

Prologue:

"I know not if you have heard tell the marvellous gestes and errant deeds related so often of King Arthur. They have been noised about this mighty realm for so great a space that the truth has turned to fable and an idle song. Such rhymes are neither sheer bare lies, nor gospel truths. They should not be considered neither an idiot's tale, or given by inspiration. The minstrel has sung his ballad, the story teller told over his tale so frequently, little by little he has decked and painted, till by reason of his embellishment the truth stands hid in the trappings of a tale. Thus to make a delectable tune to your ear, history goes masking as fable."

Roman de Brut

Master Robert Wace

1155 AD

The Road to Sarras

Tantalising, teasing, the smoke from the campfire swirled and faded into the star scattered turquoise night. Gwenllian stretched her hands towards the warmth of the flames, letting the smoke curl playfully between her fingers. By the eerie light she could make out Perceval's features. If not for the fire that separated them she could almost reach out and touch his sleeping face framed by red-gold hair, blazing in the guttering flame light.

He was not for her however; Gwenllian had long known this despite what now seemed the naïve childish dreams to which she had clung. No, Perceval was destined for a higher cause. The Holy Grail sang to him like none other, leading him away from her with every breath he drew. He was probably dreaming of it now, Gwenllian thought with a rueful smile. Such a quest teemed with danger, but the ancient relic was too powerful a lure, cushioned with the glory and fame, which all knights sought. Gwenllian could only liken what was no doubt only a battered lump of tarnished metal to the sirens, which threatened to draw Ulysses onto the treacherous rocks. Yet Perceval could not be persuaded. Even the death of his sister,

Dindraine, could not dampen the attraction of the Grail. He had allowed himself time to mourn of course, but with the approaching dawn he would continue on his path and she would take the first steps in an unfamiliar direction, without him. The road to Sarras held her captive, fate proving a cruel and unyielding slave master. Gwenllian lie still, watching the clouds tumble across the horizon, and dreaded the new day.

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The trees shivered in their luminescent gowns, huddled by the roadside where they cowered, clutching their leaves around their naked branches. Gwenllian's mount offered no complaint when she nudged it closer to Perceval's, for even the horses recognised the tension that night, could smell its alien scent in the air.

Perceval rode at the head of the party, a figure of steel strength and composure. He alone showed no signs of the fatigue or nerves which had the rest of his companions on edge. If Perceval had not been so adamant to have his sister sleep under a roof and eat a hot meal that night, they would have made camp

hours ago. Yet Perceval had insisted, assuring them there was a castle not far ahead where they could take shelter for the night.

It would seem he had miscalculated just how far however. "Not long now," he would say, but they had been riding for hours and the sun had long since slipped below the crimson horizon. Shrouded in the damp night, their surroundings were dark and unfamiliar, the source of an unease which seeped with the chill air to the bone.

Gwenllian glanced at her mistress, riding beside her. Dindraine's usually pale features were incredibly so in the moonlight, her eyes bright with poorly concealed exhilaration mingled with fear. Absently chewing on her bottom lip, Dindraine was clenching the reigns which guided her horse till her knuckles turned white.

The muffled scuffing of steel-clad hooves over the hard packed earth was the only disturbance in the voiceless dark. The silence was unnatural, not unlike, Gwenllian imagined, that of death. The air tasted of stagnant dust; no breeze had sifted through these lands for who knows how long. Gwenllian could feel her stomach turning, the bile rising to her throat. With a

conscious effort she suppressed the urge to vomit. Even the stars glittered without warmth, piercing the blackness like shards of ice.

Gwenllian tucked her woollen cloak tightly around her, attempting to appease the tingling shivers which ran along her spine. It did little to help her however, for the dew which heralded the approaching morn had settled in the folds of her garments, robbing them of any warmth they might offer. She kept her lips sealed tightly to still her chattering teeth and hoped fervently Perceval was not mistaken. Perceval himself rode warily, pausing frequently to listen, and seeming on occasion to sniff the air. Better to be over cautious than to blunder into something.

It was not fear that Gwenllian felt as she finally approached the castle. No, not fear. Some thing else, something which gripped her stomach, writhing till it hurt. The air felt dirty in her lungs, tainted, as though robbed of its life-giving source. This however, was not enough to shun the comforts, which were offered here. Gwenllian longed for a hot bath, a sound meal and a soft bed, all of which were denied her since joining Perceval's party. She sensed the others shared

her apprehension, for they too waited at the castle gates, wrapped in an uncomfortable silence. Perceval looked as though he'd bitten into something sour and was suppressing the urge to spit.

A tall, lean faced man with dull grey eyes peered at them through the bars, his gaze sweeping intensely over each of the party. When he moved to Dindraine however, Gwenllian noticed a subtle change; a flicker of what could almost have been hope. He said nothing, silently unlatching the gate to bid them enter.

Perceval was the first to speak. "We seek shelter for the night, good sir. We have ridden far and my sister is weary. May I speak with your master?" The gatekeeper looked surprised, "Master? We have no master, sir knight, only a mistress, and she stricken with such a malady which keeps her bed ridden. You must have come far indeed, for my mistress' illness is no secret in these parts." His harshly accented voice echoed unease.

Perceval shifted in his saddle, "Is there no cure for her affliction?" Once again the lean faced man was silent, as

though weighing his choice of words. "Perhaps you'd best come indoors my lord." With a final glance at Dindraine he turned, beckoning them to follow as he shuffled across the bailey. Perceval dismounted, handing reins to his squire, then helped Dindraine down from her horse. He came to her next, lifting Gwenllian from the saddle as though she weighed no more than a child, his hands easily circling her waste, confident and reassuring.

Gwenllian stayed close to Dindraine as they entered the doorway. The hall they were ushered into was dimly lit; the walls draped with shadows which the rush light failed to disperse. The filth they had been breathing earlier was stronger now, a rancid stench, causing Gwenllian to shudder queasily. The very air felt defiled. The plague which threatened the chatelaine's life was festering in every inch of their surroundings, a poison which fed on vitality.

A shadowy figure emerged from the rear of the hall, the light failing to illuminate her features except for the sea of golden hair which fell about her shoulders. Moving towards them, she stepped into the wavering torchlight, revealing a younger face than Gwenllian had expected. Two large green

flecked eyes rested upon them, and, like the gatekeeper, her attention seemed drawn to Dindraine. When she spoke, however, it was Perceval whom she addressed, her tone coldly polite, "May I ask your name, sir knight?"

Perceval hesitated before answering. Gwenllian noticed his eyes scanning the room for signs of danger, his hand hovering by his side where the ever-present jewelled hilt of his sword hung in its scabbard. To Gwenllian, that sword did not merely seem part of him, it was part of him.

The young girl, or so she seemed, must have noticed his uncertainty, for she quickly continued. "I do not wish to appear suspicious, my lord. We have received few guests in these past months, since my mistress fell ill, and those who have come have wish only to be rid of us. You must understand, we have need to be wary of strangers." Gwenllian felt a twinge of jealousy as the unknown girl stretched out a delicate hand, gently laying it on Perceval's taught arm, her eyes pleading. The tall knight relaxed, the tension melting from his stance. "Indeed, you are right to be cautious, for you know not my name nor my intent. I assure you, however, that we bear you no harm. My sister and I seek shelter for the night and that is all."

“You are all welcome then, to Caerleon. Please accept the hospitality I must offer, for my mistress is not able. My name is Gwynora and it is my aunt, Lady Angharad, who is the chatelaine of these grounds. You have not yet mentioned your name, good sir?” Unbuckling his sword belt, finally at ease, Perceval offered her a gentle smile. “I am Sir Perceval of Camelot, and this is my sister, Dindraine.” He glanced at Gwenllian, about to introduce her also, but changed his mind, removing his cloak instead.

“You must be in sore need of a hot meal after your day’s journey. I will have one prepared.” Gwynora made to leave, and they were all surprised when Dindraine interrupted her. “The food can wait.” Perceval grunted at that, but Dindraine ignored him. “First you must tell us of your aunt. What is it that ails her?”

As curious as her mistress, Gwenllian waited for Gwynora’s reply. She had been almost at the door before Dindraine stopped her. As she slowly turned around, Gwenllian saw the mixed emotions cloud her features, could see the reluctance in her eyes. “Would you rather not eat first? Your

clothes are damp and you must be tired, I can have a bath drawn for you, if you wish? There will be time for talk in the morning." She took a hesitant step backwards.

"Gwynora, please, you must tell us. Perhaps there is something which can be done?" Dindraine reached for her hand, with such warmth and sincerity that Gwynora could offer little resistance. Her faltering compelled even Perceval, whom Gwenllian was sure would rather have been satisfying his hunger than prying information from this unwilling subject, to urge her to talk.

"We could have a physician see the Lady perhaps?" he offered. Gwynora shook her head, "No, my lord, many have been to see her, but to no avail. She grows steadily worse. They now refuse even to set foot in the castle, fearing the devil himself has taken her! It is only the fever of course, causing frequent fits of delirium. She is not possessed, my lord, I swear she is not!" Gwynora was in tears. Having abandoned her earlier reluctance, the words were now tumbling convulsively from her mouth. Gwenllian poured a goblet of mead, found in a corner of the room, and handed it to the weeping child as

Dindraine attempted to soothe her.

“So all possible has been done?” Perceval’s brow was furrowed in thought. Gwynora nodded. “They’ve bled her till I’m certain her heart is pumping naught but thin air! I’ve tried a burnt feather under her nose, rubbed her wrists with vinegar, even had her swallow powdered root of dragonwort with blackthorn. To no avail, we’ve not been able to bring her around.” Dindraine’s arm about her shoulder was doing little to ease her sobbing. “My aunt has been in her restless sleep for weeks now, no coherent words have escaped her lips and what food we do manage to feed her does little good, she’ll not respond; she’ll not wake.” Gwynora paused to sip from the goblet in her hands. They were shaking, Gwenllian noticed, as she raised them to her lips. The steaming mead seemed to have a calming effect, however, and the flood of tears trickled gradually to a lull.

As though suddenly aware of her company, Gwynora recoiled with embarrassment from Dindraine’s touch. “I’m sorry, my lord. I’d not intended to burden you, ‘tis not proper that I should act so, you must excuse me, I...I...” she turned and fled.

It was quiet after that, a pensive brooding silence that lasted too long for Gwenllian's liking. Dindraine was lost in thought, seeming close to tears herself, while Perceval merely stood, his hands clasped behind his back, his face impossible to read. The chamber suddenly seemed too stifling. Unable to hide her eagerness to be alone, Gwenllian muttered something about fetching a meal and made her way into the corridors beyond.

Silence cloaked the castle grounds, so too should have sleep, but Dindraine and Perceval were yet to be fed and that was all Gwenllian could find to occupy her thoughts. Somewhere, in the maze of mottled stone walls and locked doors, a woman was dying. She could feel it, oppressive and foreboding. Gwenllian shivered, nothing to do with the cold cutting through her woollen cloak.

Rounding a corner, Gwenllian all but collided with the fragile Gwynora, her tear-stained face lost in the shadows. Gwynora spun away from her and Gwenllian wracked her brain for worlds of consolation, comfort, any thing, but could not even find pity. "Master Perceval and the Lady Dindraine are waiting for their dinner." Hardly recognising her own voice, she

heard it echoing harshly off the cold stone. Gwynora blinked, temporarily stunned and Gwenllian immediately regretted her words. Seeing the young girl about to leave, Gwenllian mustered a taught smile, still ragged around the edges. "Wait, Gwynora, I did not mean that, I knew not what else to say." Reaching out she felt the girl's muscle contraught beneath her touch then pull violently away. Gwynora's mouth twisted, "What do you care? I am nothing to you. I will not plead for sympathy from a servant," she said bitterly. "Leave me be and I will fetch their supper."

"Don't bother, I doubt either of them still has an appetite. I would speak with you".

"On what matter?" Gwynora asked flatly. Gwenllian found the other girl's eyes and held them for a few moments.

"Dindraine," was her reply, and then there was silence. When Gwynora finally spoke, her voice was a tired whisper. Somehow, Gwenllian already knew what she would say.

"She could save her. Your mistress' life for mine."

"How?"

"When Lady Angharad first fell ill, an old man came to the castle, determined to speak with my aunt. I know not who he was or where he was from, he would not say. But there was

something about him, such innocence yet such wisdom, clear in his eyes. When he looked at me I knew he was incapable of telling a lie. That I have found in none other. So I took him to my aunt who refused to speak with him, such was his ragged appearance, almost beggar like. How could a man so beneath her possibly have any thing of importance for her? But he talked to me and I listened, and I believed."

Gwenllian could hear the utter honesty in her voice, almost desperate, she thought, and why should she not be? Her aunt was dying. "What was it that he told you, Gwynora? I do not see how this involves Lady Dindraine."

"I am coming to that, be patient." Gwenllian let that pass with an indignant look. "He talked of a maiden who would come, seeking shelter for the night. One pure and chaste. The only cure for my aunt's malady is a dish of her blood, given freely and without doubt..." Here Gwynora paused. There was no need for her to continue.

"You believe Dindraine is that maiden?"

"Don't you?"

Gwenllian dared not answer, she would not allow herself to even think of the possibility.

“She’ll not do it. How can you be so certain she is this miracle cure you talk of? What if you drain her of her blood and then realise you are wrong? What then?” Gwenllian could not hide the fury that slurred her voice without even knowing why. “Dindraine can not save your mistress any more than you can, surely you believe that?” It was her turn for desperation.

Gwynora merely looked at her. Her gaze intense and unwavering which Gwenllian could not avoid. She could see the truth, and it tore at her, ripping her to shreds. “No.” She whispered, “Please do not ask this of her...please?”

“It is not only my aunt who is diseased. You have ridden through these lands, seen the ruin, tasted the rancour in the air. The whole of Caerleon is plagued, the very earth decaying. You cannot deny that.” Gwenllian know she could not. “Soon this will be a wasteland with less life than a grave yard, no doubt even the tombstones will crumble into dust.” Gwynora added with a laugh. It held no humour however, but had an odd brittle ring to it like echoes of shattering glass. Gwenllian could bear no more. Sinking to her knees, she wept.

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Strangely enough Gwenllian could clearly remembered the food that night, the first substantial meal they had shared in weeks, and the last. Having shed tears with Gwynora, Gwenllian was prepared to side step her dislike of the girl, go as far as to help make ready the feast. Fresh rushes were spread about and the trestle tables draped in white linen. Roast venison, quails in spice, fried apple fritters, roast peacock with the bones painstakingly strutted and skin and feathers refitted to give the illusion of life, pike stuffed with chestnuts and spiced pears. The dishes were spread across the tables, such as Gwenllian had never seen before. As the guests dined the musicians strolled about, filling the hall with the music of harps and gittern, flute and viol. The extravagance of the feast was almost a defiance, proving the disease in the air had not fully consumed Caerleon, not yet.

Gwenllian watched as brother and sister satisfied their appetites, the atmosphere almost sufficient to suppress the acknowledgment of death in their presence. Gwynora had indeed played her role as hostess to the utmost; Gwenllian doubted even Dindraine's' ability to out do this effort, though

with grudging admiration only. Aware of what Gwynora would soon ask of her mistress, Gwenllian could never admit true respect.

Dindraine sat by her brother, clad in a deep purple gown, set off by a surcoat of lavender fretted with seed pearls. Seeing her thus, Gwenllian could understand why Gwynora believed she could hold the cure to the chatelaine's malady. Dindraine was young and beautiful, her eyes glittering as Perceval sent her into fresh fits of giggles, so innocent and trusting. Though bemused by their bantering, Gwenllian was also saddened. She knew her mistress would not hesitate to risk her life for Lady Angharad and Caerleon. More than that, she would feel it her duty, just as Perceval would sacrifice his for the Holy Grail. Gwenllian's heart cried out in outrage, anger and grief that one so young should be the victim of a senseless cruel waste.

Perceval glanced across the hall at her, and it was then that Gwenllian blinked back a fresh flood of tears. He studied her face, perhaps searching, perhaps not, his face a mask, concealing. Gwenllian did not know what he felt for her but what ever it was, it would come to naught. It did not stop her,

however, from catching her breath as his gaze met hers, nor the stab of disappointment as he looked away. From the corner of her eye Gwenllian heeded Gwynora's approach to the dais. Her heart sinking, Gwenllian knew what was about to take place, she had heard it just hours ago, had no wish to do so again. Inconspicuously, she slipped from the hall.

She was not sure how long she had been gone for, not exactly sure where she had gone even, but as she listened at the door, there were a few seconds of silence, then pandemonium. A reel of explosive oaths battered Gwenllian's ears as she opened the door. Perceval's tone was incredulous, that of a man suggesting a tactic he'd already dismissed as ludicrous. "Is this some sort of jest?" She heard him say. There was disbelief in his voice, but also the first flames of a white hot rage. And that was all. There was silence once again. So quickly had Perceval gained his composure one could doubt he had slipped at all. The scene which Gwenllian entered was the antithesis of that which she had left. Dindraine and Perceval sat close as before, but were worlds apart. On Dindraine's face was an expression of such reverence and exhilaration that Gwenllian almost congratulated herself on her correct

anticipation.

Perceval, however, was a complete surprise. While he had managed to regain control of his tongue, the raw emotion betrayed in his eyes was as alien to her as the ocean was to the desert. Such exhaustion and pain showed now in his face that Gwennlian could almost believe he was bleeding from a hidden wound. He looked for a long time into Gwennlian's stricken face, for the first time she knew Perceval needed her. She knew he would not try to stop his sister from carrying out what could possibly be the last hope of a dying woman, but she also recognised the heart ache that parting from Dindraine could cause him.

Perceval held out his hand and she came to him. His hand covering hers and the beseeching depth in his eyes was enough to cause her to forget all but the here and now, and the man to whose hand she clung. Then once again he lowered his gaze and the moment passed, letting his hand drop to his side, no doubt searching for the comfort of a steel blade. That was all Perceval believed he could truly trust and she would never be able to take its place.

The whining of the hinged door jarred all three from their personal reveries, realising Gwynora had left the room. Gwenllian had not even noticed her presence, so bewildered was she by Perceval's uncharacteristic display of affection. As far as he was concerned though, it may as well never have occurred, for he had refocused his attention on his sister, Gwenllian forgotten.

"You intend to go though with this?" It was not really a question, Perceval already knew the answer. He stood so abruptly that the chair he had been seated on toppled backwards, clattering to the stone floor. Gwenllian moved to right it, but the menacing glare he shot her froze her steps. She retreated to the safety of the corner instead.

Hands clasped behind his back, as he always did when his mind was preoccupied, Perceval stared pensively into the fire. It offered few answers however, indeed the flames began to splutter and choke as if reflecting his mood. Dindraine crossed the room, slipping her arm through his, she rested her cheek on his shoulder. The firelight danced upon the contrast of their hair, hers a rich black mingling with his ruddy crown. Dindraine closed her eyes and Gwenllian glimpsed a slight

tremble of her lips.

"I have to," was all she said. Perceval brushed the stray strands of hair away from her eyes with a gentle finger. "I know," he replied. And he did, would do the same if it were asked of him. The silence that followed was personal, each understanding the other, and Gwenllian felt like an intruder peering in through an open window which someone had carelessly left ajar.

Watching the two of them, Gwenllian tried to picture life without Dindraine, and failed. She would survive of course, but Gwenllian had no plans that did not involve Dindraine and her brother, nowhere to go, nothing to fall back on. It was not certain, Gwenllian reminded herself, that taking a dish full of Dindraine's blood would be fatal, but Dindraine was preparing herself for the worst. So too was Perceval. To think, just that morning, Perceval, Dindraine and Gwenllian were firmly set on the path for the Holy Grail, and now this. If they had just camped by the roadside, or stayed an extra day in Abergele, perhaps this could have been avoided? It was fruitless to question Fate, Gwenllian knew that, but she needed a reason, needed someone to blame, someone to centre her frustration

on, someone to care.

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There was only the faintest sliver of moon over Caerleon by the time Dindraine's blood began to flow, caught by an impossibly large basin of heavy gold. Dindraine had been unwilling to wait for the new day before beginning the process, was afraid she would lose her nerve and be unable to follow through with her promise. So it was that she lay calmly, almost lost in the vastness of the bed, Perceval kneeling at her side. The maids had protested at that, before his dark scowl quickly silenced them. Dindraine appeared dignified and serene, but Gwenllian noticed her free hand clench to a fist every now and then, betraying her inner fear. Her eyes filtered from face to face, concentrating on anything but the blood seeping from her arm. Despite her nerves, Dindraine seemed in no physical danger as yet, though the dish was not even half full.

The maids hovered around the bed, sending frequent withering looks Perceval's way. He ignored them, no fussy old nurse could persuade him to leave his sister's side, not now. Gwenllian could see the concern in his eyes. He kept them

averted from Dindraine's, however, not trusting his ability to suppress his worry should her eyes catch his.

As Dindraine's blood drained away, so too did the night. It was not until the first attempts of the sun to rouse the countryside appeared in the sky that Dindraine showed signs of distress. Her breathing had become laboured, slow and painful, as though demanding strength she no longer possessed. The dish beneath her arm was near full now, but with alarm Gwennlian noticed the blood flow was rapidly increasing, almost bubbling as it tumbled from her vein. When a harsh cry of pain escaped his sister's clenched jaw, Perceval could sit and watch no longer. "Enough," he whispered. The nurses seemed to not have heard him for they paid his dangerously quiet tone no heed. Perceval stared at them in disbelief. "Enough!" he roared, leaping to his feet. His presence filled the room, the tall knight's harrowing sleep-starved gaze froze the maids, who gaped at him in fearful awe. "You must staunch the blood flow now, if she loses any more, she'll not make it past sunrise. You know she'll not. Please, stop now." The last was almost a plea, his words heavy with desperation. The maids could do nothing but obey, not daring to test his precarious composure with protests. Besides, the dish was nearly full to the rim, surely

that would be sufficient.

As they tightly wound bandage after bandage around Dindraine's limp arm, her eyes flickered, giving Gwenllian a glimpse of glazed greenish eyes, her pupils shrunk to slits. Gwenllian tried to sponge her face with a damp cloth, but Dindraine brushed her away irritably. Her voice thick with fever and fatigue, she began calling Perceval's name, over and over, refusing to be quieted till she felt his hands enclose over hers. "Brother," she whispered urgently, "do not leave me here. When I die..." Perceval would have protested if she had not hurried on, the words rushing from her mouth as she staved off delirium. "When I die, I know I shall, do not bury me here, please, I can not stay here." A silent tear slipped from her brother's tortured eyes and Gwenllian longed to comfort him. She stayed where she was however, and Dindraine continued. "You must place my body in a boat at the next haven and let me go wherever the sea will take me. You are bound for Sarras, dear brother, and it is there that I shall meet you, where I wish my final resting place to be. I believe you will find the Holy Grail, Perceval, and then you will return to Sarras where we may be together once more. Please Perceval, you must listen to me, promise me...please?" Her voice drifted off

to a mere breath but the pleading in her eyes held Perceval captive. Through tears, he gave her his word.

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They were the last intelligible thoughts to escape Dindraine's lips. Her temperature rose rapidly, consuming her body in a lethal heat. Gwenllian did all she could to put her mistress at ease. Hot poultices were placed over her inflamed arm and she tried to lower Dindraine's fever with cold compresses and sage, but Perceval's bedside vigil had become a death watch. A physician was sent for who he took her weak, racing pulse, noted her pallor, her hot, dry skin and her laboured breathing, then left, unable to offer any hope. Gwenllian sought desperately to do something to help the fragile figure in the bed. She tugged to disentangle Dindraine's limp weight from the constricting snarl of the bedclothes. But that was all she could do.

Perceval withdrew into a numb silence, his face a mask unreadable even to Gwenllian. Dindraine drifted in and out of delirium, mumbling incoherently, breaking out in sweats and her breathing burdened now by intermittent coughing spells.

Her gaze once settled on Gwenllian, but she could find no recognition in the depths of those fever-bright, hollowed eyes.

Settling down beside his sister, Perceval gently lifted her off the pillows, took her into his arms. Her head lolled against his chest; her breath hot upon his hand, as ragged and shallow as her pulse. After a time, he wept.

As Dindraine drew her last breath, the sun began to spread its ruddy glow in the distance. The new day dawning on an end. Perceval was alone with his sister, sitting very still in a chair by the bed. He did not look up as Gwenllian left the chamber. He showed no emotion at all.

Gwenllian retreated only as far as the corridor. The coldness on Perceval's face struck at her heart and she jammed her fist up against her mouth, bit down upon her knuckles to keep from crying out. Her throat closed up, her chest heaved and so great was her grief that she honestly thought she might die of it. Dindraine was gone and Perceval would have no use for her now. Once again she was alone in the world. The fatigue of a sleepless night began to sink in and Gwenllian sought the comfort of her bed. Sleep, however, was a long time coming.

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Gwenllian had worn herself out with crying that night, and she roused slowly, her eyes puffy and red, to an environment she did not recognise, so altered was it. Unlike the disease ridden castle they had entered the night before, choked with the onslaught of death, the scene which met her sleepy eyes was teeming with new life. Servants hurried along the corridors, bright colours, sunlight and jubilant flowers adorned the hall. The sombre atmosphere of the previous night was replaced with laughter and rejoicing. The chatelaine had awoken, indeed was cured of her malady, and so too was Caerleon. The bell tolling in the bailey was spreading the news far and wide. Dindraine, Gwenllian thought, would be exulting if she could see the rewards of her sacrifice. For the first time since approaching Caerleon, Gwenllian could truly smile.

Then she saw Perceval cross the hall towards her, and she almost stumbled. The glass of cider in her hand splashed onto the skirt of her gown. Even he seemed different, care-free and refreshed, as though his sister's final departure had filled him with a sense of peace. What could he possibly have to say

to her? It could only be goodbye, and that was the last thing she wished to hear. Perceval smiled at her, just scant seconds before she flung the contents of her cider cup at him.

Perceval recoiled with an astonished oath. For a stunned moment, neither of them moved, not even Gwenllian, who seemed shocked herself by what she had done. But then she threw the goblet into the rushes at Perceval's feet, spun round and began to walk swiftly away. This jerked Perceval out of his disbelieving daze. "Gwenllian, wait!" She did not look back and within a few steps she was running, fleeing into the stables with Perceval in close pursuit.

"Gwenllian!" Perceval filled the doorway, blocking out the light. He sounded out of breath, perplexed, almost angry. Gwenllian squeezed her hands together to still the trembling. She had no right to have acted so, but she did not care anymore. Gwenllian realised she loved Perceval and that was all she could focus on.

"Go away!" she said, "I have nothing to say to you."

"Yes you do! You owe me an explanation, if not an apology, and I mean to have it".

"You'll have a long wait then!" Gwenllian could not believe the words coming from her mouth. They glared at each

other. Perceval swung round and slammed the door shut. She knew there was another door, one leading out into the stable yard. By the time Perceval had turned towards her again, she was already in flight. Ignoring Perceval's shouts, she raced for the rear of the stable. As fast as she was, Perceval was quicker. He overtook her before she could reach the door and grabbed her arm. Whirling, she tried to pull free, but lost her balance, lurched against Perceval and they both went sprawling over a bale of hay, tumbling down into the straw of the nearest stall.

Perceval caught his breath first. "Are you all right Gwenllian?" Not trusting her voice, she nodded, wishing she could lie there forever in the sheltering gloom, never have to face any one ever again. But Perceval was already straightening himself up. "At least," he said, "you had the foresight to fall into a stall without a horse in it."

To Gwenllian's dismay, he was beginning to sound amused. When she did not move, Perceval reached over, put his arm around her shoulders and gently drew her up beside him. She had lost her veil in their struggle and her hair was tumbling down her shoulders in disarray, tickling the back of

his hand. He had never seen it wild and loose like this, started to brush it away from her face, but stopped just before his fingers touched her skin, for that seemed suddenly too intimate a gesture. "I do not know what I did to make you so vexed with me, I'd not hurt you for the world, Gwenllian, I swear. Tell me so I may make it right."

Gwenllian drew a constricting breath and suddenly she was angry again. Angry with herself, a servant daring to approach a knight, but more so with Perceval, whose blue eyes were blinder than any bat's.

"I was willing to wait for you," she said in a trembling voice, "to wait as long as it took for you to see that I was not just a servant, but a woman grown. I was so sure you would, so sure..." Tears had begun to well in the corner of her eyes, slowly spilling down her cheeks. Perceval wiped them away with his fingers. Turning her hand over, he pressed a kiss into her palm. It was a while before he finally spoke, his voice soothing. "I do care for you Gwenllian, more than I have been willing to admit. But I am not for you, lass, not for any woman, you know that." Gwenllian did, and it hurt. "My life is my quest. Until I seek out the Holy Grail, hold it in my hands, I can not rest. It would not be fair to ask you to wait, nor was it fair

either to bring Dindraine with me. The road is no fit place for a woman. You deserve so much more, Gwenllian, more than I could possibly give you." He paused there, before adding with quiet compelling conviction, "I think you understand that, understand that we belong to different worlds."

Leaning against his arm now, Gwenllian wished fervently that they would never have to move. Whilst he spoke he had been gently stroking her hair, could feel that at her temples were damp from crying. The stricken look on her face caught at his heart, but there was nothing else he could say.

"Take me with you, Perceval. Let me travel with you?" Gwenllian knew she was asking the impossible, knew he would not allow her to stay with him, not now. Gwenllian did, however, notice the regretful look on his face. "I can not, lass, you know I can not, would not be fair on you."

"But what am I to do now? I have no where to go without Dindraine." She was almost begging.

"Not so. There is something I would have you do." Perceval seemed almost hesitant, but he continued all the same. "I will be sending my sister's body to Sarras, to be buried according to her wishes. A ship will escort her there, but I need you to go too. Meet the ship when it arrives, make sure

she is well cared for. Dindraine would want you there.” He paused, searching Gwenllian’s face for an answer. “Would you do that Gwenllian...for me?” So intense was the light in his eyes right then, that there was no way Gwenllian could refuse, even if she wanted to.

“Yes,” she replied, her voice husky. It was all she needed to say and the look he gave her, so full of gratitude and pride and love, was all the reward she needed. Her answer echoed throughout the stables, final and resolute, solidifying her departure from Perceval. She could not take it back, not even sure she wanted to. The Holy City of Sarras seemed far way, hardly even real in her mind, but it would be her final destination, all she had left of Perceval.

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Reflection Statement

“To make a delectable tune to your ear, history goes masking as fable” (Master Robert Wace, Roman de Brut, 1155AD). It is this which I have attempted to achieve via my major work. Though the truth of the Arthurian legends “has turned to fable and...idle song” it can not be denied that there are indeed historical elements in their origins. In the form of a short story, I have drawn upon this historical background in order to form the guidelines between which I have created a fictional representation of Arthurian life.

In my story I wished to present the characters of these legends not merely as historical figures but as real people, with personalities, emotions and flaws to which the reader may relate. Through the eyes of Gwenllian, I have tried to portray Sir Perceval as such. As a knight he does indeed possess the bravery and chivalry expected, but he battles with temptations and emotions as readily as the common man.

Research was necessary to gain an understanding not only of Perceval's achievements, but also of the period. I explored the customs and culture, including common names, various castles, beliefs regarding the Holy Grail, the types of food eaten and the medical practises of the time, in order to base my story as accurately as possible.

Originally I thought to write from the perspective of Perceval himself and focus on the significant events of his life. After some reflection however, the viewpoint of a woman proved far easier and Gwenllian provided a means by which I could present the man behind the suit of armour to the reader. So too did I shift the subject of my story from Perceval's quest for the Holy Grail to the plight of his sister. The Holy Grail is a periodical concern, alien to today's society, which, unless the reader had previous knowledge on the subject, is difficult to understand. Whereas, dealing with death, loss, grief, separation and love is a universal issue. By focusing on these common human emotions, I hope to delineate to the reader that though these are indeed historical figures; Gwenllian, Perceval and Dintraine are not so different to themselves.

The myth on which I based my story was found in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D' Arthur* (edited by John Matthews, 2000). Through the perspective of Gwenllian, a fictional character not mentioned in the myth, I was able to present this legend with a more personal and real approach.

My intended audience is females, ranging in age from approximately fifteen to twenty. By focusing on the emotional rather than the historical elements of the myth, readers without knowledge of the period may still be able to relate to the characters.

I chose the medium of the short story in order that I may present in detail the action of only one night. In keeping with the convention of the short story I have minimised the number of characters, the setting and the time over which the action takes place.

With regards to the final product, there are several areas that perhaps may have been improved upon. For instance, the relationship between Perceval and Gwenllian and Dindraine Gwenllian could have been further developed to explain Gwenllian's reaction to Dindraine's demise. Also, the

healing of the chatelaine and of Caerleon after Dindraine's sacrifice would have benefited with further attention.

From the beginning of my research to the conclusion of the final product, it is clear that my intent regarding my story varied considerably. This was the result of further research into the exploits of Perceval. It was his relationship with his sister, which appealed to me most, as opposed to his quest for the Holy Grail. I also found that writing about his temptations in the case of Gwenllian would clearly delineate the strength of character, discipline and determination in his personality, which I wished to portray.

Via my short story I was able to explore my interests in Arthurian legends and hopefully to evoke a likewise response in the reader.