

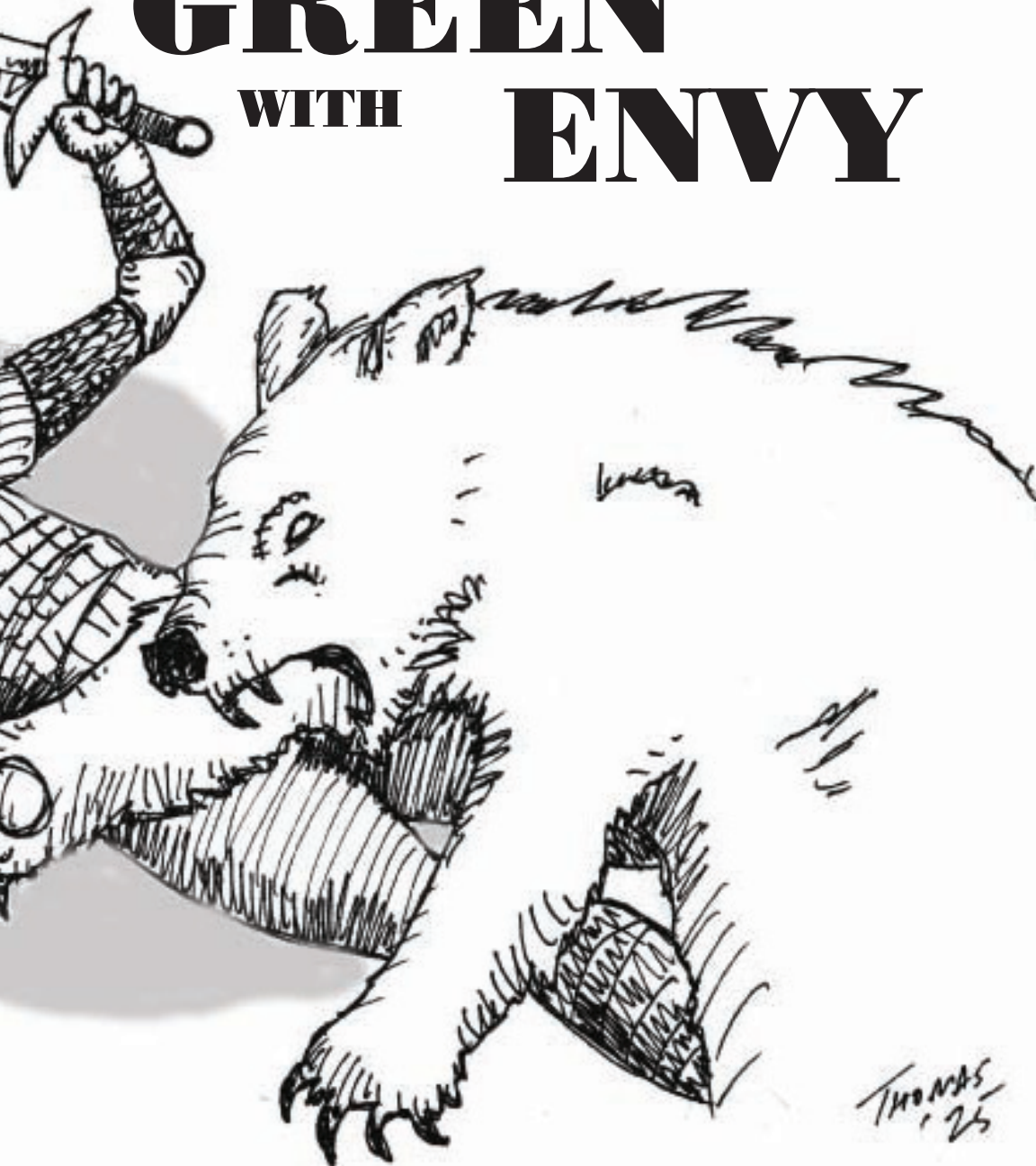


Illustrated by
G. W. Thomas

GREEN

WITH

ENVY



A Tale of Arthan the Bear Man by
G. W. Thomas

The smell of death floated on the air. To the bear this was not necessarily a warning. It might be opportunity. He pulled his eight hundred pounds up out of a bed of last summer's leaves and ambled in the direction of the breeze.

He walked slowly, sniffing as he went. There was no rush. If it was a bleeding animal, it made sense to wait, allow it to die before he arrived. Wounded animals were dangerous. He did not fear any creature in the woods but he had no desire to face off against a moose in its death throes.

The bear loped along a creek bed, his massive paws brushing loose gravel as he moved. There was a tang in the wind now. The blood—human. He did not eat human flesh. This could only mean trouble. Humans were always killing each other over foolish things: gold, property, ideas. His instincts told him to run in the other direction, leave the humans to their dying.

But the bear was also curious. If he could help-- And sometimes it was better to know what hunted you in the night.

The bear took human shape, appearing as a youth of seventeen. He stepped up to a large elm tree that stood alone in a glen formed by a hillock. For a moment he wished he had brought his sword with him. The weapon was hidden miles away in an old log. Still, if danger showed itself, he could return to bear form.

The smell of blood was over-powering now. Arthan, for that was the bear's name, heard soft noises coming from the elm tree ahead of him. The sounds were moving leaves and dripping blood. He looked up into the dark shadows in the boughs above. A man hung from a branch, two sharp branches poking from his shoulders. A steady bead of red fell from the sodden shirt with a plop-plop. The head was bowed. The eyes closed. Dead, but still something moved.

There was a loud plop as a heavy chunk of dead flesh glopped from the man's boot onto the leafy floor. It was followed by another and another. Soon, a steady rain of goblets fell, exposing sections of skeleton beneath the clothing.

This is sorcery, thought the bear man, circling the growing pile of black-blood drippings. *Who would do such a thing? And why?*

Arthan took bear form, began a wider circle around the tree. Where did the back-trail sit? Where had whoever done this come from? He

found it soon after, smelling a spoor that ran to the west into the trees. The scent was human enough, made by a small naked foot. His bear eyes spotted a track. A child might have made that mark...

The bear lifted his head and breathed in a fresh rush of air. He followed the scent, as it ran along the spoor trail anyway, and stopped at another tree, an oak. Looking up he saw another corpse hanging in the same fashion as the last. This one had no clothes. Most of its flesh had fallen into a fly-dotted pile on the ground below.

Arthan ignored the dead man, continued smelling the ground. The scent, hard to detect with a rotting corpse hanging over it, took him to another copse of trees, where a third body hung. This one was a woman.

A slow anger grew inside the were-bear. He had no love for the humans who had pursued him into the forest with sword and spear. But such wanton death made his stomach knot. There could be no good from such terror. Was it magic? He didn't know. His encounters with sorcery and black magic had made him cautious. His own were-powers were a form of magic, given by the Great Ursus, but they were not a form of evil. He was a bear and lived a bear's life. This tree-hanging death was something else. Someone had done this with some dire goal in mind.

The trail came to a stream. For a moment, Arthan worried he would lose the scent so he took human form. Using his man's eyes, he saw tracks on the far bank, taking him into a new grove of trees. These tall trunks looked different as they were very old. The giant boles had little or no undergrowth since the light above was blocked by a canopy of needles. Nestled between two gigantic trunks was a small pile of stone, once a temple or shrine. Standing in front of this abandoned ruin was a girl.

"Hello," said Arthan, unsure what to say.

"Have you come for the treasure?" asked the girl, who was no more than twelve.

Arthan said nothing. He was barely a man himself, and had spent very little time in the company of females.

"No, I don't want any treasure."

"But look!" The girl held up a cup of great beauty, solid gold ringed with rubies and emeralds. Inside the vessel glittered diamonds. "You

can have this. If you win.”

“I don’t want it,” admitted Arthan, looking behind her to see if any adults were about.

“My name is Envy,” the girl said. “Who are you?”

“I am Arthan.”

“Come, Arthan. Come and take this treasure. You can buy a kingdom with such riches.”

The bear man shook his head, made to turn away. Then he remembered the dead men hanging in the forest.

“You should come with me, Envy. There is great evil near by. Men hang in the trees, their flesh melting away--”

“Those are the losers. But you will win Arthan. You are very strong.”

“What do you know of these dead men?”

“These people came for the treasure-- but they lost.”

“You fought them?”

“No, the champions fought them and then put them in the trees.”

Again Arthan looked about for any sign of an adult, for this child was clearly addled. As he gazed about, he noticed the sheen of metal. He stepped forward, allowing his eyes to fall on a large pile of scattered weapons. There were axes and other garden implements but also a battle ax and a few swords.

“Take your pick,” said Envy, rushing over to the discarded items. She picked up the battle ax, offering it to him. “This one is especially nice.”

“I don’t want it. I don’t want any treasure. And I don’t want to fight any champion.” The bear man shook his head repeatedly.

“That is too bad,” said the girl, leaping back up the fallen marble slabs to the highest point on the ruin.

Arthan turned, hearing a soft sound behind him. He leapt suddenly back as a sword blade slashed the air where he had been standing. The weapon was one of two that cut at him, for two dark shapes armed with blades had appeared with little warning. The bear man retreated three more steps until he hovered over the pile of arms. He took up a sword, using it to block the lunge of one of the attackers. It was a good sword. It reminded him of his Salimander, hidden away far from this strange grove.

The bear man pressed his opponent back as he came up to face off

against these strange men. His own blade blocked another strike, then flew off at an angle, taking off several of the other man's fingers. Arthan smiled as the pulse of battle filled him. He had to tuck-and-roll to avoid the second attacker. The injured man simply change his weapon to his other hand and continued to come.

The bear man manoeuvred some fallen masonry between himself and the two swordsmen. The grove was dark but this short pause gave him time to look carefully at the strange men who wanted his blood. They appeared naked, but not smooth-skinned as the unclothed usually looked. Their limbs were covered in a gnarled bark-like surface. Their faces possesses no eyes, only divots for eyes. Their entire bodies were green.

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“What thrice-damned sorcery is this, Envy?” he shouted at the girl, who sat giggling with delight from her perch.

“You are one to talk, bear man.”

So she knew he had come in bear form. He had wondered, but now he knew.

The second attacker leapt at Arthan after scrambling over the mound of stone. When he did this, the first raced around to help press the attack from the other side. Arthan swore, swinging wildly and taking the second thing's head clear off. It rolled behind a fallen stone. The body did not fall but continued with the advance, slamming its blade over and over at the retreating bear man.

The first swordsman flanked Arthan as he defended. The green man's blade slashed Arthan across the shoulder, spraying the mouldering blocks with red spatter.

Envy cried out, “Hussah!”

Arthan had to retreat but felt pain in his ankle. The fallen head bit

at his bare foot with wooden teeth. He jumped, kicked the skull away like a ball in Envy's direction, then returned to his two opponents.

The green man without a head seemed no worse off than before his decapitation. He thrust at his target without losing strength. This was his advantage. It made up for the lack of skill with which he fought. Arthan perceived this, too, and rushed the figure, slashing with both hands on his hilt. The vicious attack severed a green arm. Limb and sword fell to the ground, twitching but unable to harm him. The stump of the arm flailed, spraying green sap everywhere while it displayed a very human looking arm bone.

Arthan kicked the flagellating creature away from him and defended another stab from the second green man. Now that he knew the creatures could be rendered harmless, he used his best fencing skills to draw his opponent close to one of the giant trees. Using the bole to block his adversary, Arthan played cat-and-mouse with him around the trunk. Tireless, the green man dodged either way but was too slow when Arthan leapt. The bear man thrust as he fell away. The sword blade hit true, pinning the green opponent to the tree. It flopped around like a bug on a pin. This gave Arthan time to pick up the battle ax, dropped where Envy had left it, and return. With four solid swings, he turned the green man into four quivering quarters.

He took a breath, then went looking for the other green creature. It, too, became chunks of undeadly flesh.

Envy clapped her joy from on top of her mound. "Well done, Arthan. You may have the treasure!"

"I told you, I don't want it." He stared at the child, looking for any trace of green.

"I'm human," she said. "That's what you're wondering, right?"

"So you appear. Why do you stay here? Doing this?" He did not try to keep the contempt from his voice.

She didn't answer, only slipped off her throne and disappeared into the trees. Arthan ran up but she flitted off into the dark gloom of the grove before he could stop her.

He examined the ruins with an eye for a clue. The only marking he found was one that resembled a leaf. As he did this he saw the treasure again. The golden chalice filled with diamonds proved to be a rusty old cup filled with acorns. The illusion had faltered, its glamor dispelled.

With all apparent dangers dealt with, Arthan approached the severed arm that had no longer held a weapon. It inched along, pulling itself with its fingers. The bear man watched for a moment before raising the ax. With a single blow, he cut the hand from the arm. The spidery limb curled up then jumped at its enemy with wicked intent. Arthan batted it away with the flat of the ax. The hand smacked against a distant tree trunk then fell to the ground.

Arthan ignored it. He was interested in the arm bone, which he picked up after he dropped the battle ax. The foot long limb was coated in tough bark-like strands, while both severed ends dripped with green blood. He allowed a drop to fall on his fingers. Sticky like sap. He smelled it. Bitter like turpentine.

The bear man looked around, found the sword he had abandoned for the ax. He placed the bone against his leg and ran the blade down the length of it. The bark-like flesh fell away in brown strips, revealing two stark white bones underneath. An odor like a woodworker's shop filled the dark space. The curls of skin felt like wood chips. The bone underneath was human. And Arthan had a suspicion where it had come from.

The answer lie with the girl who had fled into the darkness. He had to follow. He needed to know why. He needed to know if she was a slave or a slaver.

Arthan took bear form. He left the sword, having no way to carry it. The gloom of the wood made it hard for his poor bear eyes to see but his nose was more trustworthy. Her trail was as plain whether she leapt over abandoned stone or climbed into a low-hanging tree. He sniffed and walked and sniffed and walked.

He only stopped once. Suddenly, he took human form because he wanted to see better. Envy had paused, sat and waited in one spot. Why should she do that? He looked all around the ground, no different than any other stretch of dark woods. It was only when Arthan looked up that he saw what was different. The branches above him were hung, not with skeletons but giant cones. These pods hung by the hundreds from each tree, one half as long as his human body. This was a special place, he realized. Envy had stopped to—worship? Take account? He didn't know. But she had stopped and now he had seen why.

Moving through the weird hanging orbs, he came to another set of

ruined stones among the trees. Hanging above these broken walls and stairs was a green ball, rounder than the others surrounding it. Arthan looked up at the weird shape and knew he was staring at the real treasure of the forest. It was not gold or jewels but some terrible thing he would destroy if he only knew how. He thought about taking bear form, attacking the globe but what could he really do in that shape? Perhaps it was better to let it sleep here in this dank, sunless place.

The bear left that dark grove, finding the edge of the grim forest. The trees grew smaller, a mix of deciduous and pine. The normal smell of Arthan's world returned with it. He saw rabbit droppings, then heard a jay whir his noisy complaint. He took a deep breath, almost as if he had been holding his breath all this time.

The trees thinned as the land rose to a bulging outcrop before becoming a steady slope downward. There was a human trail cutting a path down that slope before running alongside a small river. The village sat on the bank, twenty huts built with pine and rope. Arthan took human form as he walked into the silent street. No one came to stop him, greet him or try to sell him anything. He saw a horse corral with a busted rail. The horses had left, perhaps because they were starving. No dog barked. Only silence lived here.

Except for Envy. She sat on a fence, looking off across the river. She didn't run, not even acknowledging the newcomer.

"Is this your village?" asked Arthan unnecessarily.

"Yes."

"Why did you run?"

"Because you need to see something," she said, jumping down to the dusty ground, her bare feet used to worse. "Come." The girl's long legs ate up the distance quickly. She was young, verging on womanhood. He had to push himself a little to keep up.

Arthan kept his distance. The two walked down the street. There was another road that cut across it but they kept going straight. Envy left the last house and continued down the path made of hard packed mud and some gravel. The ruts in the surface spoke of muddy days when it rained.

They kept going until the road ended at a weedy patch. She stopped, pointed farther on. "There."

Arthan nodded, leaving her behind as he moved into the thicket,

pressing through where others had gone before. The brush fell away for a lawn of sparse grass dotted with standing stones. It was a graveyard, the village's burial ground.

Or it once had been. Instead of rows of overgrown graves, Arthan saw pile after pile of dirt. Someone had excavated every single grave. Burial shrouds, the odd pine coffin, everything had been left behind. He walked slowly around heap after heap until he saw a skeleton. There was one that had not been taken. Arthan examined it from a distance. The dead man had been the victim of some terrible accident or battle. Both of his legs stopped at the knees. He found others, mostly those of infants, one so twisted and deformed he did not know what to think. But the normal, complete skeletons were gone.

"They took them. They want skeletons. That was why they made me tell people about the treasure, to lure them out to the grove." This poured out of Envy, her eyes full of tears. "You are the first to survive."

"So many of them." Arthan might have counted them but his training in letters and numbers was limited. He knew there were enough to make a small army. An army of green men.

"Where do they keep them? And who are they?"

"Did you stop in the grove, did you see them?"

"Yes, I saw the pods."

"Each one of those pods holds a skeleton, a green one now."

Arthan nodded his understanding. So many. "But not you."

"Some day they will have me, too. Maybe when I am taller. Right now, they need me. They can not talk. They need me to be their voice."

"You should run. I will take you."

"I have tried. But no matter how far I go, they find me. When I sleep, they always find me."

"What are they?"

"They have no name. They are very old. Once they were worshipped in that shrine, in that holy grove. But the worshippers moved away, died out, I don't know. They were forgotten. They don't like that. They want--"

"What could they want? They have an army but no generals, no kings."

"There is the real treasure of the grove."

"Another cup full of acorns?"

“No, no, at the heart of the grove, there is a pod, a giant one. They guard it, pray to it. That is the real treasure.”

“That is what we are going to destroy.”

He didn't explain. He kept walking, stopping at a barn near a paddock. There were no animals in the corral but round droppings and the smell of sheep was strong in Arthan's nose. He opened the rickety wooden door on the barn and stepped inside.

“Yes, this will do,” he said aloud.

Envy followed him into the semi-darkness. Motes of straw floated in the bright beams that cut their way in through the flimsy wall. “It's just a shearing barn. There aren't even any sheep now. All run off – or killed.”

“We don't need sheep. We need those.” Arthan pointed a several bales of sheep's wool.

Envy laughed. “You going to knit a shawl?”

Arthan grinned, shaking his head. “I'm going to need oil, as well. Where do you keep that?”

“There are drums full of it by the olive presses.”

“Good, show me where.”

Envy led the bear man out of the barn and down the dusty street to another structure. This one was not tumbledown, but newly enhanced with fresh timbers. He smelt the strong odor of fresh cut grass but different, almost fruity. As a were-bear, even in human form, his sense of smell was much stronger than an ordinary man's. He held his nose and stepped inside the doorless shed.

Envy was as good as her word. Dozens of barrels of dark olive oil rested next to a set of stone basins, each with a wheel assembly on a bent arm sitting inside it. Arthan ran a finger around the edge of one wheelstone, noting the dried crust of old oil. No one had been here for sometime. The oil in the drums had sat for weeks but it did not matter. He could use it.

“Where can I get a flint?”

Envy walked past him to a small stove that sat in the corner. Used to heat the space or to boil oil, it had a small chimney and a stack of cut firewood. Hanging on a string on a nail over the stove was a bar of flint with a steel striker.

“I think we're ready,” declared the bear man finally.

He wasn't quite right. Seeing what he had in mind, Envy retrieved a collection of jars with corks and lids. She filled the vessels with oil, stoppered them then placed them in a small hand wagon. Half of the jars were given a cloth strip, which hung out like a tail.

Arthan asked, "What are those for?"

"These ones," said the girl, pointing at the tailless jars, "are for you. These," she pointed at the others. "These are for me."

The bear man smiled. "I wasn't going to take you along. You should stay here where it is safe."

Envy snorted at his words. "Safe? I don't think so. I want a chance to get even."

Arthan thought this over. He was not operating out of a sense of vengeance but concern. He had to digest that idea for a time but finally saw that this young woman had lost much to these green things. She would not be free unless they were destroyed. She had as much, if not more, to lose.

"Alright," he said with finality.

This got another snort of derision. "Boys!"

The bear man did not know what to say to that so he went back to the barn and gathered up his fleeces. He lay one on another and another until he had a large bail ten feet long and four feet high. He bound this with some old twine he found in a box in a corner. The bail would hold long enough for it to deal death. The oil would be added only at the last moment, allowing him to roll the heavy weight into the forest without covering him in oil.

He gave the bail a push, heading up the road in the direction of the forest. The weight was evenly distributed so it did not require too much effort. He heard Envy draw up behind him, the hand wagon creaking as its wooden wheels thumps and bobbed over ruts and rocks. He glanced back once to see her smile at him. There was nothing more to say. He pressed on.

The trees changed from birches to pines. The wool bundle rolled smoothly for several pushes but then had to be corrected with a side push to keep it from going off to the left or right. He stopped, mopped his brow with the back of his hand. He turned to see Envy leaned over

her wagon. She fingered one of the tailed bottles. In her other hand was the flint.

“Oil?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Too soon. The grove is still a few miles away.”

Arthan shrugged his shoulders and continued with the job of rolling the bail. He left the watching to Envy, who knew these woods far better than he did. After what seemed an endlessly series of rolls, she said, “Here, Arthan. I see movement ahead. They are coming.”

“You pour the oil. I’ll keep them away.” With that, he became the bear. He went to the bail and placed his paws on the top, allowing him to look over the wool at the three green ones coming from the trees. Arthan heard Envy pulling corks. He leapt around the wool roll and engaged the first of the trio of attackers.

The green man had an ax, which he swung at Arthan’s head. The bear leapt beyond his swing and smashed the weapon from its grasp. Another leap and he had the creature’s skull in his mouth. Teeth crushed and the head broke away from the body. But as before, the green men did not need a head to fight. The damaged thing ignored the lack of its head and drove its green, thorny fingers into Arthan’s front legs. The pain only stopped when he had rendered the remaining body parts into shattered shreds.

The other two did not wait for him to finish. They came at him with swords. Wide paws came up to bat aside the blades, with teeth to follow. Arthan ripped one green man in half but the arms continued to swing its blade at him, while the feet kicked at his knees.

The third attacker kept its distance, stabbing and then retreating while its fellows kept the bear busy. The green man raised his sword, finding an opening in the large animal’s vicious counter-attacks. The sword went up with the point aimed at the bear’s heart. The weapon never fell for a smash and splash of pottery was followed by a burst of flame. Envy smiled as she watched the silent killer drop and die in a gout of flame.

Arthan took man form, gathering up the ax. He left the girl to finish the fallen. His eye was on small trees poking up among the larger ones. Arthan selected a long, thin one and cut it off with a single swing. A swipe down three sides removed all the limbs. He now had a good pole for the next part of the journey.

The bear man pointed the staff against the wool bail and pushed. The soddened burden rolled as he applied pressure. The smell of pressed olives was strong. He smiled at the girl and said, “Keep that flame handy. But not too close.”

“I brought a torch. I’ll light it.” Envy produced the small wand from her wagon. The stick had a ball of oily wool at the top. She lit it off the burning skull of a destroyed green skeleton.

“Keep it away from the bail,” said the bear man. She gave him a look but he missed it as he was concentrating on rolling the oily bundle. The path had begun to incline. It was the steep ascent that Arthan had noticed coming down. All he had to do was get the roll to the top and then gravity would do the rest on the other side. The path sloped the other way, all the way into the deepest part of the trees.

He concentrated on rolling the wool bale, leaving the watching to Envy. She hovered a ways behind him, ever alert for more green men. When they came, the green ones were in a large group, as many as twenty.

“Arthan--”

“More green men?”

“An army of them.”

The bear man pressed the stick into the wool then parked the butt in the dirt. He waited a second to see that the wood held the roll in place before looking up. She was right, a horde of green warriors. And still a good hundred feet left of the hill to the top.

“Envy, I have a plan. It’ll be risky, but I think we have no other choice.” The green figures bounded down the slope with weapons in their knotty hands. “I will draw all the men to the bottom of hill. When they are gathered there, light the bale and let loose.”

“But Arthan. The grove--”

“We’ll deal with that – if we live. So stay behind the bale, crouch down and use your fire on any of them as come for you.”

He didn’t wait to hear her reply. He didn’t have time. He hamasked into the bear and launched himself up the slope before the green horde could reach the other side of the bale. He crushed two in his charge then took another with his jaws and swung him around, knocking down more. The eerie lack of shouting went unnoticed as the bear was piled on by ten green men. There was no movement for a few seconds

before Arthan exploded out of the dog-pile and ran for the bottom of the hill. The green men followed.

Envy watched from behind the bale as the green things lumbered down the hill. Arthan waited for them at the bottom of the path where the bale was sure to roll. Envy looked to her torch, waiting for more green men to gather when she saw she wasn't alone. One of the green men, one whose head had been smashed completely off by the bear's wide paws, clambered over the bale and reached for her. She gave a short scream and pressed the torch at the green limb. The arm fell back, now alight. The green man disintegrated as the bale caught fire, engulfing the headless monster as well.

Envy leapt clear as the green man's weight dislodged the pole. The

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bale began its roll downward, slowly at first but with more and more speed as it careened down the path. The movement also fanned the flames, making the bale a titanic meteor of fire. It smashed into the first green man, crushing him as it tore through the green army. Arthan was not immune to the speeding fireball either. The bale rose off the ground, partly because of velocity, and partly because of several mashed victims acting as a ramp, coming at the bear at face level. Arthan ducked but the flames tore across his back, burning fur and skin alike. He howled then ran for the creek.

A wet, burnt bear rose from the water then headed back up the hill. Arthan remained in bear form, allowing the were powers to heal his scorched and bruised body. As he came up the bank, he saw dozen burning piles that had once been green men. Two remained only partially injured. He dove on each separately, breaking and crushing the bones inside them. Then he looked up hill. Envy stood there, her

torch in one hand. She waved to him.

Taking human form only at the last steps up the hill, Arthan called out, "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," the girl admitted. "You sure got cooked."

"Yes, I did," admitted the young man with a laugh and brushing at his head.

"It grew back," said the girl, checking him for injuries.

"One of the benefits of being a were." Arthan's face grew more serious. "Do we have enough wool and oil left to try again?"

"Oil, yes, but not wool. We've used up all that was in the shed. We still have these two jugs left." Envy held up one of the vessels from her small wagon.

"It's not enough without another bale, is it?"

"No."

"Doesn't matter. This oil can still do the job."

"If we take it right into their temple. But--"

Arthan didn't let her finish that sentence. He took up a jug of oil and put out his hand for the torch. "You stay here. I can finish this."

"You won't know where to place that." Envy put a hand against her hip.

"A large green ball resting over some stones."

"You have seen it then."

"The real treasure. I will light it on fire and then the green men will rest." Arthan hiked the oil jug over one shoulder. "Go back to the village. You'll be safe there for now."

"But if you don't come back--"

"If I'm not back by dark, sneak off as best you can. The green men will be too busy to follow you."

He went up the last part of the hill without looking back. He knew she wanted to join him but he couldn't guarantee her safety. If another horde of green men attacked him, she would die almost instantly. He would not have that on his conscience.

The cool gloom of the forest fell over him as the ground shifted in the other direction. The slight slope took him quickly into a world of tall cedars with very little plant growth under the over-arching monarchs. The ground was spongy with needles and a scent with a nose-wrinkling bite covered everything. The torch crackled in his

hand, casting a little light into dark holes made by curling roots.

Arthan knew the way. He had been there before, though in reverse. He took the wrong trail for a few meters then corrected himself. All the time that he searched, he saw no green men. Had he destroyed them all? He doubted it but the evidence seemed to say otherwise. It was only as he came across the old ruin stones that he felt like he was being watched from secret places. The green ones held back. Why? Out of fear? That made no sense. They had never shown any such emotion before. They waited, but why?

The bear man hurried with his jug now in hand as he closed in on his goal. As he came abreast of the shrine stones, he saw something had changed. The giant, green globe that had crowned the altar was gone! The treasure he had come to destroy was no longer there, only the withered husks that once wrapped the prize. He was too late! The green men had taken the globe and departed for another location.

When he heard the loud footfall behind him, he knew he was wrong. They had not left. He turned and saw who had made that sound. It was a green man but of titanic size. The globe had opened and this monstrosity had emerged. The form was not human but that of a giant. The green ones had killed a one of the stonelanders and taken its skeleton. And now a titan had arisen to lead them.

It was now that the bear man noticed that this green man, though twice as tall, was not entirely like the others. For one thing, he had eyes. These were deep-set and completely black like jet. Next he perceived as the form moved that it gave off a kind of dull, green radiance, as if it shimmered with power. And lastly, and most obviously, was the sword the titan bore. Fully eight feet long it was not forged from steel but grew from his very hand, a twisting and knotted blade that was part of the giant as much as his head.

From behind him came two of the normal-sized green men, guards of the green sphere perhaps. When they saw Arthan, both leapt forward brandishing maces on long handles. The bear man raised his sword, preparing for their charge but need not have bothered. The titan swung his blade left and right, cutting both green men in half, sending their severed corpses into the ferns around a tree. Immediately, the two halves sprouted roots and the greenish light burned as the corpses became shrubs almost instantly.

Arthan's gaze returned to the giant. He lumbered on legs as thick through as the bear man's chest. The green blade swished side-to-side in preparation for battle. The silent giant would brook no interruptions from underlings. He would kill the were-bear.

To do this, the titan launched itself at the man. Arthan stood his ground, the jug in one hand, the torch in the other. The green blade made a vicious swing at his opponent. Arthan leapt back twice to evade the massive edge. He countered with a stab at the giant's elbow with the torch as the blade swung past. The green man pulled his weapon back instantly smashing Arthan's flames away with little damage.

He's faster than I thought, realized the bear man. *I'm only going to get one try with this jug.*

The bear man danced, trying to get behind the giant but the titan spun quickly, keeping the blade between them. But he didn't stay there. He dove in at the bear man again, swinging that gigantic sword. Arthan backed away again, saying to himself, *On the next charge.*

The giant came again. This time Arthan swung the jug as the sword plowed towards him, stabbing this time instead of swinging. The bear man dodged under the lunge, throwing the jug at the green man's chest. The woody bark-like surface proved hard enough to crack and break the jug. Oil spilled all over the titan's waist and legs. Arthan ducked and rolled away as the blade came rushing back towards him. He wasn't fast enough to miss it completely, feeling the rough surface of the sword scrape across his back. Pain shot through his skin, far more pain than rough handling should have given him. The green fire from the weapon burned him. For a moment, he wondered, *will my were-powers heal such a wound?*

"Come on, greenie," he chided the giant. "Come get the kiss of fire."

The giant did not need to be baited. The massive form came again, swinging its sword again in quick back-and-forward chops. Arthan leapt back but his torch did not. It flew towards the green belly, struck, igniting the oil in a whoosh. Flames engulfed the titan's lower half, crawling up its chest, sending smoke into its eyes.

Arthan did not wait. He hamasked into the bear and dove at the arm that ended in the sword. If he could destroy that limb, the weapon would become less of a threat. His jaws clamped on the giant's arm and dug in with terrific fangs. Green blood sprouted out of the wound

as the burn of the green magic fire did likewise. Arthan hung on and tried to bring his paws into the fight. The sword blade rose and fell but could not quite strike him with full force. The sharp edge of the blade cut into his fur as the green power burned the wounds.

The two titans rolled. There was really nothing else they could do as they struggled one giant against another. Arthan released the arm as his head came closer to the green head. His fangs nipped at the throat that held that strange head in place. He wondered for a second if this green man could live without his head like the smaller ones? He was going to try and find out.

The rolling motion took the fighters in a downhill directions, striking the giant bowels of trees, a boulder but on they fought. The sword became a handicap at such close quarters and Arthan exploited that to the fullest. The burning oil smouldered as their rolling motion and forest needles snuffed much of the fire.

Arthan pressed his snapping jaws, unable to get the thick neck between his teeth. His claws raked the smoking body, both front and rear as the green man abandoned his awkward sword arm for new attacks. All over the titan's body small, sharp pointed formed from the wood, biting into the bear's body in a dozen places, drawing blood and spreading green fire into his wounds.

On they rolled until the trees fell away. Arthan felt water. They had come to a stream. The smoking trunk of the giant hissed with relief as the fires quickly died. The soft silt of the streambed suited the green man better, for it made it harder for the bear to find a purchase for his bites and claws. The green man rose to his full height, grabbing the bear with one hand and forcing his head under the cool wavelets with the sword blade. Arthan fought like a demon but could not break the titan's hold.

It looked bad but the were-bear had fought many battles in his short seventeen years. He knew what to do. He turned into a man. The sudden shrinking in size allowed him to crawl quickly out from under the titan's legs and get behind him at last. Taking bear form again, he leapt, driving his jaws with deadly force into the green man's neck. The teeth tore and the paws swung. Suddenly the green man's head bounced away like a child's ball to land in a shrub a few yards away.

Arthan pulled back. Was the giant and his sword going to come

now, headless but deadly? No. The green body slipped quietly into the water and remained still. After a minute, Arthan took human form so he could examine the fallen giant. The body still glowed with the green fire. In fact, like the two green men he had sliced earlier, the torso had formed roots and was quickly becoming a large plant with new branches and leaves.

The bear man walked over to the head. It looked up at him with those solid black eyes. What was it asking? He did not know. Instead, he wiped his brow and sat on his haunches. He was tired—and sore. The wounds he had taken burned with an evil soreness. He was used to having all his ailments disappear in a few seconds, sometimes minutes. These new injuries were not reacting to the were-powers like ordinary wounds. It would be a long time before he healed.

Too tired to do much else, the bear man looked around him. Where was he? He was no longer in the forest with its tall stately trees. This was a square of land that the villagers had cleared. He saw long rows of cut branches ready for burning. They had cleared this section. In one area he could see newly planted trees, slender olive branches to grow new oil-producing trees. The oil production in the village would have tripled once the entire lot was planted and the trees allowed a decade or two to grow

Arthan looked back into the forest where he had begun his fight with the titan. Not that far from here, maybe a five minute walk. No wonder the green men wanted an army! They were protecting their sacred grove. As the villagers moved in toward their altar, the forest needed to respond. It had chosen a strange way but it made sense...

Arthan picked up the titan's head in his hand. The green fire stung but he ignored it as he made his way out of the clearing, through some trees and finally onto the trail back to the village. He saw Envy waiting at the bottom of the hill.

"You won!" she cheered, seeing the head.

"Tell me, Envy. What will you do tomorrow? Are you staying here?"

The girl stopped her giggling and became serious. "No, I thought I'd go with you. At least to another town, maybe a city."

"So this village means nothing to you then?"

"Not much now that everyone is dead, or gone."

"Gather whatever is precious to you and bring it here. I will meet

you in an hour.”

Envy ran to meet Arthan, a worried look in her eyes. The oil factory was blazing as were many of the houses.

The bear man stood with a shovel in his hands. The severed head was nowhere to be seen.

“Where did you put the head?”

“I buried it over there, where the fire isn’t likely to go.” The bear man pointed to a fresh heap of black soil off the left of the path.

“Why the fire?”

“It’s all going back to the trees. I promised the green head that much.”

“Promised? He can talk?”

“No, not like that. It doesn’t matter. Soon everything here is going to be ash, good grey ash, perfect for growing.”

The two watched the fire claim the mill as the tallest structure collapsed under the flames.

“Ready to go?”

“Not yet,” the girl said, touching his arm. The bear man flinched but said nothing. “I just want to watch that building here fall down.”

“Why that one?”

“It’s the temple. I used to go there mornings for lessons. Makina taught the schooling. Mostly how to behave, how to do things. Very boring.”

Arthan nodded. It wasn’t that long ago he had been in a similar temple at the Mountain of the Bears. His masters used wooden swords to show their displeasure. He was thankful for lessons in sword fighting but did not miss being cooped up between stone walls.

“Come on. We got a long walk ahead of us.” Arthan headed towards the burning village. They would work their way around the falling structures and take the road east. He had no desire to go west and pass through the dark woods. He had had enough of towering trees for awhile. The distant plains sounded pretty. Open air, plenty of sunshine. And there was Envy to keep him company for now. A few days from now, maybe a week, she’d go her own way, but until then he’d just keep walking east.



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