

The Castle of the Green Spectre

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T

he ballads of the deeds of the renowned knight Gervais Dedoigne on his personal Quest are numerous and often as grand as his adventures. His endless search for the Chalice brought him from the far regions of the cursed North to return untouched, the blistering lands of Araby a bronzed templar, the Border Princes left him his antique armour and Lustria to never be heard off again and disappear in the endless woods. This tale takes place in his early years as a quester in a remote region of the barony of Roiglan near the borders of the infamous Forest of Arden. Some great evil trespassed there when Elves still roamed these lands, disturbing the balance of a guardian spirit. The Elves were unable to find a cure for the wounded spirit who turned baleful and malignant in the ages to come. The fay left these shores for their eternal domiciles on the other side of the ocean, leaving the fortress to become a ruin and years later nothing but rubble. The spirit however endured, crazed over the loss of his protectorate. It was one of the kin of Landuin who rebuilt the ancient stones to a fortress of certain strength. To recreate the horrible curses the spirit rained on this man and his family is for another tale: suffice to say it was abandoned and thoroughly deserved its foul reputation. Many questing and venturing knights dared to face the horror of the Castle of the Green Spectre yet few escaped its clutches, even fewer physically unscathed and none could be healed anymore from the mental scars the spirit had carved in their memory.

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Winter had claimed the lands for its icy touch, covering the lands in thin veil of frost. The lands seemed void of any life as all sheltered from its cold breath. Only one man ever marched on, untroubled by the circumstances. Gervais Dedoigne is in his second year of his search, claiming renown and trophies in his name and the Lady's. As stubborn and strong hearted as his master, his trusty steed Shade has carried him through the perilous forest, his sole companion and friend on his eternal ongoing trip. Unfamiliar with the area Gervais was surprised to suddenly burst through the edges of the forest to gaze upon the winter fields of Roiglan. Aching for a warm meal and a good night's rest in a comfortable rest, the great hero scanned the horizon for traces of human life. Luck seemed to be his companion that day as he was able but barely to perceive the grey contours of a small fortress in the far distance, beckoning him a royal welcome and some peace. Satisfied and with a grin on his not-so-unsightly features, he spurred his trusty destrier onward, promising him a good grooming and a warm stalling for the night. The mare seemed to sense her masters joy and quickly brought him to the foot a donjon. Gervais was unable to pierce the illusion that made the ruinous castle seem a safe haven for the weary travellers, luring him inside as they air filled with the heartening smell of spiced food and a roaring fireplace. Unconcerned by the lack of a welcome –after all one rather sit close by the hearth in weather like this then endlessly patrol the peaceful battlements-, Gervais quickly made his way to the entrance of the keep.

Inside he would summon the stablehands to take good care of his beloved steed. With these promising thought in mind, he swung open the heavy oaken doors and entered his own nightmare. With his first step inside the cursed house, a chain of reactions quickly ensued: the spell failed, waking the evil entity within, the doors quickly swung shut once more, nearly trapping his left foot with such strength it would have easily broken it. As he startled examined the new surroundings, ruinous and in a furthered state of decay, he realised with grim determination that he had walked right into a trap. His endless night of torture of the mind had begun.

The smell of the small entry hall promised dust and decay, covering the floors and ancient furniture. A small ray of moonlight penetrated the dark from an overhead window, eerie illuminating the surroundings in a gloom of faint light. Tapestries, which once glorified the armies of Gilles and Landuin, were all but gone at the hand of time. Slowly he regained his resolve and tried forcing the doors open with no hope of success. Indeed the barriers holding these doors into place were not a physical but of the arcane arts. Reluctantly giving up Gervais quickly scanned the room, hoping for one way to escape but finding none.

The round, glass-and-lead window over the doors were beyond his reach. Opposite to the entrance was the only way out, still guarded by a skeleton honour guard, bearing the heraldry of some Duke of Mousillon long past. Still bestranged by his odd fate, he unsheathed his greatsword and firmly clutched its grip, drawing the strength of the strong steel. Slowly and with great eye for details, he passed on into the next chamber. The same scenery greeted his weary eyes: far-gone furniture littering the room and decorations on the walls, a giant tapestry adorns the floor, still holding on to its former glory. On the mouldy carpet there lay a small person with the obvious forms of the female grace, all dressed in white satin as if dressed for sleep but spending an eternal night on the scenery of battle instead. Looking barely alive, that pale her skin nor the reassuring movement of her breathing, Gervais warily crosses the room to the woman.

The knight silently lays his sword down and kneels to investigate the cause of death. Removing his gauntlet to check her pulse, the sleeping beauty slowly awakes. As life once streams into her eyes, Gervais is caught in the endless blue ocean that is her eyes. For minutes they remain unmoving, she to gauge the newly arrival, he to try and escape that maze of purity. With a throat suddenly parched, Gervais barely was able to speak but managed to pronounce the words right: "Milady, who are you and why are you here in this most cursed place?"

Bewilderment shone in her eyes as she examined the room as if now noticing its ruins. With barely containing the fear out of her voice, she answered Gervais: "I live her, Sir, or at least I think I do: all seems like it has passed through the ages My name is Lady Ysabeau de Tantireux, spouse to the nephew of the Duke of Mousillon, Mareck Landuin." Memories seem to flood her as she recounted her identity: "The bright and cheerful colours I once knew, are gone, replaced with the depressing stain of dust and sand. Time has sunk its teeth deep in seats and cupboards I once used, maiming them nearly beyond recognition. Is this Castle d'Epée?"

"I know not, milady," Gervais replied truthfully: "I have yet left the border of the Forest of Arden and know not where I am."

"Castle d'Epée lies on the border of the woods so it must be. What witchcraft have changed my home so much?"

"I know not but the same evil spell prevents us from leaving. Can you remember anything odd of your days here?" The Lady remained in deep thought for awhile.

Minutes passed when suddenly terror settled in her eyes. She started to panic, crying out while tears of fear filled those relentless seas: "My husband! He's hunting me for things I did not do. We need to go: he was right behind me!"

There lay great strength in that frail body once panicked and it took great effort of Gervais to calm her down. Gervais tried to assure her that there was no-one here alive and that he had not seen one living soul since entering the keep. The lady lay sobbing against his shoulder as the room started to swirl, turning the hands of time itself. Awestruck Gervais witnessed how decay reversed, restoring the furniture and decorations to their beautiful reality.

The room was now one of the most beautiful Gervais had ever seen, a testimony to the craft of Bretonnians. Long dead servants entered the room, starting to clean the elaborate room, while guards took up their stations for the day, ignoring the two strangers on the middle of the carpet. As Gervais forced the lady to look at him in order to ask her what in the

Lady's name was happening here, her face started to change right in front of her eyes. A malignant green skin appeared from the depths of her body, her once beautiful features expressionless and flat like the face of death. Gervais started to stumble backward, away from the apparition from cursed lands. The creature however started to speak to him in an ice-cold, chilling voice: "Trapped in time. Can you, a knight of ideal and pride, bring justice to this realm? Witness and judge us if you want to live, stranger."

As sudden as it appeared, it had gone back to wherever it came from, leaving the beauty lying limp on the carpet. However the former ignorant servants and guards now turned towards us as if now only realising we were there. As expected from a knight, Gervais helped her upwards as she awoken. With few strength she whispered to me: "I'm glad you're here with me now."

Before Gervais could ask what the meaning of those words were, a great bang echoed through the hall, soon followed with another one. The guards raised their weapons towards the new threat while servants started to empty the room through the different doors. Lady Ysabeau seemed also caught in the atmosphere of fear of whatever was forcing its way through the door: "I made a mistake, we need to go."

And she started to tug on his arm to another door, opposite to the one assailed by the creature. Great chunks of wood were propelled through the room as the door started to crumble. Perplexed Gervais stood his ground however to gaze upon whatever horror would appear through the door. With one last moan the door gave way, opening the doorway for an ancient terror from chaos.

A man, bulging with muscles and scars, barely covered by clothing save a helmet covering its face and neck stepped through. With no effort it wielded a greatsword with one hand. The guards stood no chance against the horror as it beheaded one while separating torso and legs of the other with another swing of the giant sword. The fiend started to thunder towards Gervais next, sword held high as to cleave Gervais in twain with one big smite. At that moment the lady managed to pull Gervais out of his paralysation. She pulled him through a sturdy door and locked it immediately. A corridor lay beyond with many doors leading to all sides. Not pausing she started to take the lead through many doors and hallways with flawless precision.

Rooms and corridors flashed by as the two ran away from the malignant being. Finally they stopped to rest in a small library. The lady sat down in a fireside couch, shivering. It was not until then that Gervais realised how futile the scarce clothing was she wore. Her forms were all but too clear through the soft and slim tissue of the white satin. Swallowing to clear his dry throat he gave her his cloak which she silently accepted. Several minutes passed as they both remained in thoughts. Gervais broke the silence as his many questions forced him though he knew the answer already: "What was that cursed thing?" "My former husband, lord Manfred Landuin, the sinful powers of Chaos corrupted his mind and body. Now he seeks to murder me."

Before Gervais could demand why, the door opened and in walked a handsome, young knight. Though Gervais raised his blade in defence, the newly arrival didn't seem to mind, ignoring the knight and walking towards Ysabeau. Apparently she had forgotten about the questing knight and didn't seem to mind as the young man took her hand and carefully placed a kiss on the soft skin. Indeed a careful smile brightened her face as her loving eyes held his.

Suddenly the young noble disappeared into thin air, leaving a disorientated Ysabeau behind. With startled eyes she realised she had stood up but couldn't remember why. Gervais remained silent, enthralled by the mysteries this place holds. What kind of a tragedy happened here, so long ago? Gervais never even saw the door getting hurled from its hinges but when he had turned, there that terrifying creature stood, sword still clasped tight in his right hand. Stepping forward to protect the lady, he tried to guide her backwards between the rows of bookcases where the giant sword of Mareck would be hindered. The corrupted one advanced with determined steps. Gervais had barely time to push Ysabeau into safety as the first sweep shattered one of the cases, raining books on all three.

The ruins of the case hindered the horror and making most of it they fled between the endless rows. Panting they

huddled between two rows in an attempt to determine where the creature was. The greatsword crashed through the left row with great strength, splintering books and wood right above their heads. A second thrust broke the spine of the case, making it tumble backwards as the sword was pulled back. Its silent wielder stepped through the wreckage, its heavy step crumbling papers and board. The red light that burned within the visor of the helmet seemed to pierce my skull. However the once proud knight seemed to pay more attention to his frail wife at Gervais's side. The sword came thundering down upon her with fiercesome strength. It was all Gervais could do, was to hold up his own to block the attack. The blow was so severe, its strength vibrated through his entire body, it numbed his hand and Gervais lost his grip. Tears of pain welled up in the corner of his eyes. As he once again opened them, the scenery had shifted once again. Both the lady as he lay upon a stone cold floor amidst the ruins of books and cases.

Dust now covered the grey room, the torches were unlit and there was no trace of Mareck's vengeful spirit. Gervais helped her up as he once again examined the room. Nothing disturbed the eternal silence which lay upon the castle as the dust on the floor. Turning back to Ysabeau, the green spectre was back, gazing at him with his pupil-less eyes. "The first choice has been made. True to his nature, chivalry prevails."

Before Gervais had the chance to pose the being a question, it disappeared, leaving a weak Ysabeau who fainted into the arms of her saviour. It took a while before she awakened from the restless dream that haunted her sleep.

As she drank some water and munches down some trail rations, she suddenly spoke up: "It occurred to me that my gracious hero never told me his name. Tell me who is it, the chivalrous man which I have to include in my prayers to the Lady?"

"Call me Gervais, I have not much use for my surname these days." "Well, my Sir Gervais, I need something to wear. My wardrobe is not far from here. Pray that something has remained unspoiled in this keep."

The gentlest of kisses on his cheek raced a fire through the body, making him forget the pain in his right hand. The soft lips seemed to have branded a warm mark on his rugged cheek. As they walked side by side through the abandoned corridors, Gervais decided to ask a question which had bothered him for awhile now: "What is the history between the young, blonde knight and you?"

"We were lovers long before I even had heard of Mareck and his search for a spouse. We grew up together as he squired for my father in Tantireux. Witty, strong and confident he was every noble's daughter dream knight. However fate cursed our love and I was sent to Mousillon to betroth the nephew of the Duke. Mareck was a cruel and unloving man with more interest in his army then his wife. There was few love lost to me, especially since I did not bear him any progeny. Darkness clouded his mind when moving in this abandoned keep, forcing him to mistreat his lady even further. The only thing that kept me awake through that nightmarish life was my burning love for Ilien and our correspondence. After he earned his knighthood he came to visit me a lot here, much to the envy of my lord. In my defence there never happened dishonourable between us two. However the seeds of distrust were sown and Mareck ever hurt me more, some times I thought I would not survive the ordeal. Ilien managed to interrupt me when I was about to commit a great sin. In a state of panic he tried to calm me but failed. In a last resort he kissed me, ripping me out of my fear for Mareck. We decided to flee together to a safe haven away from Mousillon and this realm of tears."

Tears escaped the corner of her eyes as she related the story to me. Even so it explained a lot to Gervais about the curse that had this place locked. It hurt him to see her sadness and he vowed he would find a way to get rid of the terrible curse.

"What happened?" I ventured forth: "What keeps us here trapped into this unreal realm?"

"Last I remember I was running after one of the irrational attacks of rage of Mareck which was so bad I tried to escape. I stumbled and then there was nothing but darkness."

Some of the clothes were dusty but had survived the ordeal of time. As she dressed Gervais came to see the woman which had enthralled Ilien, Mareck and probably much more men. Ysabeau seemed more confident, even granting me the same smile as she did Ilien in the dream world: "I'm glad you are here besides me. In many ways you remind me of Ilien but even he had flaws. I sense nothing but good and love in you."

"I'll take that as a compliment then. Truth be told your beauty inspires me beyond my own capabilities. I promise you that I'll release you from this curse to live a life you deserve. That man will never hurt you, this I vow."

The promise of Gervais made her kiss him on the lips out of love, a kiss that Gervais answered with the same longing and love. Two lovers united through the mists of time as it stood still.

As they unlocked out of their loving embrace, they saw that the clock of time had rewound once again. Even more so: in the door opening stood another grotesque nightmare. Clearly what remained of a young man in a rusted armour kept together with wire that had torn deep in his skin, a hue black longsword in his hand, his neck soaked in blood and his face covered by a pale white mask, replicating an angered man. "Squire Maurice de Chaptras," whispered Ysabeau as she took a few steps back behind the back of her protector. The former squire uttered some garbled sounds as he pointed towards Gervais after which he raised his sword and charged. The nightmarish squire was fast and nimble, a good swordfighter, and it took the knight all his energy to keep him at a distance. In the fray of battle he missed a step and stumbled, dropping his sword. With fear in his eyes he witnessed the coming of the blade that would end his life yet finally dropped out the lifeless hand of the creature. As the corpse sagged to the ground with split throat, Ysabeau stood behind him holding a bloodied dagger and fighting once again the tears: "I could not let him, I could not."

Gervais quickly rose and drew her close to him. "It was either him or me and I doubt he had honourable intentions with you afterwards. Either way I'm grateful you saved my life," he said as he kissed her tears.

The soft skin however switched to leather and as Gervais looked upon her, he stumbled back as she had changed into the green ghost once more. "Her love saved you. Does that justify your love?"

"We need a place to rest, my waking hours are running thin. Is there some place we will be safe," Gervais spoke to her as they aimlessly wandered the corridors of the great keep looking for a way to escape. The pensive look on her face told Gervais she was thinking long and hard about it. "He never once dare to enter my own personal room, not even during his madness nor during his sane life. It was my private sanctum during his rage."

Indeed her room was by far the most unscathed by the teeth of time. It still closely resembled the room where she had spend most of her life. Pushing a living chair to the door, Gervais proposed to take a first watch so that she could rest easy. While she sunk into her restless dreams, Gervais barricaded the door as good as was possible. A long wake later she awoke and Gervais went to sleep all the while all had been quiet in the abandoned keep as if it was waiting for something.

Gervais had not the faintest idea of how much time had passed when he reluctantly was awoken by Ysabeau who had crept in between the sheets next to him, her head on his chest. "I needed you to hold me for the fear was gripping me too much. Your arms are a shelter for me to shield me from this cursed silence. The silence is mortal, do you understand what I mean?"

Gervais nodded that he did and lovingly put his arm around her thin shoulder. She forced her head closer to mine and pressed her lips to mine. All anxiety and fear disappeared as the two bodies joined in an eternal embrace. A day passed but still there was no sign that things were turning for the better. Near the evening of the third day they were locked once more into each other soothing presence when the door trembled as an awesome blow was struck.

Startled Gervais quickly donned his armour with the help of Ysabeau. He had just enough time to pick up his greatsword and position himself between the door and his love as the giant sword shattered the barriers and the door collapsed before the awesome might of Mareck. Even more fearsome the giant man stepped inside, even more enraged as if that was possible. It took him a few seconds to survey the room and us two after which he charged headfirst into Gervais. With the first sweep he brushed the stricken knight aside, a massive wound in his left shoulder. The towering hulk in the meanwhile advanced on the maiden fair with grim satisfaction. Still the love of her protector would not let him to give up that quickly: he raised himself and bull rushed himself right into the giant creature. As the two bodies tumbled through the room and ended into a cupboard.

"Run, Ysabeau, run," were all Gervais could utter as she stood upright. Together they ran through the keep blindly with Mareck in wild pursuit. Fate would have it they ran through the same entry hall where they first met when Ysabeau tripped and sprained her ankle.

However it was then that Gervais could see that the doors of the entrance of the keep were wide open and beyond his trusted warhorse still waiting for its master. Making her lean on his shoulder, he forced her up and was about to head for the doors when an inner voice halted him: "Don't forget your task, knight, murder and lies are not that simple, especially when love is involved. There are always two sides of a story."

Gervais turned towards imposing figure of Mareck: "Speak to me."

This halted the huge man in his steps, surprised by those words. Ysabeau meanwhile scurried behind his back for protection with her ankle: "Don't listen to him, every word has the taint of chaos in it."

"One thing does not add up here," Gervais hesitantly started. "What sin made this nightmare world? If this were yours for slaying your wife," he continued, addressing Mareck, "the squire would have no role in this sad tale. Please account your story, Sir."

With a slight hint of surprise he started to speak in a voice which had not been used for a long time: "My tale starts so many years ago when I met her as a wandering knight during my errand. Her beauty enthralled as it had ensnared so many before me. She was known for her... low morals in this land's nobility which lessened the interests for an interesting match. But I was adamant: I would return here when I would have earned my fief and take her home with me. Few years later my family and hers agreed on her dowry and we were married on what would be my happiest day in my life. However it did not take long before she again started to seduce travellers in her bed. My love for her however conquered my pride and I remained silent, even avoiding her personal bedroom out of fear of who I would find there. Years passed and even her ways did not grant me an heir. It was at that moment that she met the rotten character of Ilien, a man which could add poison to words. The two snakes found each other and he started to influence her. Soon they decided to get rid of me and rule this small land by themselves. Maurice caught them both in the same dressing room as his restless spirit did with yours. A battle ensued between my trusty squire and the snake. It was Ysabeau who slit his throat treacherously from behind and they dumped the body in the woods." The hate in his voice was obvious as he unstrapped his helmet, revealing his scarred face and a cut throat, much the same as the one Ysabeau had adorned the squire a few days back. "A few days later it was she who slit my throat one night after she had decided to share my bed and I naively believed her. However my chamberlain witnessed the events and summoned the guard to arrest the spider's couple. They tried to escape their fate by running away. Ilien got away in the dark of the night. Ysabeau however was killed when she was abandoned by her love after she sprained her ankle. Normally it would have been the end of this sad history of lies and deceit but ever since the ancient times this grounds were cursed by a powerful malignant spirit which trapped the entire castle in this nightmare which you now have witnessed. Every once in awhile a new unwilling Ilien wanders into the castle to solve the mystery of this eternal murder. Thus time passes and many Iliens have wandered the horrors of these corridors to fall into the arms of Ysabeau. Only few ever left this keep. Some left her in the face of the truth, other took her with them, only to find out she disappears into thin air as soon as she leaves this place, leaving a sickness which rots your core from inside out in a matter of years to die a painful death for choosing poorly. Judge now. You have regained your freedom in the spirit's mind so go and leave me to exact my revenge for the umpteenth time so the story can begin again in a farce of justice."

Gervais turned towards Ysabeau who pleaded for her life: "Please, don't let him hurt me! The pain is still real to me," she said crying and as she embraced him for a last time: "Remember the love we shared. The hours of peace we found in each other's arms! You vowed you would not let him hurt me, you promised on your..." Her sentence was cut short as Gervais's dagger pierced her chest. As the light was dying in her eyes and blood welled up from the corners of her mouth, sheer disbelief was the last emotion she ever showed him.

As the lifeless body of Ysabeau sunk to the floor, Mareck said to him: "Interesting, you may have been one of the

few to escape the clutches of the spell but you are certainly the first to be the judge and executioner. Maybe the spirit will be released, maybe?”

The hopeful words of the eternally tortured soul were never heard by Gervais Dedoigne who mounted Shade and rode away in the night, never to look back again.