

## Dreamers of the Grail

How would he act? He knew it was disrespectful to sit a horse in the presence of someone of a higher rank. He dismounted Brownie several yards from the group and led her over to where they stood.

“Perceval,” said the King, not one to forget a face nor a name. In his line of work, forgetting could be very dangerous. Merlin taught him that.

Instantly following Arthur, Galienne whispered, “Perceval.” Only Perceval himself did not ignore her. Wasn’t he from far away? Hadn’t he ridden off that day to go and learn the ways of knights? Would he take her with him? Right now, all she wanted to do was leave this place, this whole city.

“M-my lord,” Perceval began, turning his attention back to the King, bowing. “I have been these seasons past in the company of Sir Gornymant and his family at Jagent Keep. I have returned, and wish to humbly ask that our Great King consider me for knighthood. As he can see, I have taken the arms of the traitor Meliagrants as my own.” Thank goodness for Gornymant’s and Llio’s speech training, he thought.

All were silent for a few moments, waiting for Arthur to speak. Lancelot and Baudwin had only heard of this young man in passing before today, and both were so far impressed by him. For the second time in as many visits to Camelot, he managed to gain the King’s attention. Baudwin thought in his reddish armor that he looked much like the image of the Holy Spirit come down at that first Pentecost.

“Perceval, I consider myself in your debt for ridding my kingdom of the usurper Meliagrants. I shall grant you your knighthood. This very evening may you partake of your vigil here within Saint Dubric’s Cathedral. Your ceremony can be part of the ongoing festivities here at Camelot.”

“Sire, I have seen that the entire city is making preparations for this festival. Might I ask, how long does it last?” Perceval was very anxious now. He wondered how much longer his mother could wait, even though the King would make him a knight!

“It continues for two weeks,” answered Lancelot. “New knights are made then expected to participate to the conclusion.”

Two more weeks! But what of his mother? Was she still waiting, all this time? Or had she forsaken him? And what of Dindraine? He missed his sister sorely. This girl in front of him; she reminded him of her for some reason. Maybe it was that they were close in age.

No! It is Galienne! This was the girl who kept his dog. Or so he hoped.

Talking to the King was no time to be worried about his dog. His mother, on the other hand –

“– over his vigil myself,” said Baudwin, assumedly in reference to Perceval. He had been so lost he did not even hear how the comment began.

Galienne, to her surprise, was jealous. This person had returned, and now he was the center of attention? What about me, she thought, who has just today been accused of performing the miraculous? No, sinner. That’s vanity!

“King Arthur,” Perceval said, “this must be grossly out of my place to say, but m-may I make a request?” The last words came with difficulty.

Britain’s sovereign seemed a towering figure now. Something about the way he simply stood commanded respect. His very presence lent a sense of awe to the air itself. Perceval’s tongue was almost numb.

Arthur simply nodded, expecting a reply.

“It’s my mother, Sire. She lives far from here, and because of my training, I’ve been unable to see her these past seasons. I believe she has been quite worried about me, and if the festival really lasts a fortnight, then, I, uh –” Now he was not just nervous, but frightened. He couldn’t express what he wanted to say. Among the crowd, he thought he could pick out Sir Kay. Great.

Yet the King seemed to change the subject. “Perceval, come with me into the Cathedral. I should like to talk with you.” He turned, and walked toward the immense stone building, with its colored windows and steeples that pointed straight up to the heavens. Perceval stood and followed, eager to leave the crowd.

Galienne watched them go, now standing with Lancelot and Baudwin, amidst the crowd full of anticipatory eyes. Baudwin looked unsure of what to do or say. Lancelot looked defenseless without his armor, almost like a boy trapped in an older man’s body. A champion’s. The champion’s face looked defeated and tired, and he stole a quick glance at his daughter, the stranger, who would sooner take his head than talk to him.

The eyes he met were also distant, but more alive, even if frightened. He wished he could think of something, anything, to say to Galienne. Once again he thought of the Queen, considering that if he did not feel so passionately for her, he might well have loved Elaine. And their child. Now there was just an alienated girl. And a queen who would not or could not return his affection any longer. And the quest. Always the quest. The pursuit of glory was all Lancelot had to rid his mind of its torturing. He would soon make a request himself.

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Galienne felt sure she would soon feel her bread and apple jam breakfast come shooting back up her, dumping itself in front of everyone. She had not asked for this! All she had wanted was a little parental attention, for God's sake. Now she just wanted to leave.

So what was keeping her here? She was not a prisoner in the city. Lancelot ignored her, and she felt justified in disobeying him even if he ordered her to stay. And for what was there to stay? This Pentecostal madness, the Lord's own holiday turned into so much carousing in the streets? Perceval wanted to leave, too. Maybe she could go with him, back to wherever he called home. Where is he from? she tried to remember. Somewhere far. Some place where the wagging tongues and wandering eyes of Camelot would not be upon her.

She walked right between Baudwin and Lancelot, and proceeded into the Cathedral. Neither bishop nor knight made any motion to stop her. She was unaware of the talking in the street as it increased, in quantity and volume, when she disappeared into the hall.

“– wait if need be, although I wish you would stay. I never even knew my mother, so perhaps I can empathize.” The words reverberated off every wall and corner and pew in this place. Galienne had always been fascinated by the echoes in there; she thought it was God amplifying whatever was said in His house.

King and errant were near the dais, ignorant of Galienne's approach.

“Sire, please forgive me for what I ask. I know it is senseless and emotional, but I did not realize the guilt I carried until I arrived back in Camelot.”

“There is nothing to forgive. Besides, as I have said, I owe you my thanks: for dispatching an enemy, and for such an amiable, excellent hunting dog.”

“Cabal!” Perceval almost shouted. “He is in your care all this time? How is he?” Perceval briefly forgot his other concerns; at least his dog was all right.

“He's loyal and lovable as always. And his nose is already legendary around here. It's funny; the only person he ever growls around is Kay.”

Perceval and Galienne both had to fight back a sudden urge to laugh. Maybe there was justice in this world yet.

Returning to the subject, Arthur continued, “Perceval, it sounds like your mother and sister may need you. Come back as soon as you are able; your ceremony will wait, and your lord will be there to dub you a knight personally.”

Perceval drew in a gasp. So his dream would really become true! He would return with all haste, knowing he had the King's own word.

Galiene did not take time to consider what she said. "Take me with you! Please, Perceval. There is nothing here for me now." She ran up to where they both stood, emerging from the silent shadows.

"Galiene, you wish to go with him?" asked Arthur, a bit surprised, and annoyed that he was old enough to have trouble noticing when someone came sneaking up on him.

"Please, your majesty, I beg of you. You know my mother is dead this very day. Please see that she receives a proper Christian burial, but please let me get away from all these judging eyes and loose tongues!" She was crying again, missing her mother, but wanting so badly to leave she was willing to miss a funeral. Her mother would have understood, she told herself.

"I think that is more up to Perceval than to myself, child," said the King, always playing the diplomat.

Perceval was stunned into silence. He seemed to have a passenger. How could he say no? She was kind to him, that first day in the city.

"Have you a horse?" was all he could think to ask.

"I'll run at your side if I have to!"

"That won't be necessary. But I have one more thing to ask, and of the bishop this time. My lord." Perceval bowed as gracefully as he thought himself capable. When he rose again, he saw the face of a compassionate friendly man, not the stern expression of a battle veteran and politician. Arthur simply nodded, and they all left the cathedral, the King leading. Outside, Perceval was pleased to find Lancelot tending Brownie. Perceval stopped briefly to ask Baudwin if he or one of his underlings would check on a certain pair of young travelers past the city, near the source of the mysterious smoke pillar. He added that they were the children of Gornymant, and were told they would be received by the King and Queen personally.

When she was sitting atop Brownie, Galiene clutched the sword with one hand, and wrapped the other around Perceval's waist for support. She was surprised to hear several cheers as they rode toward the northern gate.

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"You haven't even returned home for this long?" Meant innocently, Galiene's words still tore into Perceval.

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“No. It’s been a long time. I’ve been meaning to get back, but my training...” He wanted to finish the sentence, but his thoughts just drifted off toward home. He wondered how tiny the village would seem; it appeared so the last time he returned, after meeting the knights. He hoped Lamorak was better.

“I’m sorry. It’s just that I can’t imagine being away from home for months at a time. My travels have been few and long between. I spent most my life back at Astolat.” If Lupinia could see me now!

He held his anxious tongue. He wanted to get to know this girl better. She was his only companion now, save for Brownie anyway. Yet he felt almost crowded on the road with her. He had no one to answer to the first time.

“Galienne, tell me of yourself. What are you like? What do you want?”

Yet now she was strangely silenced. Then, “What do you mean?”

“Just what I said. I’m trying to learn something about you.” Galienne felt defensive about herself as ever. She would not admit that she inherited this from her father. Galienne had herself already judged and condemned him, but she refused to dwell on this, too.

“I am fifteen years old, sixteen come Christmas. I was born on Christmas Eve, you know. My mother said it was a great blessing.”

Perceval could feel her ease her hold on him slightly. She all but molded herself to him when they left the city. “I can read, too,” she added proudly.

“And I’m sure you can ride,” said Perceval, interrupting her thoughts.

Suddenly embarrassed, Galienne tightened her embrace again, squeezing Perceval around the ribs. “I don’t know, really. Mother never taught me. I’ve always ridden in carts or wagons.”

“Anyone can do it. My own teacher helped me. Just last year I could barely ride, but I managed to get Brownie here all the way to Camelot. Isn’t that right, girl?” He stroked the horse’s thick damp neck. She grunted approvingly.

Perceval stopped Brownie on the road, already trying to dismount. It proved difficult, with Galienne all but wrapped around him.

“But, wait,” she protested. “What if I fall off? It’s a long way down there.” She nervously glanced down toward the ground.

“You’ll be fine. Brownie’s wonderful. She wouldn’t hurt anyone, especially someone who has been so kind to me.”

The compliment had its desired effect; Galienne loosened up enough to let him off. He hopped down, then handed her the reins.

“It’s easy. She understands commands. If you want her to turn, pull the reins in that direction. If you want her to go the other way, pull the reins in the opposite direction. She’ll stop if you pull up toward you, and if you want her to go again, just give her a nudge with your heels here.” Perceval pointed to the fleshy area of Brownie’s midsection which responded most readily to gentle prods; he tried to keep contact from Meliagrants’ spurs to a minimum.

“You mean kick her to get her to walk?” Galienne was aghast.

“You don’t have to kick her. Just give her a push, with your heels.” He grabbed her left foot, pushing it into Brownie’s body, and the horse obediently started walking. She went deliberately slowly, sensing the novice atop her.

Galienne let out a short, startled but high yelp at the sudden motion. She was riding! And with no one else to control this huge creature. Perceval walked alongside them, refusing to take the reins back when Galienne tried to return them.

She had to confess though, it felt wonderful. There was something about being perched on a horse that made her feel... how? She considered it, smiling as she watched the fitted rocks that made up the road pass under her, like the River Wey beneath the Astolat Bridge, when she wished she could just follow it.

She thought of her adjective. Free. It felt free to be up here. The breeze seemed sweeter and the scenery lovelier when seen from Brownie’s back. The mare, too, felt a bit freer; for a while she could ride with only the weight of one person. And Galienne was several dozen pounds lighter than Perceval.

He enjoyed seeing her smile. And it was good to walk again. His back needed the stretch, after having her slumped against it for a few hours.

“So now you can read and ride,” he told her. She grinned down at him.

Brownie then began to drift to the far right side of the road. Perceval looked over, noticing Galienne manipulating the reins as he had instructed.

“It works!” she cried, feeling triumphant. “She went right where I told her to go!” Brownie snorted again. Perceval laughed. So she wanted to show off, did she? Fine. He followed Brownie over to the roadside, smiled up at Galienne, and then slapped the horse on the rump.

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“Hey!” shouted Galienne. “What was that for?” But she was off, Perceval simply walking behind her now. The horse took off at a good stride; to Galienne it seemed she was flying.

And out of control, too, even though Brownie was only going straight up the road. After they went a good ninety yards, Galienne remembered the instructions, and pulled the reins, Brownie’s neck and head rising slightly at the gesture, her teeth putting another set of minuscule nicks in her bit.

The mare stopped as quickly as she started. Galienne turned around, seeing Perceval nodding approvingly, still ambling his way towards them.

Not wanting to be outdone, Galienne pulled the reins to the left, and kept pulling until she faced Perceval. Then she immediately dug her heels into the muscled horse flesh beneath them, and Brownie was charging him down. She got the horse to go even faster this time.

Perceval had to jump clear off the road to avoid them, hearing Galienne’s giggle. By the time he was on his feet, she had turned around and ridden back.

“Excellent,” he said, returning to the road. “I think you have a knight’s blood, after all.”

For the first time, Galienne felt proud to be mighty Lancelot’s child.