

The giant man on his gargantuan horse rode right through the open door, sitting tall in the stirrups, reined in his great steed, and towered over the gathered nobles, a majestic and alien sight. He was decked out in green armor from head to toe. His helmet, chest plate, chain mail, boots—all were made of some unknown bright green metal that shone with an unholy luster. Stranger still, his stallion, the largest horse Gawain had ever seen, was the same grassy hue. At his side, an emerald-studded sword hung in a juniper scabbard, until the strange knight reached down with one lime-colored glove and ripped it from its resting place, holding it high above his head, so that the edge of the moss-colored blade scratched the high ceiling of the dining hall.

This was all done before anyone could react, but the knights would not remain paralyzed for long. With sudden cries of anger and fear, they leapt atop or over the tables, grabbing up sharp knives or heavy tankards. Gawain was among the most quick-thinking of those there; he jumped to the wall, where several weapons of warfare were hung as trophies and decorations. Among these were a large claymore and hand-axe, taken from fallen soldiers when Lot's rebellion was put down years ago. Gawain tore both from the wall, turned, and tossed the axe to Lancelot, whose hand was already outstretched to catch it. They joined the throng of knights pointing silly knives at the massive opponent, while others ran to the walls to take down other weapons.

Arthur was the only man at the tables to remain seated. He was glaring sternly up at the anonymous intruder, his hands steepled in front of his face. After a moment, the initial cries from the knights were replaced by an eerie, confused silence, broken soon by Arthur's harsh voice. "Guinevere, get the ladies out of here."

There was a scuffling sound as the ladies of the court stood and hastened out of the room via a back door. Without looking, Gawain fervently hoped that Raquel was among them, and had resisted the urge to grab a weapon and stand with the knights.

"How have you passed my guards?" Arthur asked in a voice like ice, "And by what right do you intrude on this feast, in full arms and armor? I warn you—if I don't like your answer, I'll have your head."

The green knight had not moved since raising his sword. He might have been a jade statue, posed perfectly and magnificently before the door.

A low rumble sounded from the knight, growing in volume. It took Gawain a moment to recognize it for what it was, so unearthly did it sound: the green knight was laughing. The laugh grew slowly louder, and then it was impossibly loud, echoing throughout the dining hall, shaking the trays and dinnerware on the tables. Gawain's ears throbbed at the sound of that ominous, unnatural laugh, rolling over him like thunder.

The knight sheathed his sword, and his laughter died away. Reaching up with both hands, he removed his helmet. Gawain's heart shook in his chest when he saw the man's face.

Like his armor, horse, and weapon, the knight himself was green. His skin bore the color and texture of bright, light moss in a streambed. His long hair and beard were like dark grass. He was smiling, and the teeth that shown brilliantly through that smile were a bright chartreuse, the same color as his mesmerizing eyes.

"Few things can stop me from going where I please, Arthur of Camelot," the man's voice boomed across the hall. Gawain's hand shook slightly around the sword. "Your guards are asleep outside. Don't hold it against them—when I want people to sleep, they sleep. At any rate, I doubt they could handle me."

The green knight dismounted his huge horse. When his feet touched the ground, Gawain could see that he stood a good eight or nine feet tall, towering well over every man in the room. His helmet, which he'd been holding in his hand, had somehow vanished, and with that broad, insane

smile still plastered on his mossy face, the green knight spread both hands in a gesture of mock respect.

“I’ve heard great things about this court,” he boomed through his maniacal grin. “I’ve heard these are the greatest warriors in all the world. I’ve heard they fell goblins and ghosts, dragons and drakes, trolls and troglodytes alike.” He sneered. “They don’t look so strong to me.”

The emerald cavalier put his hands behind his broad back and began strolling around the empty space in the middle of the room, ignoring the weapons still pointed towards him. “In fact, now that I see you all, I realize I have come only to witness sniveling cowards. These are the famous Table Knights? They tremble. They’re ready to faint with fear, and I haven’t even offered a fight. All the glory and triumph of the Round Table—toppled by a single rider.”

“You haven’t toppled anything, creature,” Arthur countered quietly, “You only live now at my mercy. Tell me why you are here, or get out of my house. I warn you—the only thing holding these men back is my command.”

“Then your command is only keeping them from their deaths. You could throw your whole army at me, petty kingling, and it would be like tossing pebbles at a mountain.”

Sir Kay, overcome by this insult to his liege lord, stepped forward with a challenging cry, holding out the sword he’d taken from the wall.

The green knight simply glanced at him, and suddenly, Kay dropped the weapon, screaming in pain and clutching his hand. “It’s on fire!” he gasped. Gawain’s eyes fell on the fallen sword, and to his amazement, he saw that the hilt was indeed glowing as if it sat atop a blacksmith’s forge.

“Not until I say you can, little man,” the knight jeered at Kay’s hateful glare. “I’ll tell you what, Arthur. I’ll give you a sporting chance. I *won’t* destroy this pitiful little upstart of a kingdom—if one of your knights will play my little game.”

“We’re not playing any games,” Arthur told him, still seated. Gawain marvelled at the king’s unflinching calm. His own heart was pounding.

“But you haven’t even heard the rules, yet!” The green knight threw up his arms in mock protest. “Here they are. I’ll let one of your knights—just one, mind you, so don’t all come rushing in at once—take a swing at me with whatever weapon he wants. He can strike me anywhere he’d like, but he’d better make it a *good* strike. He’d better kill me, because if he doesn’t, he’ll be obligated to allow me the same honor. Just as I’ve come to your house to be struck, he must come to mine for the same treatment. Now, that’s fair play, don’t you think? I’m not threatening the whole kingdom. Just one man. Who’s brave enough?”

The hall was silent for a moment. Then Arthur spoke again. “I already told you,” he said, finally standing. “We’re not playing any games.”

The green knight looked disappointed at this. His smile disappeared in a cloud of frustration. “Oh, but you are, Arthur,” he said, his tone now menacing. “Only by refusing me, you’re playing a much more dangerous one. Shall I kill every man in this room, right now, with a thought? Perhaps I’ll fuck all your women once I’ve done. Then I’ll kill them, too. I’ll fuck and kill your queen last, so she can watch all the others. Would that be a better game?”

For the first time, the rage Arthur must have been feeling could be heard in his voice. “This is your last warning, creature. Leave this hall, or I will order these men to fall on you, and you have my word, they will end you.”

And then Gawain knew, suddenly, without knowing how, exactly how it would end. Arthur did not believe the creature’s threats, but Arthur was wrong. Why Gawain believed it, he could not say, but deep in his soul, he felt absolute certainty that the green knight could—and would—do everything he claimed. Arthur would not back down. The knights would attack, they would die,

and that would be the end of it all.

“I’ll do it!” he shouted, stepping forward.

“Gawain!” Arthur’s sharp tone cut across the room.

Gawain flinched at the rebuke, but stood firm. “I’ll do it. One strike, anywhere I want, as good as I can make it—that’s the deal, correct?”

The green knight regarded him now with lazy eyes, and that insane smile slowly spread across his features again. “I won’t defend myself. I’ll stand right here and let you strike me. But if I survive, you’ll have to take the same from me, in my home—or I’ll be back.”

“I’d better make certain you don’t survive, then.”

“Wait, you idiot!” Lancelot hissed, clapping a hand on his friend’s shoulder as Gawain stepped forward. “It’s a trick. This thing doesn’t want to die! And whatever he really wants, you’re giving it to him!”

Gawain shook off Lancelot’s hand and moved forward, putting himself only a few feet from the enemy. He turned to one side and took a few practice swings, testing the unfamiliar sword’s balance. Then he turned and met the green knight’s eyes. The room was silent. Time stopped. The world around Gawain vanished, and all that was left was the insane smile on the mossy face of his opponent.

Without taking his eyes off the green knight’s face, Gawain swung the blade. He perceived everything moving slowly, then, and he saw his own weapon moving sluggishly through the air, rising gradually but inevitably towards the green knight’s soft, naked neck.

Time caught up as the blade bit into the creature’s flesh, and Gawain felt a tingle run down his arm as the weapon cut cleanly through it, slicing through skin and muscle, tendon and spine, separating head from shoulders with the same ease that a man might have in cutting grass. The head, still smiling that maniacal, impossible grin, flopped to one side, bounced off of one shining green shoulderguard, fell to the floor with a stomach-turning thud, and rolled like an uneven melon across the tiles. Green blood splattered in its path. By some impossible fortune, it came to rest with the ugly stump against the floor, the face frozen in a terrible grin, the open eyes resting directly on the man who’d separated it from its body.

Gawain completed the great swing and stepped back, breathing heavily, expecting to see the headless body crumple to the floor.

It didn’t.

Instead, the green-clad corpse continued standing there, arms crossed, feet spread, and for a moment Gawain marveled at the balance of his slain foe, who had stood so perfectly that not even death could break his stance.

Then, impossibly, the corpse’s shoulders began to shake.

The rumble of the knight’s laughter filled the room once more, and Gawain stared in unabashed horror as the headless body unfolded its arms and shook one finger scoldingly at the northern knight. Then, impossibly, the body turned and strode over to where its lost head sat on the floor, and as Gawain’s terrified eyes fell on that head, he saw that the mouth was open, guffawing with glee, its eyes rolling at him in mockery of his failed attempt. With one fluid movement, the green knight stooped and grabbed his own severed head by the grassy hair, lifted it into the air, turned, and walked back to his horse.

Before mounting, the knight turned held out the severed head to face Gawain. The mouth moved to form the words that spilled out into Gawain’s shocked ears.

“Seek me in the north, Gawain. Leave tomorrow morning at the latest—if you don’t, rest assured that I’ll know! Come alone—and remember, this bargain saves your king, so don’t even

think about forfeiting! I look forward to seeing you at the Green Chapel!” As he spoke these last words, the green knight climbed up atop his enormous steed and, still holding his fully animated head in his hand, he rode out the door, once again somehow fitting his gigantic girth through this tiny frame, and was gone.

His deep, insane laughter echoed throughout the dining hall for some time afterwards.