



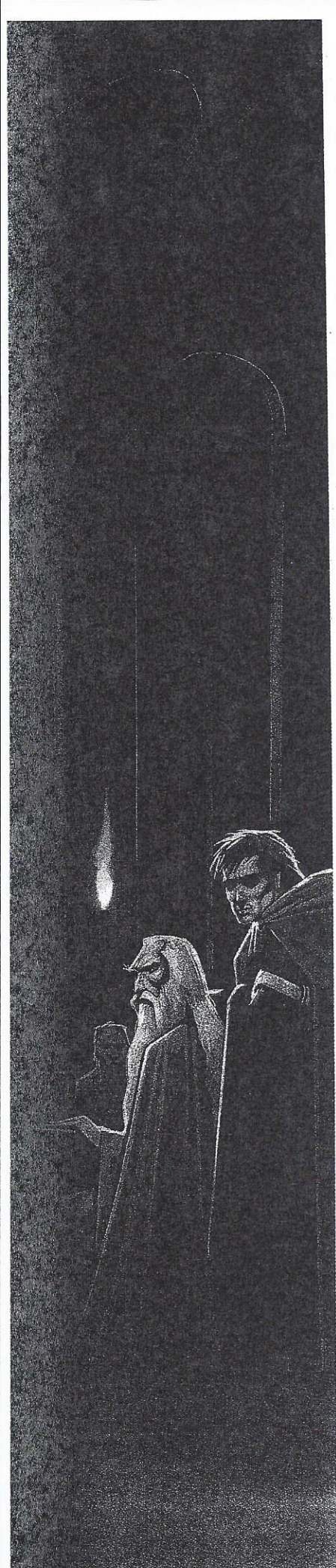
# GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

**I**t was midwinter, and bitter cold. In the great hall of Camelot the knights of the Round Table sat wrapped in their cloaks, eagerly awaiting the meal that would soon come steaming from the great hearth in the next room.

To pass the time before the food arrived, King Arthur proposed that a tale should be told, one of bravery and great deeds. Arthur turned to Merlin, but before the old man had a chance to rise, there was a thunderous clattering at the gates, and a rider burst through the doors.

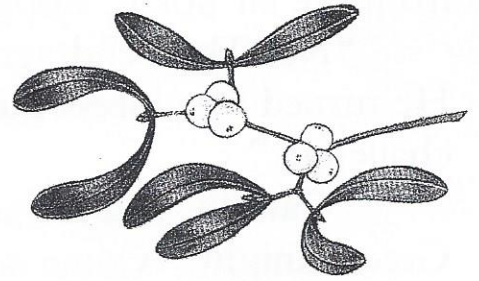
The men were taken aback. No one entered the hall of Camelot on horseback, let alone unannounced and without permission. When they took a closer look at their guest, they had an even bigger surprise.

Everything about the man—his skin, his clothes, his horse, his hair—was green. Only the whites of his eyes and his gleaming white teeth

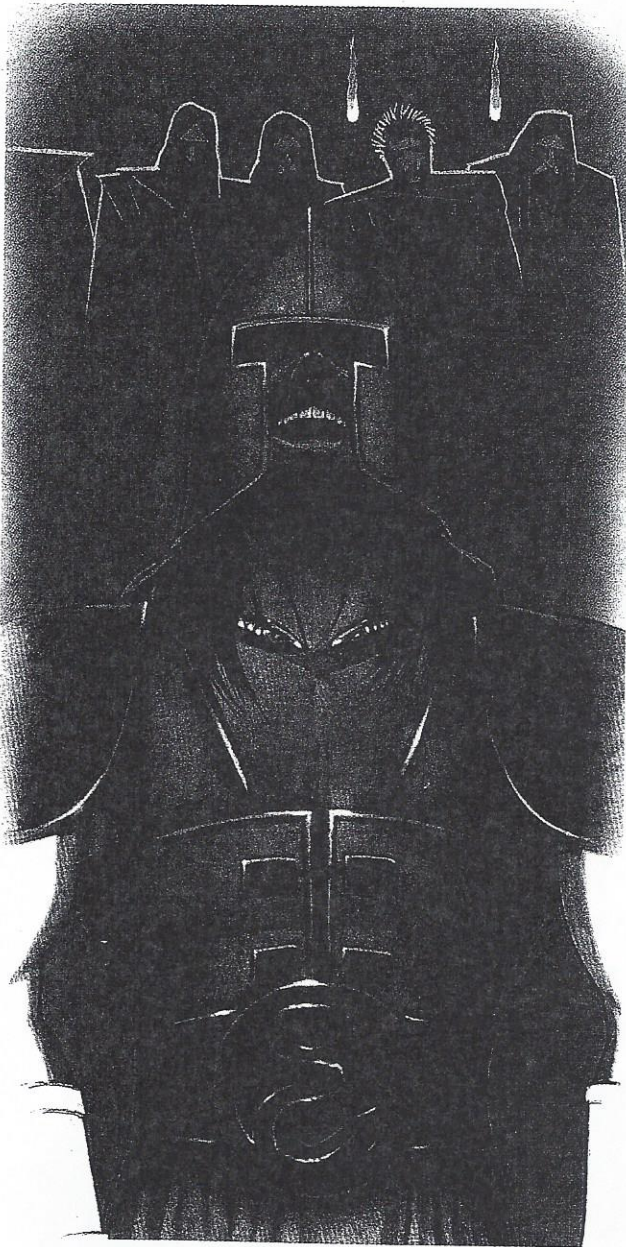




shone through the mask of green. In one hand he carried a large axe. In the other he held a sprig of mistletoe, a holy plant to the Celts, to show that he did not come in anger.



"Men of Camelot, I come in friendship," said the Green Knight, getting down from his horse and laying his axe on the floor. "To entertain you on this coldest of all nights, I present you with a challenge: I ask that one man here come forward, and, with one blow, strike off my head with this weapon."



There was a small murmur from the men, but it was quickly hushed as the Green Knight spoke again. "There is just one condition," he added. "I am to do the same to him in a year and a day."

The hall was silent. Not a single warrior wished to take up the terrifying Green Knight's challenge.

The Green Knight began to laugh—so loudly that the walls shook. "I had heard," he roared, "that the men of the Round Table were the bravest in all the land. Now I see the truth, and I am quite disappointed."

This was too much for Arthur. He could not have his loyal, courageous warriors spoken of this way. He stood up.

"I will do it, sir," he announced to the Green Knight.

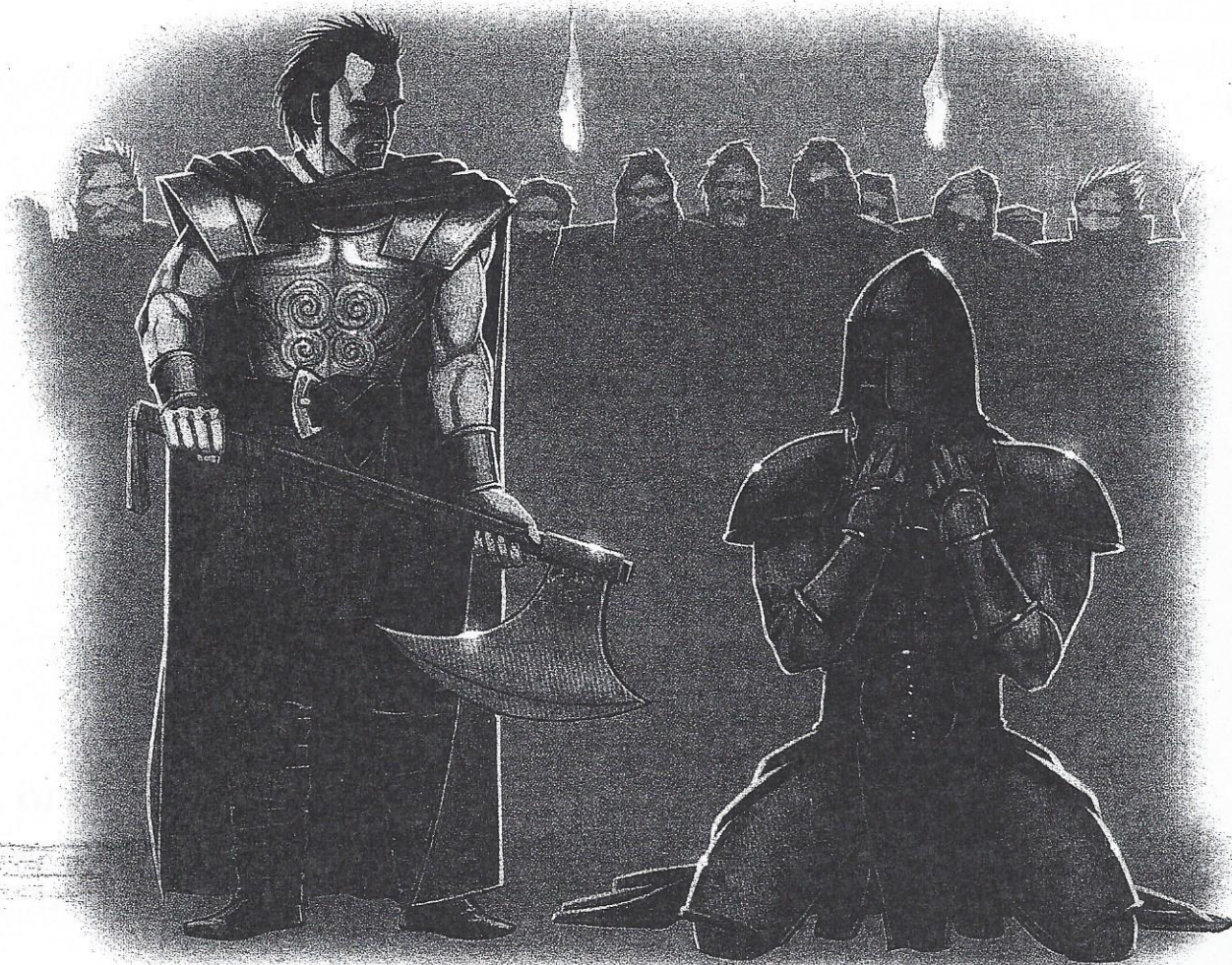


But before Arthur could step forward, Gawain, a young warrior from the far north, stopped him.

"No. The Pendragon must not go," said Gawain. "I will do it." He turned to address the Green Knight. "I am Gawain. I accept your challenge."

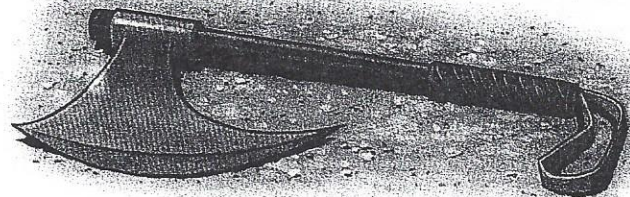
"Gawain, you are a credit to yourself and this table," said the Green Knight. "Come and take my axe."

Gawain did so, and the Green Knight knelt and bared his neck.



"One blow, Gawain," he reminded him.

Gawain struggled to lift the heavy axe, but at last he held it over his head and took his swing. He made a clean cut through the Green Knight's neck. Instantly his head fell from his body and rolled across the floor.







Gawain jumped back. But instead of toppling over, the Green Knight got up, walked over to his head, and picked it up by the hair.

The head cleared its throat and fixed its eyes on Gawain. Then it spoke.

“You will find me at the Green Tower,” it said, “in a year and a day.”

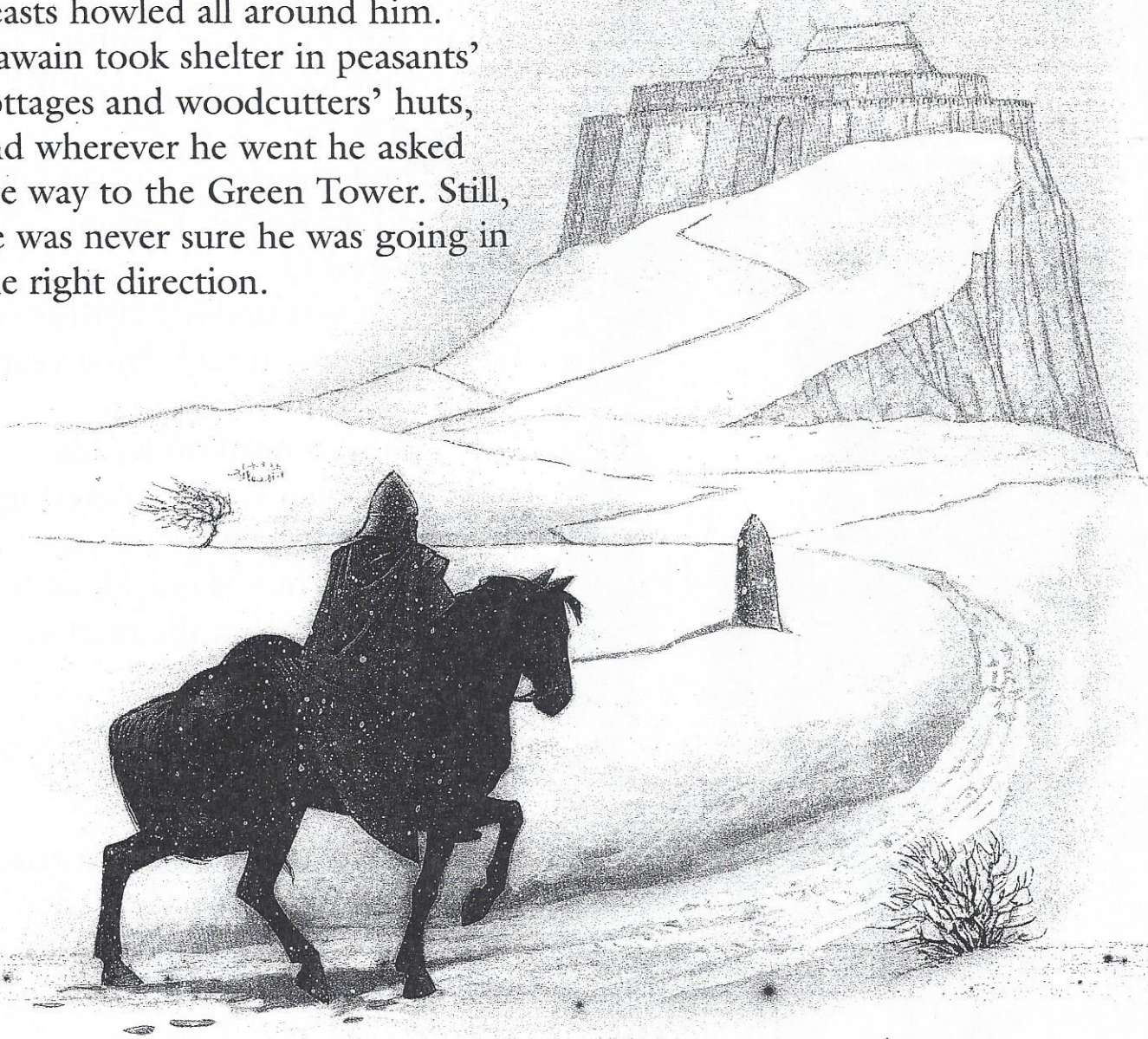
With his head under his arm, the Green Knight picked up his axe, hopped onto his horse, and galloped out as quickly as he had arrived, leaving the men in the hall stunned.

The year passed quickly. Everyone seemed to forget the Green Knight’s challenge—everyone but Gawain. He worried about it all year, and when the time finally came for him to leave, he was filled with dread.

“Good luck, Gawain. Return safely,” Arthur said as he watched him go. In his heart, though, Arthur did not believe he would ever see Gawain again.



Gawain rode for days through treacherous, frozen woodland paths. Bands of robbers roamed the forests, and wild beasts howled all around him. Gawain took shelter in peasants' cottages and woodcutters' huts, and wherever he went he asked the way to the Green Tower. Still, he was never sure he was going in the right direction.



Finally, just a few days before he was supposed to meet the Green Knight, Gawain was close to giving up. Icy sleet lashed down from the sky, and he felt he did not have the strength to go on. But just as he was about to turn back to Camelot, he saw a fortress on the horizon, and galloped toward it. When he arrived he banged hard on the gate, and begged the gatekeeper to let him in.



That afternoon, when Bertilak returned from the hunt, he presented Gawain with a small fox.

"And what do you have for me?" he asked.

In reply, Gawain reached up and kissed Bertilak, who roared with laughter.

"I won't ask how you came by that!" he chuckled.

The next morning the lady visited Gawain again, and again she kissed him. Later, Bertilak again presented Gawain with the morning's catch, and again received a kiss.

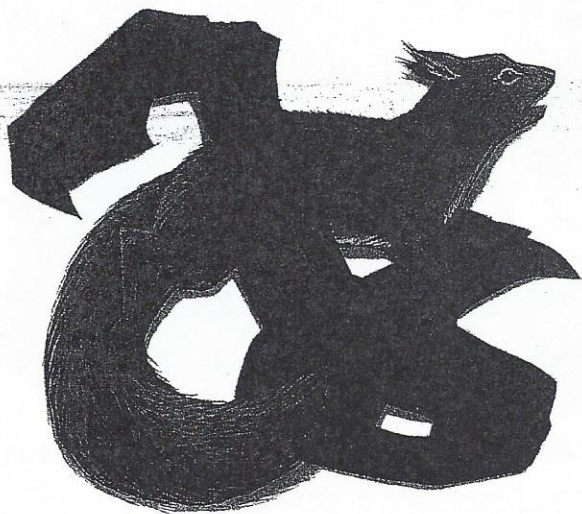
"You're a lucky man to be getting all these kisses," he laughed.

On the third day, the lady came to Gawain yet again.

"You go to meet the Green Knight tomorrow. Please take this," she said, holding out a green sash. "If you wear it, nothing will harm you."

Then, as before, she kissed him and left.

When Bertilak returned, the usual exchange took place—he gave Gawain a squirrel, and Gawain gave him a kiss. But Gawain did not give Bertilak the sash, knowing that without it he would surely die.





The lord of the fortress came to meet Gawain in the courtyard.

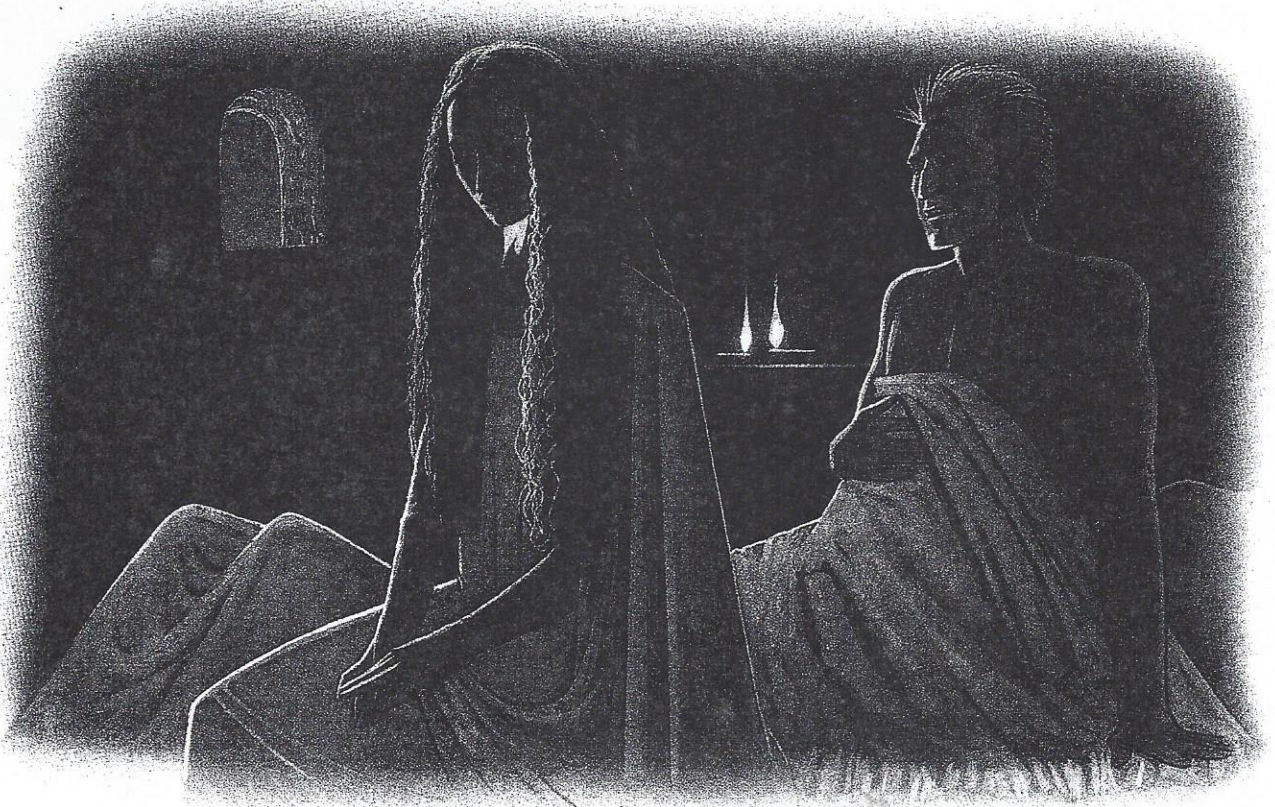
"I am Bertilak," he said. "We are privileged to welcome a knight of the Round Table."

After dinner that evening, Bertilak invited Gawain to stay for a few days. When Gawain explained that he had to be at the Green Tower in four days, Bertilak exclaimed, "The Green Tower is less than a day's ride from here! Stay for another three days."

Then Bertilak suggested that they play a game over the next few days. "Anything that I acquire while you're here I'll give to you, and you must do the same for me."

The game seemed a little strange to Gawain, but he agreed.

Early the next morning, Gawain was awakened by a knock at the door. It was Bertilak's beautiful wife, who came in and sat on the bed.



"Good morning, Gawain," she said. "I have heard many tales of your bravery in the wars. Such courage deserves a reward."

She leaned toward Gawain and kissed him.

Stunned, Gawain could only murmur, "Thank you, my lady."

The lady just smiled and left.



The next morning, Gawain wrapped the sash around his waist and followed Bertilak's directions to the Green Tower. The Green Knight was waiting for him, axe in hand.

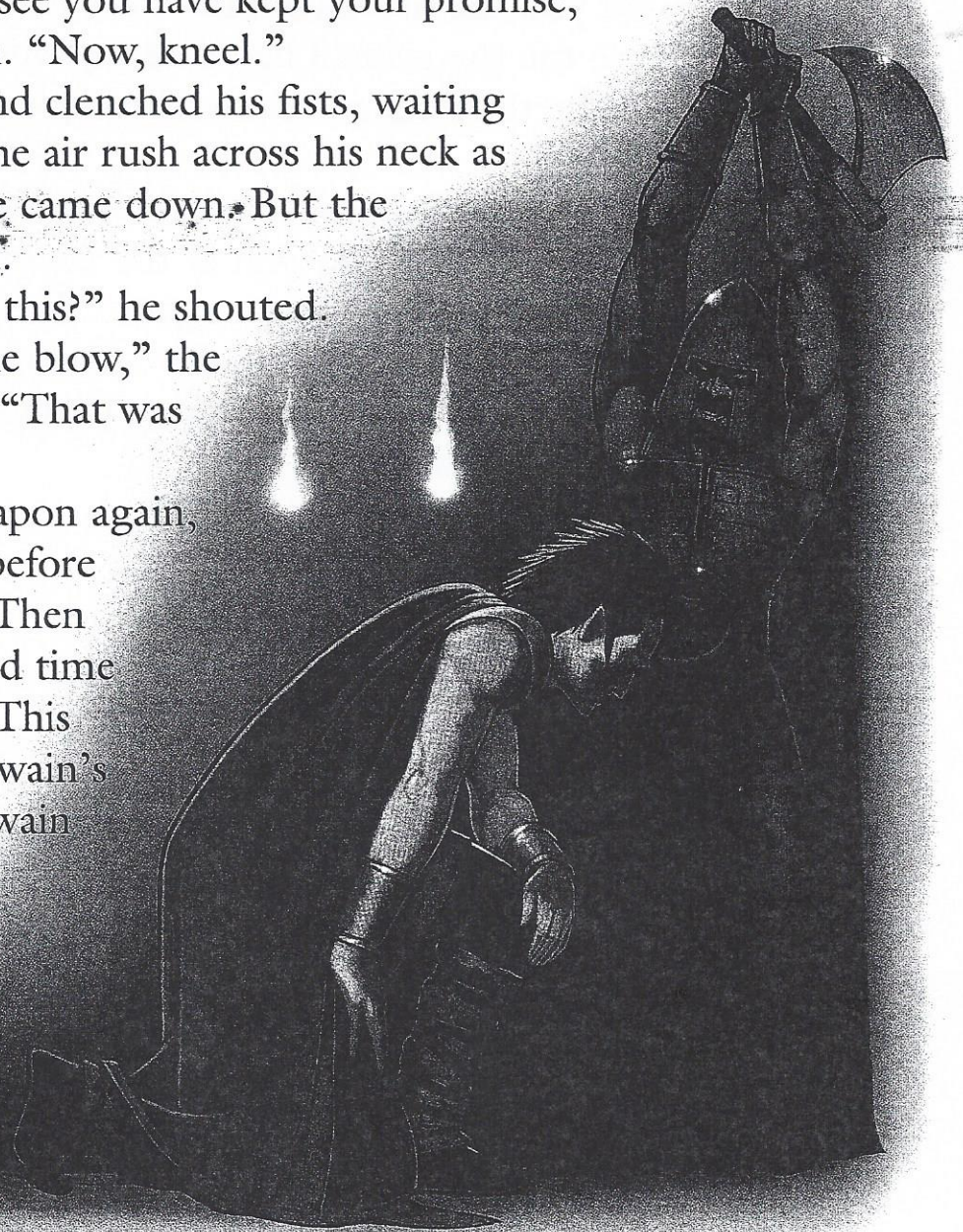
"I am pleased to see you have kept your promise," boomed the huge man. "Now, kneel."

Gawain did so, and clenched his fists, waiting for the blow. He felt the air rush across his neck as the Green Knight's axe came down. But the blade never struck him.

"What trickery is this?" he shouted.

"I am allowed one blow," the Green Knight replied. "That was not a blow."

He raised the weapon again, but again he stopped before he hit Gawain's neck. Then he raised the axe a third time and brought it down. This time it just scraped Gawain's neck. Jumping up, Gawain drew his sword.



"You have had your blow!" he cried. "Now prepare to fight!"

"Put away your sword, Gawain," the Green Knight said calmly. "You are in no danger from me."

"Why?" asked Gawain. "Who are you?"

"I am Bertilak," he replied, "the very man you have been staying with for the past three days."



"B-but...", stammered Gawain, "how can that be?"

"Morgana, half-sister of Arthur Pendragon, placed me under a spell," said Bertilak, "and turned me into the Green Knight. She sent me to test the bravery of Camelot's warriors, and so I offered my challenge—the challenge only you were bold enough to accept."

"But why did you not cut off my head?" asked Gawain.

"I missed you the first two times because you kept your promise to me and gave me the kisses I had told my wife to give you. I scratched you the third time because although you gave the kiss, you kept the sash."

Gawain looked down, ashamed. "I have been dishonest," he admitted. "I don't deserve my seat at the Round Table, and I didn't deserve your hospitality." He knelt again. "Take my head."

"Get up, Gawain," said Bertilak. "Nobody is perfect, but you have come closer than most. Go back to Camelot with pride—you are an almost perfect knight."

Everyone at Camelot was astonished when Gawain returned, alive and well. When he told his amazing tale, Arthur decreed that every year, on the anniversary of his return, everyone at the Round Table should wear a green sash to remember the deeds of Gawain, the almost perfect knight.

