

The Defender of Central Park

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A tree grows in Brooklyn. Lots of trees grow in Central Park.

Deep within the heart of the great tree, something stirred, yawned, opened its eyes—then froze in confusion. This was not the forest, not the springtime, not even the good, proper feel of Mother Rus. And this tree, this huge, once-wonderful tree, wasn't even alive any longer!

The being uncurled, peering through solid wood as easily as though it was glass...

Ach! What was this place? Bright as day though every sense screamed it was late night: human bright, with strange, strongly gleaming globes on poles placed everywhere, with yet more light blazing from the windows of the buildings that—how could this be?—were tall enough to nearly touch the sky!

What have I come to? Where is my forest? What oh what am I to do?

Wait, the being decided. Wait. This was plainly some vast city. And sooner or later someone human must pass, someone of the old blood and knowledge...

Tanya Hanson switched off the computer and got to her feet, stretching stiff muscles. Being an associate producer at a New York news station might sound like a glamorous job, but it meant long hours of overtime and not all that much in the way of salary.

It's a start. Besides, it's not as though I've got somewhere better to go.

Grimly, she fought to block thoughts of Dave from her mind. Tall, handsome, with such a charming smile—as long as she was properly deferential. It was over, had been over the first time he'd slapped her. An accident, he'd claimed, something that would never happen again.

You bet it won't. Tanya thought, snatching up her coat and heading for the elevator. *I may be overworked and underpaid, but at least I have my freedom. And then: God, how melodramatic.*

At this hour, the elevator was nearly empty; she and the two other late-night workers studiously ignored each other as only a true New Yorker can manage. Tanya waved good night to Hal, the building's night watchman, and hurried out into Rockefeller Center, wincing as the cold, clear air hit her. For an instant she paused, glancing warily left, right, looking for that one tall figure...

No one. Maybe Dave really had taken seriously her threat to call the cops. At any rate, he seemed to finally have given up watching her. Tanya started forward again, giving a mental nod of greeting to the huge, brightly ornamented tree towering over her. A sure sign the world was changing: this year the tree was a present from New York's so-called Sister City, Moscow.

Sorry, Yeltzin. Looks just like any other fir to me, and—

A cold, rough hand touched hers. "*Spohkoyni nochi, gospadeen,*" said a sudden voice, and Tanya gasped and whirled, thinking wildly, *Dave—no, no, Dave doesn't speak Russian and I don't think muggers do, either!* "Get your hands the hell off me or I'll—Oh, come on, E.T. was just a movie!"

"*Ya ny snayo*—" The... whatever it was (odd, she couldn't see it clearly even though the street was brightly lit) held up a hand (Green fur? Tanya's mind gabbled, it has to be a glove, surely), then started again in careful, heavily accented English. "Your pardon. I thought you speak mother tongue, too."

"M-mother—Uh, no. Why would I speak—I'm American, not—Look, I don't know who, what, you are, but if you're lost, the Russian Embassy's over on the east side, somewhere in the Sixties I think—"

"I am lost," the creature agreed. "Very. You must help."

This was ridiculous. She couldn't be standing here talking to a... thing in the middle of the night. Even at this hour there should be lots of people around—this was New York, after all—so why wasn't anyone stopping or staring?

No one stared in New York. "I—I've got to go," Tanya said in panic. Blessedly, a taxi stand was nearby. Practically running, she threw herself into the first cab and stammered out directions to her apartment.

Overwork, she told herself. That had to be it. She couldn't have just been talking to a green-furred Whatever. *Overwork*.

She could have sworn there was someone lingering in the street below her apartment, a tall figure... Daringly, Tanya pulled up the window and leaned out to look; Dave wasn't the sort to take a potshot at her.

But then he hadn't seemed the sort to hit a woman, either. Tanya hastily pulled her head back inside, telling herself sternly that, no, no one had been out there, she was starting to get paranoid—

"*Gospadeen*."

Tanya whirled, just barely stifling a scream, and snatched up a paperweight, hefting it, ready to throw. "How did you get in here?"

The weird Whatever looked even more weird standing in the mundane reality of her living room. Tanya reached out a wary hand for the lamp nearest to her, fumbling with the switch. Ha, there! But even in the sudden blaze of light, she couldn't quite see the creature clearly: a vague blur of greenness perched tentatively on the side of her couch. "I clung to

strange vehicle," it said. "That one in which you rode."

"Th-the cab? But *why*? Why are you following me?"

The thing sagged. "No choice. You are of right blood."

For one ridiculous moment, she could only think of green-furred vampires. "But I'm not Russian!" she protested. "My last name's Hanson; that's hardly a Russian name—"

"Your mother's mother was of Rus. The blood is in you. Besides," the creature added wearily, "I could find no one else."

Tanya warily lowered her throwing arm, but she didn't let go of the paperweight. "Let's start at the beginning. Who *are* you? And... what?"

"Why, have you never heard of *leshy*?. No? I am Forest Lord in my realm, *of* forest, part of it, lord of birds and squirrels— Or I was." The being, the *leshy*, sighed. "Winter came. I slept in tree as always." It shrugged helplessly. "I woke here. And where is here?"

"Uh... New York City. America. The New World. You... don't understand, do you?"

"Far from Rus?"

"Very far."

"Ach." The *leshy* seemed to shrink into itself. "What am I to do?" it murmured. "Where am I to go?"

Unexpected pity roused. "I don't suppose the Russian Embassy..."

Suddenly fierce green eyes glared at her. "I am not some little lost human! I am *leshy*, of Old Magic! But," the being added plaintively, "what good is that in this stone-and-metal place? I need forest."

"I'm afraid Central Park's about it."

"Ha! You shall take me to this place, yes?"

"No! I mean, not now!"

The *leshy* blinked. "Why not?"

"Because—because it's the middle of the night! You don't go wandering in the park at night unless you *want* to get your head bashed in!"

"It is the home of monsters?"

"Human monsters. Predators."

The being's chuckle was soft and totally alien. "Think you any human frightens me?"

"Well, they frighten me. Look, I have to be at work tomorrow morning. I can drop you off at the park on the way. But tonight you'll have to find your own— Hey, what—"

The *leshy* was rushing to the open window in a blur of motion. There was a wild, savage whirl of wind, a frightened yelp, the fading sound of running footsteps— Then the *leshy*, grinning broadly, was settling back onto the arm of the couch.

"He was out there. Watching. Maybe planning to climb."

"He? Who? Dave? Dave was here?"

"Not," the *leshy* said with great satisfaction, "anymore. Who is he, this 'Dave'?"

"My ex. Boyfriend, that is. He doesn't want to believe it's over." Oh, wonderful, here she was discussing her private life with a—a thing out of folklore! "Look, uh, *leshy*, thank you for scaring him off."

"Vodka."

"Ah, what?"

The *leshy* grinned anew. "Thanks are best given and friendships sealed with vodka."

"Uh... sure." A drink wouldn't be a bad idea right now, not at all!

She wasn't quite sure what happened after that. There was a time when the two of them, human and not, were sharing their woes, Tanya about

Dave, the handsome, selfish, deceptive Dave, the *leshy* about its lost forest.

"What am I to *do* now?" it asked softly. "What purpose have I?"

"Don't worry," Tanya murmured sleepily. "We'll think of something. Tomorrow."

And tomorrow it was, all too suddenly. Tanya groaned, flinging a hand over her eyes, then flinched as her outstretched fingers touched fur.

"*Dobrahyee utro*, good morning," the *leshy* crowed.

Tanya sat bolt upright, clutching the blankets about her, staring at the being perched lightly on the windowsill. She rubbed her eyes. "You're worse than a cat."

"Never mind, never mind, it is morning and you shall show me this Central Park where I may live."

"Morning," Tanya grumbled. "It's barely light."

Why had she drunk so much? And gotten so little sleep? If there were any justice, the *leshy* would be showing some signs of the weird night, too. But the creature seemed disgustingly awake and full of energy, urging her on from behind the closed bedroom door as she dressed and did the best she could to look human.

Which, Tanya realized with a renewed shock, the being on the other side of the door was most certainly not.

It's *all right*, she told herself sternly. *I'll take him, it, whatever to Central Park, and that'll be the end of that.*

It really was ridiculously early; the streetlights were still giving more light than the sky. Tanya shivered in the chill air, clutching her coat to her, glancing about. The streets of New York are never quiet, but no one was on the sidewalks save a few fanatical joggers. Not one of them seemed to notice the small green shadow lurking at her side.

"All right," Tanya muttered, "let's go. We have a good walk ahead of us."

"This is it?" the *leshy* asked doubtfully. "So much pavement."

"It gets better further in. There's even a bird sanctuary in there."

"Let us see."

"Hey, wait, I can't— Let go!"

But the *leshy* was pulling her into the park with all the enthusiasm of a child. A child with a grip like iron.

"Look, I have to get to work!"

"It is early yet, you said so yourself. Come, explore with me."

"Do I have a choice?" Tanya muttered. Like many another New Yorker, she'd never gone beyond the edges of the park; she'd never realized there were so many dark, secret corners. "Look, I really do have to be getting on."

The *leshy* released her without warning. "This is almost forest enough," it muttered. "But it is *made*, not grown from Nature. There is no—no *heart* to it, no real purpose for my staying here."

"I'm sorry," Tanya said, and meant it. "But—"

"Not your fault. You did your best. Go on, now, go."

Tanya hesitated uncertainly, then walked resolutely away.

She hadn't gotten too far before a too-familiar voice murmured, "Good morning."

Tanya stopped short. "Dave."

He looked so amazingly normal, so totally sane and... safe that his sudden humorless little chuckle was all the more chilling. "Bet you thought you could get away from me. Bet you thought I would just let you go."

"It's over." *I will not let him know I'm afraid.* "We both know it. Now—"

"It's not over, Tanya. Not till I say it is."

God, why had she let herself come to this place? The narrow path wound too much; she'd never be able to get away. And a scream wasn't going to be heard by anyone but squirrels. "Don't be stupid," she said as calmly as she could. "We had some fun together, but—"

"Don't mock me, Tanya. You know better than that."

Tanya stared into his cool blue eyes—too cool, too controlled for the anger in his voice—and felt a new shiver prickle through her. *How could I ever think I loved him?* Oh, ridiculous question! He was handsome and charming, and she'd never once guessed, not till the end, that it was all a sham. She'd never once guessed just how shallow his veneer of sanity might be. "I—I have to get to work. Let me pass."

"Oh no, Tanya. No more games."

Panic exploded into anger. "Dammit, it's not a game! Get out of my way!"

She tried to push past him, but Dave's hand pulled her to him; his arms crushed her against him. Tanya tried to bite, tried to kick, all the warnings she'd ever heard about women needing to learn self-defense echoing in her mind; too late now, too late, he had one hand over her mouth and his weight was forcing her to the ground—

A roar like the anger of all the world split the air around them. Stunned, Tanya felt Dave torn from her, leaving her huddled, staring at—at *what?* At a whirlwind, at bird, beast, thing, at all the raw Power that was a forest, that was a *leshya*, that was enfolding Dave in primal savagery.

Dear God, and that's what I shared a drink with!

She had no idea what Dave saw, but whatever it was, it clearly held a world of horror for him. Tanya heard him cry out, a child's cry of sheer terror. With that terrified cry, Tanya realized, the last of his sanity had snapped. And when the incredible whirlwind of Power cast him away, he staggered blindly off, eyes wild and hopeless, no longer a menace to anything but himself.

"Dear... God."

"Are you hurt? Are you?"

It was the *leshy*, a small, green-furred creature once more. "I'm all right," Tanya said warily, "I—I think. Was all that... you?"

"Yes, yes!" the being crowed. "Tell me, quickly, was that a common thing for this park, that attack? Was he the sort of predator you mentioned?"

"Uh... yes. M-more or less. There are worse."

"Ha, good! A true challenge!"

"What are you—"

The *leshy* laughed. "This is a poor forest, but forest it is. It needs a Forest Lord, a protector."

"Not against everyone!"

"No, no, I never did ban my forest to humans who came in peace. But you saw what I did, what I can do against those who mean harm." The *leshy* laughed again, high and wild as the wind. "Thank you, human friend, thank you for bringing me here and giving me a home."

"You mean," Tanya said slowly, "you're going to stay here. You're going to hunt the predators."

"Of course! You saw what I can do." The *leshy's* small, strong hand caught hers and pulled her to her feet. "I have a purpose now, human friend. I am, and shall remain: Defender of Central Park! Now go, off with you. You have your work to do. And I—oh, I have mine!"