

Security Alert

A short story from the world of The Green Woman

©Jane Dougherty 2015

The alarm clattered to life, and Guardsman Thaddeus Deodato cringed inwardly. The message flashing on the monitor said: *Prepare for exit*. Just his luck to be on duty, he thought, when something nasty decides to come poking around outside the Hemisphere. He got to his feet with a sigh, trying to look eager, and glanced at the other five men in the duty room. The lieutenant was already halfway to the door. He turned and pointed at Balor.

“You hold the fort here. The rest of you jump to it!”

With a backward glance at the lucky sod who was staying behind, Thaddeus hurried after the other men who were already struggling into their survival suits.

It was hard to put his finger on the problem, but for a while now, Thaddeus had felt a squirming in his guts whenever he was on *Outside* patrol. Few of the men actually enjoyed it; the place with its winds that howled with demon voices, the air that poisoned with a mere breath, gave them all the willies. But they were soldiers; they expected a certain amount of unpleasantness and danger in their line of work. Thaddeus though felt more than just the fear of monsters and suchlike—his stomach squirmed with an unease that was almost akin to...longing.

They were all huddled in the SAS, too many for comfort. Perhaps that was the idea, to give them a sense of team spirit, mutual support. Thaddeus gave a slight shudder and told himself to get a grip. The postern gate was unlocked; the lieutenant just had to push the button and it slid open onto the dirty yellow of *Outside*. Even behind the helmet of his survival suit, Thaddeus drew in his breath. The first few seconds were always the worst, knowing that the air was poisonous, that the demons were waiting, and you could see fuck all in the swirling sand.

Any movement *Outside* was suspect, anything they found lurking in the wasteland was an enemy. The suspects noted by the Watchers weren't demons; the detectors didn't pick them up. There was that to be thankful for, he supposed. The detectors had picked up something more substantial, less creepy. Could be just a bunch of Deformities looking for food. The lieutenant knew more than he was letting on, that was for sure: the Watchers always told the commanding officer what they were being sent out after.

Thaddeus watched the lieutenant carefully. His expression was concentrated, his lips set in a firm line as if he was clenching his jaw hard. This wasn't a patrol to chase off a few cripples. Thadd hefted his rifle in inexpert hands, wishing he had been allowed more weapons training. His stomach churned with more than the usual anxiety. Suddenly he was certain that something was waiting for him *Outside*, waiting just for him. And the strange feeling of longing returned.

The lieutenant gestured *forward*, and the men lurched tentatively out of the airlock, onto the smooth platform where they waited, poised at the edge. The wilderness stretched before and below them. Grey, brown and dusty, the air filled with coils of sandwraiths and the sound of their shrieking. Cracked and jagged, the eerie landscape disappeared into the veils of sand. Shadows shifted, clouds of sand fell and rose again. Thadd waited expectantly on the platform to hear what they were looking for, exchanging uneasy glances with Sam, his mate.

The voice of the lieutenant crackled on the radio. "Runaways. Try not to damage them too much."

Runaways! Thadd glanced across at Sam. He too looked perplexed. Or at least his eyes did. They both cast furtive glances across the wilderness that rang with the eerie wailing of the wraiths in the wind. Who in their right minds would leave the safety of the Hemisphere for this? The word, *runaways*, echoed in his head, and the image it produced was unexpected.

He saw not shabby, desperate criminals, but bright-eyed, smiling citizens running towards a bright light, and in the distance, a green mist.

The guardsmen picked their way carefully down the steep slope of tumbled rock, peering through the sand clouds for signs of movement. Sam's voice came through, excited.

“By that rock wall to the right. There's someone running towards...It's a kid!”

The churning in Thadd's stomach grew almost unbearable as he followed the pointing finger and saw what some sense of intuition told him he would see—a child all right, but in the centre of a shifting ball of green mist. Or was it fire? He screwed his eyes tight, and the image remained glowing behind his closed eyes. When he opened them, another figure, a man, was leaving the shadows of a tall rock to run after the little one. Beyond, a cliff rose sheer, cut by a narrow pass full of shadows.

“Don't let them get off the plain.” The lieutenant's voice burst through in a staccato rattle. “We'll lose them in all that shit beyond.”

Thaddeus knew perfectly well, the lieutenant had no more desire to explore the broken terrain of the hostile wasteland than his men. If the runaways made it to the rocks they'd be safe. The idea surged through him with wild excitement. Did he know these people, he wondered. Was that why he had such traitorous thoughts? And how come they were out there with no protection against the toxic atmosphere? His thoughts milled about in a kaleidoscope of confusion.

The soldiers slipped on the treacherous rocks that rolled down onto the plain and leapt onto firmer ground. Thadd made his way at a jog towards the cliff ahead, not knowing what he was running towards, only that it was something momentous. One of the men knelt, took aim, and fired at the larger of the two running shapes. A scream rang out. The child stopped dead, and the other runaway, the man, froze in mid-stride then stumbled, clutching his leg. The man toppled over and the child—it was a little girl—skipped back a few steps. A third

face appeared, pale among the shadows of the pass, and another scream rang out. It was a woman's, calling out to the child. She turned, running in the opposite direction, towards the arms, the woman's arms, reaching out from the shadows of the pass. She was going to get away! The green fiery mist flared brighter, and Thaddeus looked at his mates in terror. Did they see it too?

The kneeling guardsman let off another volley. Clouds of dust rose. Thaddeus ran forward, struggling to keep his emotions under control, but secretly cursing—the child had changed her mind and was running back again! Why should that upset him? Because he had wanted her to keep on going, towards the beckoning arms? Towards what else? Freedom? The face, the outstretched arms had disappeared among the shadowy rocks. He felt a faint flicker of hope.

They reached the fallen man, the child cringing by his side. Sam grabbed her, and the green light faded. Thadd stopped to stare, but the lieutenant motioned to him to keep going. He pounded over the uneven ground, his heartbeat pulsing in his ears, the knot in his stomach tightening. He reached the entrance to the pass, peered into the half-light, along the sinuous path that picked its way between the sheer walls. Someone was running at a heavy, breathless pace, grey gown flapping. A woman. The child's mother.

A memory sprang out of the dusty depths of Thadd's childhood, a memory he never knew he had—his mother reaching out to him, her face decomposed with grief. He reached out a chubby toddler's hands. A man pulled him roughly away. He screamed for his mother as she disappeared, wrapped in a heavy grey veil. A windowless van pulled away.

The lieutenant pounded up beside him, raised his rifle. Thaddeus felt sick, the memory still fresh and raw. The woman looked over her shoulder, clutching her stomach, and the memory, raw and bitter of the crying child mingled with the newer memory of the child with her injured father, the soft green mist, and a brief breeze of hope. The memories roared out,

and Thadd nudged the rifle as the lieutenant's finger tightened. The shot flew wide. The woman had gone. The lieutenant spun round; the anger in his voice burst on Thadd's ears like shrapnel.

"You know what this means, don't you, guardsman?"

Thaddeus barely heard. His senses were full of green mist, the smell of green things, and the sound of singing. He nodded.

"Insubordination. You know the penalty?"

Thaddeus looked at the child wriggling in Sam's arms, at the man, her father probably, clutching his leg, at the red blood on the pale sand.

Isn't this enough?

He wanted to say it aloud, try to make the lieutenant see. A warm voice in his head answered the unspoken question.

For you, this is enough. For some, even the blood of a child will not be enough.

He nodded again. He was beginning to understand.

"You let her get away, you stupid fucker! She was fucking important! If anyone's going to swing for this it'll be you, you hear?"

Hold firm. It is almost time.

Thaddeus was filled with an inexplicable joy. He turned slowly to his lieutenant, his eyes full of soft green light. He spoke gently, as if the lieutenant's words had had no more weight than dust on the wind.

"Didn't you see? She was pregnant."

When he looked back down the dark canyon, it was filled with soft green light, and in the distance he heard the sound of joyful laughter.

If you enjoyed this story, don't fight it; let yourself be drawn into the darkly brilliant world of The Green Woman. The first volume of the trilogy is The Dark Citadel and you can find it on Amazon along with all of Jane Dougherty's stories.

[Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

[Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)