We were both tired from watching Jacob finally pass from this world, but Merla stood in the drizzle with me, fussing with my cloak.

"Make sure you stay warm," she said.

"I will," I said for the hundredth time.

"Don't fight with people," she said.

"I won't," also something I'd said frequently.

"Don't sleep with anyone that can get you into trouble," she said very firmly.

I grabbed her hands, "Enough, Merla. I am a grown man. In the city my sexual preferences will hopefully be absorbed safely and I'll be safe."

She nodded and my beautiful sister shut the door in her heart, which would stop her from worrying about me. Her green eyes grew distant and her body stiff. "Time for you to leave, little brother. May the gods go with you and protect your steps until we meet again."

"And may they protect yours as well," I said. Her mercurial nature hurt but at least I now understood why she'd hidden me and keep me from the world. Being full fey from the Wild Wood of Albion, would make me no friends in this world but her ferocious nature made her cold and I longed for warmth.

I began walking south when her voice reached me on the wind. "Protect yourself, little brother. He will not see you for many months. His heart belongs to another."

I turned and stared at the caravan ambling over the track toward its new home. We were out of earshot but her words were clear and stole the elation I felt about being free.

I stood on the crest of a hill overlooking Camelot. Six weeks of walking, my boots worn thin, and I'd arrived. I grinned, my sister's words long gone.

"I am going to be Sir Lancelot du Lac's squire," I said aloud. I'd been repeating this to myself constantly for weeks. A flash of guilt shot through me when I thought about Jacob but I'd already grown used to stuffing things in boxes to hide the pain. As for the rape. A big box. A very big box with lots of chains around it in a deep hole buried under a large monster. I repeated my mantra to force the horrors away and walked with firm purpose towards Camelot.

The city opened for me like a rose. I walked through the huge gates, the guards watchful but friendly, their uniforms smart and their halberds shiny. People flowed in and out of the main entrance. The walls towered over me, offering protection and warning. Once inside, you were subject to the life of a city dweller under close scrutiny from the King's men. I wanted to be one of those men. The deep blue background and golden oak of King Arthur's colours were a sign of confidence and reassurance.

I walked in surrounded by merchants and farmers. Noise, people, smells, more noise. I'd never, ever been anywhere so big or so, well, loud. The smell, oh, the smell. People and their waste, animals and their waste, industry and its waste, food everywhere much of it no longer edible. The smell of the sea and the docks overrode everything when the wind shifted. The streets were paved or cobbled on the whole, which helped and a channel of water ran through each to carry waste away. I saw building work going on everywhere, from municipal centres of various kinds, all of which reached for the sun with soaring towers and flying buttresses, to better sewage systems which dealt with the stinking waste.

My heart filled with love and awe for the perfection of humanity engulfing me and the trials of recent months fled under the optimism of a new start.

"Hey, boy, you looking for a little fun?" a rough voice

asked and a hand grabbed my arm. I deftly untangled myself from the drunk's grasp. He stank like a fish dunked in rum.

"No," I said firmly. "And I'm not a boy."

"You shaving yet, handsome?" he leered.

"You able to make that tiny cock of yours stand?" I asked.

He lunged in anger. I knocked him to one side and walked away as he collapsed into the filthy street. Anger stirred in my chest but I squashed the sensation. Retaliation would cost me more dearly than the satisfaction I'd gain from revenge for his stupidity.

"Just find somewhere to sleep," I told myself firmly, walking up the steep street toward the keep. I'd seen the vast sprawling edifice from the top of the hill, a huge square castle squatted in dark stone dominating the skyline with its own walls enclosing the grounds.

The day started to darken and I finally found an inn which looked clean and friendly. I'd been hording my money so I'd find somewhere safe to sleep for a few nights before I'd found my place in the castle.

"Well, my poppet, you're welcome to a room," said a large woman with a kind smile. "If you help with the chores, I'll even throw in a few meals."

I grinned. "I'd be grateful and I'm happy to work for my supper."

She showed me to a small room, with a clean cot. I sat on a mattress of thick rags and a waft of lavender whooshed up around me from the woollen blankets. It reminded me of my sister and my heart ached for her.

"Thank you for your kindness," I said.

"You're welcome, poppet. When you're settled in, come down and I'll show you the ropes with regards to serving. Work hard and your lodging will be free." Her amble bulk vanished with surprising speed. I unpacked my few belongings and lay them carefully on the floor or on the small table.

That night I worked harder than I'd ever done in my life and loved every moment. I served ale, stew, cheeses, meats, bread and spirits. Hilda, my new employer, chuffed and chortled with many of the customers. Until a trio of men walked in clearly the worse for drink. One stood out from the

others, who appeared to be low ranking soldiers.

“Oh dear,” Hilda muttered.

I looked from her and back to the tall dark man. His eyes were cold and such a deep brown they looked black. His dark hair, shoulder length, tangled and thick, curled around a strong jaw and high cheekbones. His shoulders were broad and his hips narrow. Every muscle spoke of war and the potential for violence. Stubble made him appear roguish and although drunk he was not out of control. He wore dark brown leathers and more weapons than I would deem appropriate.

My heart left my chest and slammed itself into his body, he didn't even flinch.

“Tancred, poppet, I think you should go to bed,” whispered Hilda.

“Who is he?” I asked, though I already knew the answer.

“Sir Lancelot du Lac. He's a dangerous man and rarely frequents the Old Oak when he's in his cups,” she said.

I patted the concerned hand grasping my arm. “Don't worry, he won't hurt me or anyone else,” I said.

“It's not him that'll hurt us, it's the trouble which comes with him. Especially now,” she said quietly.

I glanced at her find out more, but the men shouted for ale and I moved to deal with them. My hands shook as I approached the table and I placed three tankards and a jug of ale on the table. I breathed in deeply and caught his lordship's scent. Rich, spicy, dark and strong. My heart juddered and I spilled a little ale on the table.

A roughly calloused hand lay on my arm, the knuckles scarred. “It's alright, boy. I'm not going to bite,” his voice rumbled through me.

“I know that, my Lord,” I said feeling like I squeaked. “I have been hoping for the privilege of meeting you.”

He looked at me and our eyes met, the right side of his face lifted in a smile, but it didn't reach those dark eyes. “Are you going to challenge me?” he asked.

My own eyes widened in shock. “No, no, I...” my words dried up. His lips were full and looked so soft. I heard his friends laughing at my foolishness, but his dark eyes softened and he allowed the smile to become kind. He transformed

from a god made of marble, to a mortal hero of epic proportions with a heart buried deep and beating slowly, hardly alive.

“It’s all right, really. We are not here to cause trouble and I have no interest in anything other than a drink before returning to a cold bed,” he said.

I swallowed and smiled. “Sorry, I just,” I wanted to say, I love you, instead I managed, “I have come to Camelot for the right to ask for the position of squire. With you,” I added to make it clear. “I would like to be your squire.”

“Oh, we have a real fan. I think he’s in love with you, my Lord,” roared one of Sir Lancelot’s friends.

“Shut up, Twist,” Lancelot snarled. “The boy has more courage than most in this city to address me directly.”

I remained quiet and just awaited my fate. Sir Lancelot turned back toward me. “I am sorry, boy. But I don’t keep squires. If I need one, I use one of the King’s. I don’t need one of my own while I am the Queen’s Champion. I like your courage though, you’ve travelled far?”

My chest constricted with his words. He couldn’t turn me down, it was my destiny to ride at his side. I knew it. I squashed the hurt and said, “I’ve been travelling all my life. My sister and I have been everywhere.”

His eyebrow rose. “You have a sister? I’d like to meet her if she’s anything like you,” he said. His friends leered and laughed. I felt a blush creep up my cheeks. Lancelot sighed. “Leave the boy alone.” He addressed me, “I tell you what, just about the only place my word is worth anything these days is with the royal guard and I hold the training sergeant in high esteem. If you want to work for the King, then report tomorrow to the offices you’ll find by the royal stable. Ask for Moran. He’s a good man and will see you have a chance to join the ranks. Mention my name and say we’ve spoken, it might help.”

“But I want to work for you, learn from you,” I said. “And I’m not a boy.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” he asked and finally laughed. A bitterness coloured the sound making it harsh. “Lad, if ever there was such a thing as luck, you’ve just run out of it. If I make it to the end of this with my head on my shoulders I’ll

be counted as luck's plaything for sure. Trust me, the further away you are, the better your chances and you really don't want to work for me. People who do, die. Now, bugger off and leave us in peace." He turned his back on me and Hilda waved frantically to make me move away.

They drank half the night and when they departed, singing some lewd song, Sir Lancelot left a purse of gold on the table. "I'll not need it where I'm going," he said and just for a moment he looked at me with such despair and utter sobriety, I felt tears sting my eyes.

When they were gone, Hilda and I finally began tidying up. My feet hurt and my brain hummed with the strangeness of the day. As exhausted as I felt, I knew I'd never be able to sleep.

"Why was Sir Lancelot so angry?" I asked as I wiped tables.

Hilda sighed heavily. "Oh, my poppet, you don't want to get too close to someone who burns so hot."

"But he's the greatest knight of Camelot," I cried defending his honour.

She smiled as I imagined a mother would smile at a wayward son. "That he is and to watch him in the melee or joust is to watch a thing of beauty. The trouble lies in his heart and his love for the Queen. There are rumours the love is a little too deep and a little too real. The Court moves against him and the King, may the gods protect his soul, is powerless to stop them."

I stopped wiping. "How do you know so much?" I asked.

"I'm one of the nearest taverns to the keep, poppet. How do you think? Men come in and ale makes their tongues flap loose. Some of the most powerful men in the land drinks here," she said. "Now, enough talk. I take it I'm losing you to soldiering tomorrow, so off to bed, you've earned your keep and more." She poured out half the coin in the purse, his Lordship left us and gave to me. "You'll need it in Camelot, poppet and if you ever need a friend, you come to me."

My feet shuffled and I straightened my best doublet for the hundredth time. I rubbed my left foot on my right calf to polish my boot again. I stood outside the office belonging to

Sir Lancelot, not Sergeant Moran.

A figure appeared in the shadows and the stink of hard spirits hit me. Sir Lancelot rolled more than walked. I realised talking to him would not be a good idea, but I had to give it one last shot.

“My Lord,” I said stepping forward. “I wondered if I might have a moment of your time.”

“Not now,” he said. “Now, I need to drink. Do I know you?”

“From the inn, last night, Sir. You said to speak with you,” I lied.

He took a deep breath. “The boy, with the sister, wants to be the squire of a worthless knight.”

“I don’t consider the Queen’s Champion to be worthless,” I said with some indignation.

He opened his office door and I followed him. The room, small but ruthlessly organised, showed the mind of a commander of men, not a drunkard. “Please, go away, boy –” he began.

“Tancred, my name is Tancred,” I said interrupting him, desperate to be noticed.

Sir Lancelot rubbed his hands over his face. He looked exhausted, utterly drained. “Tancred, please, go to the Sergeant and join up. You do not want to be my squire or anyone else’s. Please, if you ever thought I was worth something you’ll leave me alone.”

He sat behind his plain desk and began sorting through parchment. Clearly dismissed, I gave up and left. To have your dreams ripped from you when they’d saved you from some miserable experiences, hurt. I was angry with him and with Camelot. I didn’t want to be a nobody in the army. I wanted to stand at the shoulder of a great man, a beautiful man. My thoughts slowed and calmed. A deeply injured man.

I sighed and kicked a stone in the yard through which I wandered. “A soldier is better than nothing, stop being so difficult,” I told myself. I squared my shoulders, fiddled with my collar once more and set off in search of this Sergeant Moran.

I found him in the same corridor Sir Lancelot had his office. He shared a room with three others of the same rank,

who took the different shifts. There were raised voices from the office further up but no one reacted.

“I’m here on the orders of Sir Lancelot du Lac,” I said. “I am seeking Sergeant Moran in order to become a part of the guard for King Arthur.” I stood straight and stared toward the white wall, at attention.

I heard a sharp intake of breath. “Sir Lancelot sent you did he?” the rough voice grated through the sentence. “I wouldn’t shout about that at the moment, boy.”

I frowned. I couldn’t help it. “My name is Tancred, Sir.”

“Tancred what?” asked the mill grinding voice.

I paused. “Erm,” I glanced down at the man behind a small desk. His face looked like it had gone through the same mill as his voice. A scary visage and one to inspire men to follow orders, hoping to stay safe. He raised his eyes, still waiting. “Erm, Tancred of Camelot,” I stuttered.

He smiled. “Tancred of Camelot, is it?” he asked. “Well, Tancred of Camelot, until you start shaving a white beard, you’ll be a boy to me, so get used to it.”

I smiled and a small laugh escaped. I couldn’t help it after all the tension since dawn. “Fair enough, Sir.”

“So, what makes you want to be a soldier in the King’s army and how do you know Sir Lancelot?” Moran asked.

I looked into the Sergeant’s bright intelligent eyes and decided to opt for the truth. I gave him the story, leaving out Jacob and my beating but telling him about my desire to become a squire.

Moran rose, nodding. “I’ve never seen a man fight like he can. He really is the best of us and I am proud to have helped shape him and the King. I just wish his troubles weren’t so deep.”

“He seems very sad,” I offered.

Moran’s scarred face twisted into a smile. “He is sad and lonely, but our place is not to gossip about the great and the good.”

Shouting flooded the small corridor outside the offices. Moran and I shared a glance and left the room in a rush. There were a dozen men filling the space before Sir Lancelot’s office and they were banging on his door.

The door opened suddenly and Lancelot, face as cold as

death, stood straight and proud in the entrance. "My Lord Stephen de Clare, how interesting to see you," he said.

I looked at the ugly pug faced man. "I have a warrant for your arrest," said de Clare.

"No," I cried out and moved forward, but Sergeant Moran grabbed me.

"No, boy, don't interfere or you will suffer the same fate. This is politics at the highest level, not for the likes of us to understand," he hissed.

Lancelot stared at de Clare with such coldness I thought the pug man would become stone on the spot. "A warrant," said Lancelot quietly and a bitter smile twisted his face. "A warrant and twelve men. Do you fear me so much de Clare?"

"I only fear your threat to England, du Lac. Your treason –" he began.

"Treason has not been proven and I am damn sure my King would not have signed his name to that charge," Lancelot stated.

A saw the cruellest smile enhance de Clare's ugly face. "Take a look," he said, handing over a scrolled parchment.

Lancelot took the scroll, his face stony and his pallor extreme. His pain at its contents only showed itself by a tightening of his lips and stiffening of his back.

"I see," he said. He handed back the scroll. I watched him unbuckle his sword belt. "Sergeant," he called and Moran left my side. "You have your orders, see this is given to Lord Fitzwilliam."

"Yes, my Lord," Moran said taking the weapon with a shaking hand.

Lancelot turned away and twelve nervous men along with de Clare left the hall.

"I don't understand," I said. "How can we let this happen? He is the greatest knight of Camelot."

"I know, son," Moran said stroking the sword.

"What will happen to him?" I said my chest tight.

"He is going to face a trial and the outcome of that could be death or banishment," he said. "He will need friends. Though I fear he will not accept any easily. He never has. He is a man separated from the rest of us."

I felt very small and lonely in the big strange city all of a

sudden. If a man who had served Camelot his whole life could be torn down and destroyed so easily, what hope for the rest of us small minnows in this lake full of pike?

“Will you take me on as a cadet?” I asked.

Moran peered up at me. “Come with me,” he said returning to his office. He picked up a scroll and held it out. “Read it and mean it,” he said.

I unravelled the heavy vellum, with the King’s seal on the bottom. “I, say name,” I stopped and felt the blush. “Sorry,” I muttered. “I, Tancred of Camelot, do hereby swear my alliance...” the words continued and I read well.

When I finished Moran said, “Right, boy, you are now the King’s man. We’ll find you a bed in the barracks and get your training started.”

“I’d rather be Lancelot’s,” I muttered out of his hearing.

The next few weeks were manic. I became a cadet among the regular soldiers and found myself doing every miserable job that came my way as well as training all hours. There were four of us in the end who all started within a few days of each other and I soon found a good friend in a man called William. I’d never had a male friend I didn’t want to sleep with and enjoyed the experience. He soon figured out women weren’t for me and it didn’t bother him, so long as I promised to never make a pass. I laughed and told him he wasn’t my type.

“That’s because I’m not built like a certain lord we all know and miss,” he said.

That burning heat once more coloured my skin and he chuckled.

Life in Camelot moved with speed put the chaos was incredibly organised. We were clothed and fed by the King and in return we offered up our obedience and our lives to his cause. We patrolled the city and the local farms and villages. We helped the City Watch with the arrests of criminal gangs and we guarded the prisoners.

I sought this job out more than any other, despite the endless boredom. Lancelot remained in his cell for months, visitors were few and he rarely spoke. I watched him through the small window in the door sometimes. He practiced sword

forms, without his sword. He lay and watched the ceiling. He did what he could to remain fit. He never prayed to any god and he never asked to write anything or tried to request a visit from a friend. He never spoke to us, his guards, he simply retreated.

Gossip filled the castle and many condemned him for his alleged actions. I ended up on charges myself, with a very angry Sergeant Moran shouting at me, when I'd grown sick of the slander in the barracks.

"Do you really think you are helping your reputation and Sir Lancelot's cause with this idiotic behaviour?" he yelled.

"No, Sir," I muttered. I licked my split lip and tried to blink my swollen eye.

Moran took a deep breath and all the fight vanished from his small frame. "Damn me, boy, you are a problem. I understand your desire to support a man like his Lordship, but you need to be clever about it and pick your fights with your tongue, not your fists."

I looked at the Sergeant. "I tried talking, they weren't listening," I said.

He huffed. "Sit and I'll find a balm for that eye and another for your knuckles," he offered crossly. We were silent for a time while he fussed over my contusions. "I know why you care, but you aren't helping him by fighting for him. There is nothing we can do right now, he's made his bed and he's lying in it with what honour is left to him. You have to accept that."

"He couldn't have done what they said. He couldn't have bedded the Queen," I said with vehemence.

"Don't be naïve, boy. There is no smoke without fire and you know the truth of this just as the King does. Why do you think he's losing control of himself and Camelot?" Moran asked.

It was true, over the last few months discipline became a constant fight for us who were loyal to the King and his leadership because we had no leadership. We were a rudderless ship and heading for the rocks because too many of us enjoyed the freedom.

All the pent up frustration and strangely confusing fey dreams of wolves, stags and hunting hounds, poured out in a

tumble of words. "But you don't understand. He is my destiny and I know he needs to be here, with me."

As soon as the words left my lips, I regretted them. My passion, my desire filled every word and could not be hidden.

Moran sat back. "So, that's the right of it. I thought it must be."

"Are you going to report me and have me thrown out of Camelot?" I asked while staring at my hands.

"Why would I do that?"

I looked up in surprise. "I thought..." the words faded.

Moran smiled slightly. "Don't be a fool, lad. I've know all types of men over the years and even sampled a few myself. You won't be the first to fall in love with a man like his Lordship, but I warn you. If you want peace, you'll rid yourself of your passion, he isn't for the likes of you. He's a womanising toe rag."

"I can't rid myself of him," I said full of misery. "He really is my destiny. I know he doesn't even realise I exist but it doesn't matter, I love him." There, I'd said it aloud.

"Then the best thing you can do right now it help him by being a man he can be proud of and admire," Moran said. "Be the man he cannot be right now."

Tears pressed against my eyes, I looked at the ground and tried to control the wobble in my voice. "His trial is tomorrow," I said.

"I know, son," Moran said patting my back.

"Can I be there?" I asked, glancing up briefly.

"With your face in that state?" Moran asked but I saw him consider my request. "I can wriggle a few things around. I have the feeling it won't take long to condemn him."

I nodded dumbly.

I stood to attention, the swelling in my face almost gone, stuffed into my best uniform. The blue tabard with the golden oak mocked the tense day. I stood on guard inside the doors of the Court. William stood with me. His red hair sat unhappily under the open faced helmets we wore. I clutched the halberd as if it would support me while the world under my feet kept tilting.

The Royal Court was full. Men and women of rank and

privilege filled every square foot and you could taste their hunger for blood. They were a pack of hounds indeed, waiting to tear their hero, a man they lauded and named Champion, down. I hated them.

The King's stone throne had been hidden under the huge wooden stage and seven heavy chairs. A space before the stage stood empty, roped off, just like the path from the door, forcing people back and giving William and I a perfect view. There were other guards posted around the room, but no one thought we'd be needed.

Six men walked up the steps behind the dais. The King at their head. Everyone but the guards made obeisance. The Queen walked up alone. She was beautiful. Utterly captivating. She wore a simple dress of white with a cloak of white ermine. Her long golden hair covered her shoulders. She looked very pale and a little too thin. She wore no jewellery. The King wore black and looked terrible. His eyes were red and swollen. His face haggard and he stumbled slightly as he reached his chair. Sir Geraint grabbed his elbow and helped him sit. He didn't look good either but Sir Stephen de Clare's small piggy eyes glowed with power and hunger. I wanted to run up there and stab the pig in the eye.

"Steady, Tancred. Moran told me to drag you out of here if you cracked. Don't make me do it," William muttered without moving his lips or raising his voice.

I took a few deep breaths. The door behind us boomed as someone knocked. William and I moved to open it. Sir Lancelot stood there, with two guards in de Clare's colours, chains binding his wrists and ankles. A whisper shot around the room and many heads bobbed in an attempt to see the great brought low.

His eyes were clear and his focus only on his King. He walked without shuffling, the chains clanking, and with utter calm toward the dais. He'd lost weight and muscle mass over the months but none of his dignity. The great hall remained utterly silent.

When he reached the clear space, he dropped to his left knee and bowed his head. "I am as ever, your humble and most obedient servant, your Majesty," he said smoothly.

I watched Arthur. His eyes betrayed his anguish for long

moments before he smothered it under the visage of a king. De Clare stood and began to read out a long scroll in legal language discussing the rights and wrongs of the behaviour required by a lord of Camelot. I looked to Guinevere, she sat very still, pale and like a cold, empty statue of a goddess. She hardly appeared to breathe.

“The sad duty of those of us chosen as your peers, is to decide your innocence or guilt of the charges brought before us,” intoned de Clare.

Sad my arse, I thought, seeing the man’s glee vibrating off him.

Lancelot raised his head. “You have listed the charges, my Lord but present no evidence other than hearsay. However, my Lord and King suffers under the weight of this vilification. In order to quell these slanderous rumours I will take whatever punishment he deems appropriate.”

De Clare grinned. “There is just one punishment for treason,” he began.

The King stood. “Treason has not been proved,” he said in his beautiful melodious voice. “All we have proved is that my Court enjoys raising up good and honest men before tearing them down. However, there is too much evidence of a dishonest and dishonourable relationship between my wife and Sir Lancelot. For the satisfaction of the Crown, there must be reparation made but the death penalty is not permitted for anything other than murder or treason and neither have been proved beyond doubt.”

I watched de Clare grind his teeth. Lord Fitzwilliam closed his eyes in relief. The other Lords remained blank, only window dressing for a trial between the King and his strongest adversary.

“Your Majesty, with respect –” de Clare snarled.

“I very much doubt respect has anything to do with this, my Lord,” Arthur said clearly and a whisper shot around the room, with the speed of light breaking over the horizon. “I have come to a decision. Sir Lancelot du Lac will be banished from Camelot forever. If he returns he will face the death penalty.” The King paused and the only thing which mattered was the gaze shared by the two men. So much seemed to pass between them. “There will also have to be a

reckoning in blood. There will be fifty lashes for each party at dusk tomorrow.”

Guinevere gasped.

The crowd shifted and muttered.

The Lord Fitzwilliam rose but realised he dare not interfere with the fragile control his King maintained.

Lancelot bowed his head. “As you command, Sire,” he said without so much as a wobble in his voice. “I just beg for one last favour.”

“What is it?” the King asked.

“That I receive the Queen’s punishment as well as my own. If there is fault, the fault is mine and mine alone. I have loved her too well and betrayed you in the process, her innocence in this is without doubt so I will bear her sentence and my own to satisfy the law of the land.”

“Done,” the King managed. “Tomorrow at dusk.” He turned and walked from the dais.

Lancelot rose when the King left, bowed to the Queen, turned and walked toward us. I craved just one look so I could tell him with my eyes he wasn’t alone, but he acknowledged nothing.

“One hundred lashes,” I cried out in anguish. “It’ll kill him.” I stood in Sergeant Moran’s office with William.

“It’ll turn him to pulp for certain but it’s all the King could do and fifty wouldn’t have been so bad. With him taking the Queen’s it might be enough to finish him off,” Moran said from his chair behind his desk.

I paced, my anguish weaving snakes of pain around the small room.

“Tancred, there is nothing we can do,” William said. “It’s time to move on, my friend.” He reached out to calm my restless body.

“No,” I shouted. “No, it isn’t all we can do.”

“We can’t rescue him,” Moran said slowly, clearly fearing my intentions. “I’ll not betray my King.”

“No,” I said calming. “No, he wouldn’t want that. But they’ve said he is to have no help with leaving Camelot. They won’t even cut him down or bind his wounds. But two guards, who know how to help a man in and out of the city,

they can help, they can save a convict.”

“Bloody hell, Tancred,” William whispered.

The door behind us opened making us all jump. King Arthur stood here. Handsome, ravaged and very angry. We all bowed low.

“My ears are sharper than they should be,” he said. “Did I hear you correctly, soldier? Are you planning on helping a convict to escape?”

“Your Majesty,” I said with my heart pounding in my chest. I’d never been so close to this incredible man. How could anyone love the Queen when they knew this vision of male perfection? “I only meant.”

“Do it,” he said. “There will be a horse at the postern gate with food, bedroll and clothes. If you are caught you will be hung. I cannot protect you and I will deny this conversation. Do we understand each other?” He thrust a familiar sword toward Moran. “He will need this.”

“Yes, Sire,” we all said at once.

“Thank you, Moran,” the King whispered before leaving.

The atmosphere in the small room shifted from terrified awe to excitement in moments. We were soldiers and our King had given us a mission.

Moran made certain William and I were on guard duty in the small courtyard chosen for the punishment and he made certain he took duty at the postern gate.

We searched the place to ensure no one lurked in a corner to offer rescue. We stopped all those who wanted to watch the punishment and we waited. We waited a long time and I grew sick. The thought of what I would have to watch drew circles of agony around my heart. Those circles tightened causing me pain and waves of dizziness. Panic nipped my heels and I wondered if I could fight all the Knights of Camelot to save Lancelot from this horror.

The sun began to set and officials filed into the courtyard to bear witness or gloat. De Clare arrived and paced with impatience, desperate to see his enemy brought low. I had no idea why the pug faced man wanted to do this to Sir Lancelot, but I vowed I’d never lift a hand to help him in battle. He spoke in quiet tones to his cronies and laughed. I

stepped forward, the pressure of the day finally causing something in my head to snap. I lowered my halberd.

“Tancred,” William hissed and grabbed my arm, pulling me back.

De Clare turned and stared at me with his piggy little eyes. A chill swept over me, reminding me of something I’d felt around my sister. I did as she instructed, I threw up a mental shield of white light and de Clare’s eyes narrowed, vanishing into his florid face.

The courtyard filled with an expectant hush and King Arthur walked in with Sir Geraint and Sir Kay at his side. He didn’t look at William and I, he merely walked very slowly, to a small platform.

“We all know why we are here,” he said. “Let’s just get this over with.”

The sound of metal on metal drew my attention away from the King’s fragile presence.

Sir Lancelot du Lac walked into the yard, wearing nothing but leather hose and long boots. I stared at the form and the perfection of the warrior before us. His skin, despite his incarceration, was still swarthy. The fine hairs on his chest glistened slightly with sweat and I couldn’t stop my eyes following the dark trail leading downward. Not an ounce of fat lay on his body. There would be no protection from the lash. His dark eyes, stubble and tangled hair made him appear roguish and almost brutal.

He walked with the same dignity and pride he’d walked into the Court for his trial. He stood before the King, dropped to his knee and held his hands out in supplication, as a knight does for his lord.

“I will always be yours, Sire. And I am honoured to have served you and I am sorry I must leave you,” he said. His voice was very quiet and when he raised his eyes, there were tears on his cheeks. Half the crowd jeered, assuming he’d cracked. But it had nothing to do with begging for salvation and everything to do with forgiving the King the terrible burden of this action.

The guards moved in, to lift him off the floor but he stood fluidly, shocking everyone and causing many men to reach for their weapons. Lancelot merely walked to a large post and

raised his chained arms to the clasp that would hold him to the post.

A man in black leather with a heavy black mask over his head stepped forward. All I could see were mucky coloured eyes and slight pot belly. I would never know the man who would deliver the pain.

The chain clicked into place and Lancelot shifted, bracing himself against the rough wood, legs slightly apart and head pressed into the wooden beam. His lips moved and I wondered if he prayed but I realised he repeated his vow to his King, constantly forcing the words through tight lips. Sweat broke out on his back and I watched the elegant, powerful body lock rigid despite his attempt to remain relaxed.

The man in black stepped back five paces. He released a coil of plaited leather from his belt and held the wooden end, while the rest unravelled toward the dusty ground.

His arm came back over his head and shot forward with a snap in his wrist. The action formed part of the weapon. The lash ripped forward, hissing through the air and kissed Sir Lancelot's back. Its sharp end bit into his skin over his right shoulder blade and blood instantly appeared. Lancelot made no sound.

The crowd felt pleased with the proceedings, on the whole, it gave them power to see justice being done to this favourite of the Pendragon family. It would prove that no man was above the law.

However, after twenty six strokes, each one cutting his skin, Lancelot's knees collapsed and he hung against the post. His breathing became harsh, filling the courtyard with sound but still no cry or wish for mercy. His back dissolved into a sheet of blood, it trickled down his legs, flew and struck spectators and soaked into the barren soil. Lord Fitzwilliam wept. Several others left the scene. Even de Clare grew pale after seventy lashes. The King just stood, utterly motionless and very alone.

From where William and I stood, we could see Lancelot's face. Blood covered his lower jaw from where he bit into his lip to force himself to remain silent. His eyes were screwed shut and I silently begged him to let go of consciousness. I

stood mute and watched them tear his beautiful body to shreds. I willed my strength and love into him but he didn't even know I existed.

After eighty lashes he did finally pass out, the tension left his body and the metal cuffs cut his wrists more deeply. The sun vanished from the sky and clouds poured over Camelot to begin raining hard, hiding the moon. The King remained, others left.

The Crown's executioner finished his grizzly task without a word, bowed to the King and simply left.

"He is to leave by dawn or face death am I right?" de Clare asked the King.

"If he is still here at dawn his life is forfeit, yes," the King said in a horribly quiet voice. "You have what you wanted, Stephen. The life of my best friend."

"He is to be guarded?" de Clare asked, insistent.

"He is to be guarded and there is an end to matter," Arthur said finally turning his back on Lancelot's body. I thought I saw Lancelot turn his head slightly to watch Arthur leave, but I may have been wrong.

The two men left. William and I were forced to stand there, remaining still and calm while Lancelot bled and the rain fell. If the King had ordered the punishment at dawn things could have been so different, he'd done all he could to save his friend and now we just had to wait until Camelot became quiet enough for us to act. The city, as though feeling its King's pain, grew hushed in the worst rainstorm we'd had in months.

"I can't bear this, the rain will be drawing more blood from him," I said, throwing my halberd down and brushing wet hair out of my face.

"It'll be cleaning the wounds though," William said. He propped up both our weapons against the wall.

I lay a trembling hand on the cold flesh of Lancelot's arm. I didn't realise tears mixed with the rain until a sob broke free. I chided myself, grief could come later, when he'd escaped.

"Come on," I managed. We took a side each and tried to lift him without touching the pulp of his back. In the end I wriggled under him, lifted him by his hips and William

hooked him free of the post. Lancelot's body shifted and I sidestepped, slipping on the wet cobbles of the courtyard. With William's help, I managed to hook the unconscious man over one shoulder and stood.

"You can't carry him far, Tancred. He's bigger than you," William said, clearly worried about being caught.

"I can carry him far enough," I ground out, my knees already shaking with effort. The keys Moran gave William unlocked the gate to the courtyard and we found a narrow dark alleyway running straight into the city. When we reached the end I recognised where we were. The Golden Oak stood not twenty yards away.

"Hilda," I whispered. "She'll help dress the wounds."

William looked at me mystified as I ran through the rain toward the inn. I scooted around the back and banged on the door. Over the weeks I'd been back to the inn many times and even helped out on my day's off to earn more money. The door opened and Hilda stood there.

"Tancred?" she asked.

"No questions, please," I begged hurriedly. "I need your help."

"Come in, come in," she said and I found myself engulfed in the hot kitchen. She didn't hesitate for a moment, bless her kind heart. She cleared the large kitchen table and ordered her staff out and the few customers who'd braved the weather. William lifted Lancelot and together we lay him on his chest. Blood leaked out of his back and he didn't stir but I felt his heart beat and his breath hiss.

With Merla's training kicking through the grief at the sight before me, I began drying the skin and clean the wounds. Hilda appeared with clean sheets and William tore them up to make bandages.

"He needs stitching," she said.

"We don't have time, if they find him gone the city will be forced into lock down and we'll never get him out," I said lifting strips of skin back over the open muscle. "He must be gone and gone far by dawn."

"If you're caught..." she warned.

"I will gladly pay the price," I muttered.

She held her tongue but found a needle and thread. "We

have to close the worse of it, poppet. It won't take me long. I promise. Go to the apothecary and wake him up, tell him we need his burn ointment."

"But it's not a burn," William said.

"It's an open wound with the same chances of infection and it won't raise questions because you're getting it for a kitchen. The herbs won't be in quite the right quantities but it'll get the job done," I told him briskly.

"Right," William said and dashed off to follow orders. That's the wonderful thing about well trained soldiers, they know when to follow orders.

Hilda and I worked until the candles and lamps burnt low. We covered his back in the foul smelling goo and William helped lift him to tie the bandages in place. Lancelot finally roused.

"Where?" he asked.

"Shut up," I snapped, tiredness and stress making it sound hard. I didn't want him to be awake because I didn't want to say farewell. I wanted to go with him and protect him but that would incriminate Moran, William and everyone else who knew me. I had to stay. I thrust a cup of water into his hands and he drank.

"Thank you," he managed. "Who are you?" he asked. He lifted his hand and brushed it against my face as I knelt before him to try to do up the laces on a doublet Hilda found.

"It doesn't matter. The less you know the better," I said. The roughness of his fingers touched my smooth cheeks and I turned my face into his palm, kissing it lightly.

Lancelot slumped into unconsciousness once more.

William coughed. "Tancred, you really need to get over your crush on him. It'll do you no good. He will never love a man."

"Just help me up," I said my voice thick with unshed tears once more.

Between us, we lifted Lancelot off the table and leaned him over William's shoulder. He was bulkier and stronger than me. I kissed Hilda on the cheek and said I'd be back to help clean up but she shooed us away.

William, finding a strength I could only wish for, ran with Lancelot through the streets of Camelot. Fortunately, it

wasn't far and Moran stood at the small postern gate.

"I thought you'd been caught," he muttered unlocking the gate.

"There's been no hue and cry?" I asked.

"None," he said. "They haven't noticed he's gone yet. Though that'll be down to the King, I have no doubt."

"Let's just stop talking and get this done," William gasped.

We moved through the gate and out of the city precincts. A leggy chestnut gelding stood looking miserable in the wet.

"He's quiet and he'll take good care on the dark road," Moran said. The three of us lifted the now semi-conscious man onto the horse and I pushed the reins into his hands and placed his feet in the stirrups.

"Lancelot," I said. "Ride, live and come back to us, please."

"Protect the King," were his last words as he kicked the gelding into action and rode away from Camelot at a disorganised canter.

I stood, still soaking wet, in the dying time of the night and watched him ride for his life. I prayed to my gods he'd come back and find a way to be a part of Camelot once more so I could see him again. I loved him and there wasn't a damned thing anyone would ever be able to do to change that, no matter how hard they tried.