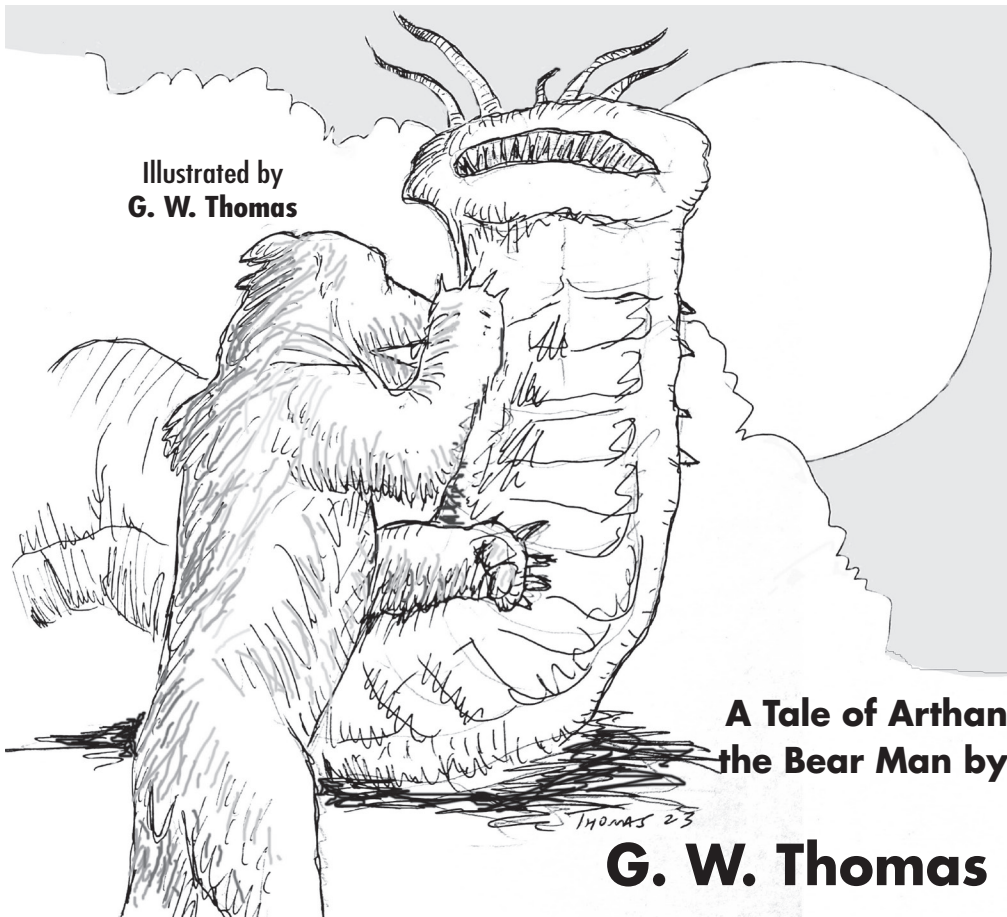


HUNTER'S MOON

Illustrated by
G. W. Thomas



**A Tale of Arthan
the Bear Man by**

G. W. Thomas

The forest was dark. The moon had set. The young man moved from tree to tree, his eyes wide with the effort of seeing. In his hand was a sword, simple without decoration. The tip of the blade swung left and right as he worked his way deeper into the shadows. *The wolf has been here, he thought. I can smell him.*

Arthan was the hunter's name. He sought a prey that had fled its bed. He found a spot in the grass, walked flat, and still warm. He bent down to feel the heat with his fingers.

He is close.

The sword blade came up as something large threw itself at him. Two hundred pounds of weight slammed into the swordsman, knocking him over. Fangs bit into his arm as clawed feet scrambled in the leafy floor. The sword, which was named Salimander, fell into the brambles to lie still in the detritus of pine cones left by the squirrels.

The wolf pressed his advantage, bringing his dripping fangs to the boy's neck. Arthan's hands gripped the hairy throat but the jaws could not be repelled. The hot breath puffed with urgent need. The hunter was now the hunted.

What happened next surprised the wolf. One second the young man was in its grips and then the next, a large brown bear of six hundred pounds rose up from the ground, swinging with its paws. The wolf took a slap across the snout then turned to run. It received another clawing attack on its rump as it disappeared into the thick brush.

The bear did not pursue. Instead, it sat up on its back legs and licked the blood from its claws. Once done, the animal became a young man again. Arthan stood up and went looking for his sword. He dug around in the duff under fallen logs until the hilt presented itself. He found the scabbard and belt that he had dropped, and sheathed the weapon. It returned to his shoulder, where it hung loosely.

The hunt continued. The wolf had killed a family living on the banks of the Gondolan River to the east. Arthan had been tracking it since discovering the father, mother and two children, all lying cold and dead outside their log cabin. They had been friends of his, Fal and Tris, and their son, Erik and daughter Casse.

The wolf would pay.

Arthan had trusted Fal and his kin with the truth about his true nature, being a were-bear. The family had made their living with growing oats and vegetables in summer and trapping fur in the winter. But now they lay dead in one large shallow grave, all Arthan could dig with his claws. It would be enough to keep the coyotes out until he could return and cover it with a proper cairn. But first, the wolf...

Arthan took bear form again, his sword hanging loosely over his

neck. He applied his sensitive nose to the ground and found the wolf's spoor quickly. He lumbered through brush and lessened the miles between them.

The hunter knew this was a lone wolf, for he had not smelled or spotted any sign of others. It must have a den nearby. Why else kill the family? It hadn't eaten from the bodies. Perhaps it was sick with the foaming sickness, but Arthan would have scented that. No, it must have killed to secure its domain, something it would not share with humans. He checked himself for bites and scratches just to be sure.

The trail went through a ravine filled with birch then up a rocky escarpment where the trees thinned out. Seeing signs of ancient masonry, the bear became a man and drew his blade. *The perfect spot for an ambush*, he thought.

Arthan pulled himself up a crumbling slab of marble to stand over several large chunks of rock that had once made a temple or some other structure. The stone was marble. He saw strange carving on the few pieces that stood among the small trees that had grown up in recent years. He had heard old legends about a race of men who had dwelt in these hills when they were not covered by trees but by farms and pastures. This was so long ago that tall pines and firs hid most of the evidence of their legacy.

The old stones would be a good place for a wolf den. His eyes wandered from marble slab to shapeless lump, seeking any hint of the wolf. There! A hole between the rocks...

"Hello, lad," said a soft, calm voice.

Arthan turned. A man, thirty or so, with a neat gray beard lay across a stone seat, a piece of long grass in his mouth. His clothing was simple, made of gray fur.

"I am hunting a wolf," said the swordsman.

"With a sword? Where is your bow? Your pack of hounds?"

"I have none. But this wolf is a man-killer. I must stop it."

The fellow sat up. "A man-killer? What makes you say that?"

"Yes, a family back along the river. The wolf killed four people."

The man shook his head, tsking. "I doubt that. Why should a wolf do that?"

"Wolves are vermin. They need no reasons."

The man laughed at this. "You aren't what you appear, are you,

young man?" The newcomer leapt off his marble seat with a spring. "Bear, aren't you?"

Arthan made no reply but raised his blade ready for a fight.

"I am the wolf you hunt," admitted the man. "I killed no family." To make his point, he turned into the gray wolf. He no longer bore the wounds that Arthan had given him, his were-powers healing them almost instantly.

"Why should I believe a lying werewolf?" Arthan asked after the beast became man again.

"Simple logic, of course."

Arthan waited to hear more, his sword tip weaving back and forth.

"Why should I kill four people? If I wanted their food, or the little gold they possessed, or even to pleasure myself with the farmer's wife, they could harm me not. If I killed the man, the others would

Arthan growled his displeasure but took bear form and followed. It was an hour's run back to the river. When he arrived at the cabin, its chimney cold and smokeless, he found the wolf holding a shovel, standing over a freshly uncovered Fal.

flee. I could take anything."

Arthan growled at the wolf's suggestion of rape and ruin. But he did have a point.

"Then you did it for fun."

The wolf laughed again. "Our ideas of fun are different, I am sure. But I need to satisfy no blood-lust, or any kind of lust for that matter."

"Then who, liar?"

"What did they look like? The dead, I mean. Were they torn to pieces by fangs and claws?"

Arthan thought about this. No, they were not.

“Cold, with dark blue skin.”

“A vampher, perhaps? Was their blood drained? Did they bear red marks all over their bodies?”

“No. I buried them. They were normal enough, though blue.”

The wolf thought about this for a while. “No, I have no idea what happened. Let’s have a look.” With that thought, he took wolf form and ran back the way they had come.

Arthan growled his displeasure but took bear form and followed. It was an hour’s run back to the river. When he arrived at the cabin, its chimney cold and smokeless, he found the wolf holding a shovel, standing over a freshly uncovered Fal. The man leaned over to examine the skin. He sniffed here and there.

“Don’t touch him,” said Arthan returning to human form.

“If I don’t touch him, I won’t learn anything,” said the wolf. He stood up, looked Arthan squarely in the face. “I think this is bad.”

It was Arthan’s turn to laugh. “What do you care?”

“I do care. My name is Trusk, by the way. And I am a scout for a pack of wolves that is moving into this area. It’s my job to make sure the forest is safe.”

“And that’s why you killed these good people. You want their land.”

Trusk shook his head. “Maybe that would have happened, eventually. That is up to the One, our leader. I am only Five.”

The bear snorted his disbelief. “If you are going to be around, you might as well help me find some rocks, so we can bury them properly.”

Trusk considered this. “Tell you what. You do that. I will go inside and fix us breakfast.”

Arthan growled again, stepped between the door and the wolf.

“What’s your name?” asked Trusk. “Or do you want me to call you Bear?”

“It’s Arthan,” admitted the bear. “You will not violate their home.”

“They’re dead, Arthan. We might as well use this place, until we have a good cairn built over them. After I put the stew pot on, I will help you with the stones.”

“Why should I trust a wolf?”

Trusk threw his hands up. There was no talking to bears! He turned away, reburying Fal’s arm in the sandy grave with the shovel he had taken from the side of the barn. He started to look around for rocks.

Arthan joined him, finding a neat pile next to the garden where Fal had cleared the soil for oats and peas. He looked up to see the wolf pulling a chicken from a rude pen that housed several birds. With a flick of the wrist he rung its neck then headed for the house. He lifted the bird in salute.

Later, after several trips to the rock pile and back, Arthan smelled wood smoke followed later by a delicious aroma of chicken, onion and garlic. *The wolf might just know his way around a kitchen.* Arthan remembered the few meals he had eaten that Tris had made. He doubted the wolf could bake soft cakes like she had. His nose soon told him otherwise.

They ate the soup and biscuits outside, served in wooden bowls. Arthan ate his first bowl quickly then went back inside for another and another. The wolf smiled to see his work appreciated.

“What are you smiling about?” asked Arthan when he saw Trusk’s lips. Suddenly, he thought the food must be poisoned. He threw his latest bowl to the ground, and reached for his sword.

“What a waste of soup,” said Trusk without batting an eye lash. He slurped up another spoonful, making sure the bear saw he too was eating the meal. “You bears sure are a suspicious lot. Do you go around poisoning each other?”

Arthan cursed, sheathing blade and retrieving his bowl. It was the last of the pot. There was no more. He stomped off because he had nothing clever to say in reply.

He didn’t go far, just to the edge of the creek beside the farm. Arthan wrestled with his anger, his embarrassment, and ultimately, his suspicion of the werewolf. This last one flared up when he saw the wolf walking away in the direction of the ruins. He took bear form and followed at a distance, the wind telling him if he strayed from the wolf’s trail.

Trusk’s path ran straight east. *Or was he going for the ruins?* he wondered. *Was the pack coming from the east? Was he headed to meet them?*

These thoughts dissipated when he saw the dog-like form atop the small hillock where the fallen temple stones sat. The wolf sniffed about, making no attempt to signal or call out to any other wolves.

Arthan sped up, taking human form as he came to the cracked marble

slabs. He drew his sword.

“Took you long enough,” said Trusk, his signature piece of straw in his mouth. “What’s the sword for?”

“Why are you here?” demanded the young bear.

“You really don’t believe me. Do you?” Trusk shook his grey locks. “I told you. I am a scout. I need to secure this land for my Pack. I’m here looking for clues. Your dead friends were a symptom, not the problem.”

“You said all that. What can we learn from these old stones?”

“Come, look. I’ve already found something.” The wolf waved his hand towards the top of the ruin. Arthan sheathed his sword, then followed, keeping one eye on the man in case he planned subterfuge.

“There! See it?”

Arthan looked between the tilted stones that crowned the top of the mount. The hole he had seen last time, just big enough for a man to fit in lie between two blocks. The dirt near the space was scattered as if someone or something had recently dug, dragging a slab aside.

“It’s down there? And you’re going down there to get it?”

“No, no, slow down, young bear. That would be suicide. It can fit in that hole, as could you, but it can also fight in there. How will you swing your sword? It would be foolhardy in the extreme.”

“Is it a snake?” asked Arthan.

Trusk shook his head again. “Don’t know. Besides we don’t need to go down that rabbit hole. It’ll come out when the moon rises tonight.”

“Why?”

“It’s a Hunter’s Moon. By its light, it will be able to see anything it wants to.” He pointed to a blotch of old writing on the side of the ruin stone. “See that? That Old Hynaerian. They used to live here thousands of years ago. This was a temple to their gods.”

“You can read that?” asked Arthan, gazing over the weathered script on the stone.

“No, no one can. It’s all been forgotten. It probably doesn’t say much anyway. Temples are all the same. ‘Oh mighty Godly One, brings us good crops, bring us good lambs, etc.’ You know the kind of thing. Worshippers are always self-interested.”

“I can’t really say I do. At the Mountain, we didn’t --”

“Tsk tsk. Don’t be giving away bear secrets to every wolf you meet.”

“I-I-” stuttered Arthan, realizing what he might have said.

Trusk laughed. “Don’t worry your head about it, bear. I can barely remember my own rituals. I don’t want to know about yours.”

“Why aren’t the Hynaerians still here?”

Trusk let off a short whistle. “That could be anything. War. Famine. Simple inertia. Anything really. Time has her way with everyone.”

“Not weres. We survive, despite the humans hating us.”

“Even the weres will succumb someday. Long after you and I are gone, I suspect.” Trusk stepped down, heading back towards the farm.

“Come on, we need to get ready for it.”

The two walked back in human form. Trusk took the time to explain his plan, what little of one he had.

“Tonight, it’ll come with the full moon.”

“We’ll be ready for it,” declared the young bear, slapping his scabbard.

“Swords alone won’t win the day, I fear. Fire, that’s our best weapon. I plan to prepare a little surprise for it in the barn.”

“I don’t understand something. Why did this thing wait so long to take Fal and his family. They’ve been living here for years.”

“I don’t know-- but I can guess. Was your friend Fal interested in those ruins?”

“He didn’t speak of them often, but he did say once he thought piles of gold lie under those stones.”

“Then he was the one who dug up that slab. Remember it?”

“Yes, I do. He might have gone looking for gold.”

“And found something the Hynaerians left there. Only it wasn’t gold.”

The two men spent the rest of the day dragging dry wood into the barn. Trusk covered the wood with oil taken from Fal’s wood-working shop. The farmer used the oil of fish to grease the belts on his lumbering mill. A rope was placed to release the trap that would block both doors. To finish his death-trap, Trusk placed a flint-striker at the front and back. There was no telling which exit they would need when the time came.

As the sun set in an orange burst, the two sat outside with another bowl of Trusk’s soup. Arthan had hoped for biscuits as well but there

hadn't been time.

As he put the last touches on his third bowl, a noise made both men stop and turn their heads. It was the sound of rocks falling off of rocks. Both men rushed to the cairn to see another shower of stones roll down the small heap as something pushed from below.

At first, Arthan expected the twisted and dirty corpses he and Trusk had buried under the boulders. What poked out between tumbling stones was no longer the dead flesh of humans but something amorphous and slimy. Soft points broke the surface as two different forms rose from the grave. A set of bulbous, shiny black heads peered out from eyeless faces. As the things pulled themselves from the hole, first with undulation then another, the two were-men saw the long black body of the first creature. Behind it was an identical copy.

The second larval creature, for that was what they were, the offspring of some unknown thing, spied the two men and brought its flabby head around like the snout of a beast.

The first one dropped its head allowing a wide gash of a mouth to form on the end. Inside bristled with needle-sharp fangs. The thing hissed a high pitched shriek that said nothing more than complete hatred.

Arthan drew his sword, moving between the first slug and the werewolf. This gave Trusk enough time to pick up the shovel that the werewolf had left next to the dirt pile. It was no Salimander but Trusk seemed to know where the sharp end was.

The flaccid things moved slowly at first but now crept on wriggling bodies that smelled strongly of sulphurous acid. Arthan swung at the first creature's head but the blade buried itself in the oozy flesh without obvious injury. The wound sealed up seconds later.

"I told you," said Trusk, swinging his shovel and striking the second creature in the head. The black thing whipped about in counter-attack, trying to bite the wolf with its circle of teeth. Trusk batted away at the lumpy mouth but kept an eye on the other end, which stank of sharp chemicals.

"You didn't kill my friends. I see that now," acknowledged the werewolf. "What are these things?"

"Babies. Mere infants."

Arthan had no wish to meet the mother.

The two creatures worked independent of each other, unconcerned for anything but themselves. Trusk used this to his advantage when he had a free second and sent his shovel blade into Arthan's monster's neck. The thing spun, allowing Arthan to stab its abdomen with a deep lunge. The thing instantly turned back to Arthan. Trusk had his hands full with his own attacker.

Arthan yowled when he drew his hand back too slowly. Rank slime dripped down his wrist, burning with a fire worst than hornet stings. The things were intelligent enough to understand that the sword made Arthan dangerous. The bear managed to keep Salimander but his arm throbbed with fire.

Again it was Trusk who came to his rescue with another shovel blade to the beast's head. The slug turned at the blow but returned to Arthan faster than last time. Another shovel smack drew the thing around, giving the bear man a clean swing at its neck. Salimander sliced through gelatinous flesh, sending the wad that was its head flying. The headless worm thrashed in the grass, like a puppet with some of its strings cut.

This victory cost the werewolf. Striking twice at Arthan's opponent had left him open. The second flabby worm drove its head into his belly with a sound like a fist hitting a wall. Trusk fell over and the thing crawled on top of him. The shovel came up but did little except block the circular mouth. Acid dripped all over his thrashing limbs as he tried to back away.

It was Arthan's turn to strike. He slashed at the head of Trusk's attacker, cutting away a large chunk of flabby tissue. The beast pulled itself off of the werewolf and came for the lad with the sword. The mouth came up but Arthan was ready for it. He knocked it aside then ran the length of his blade through its body, ripping flesh as he withdrew the sword. The open ring of the mouth let out another high-pitched squeal. Angry, yes, but Arthan began to suspect it was more than mere hissing. The thing was calling to someone. He took a second to look at the disturbed rocks of the cairn. Was it calling to more offspring inside?

He couldn't answer that for his whole attention was needed to dodge blows from the black tail and its stinging acid. He managed to slice

down on the attacking head and cut another wad from the biting head. That got another yelp of hissing hatred from the creature as it launched itself at him with all its wriggling speed, reaching for the bear man, in a last desperate lunge.

The beast slammed into the bear, his sword penetrating its body. The slug ignored the wound, throwing all its weight at his foe. In a second its mouth would find the bear and clamp on with its thousand needle teeth. Only it never got the chance as Trusk threw himself at the thing from behind, shovel held high. The metal scoop slapped into the beast's head with a stunning blow. Arthan wasted no time in pressing Salimander's blade deep into its throat, severing the back portion of

The beast slammed into the bear, his sword penetrating its body. The slug ignored the wound, throwing all its weight at his foe. In a second its mouth would find the bear and clamp on with its thousand needle teeth.

the creature's head from its front.

The black slug shrieked its loudest squeal as its life fled. The head and body thrashed for a moment then laid still.

Arthan looked to his comrade. "You okay?"

"Sure. I hamasked while you kept it busy. I'm fine." Trusk looked weak but alive.

"That thing was calling for its mother."

"Maybe, but we got something else to worry about. That cairn."

"What?"

Trusk picked up his shovel. "We got to dig it up. Make sure there aren't any more babies lying in there."

"Wouldn't they have shown up already?"

"What do you know about slugs?" asked the werewolf.

"Besides they are tasty?"

The wolf grinned. Bears always thought with their bellies. “About how they hatch.”

Arthan shrugged. He followed Trusk to the ruined cairn, started pulling rocks aside so the werewolf could ply his shovel. The job took an hour to uncover the bodies of the two children. Or what was left of the boy and girl. The bodies were now black, covered in a pupae of stretched skin. Arthan could make out the features of the human offspring in that covering. It was all that remained of Erik and Casse.

“The children were too small,” said Trusk. “They couldn’t finish.”

“We would have had four of those things to contend with,” said Arthan.

“We would have had to take our animal forms and run away,” admitted the other.

Arthan nodded. He knew Trusk was right.

“Turn away, bear,” said the wolf. “I will finish these two off. You try to remember those children the way they were.”

Arthan turned as instructed, surprised that a werewolf should feel so about humans. He wanted to ask but couldn’t find the words.

“Done. Now help me bury them.”

“Let’s burn them,” said Arthan. “I think I know where I can get some more oil.”

Trusk waited with shovel in hand while the lad sought out a can of oil Fal had stashed in the kitchen. Arthan poured it over the four dead black forms while Trusk had the flame ready with a brand from the kitchen oven. Soon an oily streak rose to the sky, telling all who could smell it that there were four less monsters in the world.

The sky was completely dark now. The werewolf looked ill, still finding his acid wounds painful, even after another hamask. Were-creatures can heal themselves almost instantly when they take their animal forms. But the wound was poisoned with a black venom that, while it didn’t kill the werewolf, still pained him. Trusk begged of Arthan to watch while he grabbed a few winks of sleep.

Arthan had no problem staying awake, his nerves jumping like fleas. He waited for the moon to rise before he curled up in a straw pile near the barn. It was the full circle of light that Trusk had called The Hunter’s Moon. Arthan would do no hunting tonight. He took bear

form, wanting to be ready for any attackers that might come in the night. None did and he woke to a bright morning.

There was no sign of Trusk.

First, Arthan's mind turned to treachery. The wolf had pretended illness so he could sneak off and meet his Pack. The collective power of the werewolves might be enough to kill a young were-bear. Arthan sniffed the wind. He detected no sign of wolves except for Trusk's trail going off to the east towards the ruin stones as he had the day before.

He took human form, looking for his sword. Arthan was often haphazard about weapons. After a good search, he could only conclude Trusk had taken Salimander. Again his paranoia rose in him. The wolves might find him without his sword, but this bear would sell his life dearly.

Taking bear form, Arthan took up the distinct trail in the grass and followed at a good speed. Maybe he could catch the wolf but if Trusk had left after the moon rose, giving him plenty of light to travel by, he would be long gone. Arthan could head in the opposite direction but he would never see Salimander again. He had had that sword since leaving his master at the Mountain, where he had trained. Good judgment said put plenty of distance between here and that Pack.

But Arthan continued through the grass until the dark shadows of the morning cut the distance from the standing stones of the ruin. There he spied someone lying on the ground. It was Trusk. Salimander lie among the rocks, fallen from numb fingers. Was this a trap?

The bear circled the mound, looking for hidden enemies. He found none. Eventually he came back to the werewolf who lay on his back staring up into the tops of the ruin stones. He turned his head when he saw the bear.

Arthan took human form. Salimander was back in his hands. The scabbard lie a ways over but he left it for now.

"Trusk, what has happened here?"

"The mother-- I thought-- I could--"

"You took her on by yourself?"

"For – the Pack."

Arthan turned and looked at the ruins above them. "Where? Where did she go?"

"Inside--"

“Hamask. You must. If you stay in man form, you will die.”

“Can’t-- can’t.”

The bear took a moment to look the wolf’s body over. His belly was swollen and large, like that of a pregnant woman. He reeked of acid, his fur covered in clear slime.

“Arthan--”

“Yes, Trusk?”

“Cut—off—head.”

“Cut off your head?” Arthan stepped back. “You are in pain. You don’t know what you are saying.”

“It—will—take me—like the others.”

“Hamask. You’ve got to.”

“Can’t—She—got--me--”

The werewolf stopped talking. His body thrashed left then right. But it wasn’t Trusk who was moving. The belly pulsed with unwanted life.

The werewolf stopped talking. His body thrashed left then right. But it wasn’t Trusk who was moving. The belly pulsed with unwanted life. A new slug was forming.

A new slug was forming. And one that could hamask!

“Quick!”

Arthan raised his blade as the werewolf stretched his neck out as far as his tortured body could. Salamander fell with a swish. The wolf’s head rolled away, ending Trusk’s life. But not that of the infant. Arthan raised the blade again, stabbing deep into the belly of the headless corpse. A weird squealing noise came from the baby as Trusk’s skin exploded, exposing the new black, shiny creature.

Again Salamander fell. A second slash at the thrashing black limbs sent the worm’s head into the dirt at Arthan’s feet. The body wriggled for a minute then stilled.

The bear thought to go to the hut to fetch shovel and oil but a shuddering in the ground told him his work had not gone unnoticed. The bear climbed up the stone slabs to the deep hole he and Trusk had

explored earlier.

He shouted as loud as he could, "I'll be waiting for you!"

A second, smaller ripple in the ground answered the bear's challenge.

There was nothing much to do until moonrise. Arthan napped then ate all the rest of the food in the house's pantry space. He did this in bear form, devouring Tris's dried fish stack, a rather rank-smelling cheese and, of course, her entire pot of wild honey. He was so full he had another nap, but kept one eye open as the sky was now dark, waiting for the shining beacon that was the moon.

Clouds darkened the sky but could not hide the swollen belly of the moon. She rose slowly, slinking from the horizon up the slope she took most nights. Not quite as full as the night before, but no matter. The mother would come.

Arthan was nervous. He couldn't sit and wait. He took bear form and circled the cabin with his sword draped around his neck. He would face her as a man, with a sword.

The bear's circling patrol took him behind the house with its barn trap, past an empty corral that Arthan had never seen a horse in. Perhaps Fal and Tris had had plans to buy one? He left the empty poles for the hardest part of his circuit, crossing the shallow stream that supplied the family with fresh water. The waves splattered his fur up to the shoulders since the rapid-moving water was not deep. He thought he felt a fish swim by but ignored it. He was too full to eat another fish, fresh or not, anyway.

It was as he made the front yard for the thirtieth time that he felt a tremor in the ground. Stones and detritus from the woods began vibrating then jumping up an inch high only to do it again.

She's here!

The rocky soil exploded as she made her way above ground. Stones stung the bear's face as the shower drove him to his belly. Arthan waited only a moment more before taking human form, drawing his sword in one smooth motion. A gigantic mouth appeared like a hummock before him, spraying him with hot breath that stank of the ages of her captivity.

Salimander's tooth stabbed out at the rim of the orifice before him. The blade rattled off hide so thick it might have been walrus skin. A

second swing produced no more, only a blunt thud that might as well have been a baby's awkward fist. The mother ignored both blows and continued to pull herself out of the ground.

Arthan backed up. He had no real choice. The titanic bulk of the worm was everything: sight, sound, smell, sensation. The shower of dust that followed her arrival slowly sank, allowing him to see her silhouette in the bright moonlight.

Hunter's Moon. The hunter had arrived.

She was twenty tons of pulsating, leathery worm. Unlike her infants, this skin was not slimy with acid. That was a protective trait for the younglings. Though she did not have the coating of gelatinous fire, she smelled of the same acidic ichor. Also different, she possesses a ring of horn-like appendages around her head that moved in and out as she closed her mouth. And at the center was that pit filled with needle-sharp teeth.

"Come on, mother of demons! Come on!" yelled the swordsman. He was tired of waiting.

Despite her tremendous size, or maybe because of it, the worm traveled fast. Arthan ran to the left, looking for some vital organ to attack. The mother shifted immediately, keeping her enemy in front of her. He dodged suddenly right. The head swung about in response.

It was time to lead her to the trap. Arthan turned and ran towards the barn. The giant behind him followed with a speed he could not have guessed. He threw Salimander away to improve his running but the mother did not lose an inch.

He could see the barn's wide doorway ahead. He pushed but had to hamask into the bear to out-distance her. Arthan ran into the barn, leaping over oily branches and came out the other side. The worm did not follow.

He ran around to the front. The worm had stopped exactly where he had become the bear. Did it not see the bear as the same person as the man? Was it confused? The mother's head went up and she began a strange wiggling dance. *What the hell was this?* Should he turn back into a man and tempt her in from the barn's doorway? He stood watching the unearthly movements of the giant creature.

In ages past, the men of Hynaeria had worshipped this thing. No doubt, with human slaves for offerings. Was this strange dance part of that ritual? There was no way to know. The Hynaerians had all been dead

for centuries. *And long may they rot*, thought Arthan. *Bunch of worm-worshippers!*

The mother continued her wiggling for only a minute more before letting off an ear-piercing shriek into the night's sky. Her head was aimed right at the moon. She was singing to the moon. Her goddess. It was then that Arthan understood why she had stopped outside the barn. The moon was at its zenith. For the rest of the night the moon would sink down and disappear.

With the song done, the worm's head dropped. It looked directly at the bear, who stood to the left of the house.

And the mother came fast.

Arthan spun and ran as fast as he could. Bears are known to challenge horses for speed. The fastest race horse might have followed. But this was no smooth track. Arthan had to dodge boulders and brush piles. The moon's light made this possible but he wasn't thinking about the moon. He only had one thought: *keep moving*.

The worm followed, smashing through a corner of the house as it pursued. What was a simple log wall to this titan? The air shook with its movement, so large was the beast. Arthan felt its approach through the stones and twigs he ran over.

He veered in a circle. He had to get her into the barn. But how would that work? She would tear through that rough-built structure like a fist through sticks. Trusk's trap would not work. For a fleeting second, Arthan recalled the werewolf, his kindness and his intelligence. He wished he were here now.

The roar grew louder. She was gaining. Arthan went for the trees, hoping it would slow her down. He felt her hot, rancid breath on his shoulder. An ill-advised look backwards sent a chill through him. The horny appendages were flexing, getting ready to grab him. He saw that they were hollow, like needles. That was how it had injected Fal and his family, Trusk with its eggs. And soon, the bear would join them. Only he had no one to cut off his head...

In that second, Arthan changed his plan. He would not become an egg sack. He turned on his back paws and leapt into the face of his attacker. The bear's sudden shift sent him past the groping pseudopods and right into the beast's maw. Curved needle-pointed teeth funneled him into the belly, their sharp points only a danger for prey that tried

to pull itself free. Arthan wasn't running away. He was diving for the center of the mother's heart.

The belly was instantly nasty. Acid, not unlike that of the babies, poured over him as flabby stomach walls pressed down on him, trying to crush him. It was instant agony as the acid attempted to render him into passive slop for the digestive process. But the hamask healed with the bear's were-powers, fighting off death. Arthan was trapped in an eternal spiral of pain and death, rebirth and life. And if he stayed where he was, eventually, he would lose.

He had no intention of staying. The bear struck with his claws, bit with his jaws. Even as the acid burned away hair, blinding both eyes, he tore into the worm's soft inner lining. Unlike the rough outer skin, the inner membranes were not built to endure underground travel. Arthan dug into the mother's belly, kept digging even as he felt her dancing a new dance. The dance of death.

The bear's claws pulled. Arthan's talons ripped through seam after seam of flesh. His jaws locked on what he thought was the outer skin and tore. Fresh air rewarded this attack. Again he lunged at the thick nightmare all around him. Suddenly, he felt his head push through into the open breeze of the night. Nothing had ever felt better. He shoved his bulk into the open, tearing a bigger and bigger hole into the thick outer husk.

Finally, like a new born calf, he fell out in a juicy heap, lying blind and helpless. In the distance he heard the worm thrashing out its life in the bushes near by. He was blind so he could not see its final minutes as the tear opened up, spilling its inner organs. The beast rolled, crushing everything in its path to death.

Quiet now. Arthan listened but not for the worm. There! To his left, the creek. He pulled his tortured body up, dragging himself towards the sweet, swift running water. Coldness, delicious and pure, claimed him as he submerged himself in the stream. The current washed away the acid. Slowly the hamask gained control. He could see again. His fur returned, wet and silky and whole.

Arthan dragged himself to the creekside and fell instantly asleep.

He was in man form when he woke. Someone was standing over him. In the cloudy morning air, he could not tell who it was. The

man sniffed.

“Bear,” was all he said. Others laughed.

A rough hand grabbed Arthan by the throat. He opened his eyes wider, taking in the man dressed in gray wolf fur.

“One,” said Arthan through tight lips.

“You know me, bear man?”

“Trusk spoke of his Pack. You have finally arrived.”

No one said anything to Arthan then. A conversation between the ten werewolves did not include him. One returned, placed his foot on the bear’s chest.

“What do you know of Trusk?”

“That he is dead. I cut off his head.”

A round of snarls and howls followed that.

“He asked me to. He was – *infected*.”

“We found the body. Over by that hill. How was he infected?”

“If you go over that way,” Arthan pointed off into the brush. “You will find the thing that killed Trusk. Almost killed me. We were--” Arthan stopped, sorting his words carefully.

“--working together to kill it. We were – friends.”

Another round of snarls and yips. A werewolf and a bear working together!

Arthan asked to sit up. The foot came off. Several wolves came running back, telling of the giant carcass lying off in the brush.

“Seems you did us a favor, bear,” said One.

“I didn’t do it for you. I did it for Fal and Tris, and their children.”

“Trusk always was a fool, too soft. He could have been Two.”

It was Arthan’s turn to growl. “He gave his life for the Pack.”

“He was a fool. He is dead. Take this filth to the house,” said the wolf leader to his underlings.

“The house is badly damaged,” said another. “The side has been knocked in.”

“Put him in the barn then. Give me a moment to think of something fun we can do with him.”

Another howl went up, a joyous one. The wolves would revel in the bear’s destruction.

A ring of wolves, each bearing a sword, drove Arthan to the barn. One wolf came with a length of rope and tied it around the bear several times.

They shoved him into the haphazard structure with little regard. A wolf was stationed at either doorway to keep him there.

Arthan sat for only a second before changing into a bear. The ropes, which were meant to prevent hamasking, squeezed him painfully, but what was pain after being half-digested by a worm? The cords snapped after a rough few minutes.

Retaking human form, he gathered up a length of solid wood. There were a multitude of them, all covered in oil. He selected one that was cleaner than the rest before letting off a stream of yells. “Help! Help! The worm! It infected me!” He screamed as he ran for the guard at the back. The wolf came into the dark barn with his sword raised, his eyes half-blinded.

Arthan struck first, landing a solid blow to the wolf’s head. He dropped his sword. The bear scooped it up and ended the wolf’s life with a slash at his throat that sent his head rolling. There would be no saving himself with a hamask.

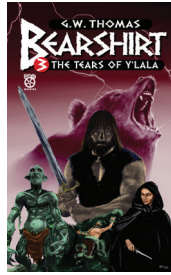
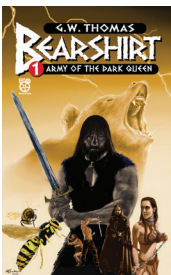
Having gained his freedom, Arthan might have run for it. A pack of werewolves on your heels was no treat. Besides, he was tired of running. He waited instead.

He saw wolves entering the barn through the front door. He told himself, *Wait! Wait!* He allowed another and then another to enter the barn. It was One, the leader of the Pack, who saw him crouching at the barn’s rear exit. Arthan waited no longer. He pulled on the rope. The trap worked as Trusk had intended. Both exits were suddenly thrown shut. The casting of the tinder-striker was but a second more before the barn exploded into flame.

Arthan turned into a bear and ran. He would not stop until he saw the moon rise again many leagues away.



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