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GAWAIN & THE GREEN KNIGHT

BY

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GAWAIN & THE GREEN KNIGHT

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Author's note

My 'Gawain and the Green Knight' story is based on a medieval poem of the same name, although with significant differences. The medieval poem has, as far as I can make out, a setting that reflects its time – knights, castles, Christianity and so forth. This is the time in which many people imagine Camelot, resplendent with shining armour, stirrups on saddles, jousting and all the other romantic trappings. If Arthur ever existed, it was not as a post-Norman-invasion King. There are good records for all of England's rulers from further back than that even. If there was a real king Arthur, he was either here before the Saxon invasions, or before the Romans. My personal preference is Arthur as Romano-British. However, I have at times used language more consistent with the later setting, simply for the sake of familiarity.

The gist of the original story is much the same as this one, save for a few key details. In the original, Gawain merely trades kisses with the lord and lady over the three days of his stay, and then departs after the fight, and there are no suggestions of homoeroticism amongst Arthur's knights. I also changed the names of the lord and lady – in the original they were overtly Norman, and had no first names.

Bryn

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Dedication:

For Nix Winter, with thanks for the inspiration.

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Part One

*Follow me through time's dark veil
To a golden, heroic hour,
Where valiant Arthur and his knights
Sit feasting in their tower.*

Beyond the great hall the wind whistled mournful notes as it carried great flurries of snow down onto the already veiled landscape. The night of midwinter had come, a time of feasting and festivity. Within the walls of the magnificent building the cold was kept at bay by a roaring fire. Huge tapestries brought colour and warmth to the walls and the sounds of talk and laughter filled the air. At the centre of the room was a vast, round table, and about it sat the most valiant knights in all of the country of Logres. There were other tables aplenty: tables for the fair ladies and other important persons. They crowded in, their numbers great. All were of good humour, decked out in their best attire and expecting a night of wonderful revelry.

Over the fire a great spit turned, roasting the enormous corpse of an ox. Smells of cooking meat wafted through the hall, mingling with the aroma of wood smoke to blanket all other scents. Cups of wine and mead were filled, laughing toasts proposed. Soon the feasting would begin, with bread, dried fruits, pies, cakes and other delicacies to accompany the sizzling ox.

Arthur, the King, rose from his seat. He did not need to make a noise or otherwise call for hush. The talk and laughter died to a whisper and then vanished entirely. Such was the force of the great King's presence that all eyes were upon him and the slightest sign of his intention brought the whole company into happy obedience. Even though his youth was long since past, Arthur was a man who could not easily be resisted. His face and body alike were well formed, noble and compelling. Intelligence gleamed in his deep brown eyes, and compassion softened his mouth. His dark hair was swept back beneath a narrow golden band and strong bones shaped a face that was not easily forgotten.

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“My friends,” Arthur’s voice rang out rich and clear, his words filling the hall. “My friends, midwinter is upon us and tonight we will feast. There will be music and dancing, and we will celebrate long into the night. Before we begin our meal, I ask this of you all. Does anyone have a quest they wish to announce or a challenge to issue?”

It seemed as though Arthur’s speech had cast some spell, for barely had the words passed his lips when the large doors of the hall swung open and a monstrous figure strode in. A howling gale chilled all the company and brought great flakes of snow onto the floor near the door. The man, if man he could truly be called, stood more than eight feet high at the shoulder. In one hand he bore a hefty axe, the blade of which glinted in the firelight. In the other, he carried a holly bough. His garb was green, as was his hair and beard, while his skin had the appearance of bark.

Throughout the hall the company was still and many mouths hung open in surprise. Even the knights who had faced terrible adversity were startled into silence by the appearance of this most outlandish knight.

“I had heard,” the green knight boomed, “that this court was renowned for its hospitality, but I see precious little sign of it.”

He paused and, although all eyes were on him, all were still amazed into silence.

“You seem to me little more than a band of beardless children. Where is your legendary courtesy? Where is your magnanimous hospitality? Will no man offer me a drink or give up his seat for my sake?”

At this a number of men closer to the door rose from their benches, their faces pale but determined.

“Perhaps you will live up to your myth of valour. I come with a challenge, if any of you dares to meet it? No? None will rise to meet my challenge and trade blows with me?”

Arthur was on his feet then, his sword gripped firmly in his hand, his expression dark.

“Let no man say we want for courage in this place. I accept your challenge, knight. I will trade blows with you.”

Then Gawain, one of the youngest and fairest of all Arthur’s followers, rose up, his hand resting on his liege’s sleeve and his face marked with concern.

“My lord, no,” Gawain said, his voice hushed and melodious. “You are too important to risk yourself in some tournament with this unknown knight. Let me fight in your place.”

The two men looked into each other's eyes. Arthur's fierce pride burned in his face, but the younger knight was right, and the King nodded slowly, allowing bold Gawain to take his place.

"Green Knight," Arthur said, his tone imperious. "Make known to us the full nature of your challenge so that Gawain may understand the scale of this undertaking."

"Young man, all you must do is cleave my head from my body. Then I will tell you the true nature of my challenge."

At this, Gawain laughed and his blue eyes sparkled with merriment.

"My lord, I doubt there will be much challenge to face when this knight's head is parted from his shoulders."

The hall resounded to the sound of laughter, for all the company were of a mind with Gawain. What threat could the Green Knight pose after Gawain had landed such a deadly blow?

Gawain bowed to the company, turning this way and that to extend his gesture to all. Words of encouragement and flutters of applause resounded through the hall. The young knight was much beloved, and few could resist the charms of his handsome face and playful good humour. Gawain strode down the hall, his blond hair creating a halo around his head. By the time he was within an arm's reach of the giant knight, it was obvious that he could not reach to land a blow on the green man's head. For a while they stood, regarding one another. The Green Knight laughed, but there was a touch of cruelty in his amusement.

"The boy is too short!" he bellowed. "Have you no men here who could do the deed?"

"I will fight you!" Gawain proclaimed. "If I cannot reach your head, I will have to cut you down to size a little."

With that, he drew his sword and swiped at the giant's legs. The blade sliced through the air, however - the giant was nimble despite his bulk, and dodged out of the way.

"Too hard a task for one so small," the giant chuckled. "Let me help you, little man."

With that he knelt down, sitting back on his heels so that his head was only slightly higher than Gawain's own. Gripping his sword tightly in both hands, Gawain lifted his weapon above his shoulder. All signs of amusement had gone from his face and an expression of determination replaced it. He swung with all his might, and the keen edge of his sword bit into the giant's neck. Gawain had thought it might take several

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blows to decapitate the Green Knight but, to his surprise, flesh and bone offered little resistance to his blade. His single blow severed the neck entirely, causing the head to roll from the giant's shoulders and onto the floor. It bounced twice and then came to rest amongst the rushes close by one of the long tables.

There should have been blood. From any normal man who had suffered such a blow, the blood would have gushed forth violently, drenching Gawain and splattering a number of the people sitting nearby. The giant should have fallen. Gawain had known men take a little while over dying, but in the aftermath of such a grievous injury the bulky frame should have crumpled to the ground to lie in a pool of its own seeping fluids. Instead, the giant remained upright and not one drop of blood showed from the assault upon his person. Eerie silence reigned in the great hall. Not a soul dared to move, and most could hardly breathe as a dreadful feeling of suspense gripped every one of them.

The Green Knight rose to his feet, steady and sure despite the loss of his head. Gawain stood firm where he was, one hand clenched around the hilt of his sword, his knuckles deathly white. The giant bent, retrieved his severed part and lifted it to the height of his waist. All at once, the large green eyes flicked open and the head began to speak.

"Gawain, you have beheaded me. A year to the day you must seek me out in the green chapel, and there I will perform the same favour and take your head in return."

"How will I find this green chapel?" Gawain asked, his voice steady despite the awful sentence that had just been passed upon him.

"You will find it," the giant answered cryptically. "You will come to me on bended knee, just as I have done this day, and offer your neck to my axe blade."

With that, the Green Knight turned and departed into the snowstorm. As the large door closed behind him, a nervous chatter began amongst the assembled people. Gawain returned to his seat. That night he laughed the loudest of all and traded jests with all those who sat close by him. Still, his eyes burned unnaturally bright, and his skin had a deathly pallor as though he already felt the cold touch of the grave upon him.

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Part Two

*Through the kingdom of Logres he wanders, lonely and bleak.
From North Wales down to Cheshire the green chapel he must seek.*

Spring came. Gawain hunted in the forests with Arthur and his many gallant companions. Summer brought fighting on the northern borders of the country and there were long days of campaigning beneath a merciless sun. The harvests of autumn came all too soon, and Gawain knew he must set forth before the winter and seek for the green chapel. He was honour bound to fulfil his part in this deadly game, even though it grieved and troubled him to think his life might end in such a way.

On the day the young knight had chosen for his departure, Gawain intended to leave quietly at first light. He had no desire to attract the fanfare and pageantry that were so often indulged in when a knight set out upon some quest. His heart was heavy and he wished to be alone in leaving. As Gawain was securing his provisions to the back of a pack mule, he heard footsteps. Out of the wan light of the misty morning strode Arthur. Droplets of water shimmered against his black hair. He was without crown, or any other sign of his rank and power. Still, the sight of him transfixed Gawain.

“I guessed that you would seek no ceremony to launch this quest,” the king said.

Gawain nodded, momentarily lost for words.

“How did you know I was leaving?”

“Merlin said it would be so.”

“I should have known.”

There was a long silence between the two men, one fraught with things unsaid.

“I have enjoyed my time in your company,” Gawain said, his voice rigidly formal.

“These have been the happiest and proudest days of my life.”

“There will be many such days to come once this quest is completed,” Arthur said.

Gawain shook his head and fixed his gaze on the distant tree line, unable to look his friend and ruler in the eye.

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“I am but a mortal man. I will not survive the challenge of being decapitated.”

Then Gawain felt Arthur’s hands clasp his shoulders, strong hands used to wielding powers of life and death. He could not resist the pressure of Arthur’s gaze – it was a force upon his skin, an insistent demand that would permit no denial. Gawain turned his head slightly and raised his eyes. The deep brown of Arthur’s irises held him prisoner, infusing him with feelings of hope and confidence.

“You will come back,” Arthur said. “You will face your ordeal with honour, and you will triumph.”

“Has Merlin foreseen this?”

“He has not. His glimpses of the future are never frequent. This is my own certainty speaking not his magic. You will come back to me, Gawain.”

Gawain knew hot tears were welling in his eyes, and lowered his lids, unable to meet Arthur’s gaze with such a torrent of emotion stirring in his breast. The firm hands on his shoulders lifted, only to descend lightly upon his face, cupping his chin. Gawain felt Arthur’s thumbs stroking along the line of his cheekbones, wiping away the tell-tale tears. He could feel the rough calluses on the King’s hands. The gesture was painfully tender and racked Gawain’s already aching heart. He had no desire to leave this place, to part from the people he loved most and seek the end of his young life. Arthur was the sun in his sky, Camlan his heart’s true home.

“You will return to me,” Arthur reiterated.

He brushed a kiss against Gawain’s forehead. The touch of his lips was fleeting, but Gawain’s skin burned from the contact for a long while afterwards. The kiss that covered his lips was sweeter yet, with the warmth of Arthur’s mouth pressed against his, the rough stubble of the older man’s short beard raking Gawain’s cheek as his hands sought his King’s narrow waist. They clung to each other, Gawain’s face pressed against Arthur’s shoulder, Arthur’s hands in his hair.

“Never lose heart, Gawain; do not doubt that you will return.”

Secure in the arms of the tall and powerful monarch, Gawain had little inclination to break away and set out on his bitter quest. He steeled himself; inhaled deeply and let his arms fall to his sides. Arthur released him wordlessly.

Having checked his horse and mule one final time, Gawain mounted the chestnut mare that would carry him on his travels. Only then did he dare to let his gaze stray towards Arthur once more. Arthur’s lips curved in a warm smile, but something else entirely appeared to burn in his eyes. Gawain swallowed hard and cursed the necessity of

leaving. He wanted nothing more than to slither down from his mount and return to the other man's arms. Honour demanded that it could not be so.

With Camlan at his back and all of Logres before him, Gawain rode out. He did not know where the green chapel might be found, for none of the knights, lords, merchants or travellers who had visited Arthur in the last months had ever heard of it. Gawain meant to ask of those he met along his way and trust that the gods would put some intelligence in his path. This was no mundane quest, he understood.

The Green Knight had risen from the dead to make his demand, and assured Gawain that the chapel could be found, despite no details of its location being forthcoming. There was clearly enchantment in the matter. Gawain knew little of such things, and they left him ill at ease.

Over many days, he travelled through the wide lands of Logres, over bleak moorland, through dense woods, by tiny villages and rambling rivers. He soon moved beyond the countryside that was familiar to him. As the voices and habits of people changed, he wondered if he might have journeyed beyond Arthur's realms and into some other place. These late autumn days were harsh, with cold winds that stripped leaves from the trees, and rain drenched skies making the unhappy quest harder than ever. Gawain was used to the company of his fellows, to friendly banter, mutual aid and bright camaraderie. Loneliness stung his heart more bitterly than the wind abused his skin. He longed for the bright fires of Camlan, for the company of knights and the beguiling delights of fair women. The cold seeped into his bones until he could not imagine ever being warm again.

No matter where Gawain went, no one had word of the green chapel. Old women and young men alike scratched their heads and told him they could not say they had ever heard of such a place. Gawain's heart grew heavy as hopelessness gnawed at him. He had recalled Arthur's encouraging words so many times that they barely seemed real to him. More than anything, he longed to return to his home, to his friends and lovers. Gawain knew he could never return to Camlan if he did not see this challenge through.

To go back having failed was unthinkable, while to see this challenge to the end would be to forfeit his life. He wondered how Arthur could have seemed so confident he would survive. But then, Arthur had led men to face hopeless odds and survived too many times to number.

Death itself did not frighten Gawain overly, but the prospect of never again laying eyes either upon the walls of his home, or the noble features of his beloved ruler grieved him. As the horse beneath him carried the knight over mud-slicked paths and winding

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roads, the young man's soul travelled the darker journey into utter despair. The trials of living from day to day, seeking shelter in farms where he could, sleeping rough when he must, ground Gawain down. Every day brought no progress, no intelligence that might lead to the green chapel.

With every sunset, he was one day closer to his appointed midwinter meeting, but no nearer discovering where he must go. With his hope fast waning, Gawain struggled on, with only his intentions of not disgracing Arthur keeping him from utter defeat.

Time had almost run out. Less than a week remained until midwinter's day. Gawain had found nothing. He was a long way from home, lost and demoralised. For days he had travelled through heavy woodland, following a well-worn path but seeing no signs of human habitation. Just as the sun was poised to sink below the trees, Gawain saw the forest thin and clear before him. There, in the failing light he saw an earthen rampart, on top of which ran a sturdy wall, one the Romans had undoubtedly left behind them.

Beyond the wall clustered numerous buildings, fashioned of large timbers and solidly built. The smell of wood smoke wafted to Gawain's nostrils and his straining ears could discern the distant sounds of human voices. Thinking that at least this place might offer respite from the cold, Gawain urged his weary horse onwards, determined to ask for shelter. The fort was in good condition, and well manned, but showed no signs of expecting attack. At the gate he was welcomed in, and while his horse and mule were taken for stabling, two men escorted him to the great hall. Travel-worn and mud splattered as he was, Gawain carried himself with the dignity becoming a knight of Camlan.

In the fort's great hall, he was presented to the lord of this place, a tall and broadly built man by the name of Dias. The lord's chestnut hair flowed to his shoulders, while a luxuriant moustache and beard graced his face. He clasped Gawain's hand, welcoming him as one of Arthur's men. Gawain saw the lord's attention caught by someone he could not see and, in a heartbeat, the lady of the fort was at Dias' side. She was a striking creature, a full-figured woman with red hair that fell to her waist. Plaits held her fiery locks in check, and a silver band circled her forehead. She turned her shining eyes on Gawain and offered him a smile that warmed the man's heart and loins alike.

"Dymphna, mistress of this household," Dias said.

Gawain took her hand and raised it to his lips, smelling rare spices on her skin as he lingered in kissing her.

“What brings you here to us?” Dymphna enquired. “Are you on some errand for King Arthur?”

“Would that I were, but I have a strange quest of my own, and I seek a place known as the green chapel. I have travelled many days but none yet has even heard of the place.”

“Young knight, it will gladden your heart to know that you are but a short journey from that very place. Why, I rode that way only a day ago,” the lord told him.

“That is good news indeed,” Gawain said, but there was little joy in his voice, for to be near the green chapel was to approach his own destruction.

“When must you reach the green chapel?” the lady asked of him.

“By midwinter’s night, my lady,” Gawain replied.

“That is four days hence unless I am much mistaken. You would be welcome as a guest at our table until that day.”

“I thank you for your kindness,” Gawain said, “and would be glad to accept your hospitality.”

“Then let us serve you without further delay. I see that you are worn from your travels. I will have water heated so that you might wash, and fresh clothes found for you while your own are attended to. We will find lodging for you at once. Are you in need of refreshment? Mead perhaps, or some cold meats and bread?”

“My lady, I would be most glad of something to drink and the chance to render myself more presentable such that I might be fit company for your table.”

Only a little while later, decked out in rich clothing and warming himself beside the fire, Gawain found himself approached by the lord of the hall.

“I have a plan to make these next days merry for you, my young knight, if you would undertake to play a little game with me?”

“What manner of game do you have in mind?” Gawain enquired cautiously.

He had no desire to worsen his lot with promises that could not be kept.

“Oh, a frivolous scheme. It is my pleasure to hunt, and I intend to give to you anything I might catch during your stay in my home.”

“That is a most gracious offer, my lord, but what is my part to be in all of this?”

“Would you consent to bestow upon me anything that you are given during the course of the day? It would not include the normal necessities of living - food, drink or suchlike.”

Gawain thought this was a peculiar geas to place upon him, but he could perceive no danger in it, and so he consented to the lord’s game. A pleasant evening ensued, and

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for the first time in several long weeks, Gawain made merry and forgot about the dangers awaiting him. Compared to the company at Camlan, the fort offered but modest amusement and simple fare. However, after long days on the road, living hand to mouth and never certain of a warm bed, Gawain had never been more appreciative of simple comforts. There were fair ladies and handsome men among the company, and more than a few of them smiled in his direction.

Tired though he was, Gawain sat talking and drinking late into the night. His hosts were eager for news and stories, and there was much he could tell them both of Camlan and the summer campaigns.

When the morning came, Gawain was not awake as usual to greet the rising sun. Enjoying the comforts of a proper bed and the benefits of a good meal, he slept soundly and was not even awoken by the presence of a second person in his chamber. Only when a slender hand alighted on his calf did he shake off sleep. Sitting up in alarm he saw that Dymphna, the beautiful lady of the fort, was sitting at the foot of his bed. It was her hand that rested on his leg. Her glittering green eyes stared intently at him, but on seeing he had woken, she smiled warmly instead.

“Good morning, fair knight. I trust that you slumbered peacefully?”

“I did, lady, my thanks to you for your hospitality.”

Gawain pulled the covers up around his shoulder, for he had slept only in a light under-tunic and the morning was chilly.

“I wanted a little time to speak with you privately,” she said.

Gawain nodded, wondering what new strangeness might be afoot.

“Your fame is widespread,” Dymphna said. “Seeing you in person I realise you are even more pleasing to the eye than I had been encouraged to believe. I want you to know that I am your servant in all matters. If you find you require anything, you have but to name it, and I would be more than happy to oblige you.”

Gawain swallowed hard. He had the distinct impression that Dymphna did not mean simply those things that fell under the normal duties of hospitality. He thought she must be a number of years older than he, but Gawain considered her beautiful and her suggestive remarks made his manhood quiver responsively. He shifted his legs, disguising the effect of her words upon his body.

“Lady, I shall consider your offer and, if I find myself in need, I will make all haste to inform you.”

The lady shook her head.

“I thought that the noble Sir Gawain rested beneath my roof, but now I wonder if you truly are that man. I cannot imagine that the Gawain so oft described by travelling story tellers would fail to ask even for a kiss.”

“If you seek a kiss, you had but to ask. I am not the man to impose himself upon a lady, but nor am I the man to refuse so tempting an offer.”

Dymphna rose and took the few steps that bore her to his side. She sat down close by him, allowing him to observe the bloom in her cheek and the beauty of her eyes. She leaned against him, her fingers trailing over his firm chest before her lips alighted upon his waiting mouth. Her kiss was a languid, lingering encounter, her lips caressing his as she pressed countless small, unhurried tokens of her desire against his eager mouth. Gawain’s hands found her waist and pulled her down against him. She made no move to resist him. Her mouth was firm, but when he pressed back and slid his tongue between her lips, he found her to be all-yielding softness, welcoming his penetration of her body.

“Your kisses do you credit, my lad,” she said.

“I am glad to find I meet with your approval.”

“Most certainly you do,” she said, brushing his hair back from his face and stroking his muscular shoulder. “Remember, my sweet, if there is anything you require, you have but to name it.”

“I will think on that,” Gawain said, and this time there was far more conviction in his voice.

At this Dymphna rose from his bed and took her leave of him. Gawain remained beneath his covers, nursing a cock that ached for want of attention. He had not thought of love or pleasure in his long days on the road, and now his body seemed determined that the long period of abstinence should be brought to an immediate end. Dymphna’s attentions were entirely welcome to him, he decided. It was only then that Gawain recalled the game he had entered into with the lord of this place, and wondered what that evening would bring him.

As the day drew on and the sun fell low, Gawain paced through the long shadows. He heard the whickering of horses as the lord and his men returned from their day’s hunting. Seeing Gawain, Dias wheeled away from the group and halted at the young man’s side.

“Today we chased deer through the greenwood,” he proclaimed, “and I brought down a young stag.” He descended from the horse and gestured towards the creature that his men were carrying in. “The stag is yours to do with as you see fit.”

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“I thank you,” Gawain said. “I have only been given one thing this day, but that I will gladly give to you.”

With that he stepped up to the burly man and planted a kiss firmly upon his lips. The silken softness of Dias’ beard caressed his chin and neck, sending delectable shivers of sensation throughout his body. Gawain honoured his promise with care, bestowing numerous small kisses upon the larger man’s lips much as Dymphna had done with him. Powerful arms and a tight embrace soon surrounded his slender form. Dias smelled of the forest and of an enticing manly sweat.

With their bodies close entwined, Gawain fully appreciated the differences both in height and girth between them. Although a strong and capable fighter, Gawain remained slender and boyish in his looks. Dias had the physique of a bear or boar—mighty at the shoulders, broad and powerful in all his visible parts. Gawain was deliciously conscious of his own smallness, of the lithe and willowy nature of his body compared to this great tree of a man who held him. He had always taken delight in those knights who considerably outsized him, and Dias more than satisfied his inclinations.

Just as Gawain had entered Lady Dymphna’s mouth with his tongue, he now found his own lips breached as Dias pressed into him. The man’s tongue was long and as muscular as any other part of his body Gawain had thus far observed. Deep it went, filling the young knight’s mouth with sensuous flesh and his thoughts with lustful imaginings. The flames of his desire had been stoked that morning by the seductive mistress of the hall. Now they burned fiercely, making Gawain sweat like a galloping horse and wish they were in some secluded place. When the youth thought the heat within him must force its way to freedom, Dias drew his tongue back from Gawain’s and laughed.

“Where did you gain such a gift as that?” the Lord enquired.

“Good sir, I do not remember there being any mention in our bargain of my having to reveal to you the source of anything I receive.”

“It is true enough,” the lord replied, chuckling to himself. “You are under no obligation to reveal to me the person who gifted you so charmingly.”

“It is as well,” Gawain said. “I have never been one to brag about my exploits.” Then he too laughed. “I usually find that my actions speak well enough for themselves.”

“Your kisses are telling indeed,” Dias said, a playful smile upon his face.

That night they dined upon venison. Gawain found himself seated between the lord and lady of the household. He was continually conscious of the kisses he had shared

with each, and struggled to maintain any sensible conversation through the meal. Sometimes he let his knee brush against Dymphna's leg, and at other times he would find some chance move brought him into contact with Dias on the other side. Each flickering moment of contact set the hairs rising on the back of his neck. Claiming weariness, he retired early and sought escape in the privacy of his dreams.

Sleep did not come easily to Gawain that night. He lay restless in his bed, thinking first of the fair lady who had enchanted him that day, and then of her husband's strong arms. He wondered where they passed their night and whether they slept soundly. Visions of the two making love occupied his thoughts, and he pictured them naked in the firelight: her slender limbs and his sturdy ones, her curving body, his hard packed muscles. Two desirable forms merging and writhing together tumbled through Gawain's sleepless mind. He sought solace with his own fingers, plying his lust-engorged manhood with rapid strokes. He thought of each in turn, wondering how it would be to lie with them, to enter and be entered, to touch and to caress. A rush of sticky release eased him for long enough that dreams claimed his awareness. Sleep was fitful, filled with scenes of his sexual torment and frustration. He woke several times, sweating and ill at ease.

Then he surfaced from sleep, angry to find a captivating dream of seduction slipping from his mind even as he tried to remember it. Impressions rushed in upon him, as feelings of sweet pleasure coursed through his body. Opening his eyes, Gawain saw that his coverlet had been drawn back. In his lap, Dymphna rested her head. Her tongue flickered over the tip of his cock, and he gasped at the acute sensation. She looked up at him, smiling.

"I heard you call out in your slumbers and wondered if there was anything amiss," she said. "When I came into your room, I found your covers thrown off and the swollen proof of your need all too visible." She paused to lick at him once more. "Your body cries out for my attention. Will you deny it?"

"No," he said.

He could not have thought about his answer had he wanted to. The pressure of unserved lust was such that all other considerations must be swept aside by it. Dymphna's agile tongue covered the length and breadth of his straining erection. She made a slick trail from the veined root of his manhood, along the length of his shaft to the sensitive tip, and there she descended upon him, her mouth engulfing him, lips sliding downwards, then pulling back only to consume him afresh. Gawain closed his eyes, succumbing to the ministrations of her capable mouth. Her tongue found the small hole in his tip, and

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pressed against him, so that he could almost imagine she was entering him, even though he was encased in the moist warmth of her tender mouth.

The insistent pressure of her lips pushed his foreskin away from his expanding glans, exposing him completely, but then she pulled that veil of flesh back again to cover him once more. Her tongue found the place where foreskin and cock blended together, then nuzzled beneath the helmeted head, tracing a line of all consuming sensation.

Gawain marvelled at her tirelessness, at the firm grip of her lips and the strength of her jaw. She managed his girth with practised ease. This set him wondering how he compared to Dias. Perhaps the lord's manhood was long and broad in proportion to the great height and width of its owner. Gawain imagined that perhaps in contrast to the cock she usually favoured with her lips, his was modest in size.

For a few moments, Gawain felt a stab of jealousy, but then the thought of this other, larger cock took command of his thoughts making his own mouth salivate with anticipation: This gift of pleasure he would have to return in accordance with the promise he had made. The prospect added to his enjoyment. By nightfall Gawain suspected he would know precisely the size of cock to which this fair lady was accustomed.

Thinking of this, he felt the first surges of pleasure rising up from the depths of his balls. Like liquid fire, it burned in him, marking a searing passage through his loins. Gawain moaned—his mind divided between awareness of his imminent release and visions of himself bestowing this favour on Dias. Digging his hands into the bed, it felt for a while as though his entire body was as stiff and tormented as his throbbing cock. He gasped for air, struggling to breathe against this fury of tension. When he knew he could bear no more, the fearsome rigidity gave way, first into a thrusting explosion of heat as he came, and then melted into a languid feeling of release.

When he opened his eyes, Dymphna was smiling down at him. Her usually perfect hair was dishevelled in a most charming fashion, and her cheeks were flushed with colour from her efforts. The prolonged attention to his cock had drawn blood into her lips, making them dark and swollen. He pulled her to him, smothering her mouth with his, tasting the saltiness of his fluids on her tongue. He could smell her desire, a musky scent that rose from between her legs to tease his nostrils.

Gawain fumbled at her skirts, working his way beneath several layers of fabric in pursuit of her skin. For a while, the pair of them wrestled with her clothing, laughing and kissing as they went. Then, at last, Dymphna sat in Gawain's lap, while he in turn rested his back against the wall. Her skirts lay in a great flood of colour around them both, so he pushed the swathes of embroidered material up to her hips, revealing her pale and slender

legs. Gawain ran his palms over her thighs, more conscious than ever of the heady scent rising from between them. She was a woman ripe for the taking and the thought was sufficient to stir new life into his weary cock.

His fingers plunged beneath the shadow of her skirts, following her silken thighs until he felt a soft tangle of hair beneath his fingers. She was feather soft and, as he drew closer to her centre, he found his way marked out by pooling moisture. Her downy hairs were slick with it, and it seeped like warm honey from between her nether lips. Gawain studied her face as his fingers danced lightly over her sodden sex. The lady Dymphna had never before looked so bewitching to him as she did in those moments, with her lips slightly parted and her eyes glowing with the anticipation of indulgence.

Gawain's fingers quested after the treasures between her thighs. He found the shy ruby that nestled deep in the forests of her curling hair. She sighed so sweetly when he touched her there that he did so repeatedly, drumming feather-light against her until she threw her head back and moaned aloud. Then he slipped into her secret cave, knowing that within those dark and pulsing walls he would find magical places and mysterious powers.

Dymphna clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders. The young knight brought all his skill and strength to bear. She thrust against him, taking him down to the knuckle. Gawain imagined his entire hand being pulled into her sumptuous cleft, then his arm, and finally the rest of his body as well until she was pleasuring herself against the entirety of his being. It was a peculiar image, one shattered by the exquisite pain of her teeth upon his throat. She nipped at him, sharp and punishing as he pressed into her. Her mouth crushed against his windpipe, and her bites came fast and furious until his eyes watered. Still he did not slow his pace. In all honour, he could not leave a lady unrequited and unsatisfied after she had worked such wonders on his behalf.

"Enough, enough!" she cried.

Gawain allowed his hands to rest.

"Have I given you satisfaction, my lady?"

In response she kissed him, grazing his tongue with her teeth.

"You have wrung more orgasms from my body than I could begin to number," she said, smiling broadly at him. "I have never known fingers so long, let me look at them."

She lifted up his hands and examined his fingers for some time. It was true that Gawain's hands were both long and slender. Men and women alike had remarked to him before on the delights of his long reach.

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“Do you find my bold reputation well founded?” he asked playfully.

“I think the story tellers do you poor justice, my handsome one. They tell of your success with fair women and how they flock to you. They celebrate your sword with flattering tongues, but never a one has mentioned the fabulous talents of your fingers.”

“Perhaps I should pass a night in the arms of a bard, then my fame would be certain.”

She laughed at this, her merriment falling in tinkling notes that could gladden any listener.

“Can you stay a while longer?” Gawain asked, nuzzling his face against the curve of her still-covered breasts.

“The day is far advanced and there is work to be done. Much as I would like to idle in your arms a little longer, I must depart.”

“Perhaps your husband requires your attentions?”

“Dias is hunting, and he had attentions enough of mine last night to sustain him through the day,” she said.

She left him to contemplate that image at his leisure.

Gawain was restless throughout the day, his thoughts divided between what the evening might bring, and what would follow on the morning two days hence. He had been led to understand that, on horseback, it would not take him long to reach the green chapel. Still he did not know the way. Time was slipping through his fingers. These, he realised, would most likely be his last days. He was determined to live them to the full and make a good death. He wandered the open land around the fort, attended to his horse, and found various other small ways to waste the precious time remaining to him. Tempting though it was to seek out Dymphna, he left her to her duties.

Not for the first time, Gawain wondered if there might be some enchantment that would allow him to rise from a beheading just as the Green Knight himself had done. Certainly, no such aid had been offered by Merlin and the other, lesser wizards who came to Camlan. Gawain knew he had not sought such assistance. He was wary of such magics, even when wielded by people he trusted. This, he felt, may well be the destiny for which he had been born. He took solace from the knowledge that, had he not interceded, Arthur and not he would face the giant knight's deadly axe. Arthur was the heart and soul of Camlan, his demise was more than Gawain could stand to contemplate. Giving his life for Arthur's sake was something he had been sworn to do, if required, from the day he was old enough to bear arms. Reminding himself precisely why he had

come to face such peril eased Gawain's fears a little. He would give his life so that Arthur might live. That was a bond to give any man courage.

Encroaching dusk brought the barking of dogs as men on foot emerged from the gloom. Gawain could see from the weapons they bore that their quarry had been a boar. Spears for hunting boars had broad spikes emerging from just above the place where iron met wood. Without such precautions, a wounded beast would, in its fury, charge down the length of the shaft embedded in its own flesh, to gore the man who dared attack it. Even for a correctly armed man, boars were dangerous prey and it took no small skill to bring one down. Gawain saw that two of the men carried a pole between them, and from it hung the lifeless form of a large, wild pig.

"The wild boar is yours, young knight; command his corpse as you will," Dias called out, his voice booming through the fading light.

"I would have him made ready for the spit!" Gawain exclaimed.

He knew it would take a long while to roast such a creature, but the thought of its rich and succulent meat made his stomach rumble. Thoughts of other flesh that might soon be his to taste made his mouth water hungrily.

"And what gifts has the day brought you?" Dias asked, putting his arm around the young knight's shoulder as they walked towards the cluster of buildings.

"One better given in some quiet place, out of the wind," Gawain suggested.

"Is it a story then?" Dias asked, shades of laughter colouring his voice.

"You must guess again, my lord."

"Perhaps a song?"

"I have heard no music this day."

"Then it must be some ripe and bawdy jest, ill suited to the ears of women!"

"I can assure my lord, it would ill become a woman's ears, but it is no jest."

"Gawain, you are a riddler indeed and I cannot outwit you. But here, step into my room a moment. Dymphna will be busy with our fine porker, and we may have a little peace here in which you can regale me with your gift."

The room was stone built and looked to be another remnant of Roman occupation. A large bed draped with furs and blankets dominated the space. There was no fire in the small hearth, and what little light there was came from a slit that also allowed a cold draft in.

"We may have warmth or light, which would you prefer?" Dias enquired.

"I would have warmth, if that is agreeable to you."

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Dias untied a swathe of fabric and pulled it down across the tiny window. At once the room was as black as night. Gawain's head swam as all sense of direction left him. He attempted to approach Dias, but his balance betrayed him. He stumbled and found himself sprawled across the bed. He could hear the older man laughing low—his fall had been all too audible an accident. As he was sitting up, Gawain felt the furs beneath him move as the other man settled upon the bed.

"Now, my handsome youth, what is this gift that calls for a quiet and dark place? I am beginning to think it must be a glow-worm, given you by some eager child."

"It involves something I have heard called a worm by those with disagreeable tongues," Gawain said, moving slowly over the bed as he did so.

His eyes were growing used to the darkness, and he found it was not so complete as he had first thought. He could make out the shape of the lord's bulky figure well enough.

"I would rather an agreeable tongue myself," Dias remarked.

"I hope that you will find it so," Gawain returned, mounting lust lending husky tones to his voice.

Gawain fumbled awkwardly in the near-darkness, then to his relief, Dias realised what he was about, and pulled his garments open.

"Is this what you were looking for?" the lord asked.

Gawain's fingers closed around a cock so broad that he could barely believe its girth. He had seen women whose fists were not so big as the straining monster beneath his hand.

"This is the gift I must pass on to you," he said, then lowered his head over the other man's rigid manhood.

Gawain licked Dias' cock thoroughly, from base to tip and back again. He tasted the saltiness of the lord's arousal, forming tiny beads, readily lapped by his questing tongue. He tried his best to emulate the tricks Dymphna had used, to replicate the gift as accurately as his memory would allow. This was a challenge indeed. His own desire pressed him not to linger, even though he knew that the lady had taken her time in serving him. His mouth was stretched so widely that he was obliged to pause from time to time, as his lips went numb from exertion and pressure. Much as he wanted to, he could not hope to take this fabulous cock into the depths of his mouth—he could manage little more than the very head of it. Gawain supposed that Dymphna must have found his own cock a very easy mouthful to manage if she was accustomed to suckling this unrivalled beast.

As he was resting his lips, Gawain used his fingers, stimulating the lord's mighty shaft and exploring the thickly haired regions beneath it. His hand found the sack holding Dias' balls, and these too proved a marvel of unusual proportion. They filled his hand and more, two heavy, firm spheres of flesh that he could not resist kissing. *Such organs*, he thought, *must surely produce liquid like a river in full flood.*

A long, rumbling moan issued from Dias' lips, and Gawain felt his own balls tighten with sympathetic feeling.

"Oh, my lad," the lord groaned. "Your tongue is as nimble at licking as it is with word play."

Several witty replies flitted through Gawain's thoughts, but he would not empty his mouth to utter them. Instead, he redoubled his efforts, until every exhaled breath that passed Dias' lips carried some sound of the lord's approaching climax.

The first spurt crashed against the back of his throat like a wave. Gawain gasped for breath, barely able to manage the erection filling his mouth. A second hot gush came, and a third. As he had anticipated the stream of Dias' pleasure was torrential indeed. The thick salt liquor ran in rivers down Gawain's throat. It breached his lips and he briefly envisaged himself covered in the sweet proofs of his skill, sodden with the wash of masculine passions. There were hands on his shoulders, in his hair. The touch was gentle, caressing his throat, reaching beneath his garments to brush fingers over his collarbone. Gawain swallowed, and swallowed again. The cock in his mouth was dwindling to more manageable proportions.

Eventually, Gawain pulled himself into a sitting position. He had no sense of how much time had passed – the world beyond the darkened room had slipped from his mind entirely. His efforts left him weary of jaw, aroused, and simultaneously basking in the glow of pleasing another. He felt Dias' arms surround him, pulling him close so that his head was nestled against the man's broad chest. Neither spoke as they sat together, embracing.

"I will not ask who bestowed so rich and generous a gift upon you," Dias said. "I am glad that you have enjoyed such presents, and more delighted yet that you have shared them with me."

"It has been no hardship, you may be certain of that," Gawain returned.

He wondered if either lord or lady suspected that he was exchanging favours with the other. Gawain thought discretion his better course and carefully avoided anything that might raise suspicion in either one.

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Gawain awoke with a start. He had been dreaming of the Green Knight, waiting with his keen axe. Surfacing, the young warrior recalled that only one day of life remained to him before he must face this deadly foe. His heart grew heavy at the thought. The touch of a hand upon his cheek made him start, the violent threat of his dream still preying on his thoughts and over sensitising him to possible dangers. His heart raced and pounded. Laughter like the musical bubbling of a mountain stream washed over him. Gawain laughed too, conscious of his own foolishness. He was safe in the bed he had occupied for the last three nights, and the hand against his cheek was Dymphna's. He realised she must have crept into his bed while nightmares wracked his unconscious mind.

"Good morning, my lady," he said, rolling onto his side so that he could better see her.

Her hair tumbled free over pillow and coverlet; a shimmering mass of crimson red like the sun setting on water. Peeking from beneath her silken hair, one pale and naked shoulder caught his eye. Gawain swallowed hard and wondered precisely how little this sensual beauty was wearing. He could feel the warmth of her body radiating across the minimal distance separating them.

Gawain reached out and stroked the hand that lay so innocently on his pillow. Her slender fingers were soft. He raised them to his lips, kissing each one in turn, then moving, kiss by slow kiss along the length of her arm. When he reached the crook of her elbow, he was obliged to shuffle a little closer. Somehow he managed not to press his body against hers, delaying the moment of discovery, wondering if he would feel her skin against his. Dymphna lay still, allowing him to have his way. He found her shoulder, her chin, and pushed back the covers as he rolled against her, his eyes confirming the report from his body. The lady was entirely without clothing. Her milky white skin was more than he could resist. Gawain fell upon her, his lips and hands covering and consuming her body. She was all curves, all softness and sensual delight.

There was a faint taste of almonds to her skin, and her nipples rose in two enticing peaks, red as cherries and equally inviting to the lips. When he closed his mouth over first one, then the other of these tempting nubs, she arched her back, pressing herself into him. Gawain ran his fingers through the tangle of red curls under her arms, and then sought out their counterparts between her thighs. She moaned at his touch, opening her legs to grant him better access. His fingers delved in her moisture.

"Would you take me?" she asked.

These were the first words either of them had spoken since Gawain's startled wakening. His stiff cock ached for the relief of softness her body could offer. He longed to sink down into her flesh, but still he hesitated.

"Are you certain?" he asked, looking into her eyes.

"With all my heart," she replied. "I know this is your last full day with us, and I have been able to think of nothing else. Be my lover, Gawain, if only this once."

The appeal in her eyes and the curve of a smile on her lips melted away his few reservations. In a moment, Gawain was lying between her thighs, covering her face with tender kisses. Her hands wove spells of lustful enchantment over the firm muscles in his back then travelled down across his rounded buttocks. Her lips encouraged his with persistent kisses.

Gawain tested her readiness with a finger then carefully guided himself in. He supposed such careful attention was hardly necessary now that he knew what she was accustomed to. The line of thought left him wondering if he could satisfy a lady used to so long and broad a cock. Gawain had never been one to balk at a challenge, and set to with vigour, determined to prove the lady had not bestowed her favour unwisely.

Dymphna was surprisingly tight as Gawain penetrated her. She gripped him hard, her pulsing muscles teasing him continually as he began to bring stimulation to them both. He paused from time to time, reserving his strength as long as he could. Her hair and skin, her nipples, her lips - each captured his attention in turn as he rested inside her. Gawain knew full well it was not the length of a man's sword that determined the outcome of a fight, but his skill in wielding it. He was proud of his talents, both on the battlefield and managing that fleshy weapon between his thighs. Gawain was determined to conquer the lady, to breach her every defence.

Gawain watched as a crimson blush bloomed on Dymphna's cheeks. Her eyes were bright, shining up at him, while her swollen nipples pressed into his chest each time he thrust into her. He licked at her skin, resisting the temptation to bite. It would not do to mark her in ways that might prove compromising.

When she came, her back arching and her fingers digging hard into his arms, it was all Gawain could do to maintain his control. Flushed and radiant with pleasure, she was lovelier than ever. *The smaller sword could find its mark well enough, he thought, and would strike a dozen times more if it could.* With all the stamina of a veteran warrior, the youth continued his campaign, intending that she should surrender all to him before the morning was out.

"Oh, I want you so," she whispered.

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“You have me!” he replied.

When their thighs were slick with pleasure’s juices and Dymphna barely ceased trembling for a moment before she commenced again, Gawain’s control was close to collapse.

“Give,” Dymphna croaked.

Gawain stroked her cheek, taking the opportunity to catch his breath. He knew what she sought, and that it could not long be denied.

“For me,” she said. “Come for me, my love.”

Gawain brought his hips down against hers for one final time. There could be no holding back after her sweetly gasped words. The heat in his loins became almost unbearable in the moments before it erupted out of him. Unleashed, his passion rushed up from the depths of his body to fill hers. She bucked against him. They crashed together, two wild forces shaking and engulfing each other.

When the maelstrom of lust finally melted into quiet calm, they lay together in each other’s arms.

“I wish you did not have to leave us on the morrow,” Dymphna whispered.

“Believe me, I wish the same,” Gawain replied.

“Is there no way you could stay a little longer, my sweet?” she asked.

“My honour demands that I must go.”

“Then would you accept a little token of my affections?” she asked.

With that she leaned from the bed and retrieved a small item.

Gawain felt a cool object pressed into his palm. Looking down, he saw a golden ring glistening against his skin. Tiny strands of the lustrous metal had been woven with remarkable skill. This was one of the most exquisite objects Gawain had ever seen, and he could not dare to consider its worth.

“I cannot accept this,” he said. “I have nothing to offer you in return.”

She pouted very prettily.

“Please.”

Gawain shook his head.

“Forgive me. I cannot.”

“I thought you might refuse. I have another gift that I would offer you.”

For a second time, she leaned down to the floor to retrieve an item. This time she brought forth a belt, woven from threads of green and gold. It was a beautiful item, such as any skilful lady might fashion, and one Gawain felt he could accept with honour.

“It is kind of you indeed,” he said. “I would gladly accept this belt from you.”

Dympna knotted it around his small waist.

"This is no ordinary belt, my sweet," she said. "The man who wears this will not be injured in any way for as long as the belt is against his skin."

Gawain closed his eyes for a few moments. Here was something that might save his life, but that he could not keep.

"Wear it for me," she implored. "I fear some danger waits for you at the green chapel. Wear this for my sake, so that I will know no harm can befall you."

"I will wear it," he said, hoping this would reassure her a little.

He kissed her slowly, tenderly, knowing that there would be few such opportunities again.

"Ah, but it is no good, I must be about my duties," Dymphna complained.

Gawain was sorry to see the fair lady depart. He sat for a while, lost in thought. The belt pressed heavily against his stomach, its presence impossible to ignore. At last he dressed himself, keeping the magical belt against his flesh where it could not be seen. Then he strode out, seeking solitude along the fringes of the forest.

The woodland in these parts was thick and dark. There were many yews and hollies, trees still green even in the depths of winter. Their leaves made a dark canopy, shadowing the earth and creating quiet, private spaces where few people and wild creatures chose to tread.

Amongst the brooding silence of the trees, Gawain examined his conscience and wrestled with himself. He had accepted the Green Knight's challenge because the honour both of Camlan and Arthur himself had been called into question. A coward might refuse to complete the game and could avoid seeking out the Green Knight and his murderous axe. Gawain was no coward. He had survived many cruel and bloody battles with honour to his name. He had set out upon this quest thinking that he would rather die than dishonour himself and, worse yet, bring disgrace upon all of Camlan.

The Green Knight was either some magical being, or had used enchantment to survive what should have been a killing blow. Gawain considered this at length and concluded there was nothing wrong with his seeking magical aid in turn. He had not sworn to present himself without defence, only to offer his neck to the Green Knight's sword. He did not want to die and this belt could save him.

There remained the considerable problem of Dias and his game. Gawain had promised in good faith to relinquish any gifts he received during his stay. The belt was a gift, and must be handed over. Perhaps he could do that, and then explain the precise nature of his difficulty to Dias. It seemed likely that once the older man understood

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Gawain's dreadful plight, he would be willing to loan the belt for a little while, and the Green Knight could be faced without fear. This seemed like a plan with some merit, and having lighted upon it, the young knight felt almost hopeful.

Then Gawain's thoughts turned to Dymphna. He realised there was little chance the lady could possess so rare and potent an object as this enchanted belt without her husband knowing of it. Surely in their years of union, there must have been times when the belt had been knotted around Dias' broad waist? To borrow the item with Dias' blessing would be one thing, but to reveal Dymphna had given it to him? Such an action might cast the lady in a very poor light indeed. Gawain knew that some couples openly took lovers to their beds much as their people had always done. Fidelity was a Roman idea and not everyone ascribed to it. Gawain for one did not, but he knew that jealousy could eat into the hearts of others, spreading a dangerous poison.

He had traded sweet favours both with Dias and his lady, but both of them had been discrete about those liaisons. He had no idea if either knew what the other had done. He could not betray the lady to her husband. Dias might be entirely willing to indulge himself with young men whilst guarding his lady against such freedoms. Gawain did not know enough of either one to judge, and concluded that this was a risk he simply could not afford to take.

He cursed himself for accepting the belt when he had not known its true nature. It had looked like a simple thing such as any clever woman might make; something that might not be thought amiss of, a fair gift for a lady to bestow upon a guest. He wished he had explained to Dymphna the nature of her husband's game, but to do so would have risked betraying Dias' secrets. Gawain growled low to himself, realising that dangers lay in every direction. He could not risk harming Dymphna by revealing a gift that should never have been given. To protect the lady, he must lie and so dishonour himself. There was nothing more important or precious to him that he could give, but she would never know he had sacrificed so much for her, he determined.

Gawain visited his mare and saw that she was well cared for. He had his saddle made ready for the following day, and saw to it that his pack mule was ready. The belt carefully removed, making sure no one saw him. He secreted the troubling artefact in the mule's pack. He could not risk being caught with it about his person, and there were other gifts that he would have to pass on before the night was through.

There was no certainty in Gawain's mind that the belt would preserve him. The Green Knight's blade might well be enchanted like its master, and perhaps even magical aid could not guard against a supernatural blow. Death was always present on the edge of

his thoughts. Any man who lived by the sword passed every day aware it might be his last. Still, his consciousness of mortality had never been keener, inclining Gawain to feel as though he was already separated a little from the domestic comforts around him. He stroked his horse's flank, whispering friendly words to the docile beast. There was solace to be had in the animal's quiet presence.

As Gawain was leaving the stables, he saw Dias returning from the hunt. Several lanky hounds ran alongside the lord's sturdy horse. Today there was no sign of a successful kill.

"How fares my young knight?" the lord enquired.

"I am well, my lord, thank you. Did you hunt today?"

"Ah, you are eager to exchange gifts I see. There is no knowing what the forests may cast in a man's path. Yesterday a boar, today a fox. The dogs had the body, but I saved the brush for you."

Dias lifted the scarlet tail, holding it upright in his lap in a most suggestive manner. As a groom approached to lead the tired horse inside, Dias slid from his mount and proffered the severed brush to Gawain.

"I have a better idea," he said, and threaded it through the plain leather belt slung around the young knight's waist. The gesture reminded Gawain of the item he had concealed, and brought a fierce blush to his cheeks.

"And do you have anything that has been given to you?"

"In a manner of speaking, my lord."

"Is it, perchance, the sort of gift best given in the quiet of a darkened room?"

"It is just as you have said," Gawain replied.

"You have been very busy, my lad. Well, let us retire to the privacy of my room and discuss this gift with the thoroughness it no doubt merits."

Gawain bowed his head and followed where Dias led. His stomach writhed within him as though some restless beast had replaced his innards. A feeling somewhere between excitement and apprehension sent shivers throughout his frame.

In the near darkness of Dias' bedroom, they kissed. All the concerns haunting Gawain's young mind fled as he succumbed to sensual delight. Aroused, and nervously anticipating that which was to come, he surrendered his mouth with utter abandon.

"Tell me of this gift you have been given," Dias asked, his voice a low rumble that vibrated through Gawain's loins.

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“This morning, a fair maiden gave utterly of herself to me. It is a gift I cannot precisely give in turn, for I am no maid,” Gawain said, his fingers straying over Dias’ broad chest.

“And what do you intend to do now?” Dias asked. “For indeed, you cannot welcome me between your thighs as some sweet wench might.”

“There are other favours I could offer, depending on my lord’s tastes and inclinations. You must decide how the gift should best be given.”

“What would you offer me?” Dias asked.

“I would gladly give you my mouth again as I did yesterday,” Gawain said. “Or else, if you are so inclined, I could offer up some other warm and yielding place for your pleasure.”

Dias’ hand made a slow journey of descent, down across Gawain’s chest, over his lean stomach to his waiting groin. The woollens that he wore could not disguise the force of his arousal.

“Have you given yourself in such a way before?” Dias asked.

“I have,” Gawain answered, “I am no virgin. I know well the joys men can share with one another.”

“Do you think your sweet, rounded bottom a good exchange for the tender pleasures of a girl’s open thighs?”

“I think you will find it so,” Gawain said. “Will you have me?” Gawain asked, hardly daring to breathe.

He felt Dias’ hand cover his cheek then lift his chin, guiding his lips into another deep kiss.

“Gladly,” the lord said, brushing kisses down Gawain’s neck. The soft beard tickled at the young knight’s skin, caressing him into heightened sensation. Too aroused to linger over these acts of mutual seduction, Gawain hurriedly shrugged off his clothing. Dymphna had used him thoroughly that morning, but his energies seemed entirely replenished and the stiffening of his cock told him he would need little encouragement. His urgent haste was soon tempered by the patient slowness of Dias’ response. Gawain felt himself touched, his skin stroked and explored by confident hands. He shivered uncontrollably, keenly aware of each fresh sensation as it came.

“It is a pity we want for light,” Dias said. “If you look as good to the eye as you feel to my hands, I will be sorry to have missed the chance to behold you naked.”

Gawain found he could say nothing to this.

With both men naked, they took the time to explore one another fully. Fingers and lips made slow journeys across expanses of chest and back. Tongues lingered over hardened nipples, skin pressed against skin. By slow degrees the temperature rose between them, taking their first heat and transforming it from the warmth of a cooking fire to the dangerous inferno of a forge. There could be no turning back. They must pound out their heat as the blacksmith pounds out blades with his hammers. They could quench each other only in the liquids of their own bodies.

“Kneel upon the edge of the bed, Gawain, and rest your head upon your hands.”

The young knight did as he was bidden. With his rear thus exposed, he felt exquisitely vulnerable. He could be used as the lord saw fit, and there was no knowing if the man would be gentle or aggressive with that unusually broad cock of his.

Gawain felt a smooth finger trace along the crack between his buttocks. He sighed with pleasure as the finger stroked over his balls, before making a slow ascent to the point it had started from. Dias repeated this languorous caress several times, until Gawain felt no tension in his body at all. Then the finger homed in on his sensitive entrance, circling it until Gawain sweated with frustration. Something cool was applied to him, something smooth and slippery. Dias worked around his opening with care, until Gawain knew himself to be as slick as any aroused woman. It was a trick he knew well, and he felt a rush of gratitude at the older man’s care.

One large finger slid into Gawain’s body. He tensed slightly, startled as he always was by the feeling of being penetrated. Taking a deep breath, he willed himself to relax, to submit and enjoy. Only when he had done this did the finger move again, sliding back and forth, pressing down upon him and making slow, delectable circles within his ass until he began to open like some flower in bloom.

“Does that give you pleasure?” Dias asked him.

“Yes,” Gawain breathed.

These anal pleasures were seldom enough to bring him to climax, but he was already giddy with sensation and desirous of more.

“Are you ready for me,” Dias asked him.

“Yes, my lord,” Gawain replied, relishing each word as he spoke it.

He felt the finger withdraw. Anticipation made the moments seem far longer than they truly were. There was an emptiness where the finger had been, a void that needed to be filled. At last came the sensation of warm flesh pressed against Gawain’s ass. The pressure was slight indeed, but he pushed back a little, finding he could open all too

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easily and permit the giant cock inside. Dias was gradual in his penetration, until Gawain felt the pressure of his lusts melt away into something sweetly patient.

Full to brimming with the other man's blood-engorged flesh, Gawain swam in a sea of sensation. Rocked and lulled as though by the motion of gentle waves, the young knight felt himself carried, floating on pleasures that clouded his thoughts in the most delightful ways.

Dias barely moved at all. His vast cock nuzzled against Gawain's innards, retreating fractionally before making further, modest incursions. Stretched as never before, Gawain found he did not need the aggression of rapid strokes to raise his pulse. These controlled, gentle pressures were more than enough, each making him gasp for breath and push back as best he could. Strong hands gripped his hips, palms rubbing along the length of his back from time to time. He wallowed in sensation, luxuriating in the knowledge that he was utterly possessed, entirely taken. He could give no more of himself than this. All he wanted was to have this encounter last as long as possible.

With his senses stimulated beyond all usual degrees, Gawain lost his awareness of time. He felt himself tightening, a clenching deep in his body that had not yet translated itself out to the tip of his stiff cock. The rolling, pulsing feelings inspired by Dias' gentle thrusts threatened to tear his mind apart.

The explosion of heat came in waves too numerous to count. Gawain felt Dias' cock expanding in one final burst of energy. The heat rolled through Gawain's body and he felt a trickle of fluids escape his cock, a surge of warm pleasure as though his aching manhood was being stroked from the inside. Not a full orgasm, but a foretaste of that which must inevitably follow. Streams of sensation rushed along his length, growing ever more intense as climax approached. Gawain felt his seed escaping from him, a searing gush of warmth, all the more potent for there having been no external stimulation to his throbbing cock. He closed his eyes overwhelmed by the strength of it, not wanting to think, move or pass beyond this glorious moment.

Eventually he sank from these elated feelings, his body succumbing to the exhaustion of satisfaction. Dias pressed kisses into his back, his beard soft against Gawain's still-sensitive skin. The young knight remained still, not wanting to break the contact between them or end their coupling. Gradually, the broad cock shrank to modest proportions and Dias pulled free of him, leaving Gawain feeling empty and somewhat vulnerable. He rose from his hands and knees, and found himself gathered up against the larger man's chest. For a long time, neither one of them felt moved to speak. Gawain had entirely forgotten the guilty secret of a hidden belt.

The room was still dark when Gawain awoke. He knew that trying to reclaim sleep would be futile. This was the day on which he must seek out the green chapel and risk death. His heart pounded within him and all hopes of further rest were gone. Gawain found his clothing by touch and dressed with great care. By the time he reached the stables, the sky was growing pale with hints of midwinter's dawn. Although he had seen no one, there were sounds of life issuing from the various buildings as the fort's inhabitants rose to greet the day.

Gawain had considered seeking out Dias and Dymphna to make his farewells, but decided he could not bear the encounter. He did not dare expose himself to anything that might shake his resolve. Leaving to face the Green Knight would be hard enough without the added burden of a difficult parting. He had told neither one of them what awaited him at the green chapel. He supposed that if he did not return, they would eventually recover his body and bury him. There was some cold comfort to be had in that knowledge.

As he mounted his mare, Gawain looked around him, wondering who he could ask for directions. Dread had settled heavy in his guts. He could see no one. A flash of white on the forest's edge caught his eye. A stag emerged, his coat as pale as moonlight and his antlers magnificent. Dark animal eyes locked stared boldly out, and Gawain heard a voice ringing in his ears.

"Will you come with me to the green chapel, fair youth, or does your courage fail you at last?"

"I will follow you," Gawain whispered, his mouth so dry that he could barely find his voice.

At once the stag leapt into the forest, and Gawain urged his horse in pursuit. The belt he had tied around his waist earlier that morning now chafed against his stomach. Low branches whipped at his face and arms, prickly leaves tangled in his hair. It was as much as he could do to keep the stag in sight. The creature's pale hide shone out from amongst the trees, always further ahead than Gawain might have liked. The stag was nimble, and even Gawain's light-footed horse could not hope to equal it. Passing through a dark and tangled thicket, the young man finally lost sight of his otherworldly guide. He was deep in the forests now, and there could be no turning back. His horse snorted anxiously and Gawain dismounted, leading the way as they pressed onwards.

Before him, the undergrowth gave way to a clearing at the far end of which clustered many holly trees. Their branches interwove, creating the impression of a living building, fashioned from the green wood. Deep in the shade of these holly trees, Gawain

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could see the pale rock of a single standing stone. This, he realised, must be the green chapel that he sought for so long. Dismounting, he went at first to tether his horse, then realised he might not survive to reclaim the beast. He pulled off her saddle and took the bridle from her head, placing both on the ground. The horse turned her dark eyes towards him, unsettled by his uncharacteristic mood and behaviour. He stroked her long nose affectionately. While he lived, the mare would not stray far. If he died, she would be free to go her own way.

Gawain approached the stand of holly trees. He found nothing sinister in the darkness of their shade, even though the atmosphere of the place was brooding. This was an ancient place, and he felt the weight of its years keenly. If people of old had sacrificed to local gods in this place, no sign remained of their blood letting. His apprehensive mind considered that the Green Knight might indeed be the god or guardian of this mysterious grove, while he, Gawain, came as the willing blood sacrifice, offering his body for slaughter in a brutal ritual.

Behind him, Gawain heard his horse whickering anxiously. He turned, sword in hand to see a giant figure emerging from the dense woodland. During the year, the monstrosity of the Green Knight had dwindled in Gawain's mind, scaling the giant down to more human proportions. Seeing the enormous fighter afresh sent Gawain's blood pumping in his veins. The great axe was clearly visible, the blade of it glinting where it caught the light. The man was vast, like some walking tree, his body covered in leather armour stained green. A wild shock of green hair and an equally green beard adorned his fearsome face.

"You have come then, little knight," the giant boomed.

"I have," Gawain replied, realising how faint his voice seemed in comparison to the Green Knight's.

"Step out from the chapel into the sun, little knight, and we will conclude our business."

Taking a deep breath, Gawain stepped forth, making every effort to hide the fear he felt now that the long threatened moment was upon him.

"Kneel before me, Sir Gawain. Kneel as you would kneel before your king, so that my axe may taste your young neck."

Gawain knelt, conscious of the cold, damp grass beneath his knees. He tried to compose his thoughts and make ready for death, but the faces of those he loved most persisted in his mind, causing him to hanker after the life he expected to lose. He saw the axe raised, then race down in a lethal arc towards him. There was no pain at all.

“You flinched, Sir Gawain. Face your death like a man!”

The Green Knight’s words stung Gawain’s pride. He had not been conscious of flinching. Keeping himself rigidly still, he watched the axe rise again but closed his eyes before it swung down towards him. Gawain wondered if he had lost all sense of time, for still the agony of metal biting into his flesh did not come.

“Now you do justice to yourself,” the Green Knight observed.

Gawain knew he was being toyed with just as an otter will sport with an eel before landing the killing blow.

For a third time the axe was raised. Gawain was still, determined to meet his death with dignity, if death indeed meant to take him. He thought of the belt around his waist, and hoped its magic would hold true and preserve his life. Pain flared along the side of his neck as the axe struck him. He could not stop himself from crying out, and agonised moments passed before he realised he had not been fatally wounded. Blood seeped from the cut on his neck, but it was not deep enough to do him any lasting harm. Gawain looked down at the crimson stains on his fingers, then up at the giant. He expected taunts and another round of waiting for the axe, but the vast man was both still and silent for a long time.

“The first two blows were for the first two days, when you were true to me, Gawain. On the third day, you broke faith with me, and for that I have marked you.”

At first the words made no sense to the young knight and he frowned deeply, looking downwards at his hands as he tried to unravel this peculiar riddle.

“Look up at me, Gawain,” the giant said, but this time his voice was softer, quieter, and altogether more familiar.

Raising his eyes once more, Gawain could barely comprehend what he saw. Where, moments before, there had stood the giant figure of the Green Knight, he now saw the broad form of Dias.

“What enchantment is this?” the young knight said.

“Mine own, sweet youth. I am the Green Knight whom you have sought.”

“Why have you spared me?”

“The true test of your mettle was your stay in my house. I meant to reward or punish you depending on your conduct. On the first day you were true to me, and offered up the kiss my Dymphna had given you.”

“You know then?”

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“How else could I test you? On the second day you remained true to me, offering up the favour my lady had gifted you with, and for those two days, I have not struck you.”

Dias sighed.

“On the third day you only returned a part of the gifts given you, or did you forget my lady’s belt?”

“I did not forget it.”

“Perhaps you believed that it might spare your life.”

“I hoped it might, but would have asked it of you had I not feared for the lady’s honour. I did not know that you and she were privy to each other’s games.”

At this, Dias laughed aloud.

“You thought to spare Dymphna’s blushes by hiding a belt you were certain I must recognise? Why did you accept it in the first place?”

“She caught me when I was not at my best. I was – ah – distracted.”

“She is a fair woman and can do such things to a man. Come lad, you did well enough, I am pleased with you.”

Dias slipped an arm around Gawain’s shoulder and steered him in the direction of his horse.

“Can I ask you why you went to such lengths – the enchantment, the challenge last year—what purpose does it serve?”

“Oh, you may ask anything you like, Gawain, but I will not tell you the answers. Come, let us feast and drink a while.”

In the great hall of the fortress, everything needed for long hours of celebration had been laid out. The fire burned brightly, warming the large hall. Boughs of holly, bundles of bay, and sprigs of mistletoe adorned the building, lending festive cheer.

“It is midwinter’s day,” Dias reminded Gawain. “You must join with us as we feast and make merry.”

“I would be honoured to do that, my lord.”

They indulged palates and taste buds with fruits and meats, mead and wine. Gawain laughed and jested with a light heart, now that the threat of death no longer weighed down upon him. The hours sped rapidly, aided by fine wines and succulent delicacies. It seemed to Gawain that every inhabitant of the fortress must have gathered there, for the great hall was full of smiling, red-cheeked people indulging in food and laughter. Appetites for every public pleasure remained high through the afternoon and on

into evening. Long shadows crept over the fort until its walls were lost to the darkness of the shortest day.

Dymphna graced the young knight with many beguiling smiles and with the rich music of her laughter. She did not ask what had befallen him at the green chapel, but Gawain supposed she must have been privy to her husband's curious plans.

When at last the revelries were over, Dymphna put one arm around her husband's waist, and the other around Gawain's drawing the three of them close together.

"The night will be a cold one, I think," she said softly. "I have ordered a fire lit in our room, and mean to retire there. Will you come with me?"

Gawain glanced at Dias, saw the broad smile on the older man's face, and hastily nodded his own consent. Food and wine had done their work, rendering Gawain sleepy and satisfied. He shook off his somnambulance rapidly as he stepped out of the warm hall into the chill of a covered walkway. A thin layer of snow had blown in, and the wind struck him to the bones as he hurried across the short distance, following the lord and lady. He had no idea what this unpredictable pair might now have in store for him. Their games thus far had proved complex and dangerous, but he had no desire to retreat from them.

After the brief chill of midwinter's night, Gawain was glad to step into the warmth of the lord and lady's private room. A large fire burned in the hearth, driving off the cold, and gently illuminating the large bed with shifting orange tones. The smell of wood smoke filled the air.

"Did you truly not suspect we played the same game with you?" Dias asked, laughing.

"I confess I did not," Gawain replied.

"Such an innocent, in some regards at least," Dymphna said. "You have had your way with both of us separately. What say this night we three share one bed?"

Gawain swallowed hard. It was true that he had bedded a significant number of women and a fair few men in his time, but only ever singly. The novelty of this unexpected proposal appealed to him, even as he wondered how the three of them might arrange themselves to best effect. He had barely managed to nod his consent when the two of them closed in upon him. He felt Dias' broad hands glide over his back, the touch all too familiar, now. Dymphna pressed her bosom to his chest, offering up her lips.

Caught between the two of them, Gawain's entire being pulsed with arousal. Hands loosened his belt, unpinned, unlaced and removed his various garments. Gawain

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submitted to their combined efforts, deciding it was better to remain passive and enjoy whatever they intended for him.

Lips and fingers spun fine webs of sensation across his body. Gawain responded as best he could, kissing and touching first one, then the other. The contrasts between these two had never been more apparent: Dias towered over Gawain, while Dymphna stood slightly shorter than the young knight. The lord's skin was roughened by days of hunting; his muscles lean and firm, while the lady was all delicious softness and curving allure. There was something uncannily similar in their kisses, and were it not for the brush of Dias' moustache and beard, Gawain would have struggled to tell one from the other when they put their mouths against his skin.

Gently, he was pressed down onto the bed, until he lay full length on his back, utterly exposed and revelling in his vulnerability: They could do exactly as they pleased with him. Then Dymphna lay at his side, her hand on his stomach, her lips parting as she took his nipple into her mouth. Gawain closed his eyes, and felt Dias take his other nipple in much the same way. The two suckled on him, until he lost all sense of which tongue, which mouth tormented which side of his body. His awareness floated between these two moist pools of contact, the swirling action of skilful tongues, the pressure of confident lips. Gawain gasped and bucked, his hands pinned to his side so that he could do little to return the favours so lavishly bestowed upon him.

"What shall we do with you, my handsome knight?" Dymphna asked.

"I put myself entirely at your mercy," Gawain murmured.

"No requests to make? No sensual delights you have yet to indulge and might venture now to name?" Dymphna pressed.

Gawain's imagination swam with erotic visions – the three of them combined in numerous ways, mouths and orifices welcoming cocks, fingers, and tongues. He might not have indulged in such combinations of lovers before, but he could see the myriad possibilities created when three made love rather than two. Gawain wanted to penetrate, and be entered in turn, to try every sensual arrangement his desire could envisage.

Dias caressed Gawain's cheek with his thumb.

"Too many choices, I'll warrant," he said. "Perhaps we should choose for you?"

"Yes," Gawain said. "Please."

Dias and Dymphna kissed above him then whispered suggestions to each other. Gawain waited, anticipation fuelling his self-awareness such that every last part of his skin was acutely alive to sensation.

Dias swung himself around such that he was straddling Gawain's body. Thickly muscled legs pinned him to the bed, hard flesh that Gawain was quick to grasp with his hands. Then Dias' swollen cock was presented to his eager lips. Gawain stretched his mouth as far as it would go to accommodate the vast appendage. He licked at the helmeted head, sucking down the first tantalising trickles of salty fluids.

Just as he was settling into rhythms of giving, he felt his own stiff member overwhelmed with warmth and moisture. A teasing tongue flashed over his tip, jolting his body with a rush of sensation.

Gawain soon discovered that it was difficult to give the attention required to Dias' cock while his own was being stimulated. The urge to groan and cry out was powerful, but the mass of swollen, pulsing flesh between his lips made all but the faintest expressions impossible. Just as he was growing used to this exchange, the couple moved away from him and his aching jaw was relieved from the strain of encompassing so large a cock. The cessation in their play felt like being plunged into cold water. He watched them strip off the rest of their clothing before they swapped positions.

Then Dymphna's silken thighs surrounded his head and he was launched back into the heat of desire. Dymphna was dripping as she lowered herself down, her soft curls tickling his nose as his tongue sought the straining nub of her clitoris. Her juices trickled over his chin and the sweet smell of her arousal made his mouth water.

As Gawain worked upon Dymphna's slippery sex, Dias parted the young man's legs and set upon him. Gawain gasped and moaned into Dymphna's sodden curls as first his balls and then his still tender ass were lathed by Dias' tongue. The young knight's body shuddered and twisted with frustrated lust. He longed for the relief of some soft orifice wherein he could spend the pent-up force boiling inside him. Neither of his lovers seemed inclined to offer him such release.

Above him, Dymphna cried out, a guttural sound torn from her throat by pleasure. Gawain was triumphant as he felt her body quivering, and envied her such satisfaction. When she climbed off him, he wondered what these two might have in store for him next.

"Can you stand?" Dias asked.

Gawain struggled to his feet, finding his legs unwilling to co-operate. Dias knelt before him, his strong arms wrapping around Gawain's waist and holding him steady while his lips closed around the young man's aching cock. He felt Dymphna's hands on his buttocks, and then her dexterous tongue began to probe his ass, sending intensely pleasurable feelings shooting through his body.

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Having spent so long wanting to release himself, Gawain now resisted his approaching climax with all the will he could muster. Caught between these two talented mouths, he did not want his torment to end. Try as he might, he could not hold back for long. Gawain had little choice but to rest his weight on Dias' broad shoulders as he erupted into the larger man's mouth. Sobbing and trembling, he continued to gush for longer than he had thought possible. Spent and weary, he stumbled. Strong arms caught him, and Gawain found himself lifted tenderly to the comfort of the bed.

Lying wrapped in warm furs and blankets, Gawain watched Dias kissing Dymphna. She had to stand on tiptoe and, even so, her lord was obliged to crane his neck in order to reach her lips. Gawain was groggy with pleasure, but he watched hungrily, hoping they would permit him to see more of them. It seemed a very long time before they arrived on the bed beside him. Dias stretched out, giving Gawain a perfect view of his muscular body and straining erection. Gawain watched, eager for every new sight and experience. He was not disappointed. Dymphna lowered herself onto her lord's majestic prick, and their lovemaking began in earnest.

Gawain thought of all the things he might do. He could apply his tongue to both their nipples; use his fingers to further enhance their enjoyment. He thought of kissing each in turn, of working his fingers into the tempting roundness of Dymphna's rear. He did not doubt that they would welcome anything he chose to do. However, the day's trials had taken their toll, and Gawain settled for the easy pleasure of watching.

These two were beautiful together, and he feasted his eyes upon their passion. He could see the tell-tale looks on Dymphna's face that heralded the approach of an orgasm. The strain of mounting pleasure was etched in the furrows on Dias' brow. Gawain knew what it meant to give these two pleasure, but watching them indulge each other proved more intoxicating than even his own efforts had been. Lost in vicarious enjoyment, in empathic responses, he felt his own body rise and fall, carried on a sea of blissful feeling.

The night was old indeed when at last these three lovers were too weary for further sports. Gawain lay in the middle of the bed, his body warmed and sheltered by the lord and lady. He sank into sleep so deep that dreams did not find him there.

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Part Three

Back along the ways he went, to the hall with the round table.

It was with some reluctance that Gawain readied his horse and pack mule for the journey back to Camlan. He had broken his fast in the great hall then shared kisses with the lord and lady of the fortress. The day was grey and overcast, hardly auspicious for his departure. The open ground before the fort was empty as he led his steed to the entranceway. Dymphna opened her arms to him, holding him tightly and planting a dozen sweet kisses on his lips. When she relinquished him, Dias pulled him close. Gawain's heart ached with the knowledge that he must leave. He could think of nothing to say that would do honour to his feelings.

"Travel well and safely, my sweet," Dymphna murmured.

"Remember us," Dias added.

Certainty settled upon Gawain that he would not see these two again in life. He took Dymphna's fingers in his right hand, Dias' in his left and held them tightly.

"My thanks to both of you," he said, "for everything you have given me."

"There is one more thing, given once already but forgotten in the heat of last night," Dias said.

The broad-shouldered man rooted in his pocket and drew forth a finely woven belt made from green and gold strands. He fastened the belt around Gawain's narrow waist.

"While you wear this, no blade can end your life," Dias promised him.

"I have nothing to give you in return," Gawain replied.

"We ask nothing," Dymphna said. "Go in peace, Gawain, return to your king."

With a flurry of parting kisses, Gawain forced himself to step away and climb onto the back of his mare. He sat for a moment, fixing his two lovers in his mind before he wheeled the horse around and set off.

When he reached the tree line, Gawain turned his horse back, meaning to wave one final farewell to the lord and lady. Behind him, mist wove across a small, open

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clearing, beyond which the woodlands continued. Gawain rubbed his eyes and stared again with disbelief. He had only ridden a short way. The rising walls of the fort should have been easily visible. All sounds of normal life had gone, leaving only occasional birdcalls and the dripping of water from nearby trees. The belt around his waist seemed entirely real, as did the ridge of scab along his neck where Dias had struck him. All other evidence of his strange encounter had vanished away without explanation.

Gawain turned his horse once more, and set off along the track that wove through the woodlands. He could not quite remember how he had come to this place, and did not know how long it would take him to return home. It seemed strange to him that less than a week had passed since he last travelled through these lands. It seemed far longer, as though years had been lived out on the fortress. Gawain wondered if he had strayed into faerie realms and would return to find that a century had passed, the life he had known eaten up by the years he had lost. These were grim thoughts to nurse alone in a brooding forest.

Several days of travelling and sleeping on the cold ground brought Gawain through the woodland. Rolling farmland dotted with smaller woods lay before him. He thought perhaps he had seen this place before, but could not be certain when. There were many parts of Logres with a similar appearance. Day by day, the hills, copses and villages looked every more familiar, until at last Gawain saw the walls of Camlan rising from a nearby hill. The young knight reined in his horse and sat for a while, taking in the view. He could see people in the distance. Leaning forwards, Gawain scratched his horse's ear.

"We're home, old girl," he said.

Gawain wondered what his comrades would make of his strange adventure, and how much of its true nature he would reveal to them. No doubt by nightfall, he would be sat at the round table once more, telling his tale and learning of all that had passed during his long absence. There were friends he had missed, lovers he longed to pass time with. More precious than all of these, there was Arthur, his beloved king.

Only now that he was returning did Gawain appreciate how deeply he had missed his sovereign. He longed for Arthur's commanding presence, for the warmth of his voice. It had been too long since those compelling dark eyes had last turned upon him. Memories of their parting kiss brought heat to Gawain's body, driving out the winter chill. There was no knowing if Arthur would so favour him again. For Gawain, it would be enough simply to lay eyes upon the man once more.

"I think this fair young knight must be lost," a familiar voice said.

Gawain slid from his horse and dropped to one knee in the road. Arthur had never demanded such gestures of obedience from his closest followers, but so intense were Gawain's feelings that he needed to kneel.

"Have you wandered for years in the fairy realms? Is that why you no longer recognise me?" Arthur asked him.

"I do not believe so, my King," Gawain answered, raising his eyes and hoping that the tears there would not betray him by sliding down his cheeks.

Arthur reached down and took Gawain's hand, helping him to stand once more. Then he clasped Gawain about the shoulders and pulled him close. Gawain embraced Arthur in return, feeling that now he truly was home. Raising his head from Arthur's shoulder, he saw that there were perhaps a dozen knights in the King's entourage. Familiar faces smiled back at him. Arthur released him and turned to these men.

"You will have your share of him when we eat tonight," Arthur promised. "For now, I will keep young Gawain to myself. Ride ahead, we will not be long in catching you."

Gawain watched the other riders depart. The road was quiet in the winter dusk.

"Did I not say that you would return safely to me?" Arthur said, his tone intimate now that the others had departed.

"You did indeed, and I am glad to prove you right."

Arthur stepped closer, his fingers finding the scar on Gawain's neck.

"I met the Green Knight and submitted to his axe, but he chose not to part my head from my shoulders," Gawain said.

"It sounds as though you have a strange tale to tell."

"I do, and will gladly share the greater part of it tonight, if you so desire."

"Only the greater part, Gawain? Will you not share it all?" Arthur asked.

"Forgive me my King, but there are aspects of my tale that would make me blush to repeat, and are not suited for your hall."

"Then perhaps you would tell the whole of it to me when there is no one else to see your blushes. I do not think I have ever seen you blush, it must be quite a tale to affect you so."

"I do not think you will be disappointed," Gawain said. He looked around at the darkening sky, and added, "Night is almost upon us."

"It will be dark soon. Gawain, will you allow me to hold you again?"

Gawain answered by stepping closer, covering the small distance between them. He slipped his arms around Arthur's waist, feeling the taller man's hair tickle against his

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face. He felt the brush of Arthur's short beard against his cheek, then the softer pressure of lips on his skin.

"Camlan has been quiet in your absence," Arthur said, his breath warm against Gawain's ear. "I have missed you my friend."

"And I you," Gawain replied.

Gawain turned his head slightly, planting a tentative kiss high on Arthur's cheek, above his beard. He wanted a kiss akin to the one they had shared on parting, but hesitated to ask. As though sensing this longing, Arthur moved his head to meet Gawain's, bringing their lips together. Gawain could neither move nor think, he melted, gripped Arthur harder, and then managed to open his lips a little.

Arthur's tongue lapped at his mouth, a tantalising hint at greater sensual possibilities. Gawain's tongue responded in kind, deepening the kiss and drawing them hard against each other. The pressure of Arthur's lips against his stole away all other thoughts. Gawain could not think of lust, of expressing the heat in his body, or requiting the hunger that gnawed deep within him. It was enough to be here, in this moment, held tightly in Arthur's arms and lost in the enchantment of a kiss.

"Come and tell me your story, Gawain," Arthur said. "The night grows cold and there are warmer places for kisses such as these."

"And warmer places to be kissed," Gawain said, surprising himself.

"That is so."

They walked together, arms around each other's waists. The horses followed dutifully behind.

"And so, one story ends and another begins," Arthur remarked.

Bryn Colvin

About the Author

Bryn Colvin is a British author with a passion for all things strange. This is her first foray both into joint writing, and to working with the lovely people at Venus Press. She has other work published online, and in paperback anthologies.

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