

THE WINTER STAR

A *“Sir Gawain and the Green Knight”* story

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PART I

The meat was practically gone by the time the minstrels began.

The knights and ladies had taken their share of roast ham in minutes after it was set on the banquet table. King Arthur was, of course, given the first slice. Then, ten by ten, the men shoved their way towards the mouthwatering aroma. Plates were piled high with the thick, juicy meat, warm brown bread, dates and cheeses, berries of every kind, apples and orange slices, and figgy pudding for dessert. The king was so pleased, he even called to the guards at the door.

“Keep open the gates for all,” he spoke. His smile was warm and boyish, at least for this night. His eyes were lit with a spark like that in a child’s on Christmas Eve. “Let commoner and nobleman alike come in from the cold and join our feast.”

The guards nodded and Arthur took his seat. He did not sit at the end of the long, oak banquet table but in the center, for it was known that he liked to be considered as equal among his knights.

The lords and ladies of Camelot all delved into their meals with grunts of satisfaction and the licking of lips. Voices rose in chatter, silverware clinked on metal plates, laughter rung throughout the hall.

One knight, the newest and youngest of them all, about the age of seventeen, ate quietly at his place.

“Come, my friend,” said Arthur, settling down beside him. The young knight glanced startingly up at him. “Put some more on your plate. You’ve hardly anything there.”

The knight couldn’t help but smile a little, though his eyes were distant. “It is my first Yuletide without...well, without...”

A look crossed the king’s face, and he suddenly seemed older, paternal. “Your father would not have given you this for Christmas, I imagine. Nor would he have given this to his knights.”

“No,” said the knight. “We don’t even celebrate Christmas.”

“The winter Solstice, then.”

“Aye.”

“I should have known. I almost forget sometimes that you are of the Old Religion.” Arthur looked at his newest knight for a long moment. Looked at the boy’s mahogany eyes that had clearly seen too much. Arthur’s expression darkened. “Gawain, I did not kill your father out of spite. It was self-defense.”

Gawain stared at his plate. His voice hardened. “I know.”

“Good.” Arthur looked down at his own plate. “I want...I want you to feel welcome here. I hope you know that you are not a prisoner of Camelot. You are a guest. *My* guest. I have come to regard you as one of my finest knights.”

“But I’ve done nothing yet to give you such an impression,” Gawain muttered. “I have done nothing but fight your men and resist your kindness.”

“Let us end that tonight, then.” Arthur gave him a smile. His face seemed youthful again. “Christmas is a time for forgiveness and renewal. And though I do not ask you to forgive me the death of your father, I ask that you accept my open arms. I offer you a place here in Camelot forevermore, Sir Gawain, should you wish to take it. I could use a knight like you at my new Round Table.”

“Truly?” Gawain smiled a little.

“Indeed,” Arthur insisted. “You are a strong lad, bold, resilient. Undefeated. A warrior.”

Gawain’s eyes flickered. He swallowed something in his throat. “What I would give for my parents to have seen me the way you do.”

Arthur put a reassuring hand on his back. For the first time, Gawain did not resist his touch. “Your family did not know the strength of your heart. Let us be your family now, Prince Gawain.”

Gawain still looked down at his plate. Emotions and intimacy were things he was not well versed in. Instead, he looked away at the rest of the court, feasting and merrymaking as he spoke. “I think I’d like that.” A smile snuck into his lips. He looked back at Arthur. “But I am never to be *Prince* Gawain, again. That fearful child is dead. I would be called *Sir* Gawain, so long as I’m of your court.”

Arthur let out a chuckle. “Sir Gawain, it is then. You know, I have always wanted to be father—or at least, uncle—to a knight of your strength. A knight of your valor.”

Gawain let out a laugh. “‘Uncle Arthur’ has a very strange ring to it.”

“Ah, but ‘Nephew Gawain’ has a ring of promise in it!” The king raised a glass to those seated around him. “A toast, friends! I’ve a nephew!”

The lords and ladies nearby were far too drunk to comprehend his meaning but simply raised their goblets and cheered, laughing and drinking their fill.

Gawain gleamed at the sight. “It’s just like I’d always dreamed when I was a boy.”

“What is?” asked Arthur.

“Camelot at Yuletide. I hate to admit it...but I dreamt of this place all the time in Orkney. My childhood was so cold, dark...isolated.” Gawain took in the warmth around him. The candles in every window, the strum of the lute and rhythmic beat of the tambourine, the laughter and smiles and light. “It’s beautiful. And loud and...fun. So cheerful.”

“As Christmas should be!” Arthur laughed, downing a gulp of ale. He motioned a servant over and ordered Gawain’s plate to be filled again. “The only thing missing now is a good story,” the king spoke, his mouth half full.

“A good story?” asked Gawain.

“A story is told every year on Christmas Eve in our hall,” Arthur informed.

“Let us have the tale of Egbert, first king of Britain!” shouted Sir Bedivere.

“When we have the *best* king of Britain before us?” Sir Kay challenged. “A tale of your Sword in the Stone, Arthur!”

“The tale of Pyramus and Thisbe!” called out Lady Soreadamors.

“Ugh, a *love* story?” blurted Sir Bors, rolling his eyes. “No one wants a love story at Christmas! It’s all about the birth of Christ.”

“Ah, yes! The birth of Jesus!” called some of the ladies.

“Yes, yes, but what of adventure?” Arthur protested. “Are there no adventure stories that pertain to Christmas?”

And suddenly, the hall doors burst open with a gust of frigid, hard winter wind.

The candles in the room blew out. The entire hall was filled with darkness, save only a few last candles that lit the table. The eerie jingling of harness bells was heard in the dark corners of the room. It seemed to echo on every wall. The knights and ladies all gasped. The jingling bells continued. As it did, the room fell utterly quiet. Arthur rose immediately and placed a hand on the hilt of his sword. Gawain gulped. He had no weapon on him. And the last time anything like this had happened, it was from an evil magic caused by his mother—the sorceress, Morgause.

“Who goes there?” Arthur demanded.

But there was no sorceress.

From the shadows and into the flickering candlelight rode a man entirely in green.