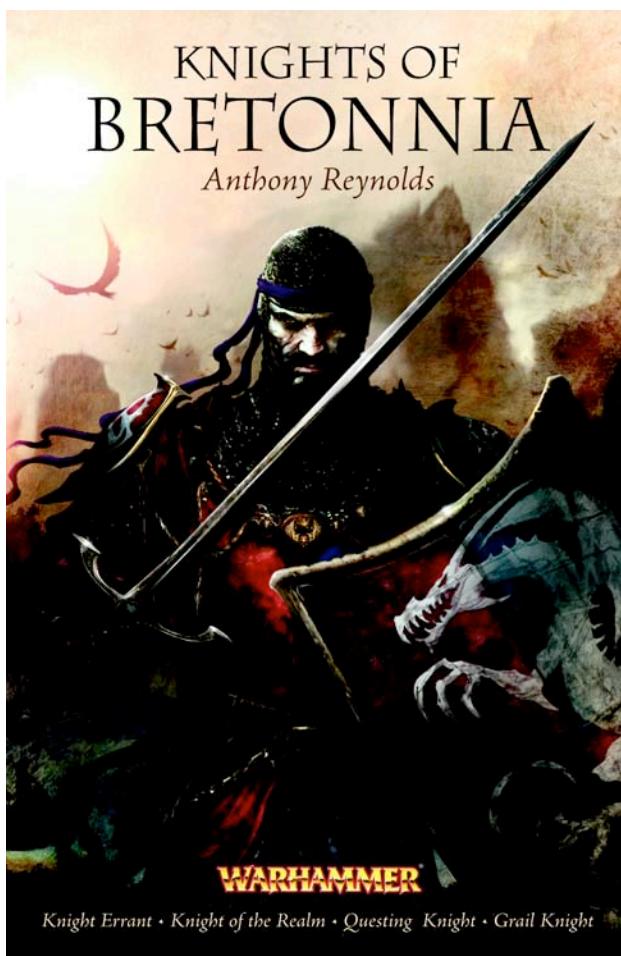




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KNIGHTS OF BRETONNIA

Anthony Reynolds

WARHAMMER

Knight Errant • Knight of the Realm • Questing Knight • Grail Knight

KNIGHTS OF BRETONNIA

An omnibus of Warhammer novels

By Anthony Reynolds

When young noble Calard starts upon the path to knighthood, he soon discovers the darkness hidden within his homeland and the price that must be paid by those seeking the holiest of honours – the title of Grail Knight. Accompanied by his faithful manservant Chlod, he must face vampires, wyverns, Chaos warriors and goblins, and each battle brings him one step closer to becoming the legend he seeks to be.

Knights of Bretonnia collects the novels Knight Errant and Knight of the Realm, plus two new novellas, Questing Knight and Grail Knight, completing the saga of Calard from his knightly training to his most epic of victories.

About the Author

After finishing university Anthony Reynolds set sail from his homeland Australia and ventured forth to foreign climes. He ended up settling in the UK, and managed to blag his way into Games Workshop's hallowed design studio. There he worked for four years as a games developer and two years as part of the management team. He now resides back in his hometown of Sydney, overlooking the beach and enjoying the sun and the surf, though he finds that to capture the true darkness and horror of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 he has taken to writing in what could be described as a darkened cave.

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Taken from *Knight Errant*:

CHLOD BLINKED THE sleep out of his eyes and sat up. He was beneath a rotting wagon, his companions sprawled around him, clustered together for warmth under the damp blanket they shared.

He looked around the small clearing, seeing it in daylight for the first time, for they had hauled the wagon here the previous evening. A low fog hugged the ground, and long stems of grass glistened with the heavy morning dew.

Chlod grinned as he pulled a small, squirming shape from within a deep pocket. Lifting it to his misshapen face, he smiled as the whiskers of the scrawny black rat twitched in the cold air.

Producing a small piece of stale biscuit from his pocket, Chlod took a bite before offering the crumbling remains to the rat. It eagerly grabbed the food in its paws, and began gnawing at it frantically. Chlod grinned again.

‘You feeding that damn rat again?’ said a muffled voice from beneath the blanket.

Chlod held the half-starved creature protectively to his chest.

‘He’s mine,’ he grunted, too loudly. ‘There is enough food.’

Muffled protests came from under the blankets as Chlod’s harsh voice disturbed the others’ slumber.

He made a face in the direction of the voices, and turned his attention back to the rat. It had finished its meal and its head was lifted high, nose twitching as it sought more sustenance, making Chlod grin once again. He twitched his own nose in imitation, puckering his lips and showing his crooked, yellow teeth. He extended one stubby, dirty finger to the animal, and it gripped his short-bitten nail, sniffing. Finding nothing edible, it wriggled free of Chlod’s grasp and leapt from his hands. He frowned, and snatched at it, but it was quick, and burrowed beneath the dank blanket. Chlod’s pink, slug-like tongue emerged from the corner of his mouth as he struggled to grab it.

There was an irritated groan at the sudden movement, and an elbow jabbed into Chlod’s ribs, making him scowl darkly. He balled his thick sausage-fingers into a fist and thudded a punch into the shape beside him in retaliation, which was met with more protests from the others as they woke. They shifted their positions, and pulled the blankets tightly around them against the cold.

Having regained his hold on the rat, Chlod shoved it roughly back into the deep pocket on his stained tunic front, and crawled awkwardly out from the tangle of bodies. Curses and groans emerged from under the blanket as he made his ungainly progress out from beneath the rotting wagon.

Blinking against the dull pre-dawn light, Chlod blew out a long breath that fogged the air in front of his face.

He shoved a hand down the front of his patchwork trousers and scratched at the lice in his nether regions.

He stamped his feet against the icy cold. A thick mist surrounded him on all sides, so that he could see barely ten yards. Ghost-like trees loomed like wraiths through the wet fog, and Chlod limped over to check on Beatrice.

‘How are you this fine morning, my beauty?’ he grunted as he approached Beatrice. She lifted her heavy head in response, her beady eyes fixing on the approaching peasant. Seeing nothing that interested her, her head slumped back down into the wet earth.

Chlod bent down and scratched her between the ears. She endured his attention, studiously ignoring him. The swine wore the peasant group’s best blanket over her back, and Chlod gave her one final, solid pat before rising once more.

He limped towards the still-smouldering fire pit, over which was spitted the remains of the previous night’s feast. Chlod’s belly was fuller than he could ever remember, and he patted it contentedly. Life was good, he decided.

He opened up the flap of his trousers and sighed contentedly as he emptied his bladder onto the smouldering ash. Steam rose from the thick yellow stream, and the fire pit hissed. Chlod hummed tunelessly and passed wind loudly.

He froze, the tune dying on his lips as he heard the jangle of a horse’s bit behind him. He spun around, his uneven eyes bulging in their sockets as he focused on a pair of knights sitting astride massive warhorses. He swallowed heavily, his heart lurching, as his eyes flicked from one to the other, like a cornered animal.

Fully armoured in gleaming plate, the knights stared down at him disdainfully. Neither wore helmets, and a

flash of envy and awe overcame him as he saw that their youthful faces were free of disfigurement and their shoulder-length hair was free of tangles or burrs. One, the taller of the pair, had hair the colour of dried wheat; the other had hair as dark as pitch, and wore a serious, grim expression. Neither looked as though they had seen more than twenty winters.

Both wore brightly coloured shields upon their left arms, proudly displaying their heraldry and colours. The caparisons of their steeds also bore their heraldic colours, and each of the knights held a lance upright in their gauntleted right hands.

Chlod saw that there was someone else with the pair of knights, a hunched peasant with a squint, who was trying to hide behind the nobles. Chlod focused on the man, who lowered his head, pulling his hood down low under the scrutiny. Chlod's eyes narrowed.

'Nastor, you squint-eyed bastard,' spat Chlod. 'You sold us out.'

'Silence,' snapped the fair-haired knight, who was bedecked in black and red. His voice was cultured and noble, each word clearly enunciated, and far from the crude accents of the lower classes. 'And make yourself presentable!'

Chlod glanced down and realised that his trousers were still undone. Hurriedly, he did himself up again.

The fair-haired knight nudged his steed, and the warhorse stepped obediently forward. Chlod flicked a glance towards the wagon where the remainder of the peasant band slumbered, unaware of the danger they were all in.

The knight moved his warhorse towards Chlod, and he instinctively edged backwards. The beast was massive, powerful muscles rippling up its legs and chest, and he

flinched as it snorted loudly. He had never been so close to a noble mount, and he kept his arms stiffly at his side. For a lowborn to touch a knight's warhorse unbidden was a punishable offence, and he wanted to keep his hands.

'Lower your gaze, wretch,' snarled the knight. Chlod dropped his eyes, feeling the hot breath of the immense horse on his face. 'Lower,' said the knight, and Chlod prostrated himself on the ground, pushing his face into the mud. This was the end, he thought.

The other knight then spoke, his voice loud enough to carry across the clearing.

'I am Calard of Garamont,' he said. 'First born son and heir of Lutheure of Garamont, Castellan of Bastonne.'

Chlod pushed his face deeper into the mud.

'And you peasants are trespassing on Garamont land.'

CALARD'S FACE WAS dark as he surveyed the effect of his words. Panicked voices rose from beneath the rotting wagon, accompanied by frantic scabbling. A dull wooden thump was followed by a curse, as one of the peasants sat up too quickly and struck his head. A putrid, dank blanket was thrown aside, and Calard's nose wrinkled in disgust as he watched the wretched peasant outlaws begin to crawl out from beneath their crude shelter, their eyes wide with fear.

His brother, Bertelis, gave a snort of disbelief.

'By the Lady, look at the number of them,' he said, 'huddled together under there like vermin.'

Calard had to agree with his half-brother. The peasants must have been practically sleeping on top of each other to have all sheltered beneath the wagon. They stood up, glancing nervously at each other, scratching themselves.

They truly were a pathetic-looking bunch of individuals. Encrusted with filth, they were uniformly scrawny, malformed and wretched. Several had pronounced limps and twisted legs, while others had grotesque protruding foreheads, lazy eyes, and teeth that stuck out at all angles from lips blackened with dirt. As far as Calard could make out, at least one of their number was a woman, though she was no less filthy than the others. The peasants squinted around them with slack-jawed nervousness.

Calard's gaze swept around the makeshift encampment, and fell on the blackened, skeletal carcass spitted over the fire-pit. It was clearly the remains of a young deer, which it was illegal for a peasant to hunt and kill, let alone eat. He sighed, and turned back towards the peasant rabble.

'You are illegally encamped on Garamont lands, and are accused of poaching Castellan Garamont's stock. The proof of this claim is there in front of me. More than this, you are accused of avoiding taxes levied by the Marquis Carlemont, a vassal of Lord Garamont. It is also claimed that one of your number killed a yeoman of the marquis in cold blood and stole his truffle swine. As such, you are outlawed, and will be accompanied to Castle Garamont, where you will face the penalty for such crimes.'

Several of the peasants broke into tears at the pronouncement, while others dropped to their knees. They all knew that the pronouncement was as good as a death sentence. Shouts of protest and despair erupted from coarse throats. A scuffle erupted, and two of the peasants fell on another, grabbing him forcefully.

'It was Benno, here, milord what done the yeoman in! It was him! We done nothin'!'

Bertelis, who had circled around behind the wagon, gave a derisive snort, and answered before Calard could respond.

‘Did he force you to flee the service of your lord? Did he force you to poach, and eat of Lord Garamont’s venison? No, I think not. You will all hang.’

‘Have mercy, young lords!’ one of the peasants cried, before collapsing, sobbing, into the mud.

‘Warden! Take them into your custody,’ Calard ordered.

A small regiment of peasant men-at-arms walked out of the mist, carrying tall shields painted in the red and yellow of the Castellan of Garamont, his father. They carried simple staves, topped with curved blades and hooks. One of them held an old sword proudly in his hand, and nodded his head at the young knight’s command. The men-at-arms began trudging towards the peasants. Lowborn themselves, the men-at-arms were only a little less pathetic in appearance than the outlaws. They were peasants too, after all, thought Calard.

‘You there!’ shouted Bertelis, seeing movement beneath the wagon. His warhorse snorted and stamped its hooves, sensing the tension in its young rider. ‘Come out now!’

Calard stood in the stirrups, trying to see what was happening. There was a flash of movement, and Bertelis’s steed reared. A sharp crack resounded as the flailing hooves connected, and a body fell heavily to the ground. Shouting erupted anew from the peasants, and they broke into movement.

‘Hold!’ shouted Calard, his young voice full of authority. ‘Any man that runs will be assumed guilty and cut down! Warden! Take them!’

The men-at-arms tried to restore order, pushing several of the peasants roughly to their knees with the butts of their polearms.

‘They’ve killed Odulf!’ shouted one filthy man, who had clumps of hair missing from his head. He slammed his fist into the face of one of the Garamont soldiers, and Calard cursed. Others cried out, either in protest or fear, and Calard could hear Bertelis swearing.

‘Stupid whoreson!’ shouted Bertelis. ‘The vermin came at me!’ His voice sounded incredulous.

A peasant outlaw grabbed one of the men-at-arms’ weapons, struggling against him. At a barked order from their warden, the other soldiers began laying about them with impunity, knocking peasants down into the mud with fierce blows. Calard swore again, and muscled his massive warhorse into the fray. He slammed the butt of his lance onto the head of one struggling peasant, and the man collapsed unconscious into the mud. Benno, the man accused by his comrades of murdering the yeoman, broke free of the restraining grip on him and bolted for the trees.

Kicking his spurs into the side of his horse, Calard broke free of the scuffle in pursuit, forcing men to leap out of his way, lest they be trampled. Hooves pounded up the muddy ground as he closed quickly on Benno. Calard thundered past him and pulled his steed sharply into his path. Benno, breathing hard, halted, eyeing the knight warily, and holding his hands up in front of him.

‘I warned you not to run,’ Calard said, glowering with outrage, ‘but I wish to see no more blood spilt here today. Get back with the others before I change my mind,’ Calard said, indicating sharply with his beardless chin. The man’s shoulders slumped, and he turned back to where the men-at-arms were finally restoring order.

A flicker of movement attracted Calard's attention, and he saw a roughly clothed shape clamber atop the rotting wagon, a bow in his hands.

"Ware the wagon!" he shouted, even as the man drew back the bowstring, an arrow nocked. Calard could not believe what he was seeing; for a peasant to draw arms against a noble or one of his retainers was almost beyond comprehension.

Calard kicked his horse forward, shouting. The bowman spun around at Calard's cry, his bow swinging in the young knight's direction, and loosed his arrow.

It slammed into Calard's shoulder, and he reeled in his saddle. It felt like he had been kicked by a stallion, but he did not fall. He felt no pain, merely the shock of the impact, and he looked down incredulously at the shaft of the arrow protruding from the hole it had punched in his armour.

The bowman lowered his weapon, his mouth gaping wide as he registered the foolish, hasty act that had certainly doomed him. There was a shout of outrage and disbelief from Bertelis and the men-at-arms. The bowman half-jumped, half-fell from his position on the wagon, and began racing away towards the mist shrouded trees, panic lending him speed.

CHLOD LIFTED HIS face out of the mud, and his eyes widened as he saw the arrow protruding from the knight's shoulder. They had done it now. A peasant attacking a knight! Now, they were certain to hang.

Slowly, so as not to draw attention to himself, he began to crawl away through the wet earth, elbow over elbow. He glanced behind him, expecting someone to see him escaping at any moment, and shout out.

Once at a distance he judged safe, he rose to his feet and began running low, as fast as his clubfoot would allow him, loping off into the trees, his heart pounding.

He shoved a hand into the deep pocket on his jerkin, hoping that he had not crushed his rat. It bit him hard, and he jerked his hand back out, wincing.

With a final glance behind him, Chlod disappeared into the mist.

Taken from *Knight of the Realm*:

THE SILVER MOON of Mannslieb was high overhead when Calard and his companions finally crested a rise and saw the tournament camp laid out before them. The night was bitterly cold as winter drew in, but the sounds of laughter and music, and the smell of roasting venison and boar warmed their spirits.

They had crossed over the border of Artois the previous evening, passing into the lands of Lyonesse, on the north-western coast of Bretonnia. They had ridden through the night, stopping only briefly for a few hours rest before pushing on. The previous night had been the same, and everyone was saddle-weary and drained. Still, they were here now, and the tournament proper was not due to commence until first light the next morn.

Tournaments were encouraged by king and duke in times of relative peace as a means of keeping the knights of Bretonnia battle-ready and their skills sharp. While the southern lands of Carcassone and Brionne were currently at war, besieged by a plague of verminous skaven emerging from beneath the Vaults, and the north of Quenelles was being subjected to bloody attacks from a clan of ogres descending from the Massif Orcals, much of Bretonnia was currently untouched by war on any scale large enough for the call to reach L'Anguille, Lyonesse or Artois, hence this tourney.

Many of the nobles present would have arrived a week ago or more – or at least sent their servants ahead of them, in order to claim the best site for their tents – and though there would already have been countless individual bouts, jousts and many drunken nights of

feasting, it was for tomorrow's event that the gathering had met. It was the highlight of the week's entertainment, and judging from the number of tents pitched across the lowlands, it would be one of particularly impressive scale.

Calard and his entourage rode down towards the jubilant encampment, scanning the pennants flying atop the tents for those of friends and relatives. While the vast majority of knights present were from Lyonesse, Artois and L'Anguille – the place chosen for the tournament was near the border of all three lands, after all – there was on display heraldry proclaiming that some of the participants were from more distant lands: Gisoreux, Couronne, Bordeleaux and Montfort. There was even one knight from war-torn Carcassonne, far to the south.

'There,' said Bertelis, spying what it was they had all been looking for; heraldry declaring that other knights of Bastonne were present.

Calard and his entourage turned their steeds towards the Bastonnanian contingent, and he ordered his servants on ahead to find a suitable location to pitch their tents. The peasants were exhausted, for they had not even had the chance of rest that the knights had, busy as they were preparing food for their masters and taking care of their horses, but they knew better than to voice any resentment.

Without complaint, they kicked their heavy draught horses on ahead, laden with tents, foodstuffs, chests of clothes and anything else that their lords might need to make their lives more comfortable while away from home.

'Montcadas,' said Bertelis brightly, standing in the saddle to get a better view of the flapping heraldry.

Calard saw the Bastonnian baron's heraldry too, and he smiled. They had fought alongside the baron in the campaign in Bordeleaux two seasons past, when Calard and Bertelis, as knights errant, had ridden to Bordeleaux to engage a massive greenskin army. In the ensuing war, the Bretonnians became embroiled with a further enemy – the beastmen. During those bloody times, Montcadas had left an impression on both of the brothers. As fierce as a bear and almost as hirsute, Baron Montcadas had taken the young brothers under his wing, earning their respect and admiration.

The smile dropped from Calard's face as he saw a tent near the baron's; it was white and flew a pennant with a blood-red dragon motif in its centre.

'Looks like the vermin have come out for the tournament as well,' said Bertelis.

'Maloric,' spat Calard.

For generations there had been a blood feud between the Garamont and Sangasse families. Three years Calard's senior, Maloric was the young earl and heir of Sangasse, and had been his rival and enemy since birth. Calard and Maloric had fought alongside each other in the Bordeleaux campaign, though their antagonism had resulted in Gunthar's mortal injury, and despite Maloric's assistance in the defence of Castle Garamont against the horrific half-human beasts of the forest, the hatred between the two remained strong. If anything, it had intensified since Calard had inherited the mantle of castellan; Maloric had seen first-hand the twisted creature that had been Calard's brother, and had spread the word around the courts of both enemy and friend of the Garamonts' shame.

'Maybe in the tournament tomorrow I will have a chance to put the weasel on his arse,' said Bertelis.

‘I pray that one of us does,’ agreed Calard.

‘Come!’ said Tassilo. ‘Tis a night for revelry! For dance, for drink, and pretty faces!’

‘Never mind their faces,’ said Baldemund, ‘I’m more interested in what else they’ve got to offer.’

Long tables packed with feasting nobles were positioned at the centre of the encampment, surrounded by heaving pavilions. From within these vast tents came sounds of merriment – and the clash of swords.

‘We might not be too late to enter the duels,’ said Bertelis. ‘Care to enter, brother?’

‘You go,’ said Calard. ‘I’m going to try and find Montcadas. I haven’t seen him since...’

He didn’t need to finish the sentence; Bertelis knew of what he spoke. Calard turned in the saddle and flicked a gold coin towards Tassilo, who caught it deftly.

‘If the duels are not yet done, put this on my brother,’ Calard ordered. His cousin nodded.

‘Might enter myself,’ said Tassilo with a smile.

Calard flicked him another coin.

‘Put this on your opponent,’ he said with a smile.

While Bertelis and Tassilo moved off towards the largest of the pavilions, accompanied by a quartet of peasants to act as their squires, Calard and his other companions dismounted, handing their reins to waiting servants.

‘Make sure they are brushed down, fed and watered,’ said Calard, not even deigning to look at the peasants to whom he spoke. ‘The night is cold – see that they are well blanketed.’

‘Now to find Montcadas,’ he said. Succulent aromas reached his nose; he could smell roasting meat, as well as frying onion and garlic sauces, and his stomach grumbled loudly.

‘But first,’ he said, ‘let us eat.’

Hunger was not a sensation familiar to many Bretonnian nobles, and the three knights were salivating as they picked their way through the crowd.

‘GARAMONT!’ BOOMED A deep voice, and Calard looked up from his meal of stuffed quail and venison to see the heavy-set figure of Baron Montcadas marching towards him. The baron was shorter than Calard, but what he lacked in height he made up for in width. A patch bearing the fleur-de-lys covered his left eye, and vivid scars covered the left side of his face. A wide grin split his thick beard, and as Calard pushed himself upright, the baron swept him into a crushing embrace.

‘Good to see you, my boy!’ said Montcadas, releasing him and slapping him hard on the shoulder. By the rosy tint of the baron’s nose he guessed that the baron had been enjoying the vintages on offer.

‘It is good to see you too, baron,’ said Calard. ‘You know my cousins?’

The two knights bowed to the baron, who nodded his head in response, before turning his attention back on Calard.

‘A knight of the realm now, eh? And a castellan, no less.’

‘I’d have fallen in my first battle had it not been for you,’ said Calard.

‘Ah, don’t be daft, boy,’ said Montcadas, though Calard could tell that his words had pleased the baron.

Montcadas’s expression darkened, and he lowered his voice.

‘I was grieved to hear of the death of your father. A good man, Lutheure,’ he said. ‘I am sorry for your loss.’

Calard nodded his head and smiled his thanks.

Montcadas took a step back from him, casting a critical gaze over the young lord of Garamont.

‘You are not looking your best, boy,’ said Montcadas. ‘What’s Folcard been feeding you?’

‘I am not sleeping well,’ admitted Calard.

Montcadas regarded Calard thoughtfully.

‘There is a lot of pressure that comes with becoming the head of a noble family,’ said Montcadas in a low voice. ‘There is no shame in feeling out of your depth at first.’

‘Am I so transparent?’ replied Calard.

‘You’ve a good head on your shoulders. You’ll do fine,’ said Montcadas.

‘Were that it were so simple,’ said Calard.

‘Of course it is not as simple as that, but don’t make the mistake of trying to complicate things. You’re new to your role. You’ll make a few mistakes, but everyone does. Learn from them and don’t dwell on the past.’

‘I’ll try, baron,’ said Calard, and despite himself, he felt his mood lift for the first time in months.

‘The fates have not been kind to you of late, boy, and that’s the Lady’s truth. But it’s what you do under such circumstances that will be your making,’ said Montcadas, unusually serious. ‘Or your downfall,’ the baron added, shrugging. ‘It’s up to you now. But don’t forget that you have friends and allies on your side.’

‘I appreciate it, baron,’ said Calard.

He saw an attractive young lady moving through the crowd towards them, being led by the hand by a young boy, no more than six summers old. The boy was wearing an exquisite, miniature suit of armour. Seeing their approach, Montcadas smiled, his previous seriousness evaporating.

‘What you need is a wife,’ he said, his voice booming. ‘If you think running a realm is hard, try being married. It’ll put things in perspective. And speaking of which, allow me to introduce you to my sister’s youngest, the Lady Josephine.’

‘Uncle!’ she said in exasperation, shaking her head. Then she curtsied, gazing appraisingly at Calard for a moment before lowering her eyes as a good lady was taught.

‘My lady,’ said Calard, bowing.

‘Lord Calard,’ said Josephine, a smile in her self-assured voice, ‘it is my pleasure to introduce you to your second cousin once removed, young Sir Orlando of Bordeleaux.’

Calard looked down at the boy, then towards Montcadas questioningly.

‘Young Orlando here is the son of your mother’s niece, Calard,’ he said in a soft voice. ‘They are close family friends of my house. I was, after all, the one who introduced your mother to your father.’

‘I never knew,’ said Calard, before turning his attention back to the boy, who was staring up at him curiously.

He dropped to one knee to be on a level with the boy.

‘It is an honour to meet you, Sir Orlando,’ he said, bowing his head solemnly.

The boy bowed in return, his face a serious mask of concentration. The boy’s attention was suddenly drawn away from Calard, and his jaw dropped.

‘Look!’ he cried, pointing into the sky.

There were gasps and exclamations of wonder from the nobles around them, and Calard stood, looking up into the night sky to see what Orlando has spotted.

Angling down through the clouds, moonlight shimmering like silver upon their flanks and feathered

wings, was a flock of winged horses. Fully armoured knights rode in their saddles, and they circled down towards the ground in graceful arcs.

‘Pegasus knights!’ cried Orlando, his voice full of excitement and wonder.

One of the knights pulled away from the others, leaning back in the saddle as his steed furlled its wings tight against its body. It dropped towards the ground like a diving hawk, gaining speed with every passing moment. At the last second it spread its wings and scores of nobles ducked involuntarily as the pegasus swept down low, passing just overhead.

Peasants scrambled out of the way as the pegasus landed, silver-shod hooves striking the earth. It slowed its pace and halted, tossing its head.

The pegasus was larger than any destrier, and must have been pushing twenty hands tall at the shoulder. They were known to be aggressive, and though they looked noble and angelic in countenance, Calard knew that they could be unpredictable and dangerous when the mood took them, and would wilfully stomp a man to death if provoked. Nevertheless, amongst the Bretonnian nobility they were highly sought after steeds, fierce and loyal if raised from a foal, and eager to bear a knight into the thickest fray.

It was said that vast flocks of pegasus could be seen soaring the mountain peaks above the tiered city of Parravon, though Calard had never journeyed so far east to see if such tales were true. It was from those stocks that the majority of the pegasus seen within Bretonnia were bred. Such creatures did not come cheap, however, and those who rode them were amongst the wealthiest knights of all Bretonnia. Nor was purchasing a pegasus foal any guarantee that the beast would bond with its

intended rider and accept him, and few were willing to risk the investment – one did not wish to be two hundred feet in the air before discovering that your mount had taken a dislike to you. No amount of wealth could protect you then.

The knight riding upon the snow-coloured beast wore a tabard of red and silver over plate shined to an almost painful degree, and he bore a silver pegasus motif upon his chest. The attention of every man and lady was upon him, and he tore his helmet from his head theatrically. Wavy blond hair dropped to his shoulders, and he flashed a winning smile to his audience as he slid from the saddle.

Spontaneous clapping erupted, and there were cheers. The knight lapped up the attention, bowing low.

Josephine's eyes shone as she looked upon the dashing knight.

Calard instantly disliked him.

'Who's this?' he said, unimpressed.

The knight was irritatingly good looking, and was instantly surrounded by a coterie of fawning supplicants, both men and women. He exchanged a brief word with several nobles, bowing to lords and placing a kiss upon the hand of half a dozen blushing ladies of particular beauty, wealth or social position.

'Laudethaire,' said Montcadas. 'Beloved of Parravon. Whatever else might be said about him, though, he's a damn good fighter.'

Laudethaire, his pegasus steed having been led away, swept by Calard and Montcadas with barely a glance, exuding scented perfumes. Over one shoulder he proudly wore a golden sash, which proclaimed him as the lord of the joust, having won the prestigious award earlier in the day.

He did a theatrical double-take when he saw Lady Josephine, and paused, a look of rapture on his face.

‘Such beauty must surely make even the goddess envious,’ he said, taking her hand. He maintained eye contact with her as he placed a kiss upon her hand. ‘Enchanted, my lady.’

Josephine curtsied, oblivious to the venomous looks she was receiving from dozens of women nearby. With a warm smile, Laudethaire moved on, and Calard was hustled by the devotees following in his wake. As the jostling crowd began to clear, he saw that the Lady Josephine had a slight blush to her cheeks.

His expression brightened as he saw a familiar figure pushing through the crowd.

‘Here,’ said Tassilo darkly, holding out a pouch bulging with coin.

Calard took his winnings.

‘I take it by the bruises on your face that you did not win then, my friend?’ he said.

‘No,’ said Tassilo, placing a hand gingerly to his cheek. ‘But at least you benefited from my humbling.’

‘Bertelis?’

‘Through to the finals,’ said Tassilo. ‘His is the next bout. He’s facing the knight who defeated me – Merovech of Arlons.’

‘Never heard of him,’ said Calard.

‘I hadn’t, either,’ said Tassilo. ‘But the man is a devil with the blade.’

Taken from *Grail Knight*:

A SHIVER THAT had nothing to do with the cold passed through Calard as he crossed the threshold of Athel Loren. The air felt instantly different, clear and crisp like a mid-winter morning, and the temperature dropped markedly. The biting chill filled his lungs, bringing with it the rich scent of the forest – a heady mix of soil, rain, rotting leaves and other less identifiable but not unpleasant aromas. His breath fogged the air. A low mist coiled around the twisted roots of the trees.

Movement flickered on the periphery of Calard's vision, and unseen things rustled in the undergrowth. He heard fluttering and chattering in the boughs overhead, and a tumble of twigs, dead foliage and disturbed snow fell around him, but he was not quick enough to locate the source.

Massive oaks reared up, their trunks gnarled and old, their limbs heavy with lichen. Stars flickered in and out of view overhead, obscured by the criss-crossing canopy of skeletal branches. No new leaves or buds were in evidence; it seemed that winter still reigned here.

The forest was painted monochrome in the deepening twilight, as if all colour and life had been leeches away in the winter months. The leafless trees were the colour of unyielding stone, and the blanket of ferns were shining silver, as if their fronds had been dipped in molten metal. It was a coldly beautiful realm, ghostly and silent.

The white stag waited for him close by, half obscured by the low fog. It regarded him steadily, only turning and leading the way further into the forest once it was sure that Calard was following.

While the creature moved effortlessly through the woodland, Calard stumbled over rocks and roots, and twigs scratched at his face and caught in his hair. It was as if the forest were purposefully making his progress difficult, hindering his every step. Even as he discounted the notion as foolish, his foot caught between a tangle of roots that seemed to tighten around his leg like a trap. He fell to his knees with a curse. He thought he heard high-pitched, childish laughter from nearby, but it was gone in an instant, and might have been nothing more than a trick of the wind.

A glint of metal in the undergrowth caught his eye. Disentangling himself from the grasping roots, he parted the ferns for a clearer view.

A corpse lay encoiled beneath the roots of a broad oak. It appeared to be slowly dragging it down into the earth, as if swallowing it whole, yet even half-buried Calard saw enough to recognise a knight of Bretonnia.

The knight was long dead, his armour rusted and encrusted with dirt. There was not a skerrick of flesh left upon his skull, though tufts of matted reddish hair still clung to his scalp and chin.

A slender arrow protruded from his left eye-socket.

A hand on the hilt of his sword, Calard scanned the area for danger. Beams of silver moonlight speared down through the canopy, lending the forest a dream-like quality. Shadows danced around him and the trees creaked and strained like ships at sea, though there was no wind to stir their branches.

Briefly, he considered digging the corpse free in order to give it a proper burial, for no knight of Bretonnia deserved such ignominy in death. He discounted the notion with some reluctance – the roots of the tree were wrapped tight, and would not easily relinquish their

prize. He spoke a brief prayer, willing the knight's spirit on to Morr's kingdom.

Looking back the way he had come, Calard expected to see the waystone marking the forest's edge and the open land beyond. He had ventured no more than twenty yards into the woods, after all. The way behind him now looked as impenetrable as the way forward.

'What in the name of the Lady?'

He turned around on the spot, wondering if he had somehow lost his bearings. The forest stretched out in every direction, dark and claustrophobic. Its edge was nowhere to be seen. Calard's brow furrowed. He didn't recognise a single tree or rock that looked familiar, nothing providing any clue to the way back out.

The white stag too was gone. Forcing back his rising unease, Calard scoured the ground in a wide arc, but could not find its tracks. It had disappeared without a trace, as if it had been nothing but an apparition all along.

Recalling the tales that spoke of the forest luring the unwary within its boundaries, and the inevitably grim fate that awaited them, Calard cursed himself for a fool. He had been so certain that it was the Lady's will that he followed the noble creature, but now, alone and lost in the Forest of Loren as night descended, he was not so sure.

Calard turned back. Perhaps it was just some trick of the light, he thought, and he would stumble out of the forest any moment.

The woods became increasingly dense and oppressive the further he went, and within minutes he knew that this was not the way back. It was getting colder as well, the isolated patches of snow on the ground becoming an ever-thickening layer that crunched beneath his boots.

Turning back in the face of this unnatural winter, Calard retraced his steps, intending to return to the corpse of the knight and pick another direction.

Thankfully, the snowfall thinned as he backtracked. But there was still no sign he had passed this way before.

Calard was an accomplished tracker and huntsman, and had lived for long periods in the wilds of the Old World. He was self-reliant and comfortable in such situations, confident in his own abilities. But here in the shadowy realm of Athel Loren he felt like a child lost in the woods, vulnerable and unsure which way to turn. His usually faultless sense of direction had deserted him, but he trusted his instincts enough to know that this was not some failing on his part, but rather that something was actively working to disorient him. It was as if the forest itself were conspiring to confound his senses.

He clambered over a half-buried log, but the way in front was blocked by an impenetrable tangle of branches. He turned back, intending to take a different route.

Impossibly, the log he had just climbed over had disappeared. Even his footprints were gone – the snow behind him was pristine.

‘This is madness.’

He heard a whisper of laughter behind him and turned quickly, searching. The forest was utterly still, giving nothing away.

Silence descended like a shroud, oppressive and all encompassing.

There was not a hint of movement in the undergrowth or in the canopy overhead, as if time itself was frozen. There was no breeze to cause even a ripple of movement or break the illusion. The air was charged with tension. It was the deceptive lull that came before a raging tempest was unleashed.

As silently as he was able, Calard drew his sword.

He forced himself to breathe evenly, emptying his mind of doubt and forcing the tension from his limbs. Whatever was coming would do so whether he wished it or not, and he would face it free of anxiety and hesitation.

Over the course of the last seven years he had battled hulking trolls in the blizzards of the northlands, and tracked and killed the dread Jabberslythe of Ostwald in the forests of the Empire. He had been hunted by pallid, blind ogre-kin through the labyrinths beneath the Mountains of Mourn and emerged triumphant, and had slain – several times – a monstrous wyvern that refused to stay dead. Most recently he had journeyed into the nightmare realm of Mousillon and fought the restless dead. He had been faced his own brother, twisted into a hateful vampiric creature of the night, and had not faltered, delivering him into Morr's care.

And having quite literally travelled to hell and back – the burning heavens in the Realm of Chaos still haunted him – there were few things in the world that could truly unnerve him.

As he turned, his gaze swept across something that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

A motionless figure was watching him, bathed in moonlight.

It was a knight, encased in ornate plate mail of archaic design. Utterly motionless, it stood atop a rocky outcrop that rose above the groundcover of snow and ferns. The towering figure was tinged the greenish-grey of weather-beaten rock, and Calard might have mistaken it for a statue but for the unnatural light of its eyes, burning coldly within the darkness of its helm.

Calard's heart began to pound.
It was the Green Knight.

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