

Green Glass Beads

*They are better than stars or water,
Better than voices of winds that sing,
Better than any man's fair daughter,
Your green glass beads on a silver ring.*
“Overheard on a Saltmarsh” by Harold Monro

Never trust a goblin.

Even a child knows that much. But there are times when you've got to take the chance, when the prize is worth the risk -- which is how Archer Green happened to be in a drafty warehouse on Quebec Street in Vancouver a few minutes before midnight, waiting with a goblin named Ezra for the Moth Man to turn up.

Why the goblins called the Moth Man the Moth Man was a mystery. He was an albino, so maybe that had something to do with it. That, and his predilection for the bright and shiny, especially things that easily caught fire or exploded. The Moth Man had a way of finding artifacts that were, in Archer's opinion, better left lost. It was probably a strange opinion for the curator of the Museum of State-Sanctioned Antiquities in Vancouver. Not that the ordinary man -- or woman -- on the street would know anything about MoSSA.

The wind moaned dolefully through the chinks in the old brick walls. Ezra puffed agitatedly at one of those violet floral cigarettes he was so fond of. Archer kept to the shadows and resisted checking his pocket watch yet again. He wasn't nervous, exactly -- it took a lot to make him nervous -- but he wasn't happy either.

“He'll be here soon.” Ezra continued to pace up and down before the empty wooden crates with their faded emblems of skulls and crowns, the dully gleaming vats and ducts that looked like nothing so much as a giant steel stomach. “Don't worry.”

Archer lifted a dismissive shoulder, but he'd already made up his mind to walk if the Moth Man didn't show by five after. It wasn't that he didn't believe the Moth Man had something worth his time and trouble. The Moth Mans of the worlds seemed always to have the inside track on beautiful and rare items before they hit the regular black market. Still, Archer would have preferred to know exactly what he was acquiring before venturing out in the dead of night with a wallet full of cash.

“His merchandise is always worth it.” Ezra drew hard on his cigarette and blew agitated purple puffs toward the rafters overhead. “He said he wants to talk to you personally.”

Archer threw him a quick look. “Me? Why me?”

“Eh?”

“Your friend. Why should he want to speak to me in particular?”

Ezra gave a smoky laugh. “Don't know. Never asked.”

Archer pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time. Moonlight through the grimy windows illuminated the time. Three minutes after midnight. He snapped the watch closed. “That's it for me. I've an early start tomorrow.”

“No, wait!” Ezra cried. “Don't leave. I know he's on his way.”

Archer studied Ezra, studied the beads of sweat popping out over Ezra's human features, took note of the anxious licking of tongue over lips. Yep, definitely time to say adieu. Archer opened his mouth, but somewhere to the left of where they stood came a ghostly screech of rusted hinges.

Instinctively, they both turned.

“See. Told you,” Ezra muttered.

Archer ignored him, watching warily until at last he spotted a tall figure in a drab overcoat moving through the darkness like a white shadow. The figure moved swiftly, with frequent glances over his shoulder, as though he feared pursuit through the canyons of metal tubes and casks.

“Well! You took your time,” Ezra greeted the Moth Man when he reached them at last.

“Can’t help it. Thought I was being followed.” The Moth Man’s voice was high and breathy. His eyes were large and protuberant. They appeared colorless in the gloom. He was taller than most humans, certainly taller than Archer, and very thin.

“Were you?” Archer asked as Ezra scoffed.

The Moth Man shook his head. He eyed Archer curiously. “You’re him? You’re--”

“No names,” Archer cut in.

“No. No, it’s just I thought you would be...different.”

Archer got that a lot. “What is it you have for me?”

“Have you got the money?”

“Show me the goods first.”

The Moth Man reached into his overcoat and pulled out a long, plain envelope. He picked at the flap with long gray fingernails, plucked it open, and held out an old-fashioned Polaroid. He smiled slyly.

“What is it?”

“Take it.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t buy on spec--”

As he spoke, the snapshot gave a tiny pop and green sparks flew up. The Moth

Man giggled. “It likes you.”

Casting him a doubtful look, Archer reached slowly for the photograph. It seemed to slip right into his palm. He gazed down.

He was looking at what appeared to be a small mound of broken glass arranged on a square of black velvet. The picture hummed against his fingertips.

Wonderingly, Archer raised his gaze to the pallid one so closely regarding him.

The Moth Man gave another of those unsettling giggles. “Er, might I interest you in a strand of green glass beads?”

At that instant the tall warehouse doors rolled up with a rattle like a million eyelids snapping awake. Dazzling white light flooded the building, bouncing off the canisters and tubing in a blinding glare. Navy uniformed VPD poured into the building, shouting orders. Much worse were the familiar dark-clad agents flanking the locals. The regular law enforcement hung back as the men and women in black fanned out behind the slow rolling green-gray of damping dust that tumbled lazily, almost playfully, through the entrails of the machinery and ladders. They wore spell masks and carried precision mage pistols. *The Irregulars*. Everywhere you turned these days the Irregulars were underfoot.

The Moth Man gasped in alarm, snatched back the photo, and bolted, his overcoat flapping behind him like failing wings. Archer also bolted -- in the opposite direction -- ignoring the cries to stop, the shouted warnings, and a few obscenities. He raced for the metal knot of drums and tubing and platforms at the back of the long building. What became of the Moth Man he didn't see, but his words still echoed in Archer's mind as he ran.

Green glass beads...

No time to consider it now, but...was it possible? Had they turned up after all this time?

The air was thick with holy water and incantations that wouldn't have thwarted a baby brownie. Archer sprang for a sharply slanted ladder, scrambled up, then pelted down a wide landing crowded with mysterious metal silhouettes. Climbing over the rickety safety railing, he leaped across the aisle to another landing. More of a shelf than a landing, but it would do. Below him, the green damping dust billowed up. He pulled his handkerchief out and clamped it over his mouth and nose before dropping down to a large rusted shipping container. He landed with a bang, but what was one more bang in the surrounding pandemonium?

Holding his breath, he sprinted down the scratched and peeling lid of the shipping container, the metallic pounding of his footsteps echoing the beat of his heart. *Boom, boom, boom*. No time to be subtle. His lungs burned with the need to breathe. The damping dust stung his eyes, but he could still see -- an advantage of his half-faerie bloodline. Behind him, he could hear muffled cries falling away.

“Where is he?”

“Where did he go?”

“There he is!”

“That's not him, dumbass! That's a pipe.”

Archer dropped to the dusty brick floor behind the container.

Mage lights skimmed the walls of the building and swept the floors in a tiger-eye glow. Archer crouched low, breathing hard through the damp silk of the handkerchief. It was not that he was out of shape so much as out of practice. The burst of adrenaline, his

human half's response to threat, left him disconcertingly breathless and a little shakier than he liked. This would do him good. If he got out of it. Out of this trap. That's what it was. A trap. But was it for Archer or for the Moth Man? Archer had a suspicion and it didn't make him happy.

Always lovely to be wanted, of course, but that son of a whoring goblin Ezra would regret it the next time they met.

The mage lights slid past and Archer took the opportunity to move further away from the approaching tattoo of department-issue boots. Wriggling through a narrow opening between towers of cold and rusted cylinders, he reached up, grabbed for the rough edge along the top of one of the wide vats, and hauled himself up. The soles of his boots slipped on the smooth sides. The muscles in his arms, shoulders, and across his back flared with pain.

Yes, definitely out of practice.

He clambered on top, risked standing upright, and jumped for the landing beneath the giant windows. He almost didn't make it. Nothing like slamming into a hard, splintery surface to concentrate the mind. The fleshy part of Archer's thumb caught on a nail as he dragged himself up and then half climbed, half fell over the flimsy railing. He kept clear of the moon bright window as he scuttled back, vaguely aware that his hand was throbbing. That was going to hurt like hell later on.

Assuming there *was* a later on.

For a few seconds, Archer sprawled on the narrow ledge, catching his breath and observing the activity below.

A number of regular police officers now searched the narrow walkways of the

warehouse. So many cops, in fact, that they were starting to get in each other's ways. Not so with the Irregulars. They were systematically sweeping the building from one end to the other. Black and silver figures moved quickly up the ladders to the landing across from Archer.

Archer rolled away from the edge and stared up at the rafters far above. What a pity he couldn't fly. But being a half-blood did have its advantages. There were still one or two tricks up his sleeve.

He scooted over to the wall between the banks of multi-paned windows. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on melding with the deep shadows. He pictured the edges of his outline softening, blurring, becoming part of the gloom. Yes, that was it. Fade into the darkness. Let it swallow him...

Footsteps were coming his way. He gathered his nerve and stood, taking a careful, silent step back, flattening himself against the bricks. His heart thumped crazily as the march of feet came closer. Two of them. Their mage lights scudded lightly ahead of them like dogs tugging on leashes.

Archer closed his eyes so that this last telltale gleam would not give him away.

They were nearly on him now. He steadied himself, stilled his breathing, willed his heart to pause.

Down below, the noise and activity continued.

Creak. Thump. Squeak. Thump.

They passed so close Archer felt the sleeve of the nearest brush his arm. His heart did truly stop then, but the agents moved past, slow and deliberate and blind to him.

True faerie glamour. To the casual mortal eye his silent figure would appear to be

nothing more than shadows and the outline of post or beam. That was one magic that even the Irregulars with all their special forces high-tech equipment hadn't figured out how to dismantle yet. Too old and too simple perhaps.

Archer remained stone still as the agents continued to prowl the landings and sweep through the puzzlework of aisles below.

“Clear up here.” One of the agents who had passed Archer signaled down.

“Check again! He didn't go out the back. And he sure as hell didn't go out the front.”

Archer sank further back into the shallow brick recess.

Thump. Squeak. Thump. Creak.

The agents retraced their steps, moving in unison.

And in unison moved right past him. Archer waited to expel a long, soft breath until the two Irregulars had reached the end of the landing and were starting down the ladder. Their boots clanged on the rungs. They muttered their discontent to each other.

Tense, alert, Archer continued to watch, but at last he accepted they had no more sense of his presence above them than would any civilian. He slid slowly down the wall and sat, knees hugged to his chest, waiting.

It was a long wait.

A very long, very dull wait.

They did not give up easily. In fact, Archer wondered at one point whether they would give up at all, if they would perhaps stake out the warehouse entrance and wait until hunger and thirst drove him out in a day or two.

Had they captured the Moth Man? Archer saw no indication of it, which

reinforced his suspicions. Ezra, of course, was long gone. Dear old Ezra. But Archer wasn't concerned with Ezra. It was the Moth Man he needed to speak to. He wanted to hear more about those green glass beads. Much more...

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The hunt ended at last. The Vancouver police had long since called it quits by the time the Irregulars reluctantly gave up the search and withdrew to the alley outside. The warehouse lights died out, row by row, leaving the great empty barn of a building to the shadows and moonlight. The heavy doors slid shut with a roll like thunder.

Through the dirt-streaked window Archer watched the agents milling dispiritedly. A tall figure appeared in their midst and began to speak. Archer looked more closely and thought he could make out the glittering insignia of a commander.

He swore softly. He'd heard the Irregulars were replacing Brennan. Inevitable probably, but still too bad. Brennan had been easy to work with. Or work around, as the case might be. No one knew anything about this new man, except that he was not local, not from British Columbia, perhaps not even from Canada. Apparently the rumor that the higher-ups had been worried about Commander Brennan getting slack had been true.

Thus, Commander Spit and Polish.

Archer rested his head against the rough brick and listened to the agents reporting their failure. The alley would have been too far away for human ears to catch a word, but Archer's ears were the least human thing about him. In fact, those small but definite points of cartilage were pretty much a dead giveaway of his half-faerie heritage. The difference wasn't all cosmetic, either. His hearing was as inhumanly keen as his sight.

The commander heard his team out and then reassured them that the night's

efforts had not been a waste.

Which meant...what exactly?

Then, finally, the Irregulars departed in an official rumble of government-owned vehicles. The alley stood empty.

Still Archer waited. One could never be too careful.

Another hour passed. The last of the damping dust flattened and its green faded out to nothing. The moon had now slipped down a few squares in the window panes.

Archer walked lightly down the ledge and let himself over the side, dropping quietly onto one of the oddly shaped containers. From there he jumped to the mossy bricks.

A crosshatch of moonlight lay across the open space of the floor. He stuck to the shadows and headed for the rear entrance.

The door was locked, but it only took a few seconds work to fiddle the mechanism. He eased the door open.

The alley behind the warehouse was silent and empty. The smell of garbage and cold exhaust lingered in the damp air. Nothing moved. Not so much as the flick of a rat's tail stirred the darkness. And yet...unease slithered down his spine. The same unease he had ignored earlier -- a few minutes before the Irregulars had burst in.

Archer retreated, slipping back inside the building, slipping back into the shadows, slipping back into the glamour, fading away into the bones of the old building.

He didn't have long to wait.

The door to the alley opened soundlessly. A man stood framed in moonlight. His face was silhouetted; Archer saw only that he was tall and disconcertingly broad.

“I know you’re here.” The deep voice was conversational, yet it carried. “I know who you are and I know what you are. Why not dispense with these childish games?”

It wasn’t a question. He didn’t really expect Archer to give himself up. Archer wasn’t convinced he even *wanted* him to give up. There was a certain note in the shadow’s voice. Not amusement...something more like anticipation.

Archer kept moving, intangible as a shade, heading for the side entrance. This one was clever and patient, but he couldn’t be two places at once, and since he was busy talking to Archer...

“You’ve had a good long run, but your time is up.” The voice found Archer as he reached the door.

Archer waved his hands in front of the lock and felt the tumblers turn, felt the outside bolt slide. He inched the door open just wide enough to step through.

“Another time,” he whispered, and let the door fall shut.

Just before it sank into the frame, cutting the connection between them, there came a whispered answer to Archer’s own whisper, which should have been inaudible to human ears.

“Sooner than you think.”