

Knock Wood

By Jane Tesh

The voices were closer, causing her to stir deep within the depths of the tree. It had been so long since someone disturbed the peace of the forest. Voices, one light and cheerful, the other precise and provoked. She flowed into awareness, filling the inner core of ancient wood and branches. It had been so long.

"Damn it, Benedek, you said you knew the way! I have had it with you."

"Chill, out, Jack. So I'm not Daniel Boone. Would you at least slow down?"

"I will not slow down," said Jonathan. "I have spent more than enough time on this foolish quest of yours. You don't know if there are any lights up here. It could be any one of a thousand things."

"Okay, okay," said Benny cajolingly. "I'm sorry, all right? I apologize. But could we just take it easy? This terrain's mighty uneven, and I don't want to have to carry you back."

In reply, he received a growl and a black look, but Jonathan slowed his angry stride, narrowly avoiding a fallen log. "I don't know why I let you talk me into this," he complained. "No one's seen these alleged lights for months, and how we could see any sort of light in this forest is a mystery."

"You heard what the fellow back at the crossroads said, J.J. The best spot for viewing was straight up this way."

"Did you ever stop to think this might be the locals' way of having a little fun with strangers?"

"What a cynic," Benny remarked, grinning.

"We've been walking for hours. I think we're lost."

"Okay," said Benny. "We'll take five and have another look at the map. There's a clearing just ahead."

Jonathan paused at the edge of the clearing. "What a magnificent oak," he exclaimed, staring up at the huge gnarled tree. Two larger branches lifted like arms toward the late afternoon sky. Other smaller branches grew up and out, all filled with thick green leaves. Delicate ivy clung to the rough gray bark, splashed with green and white lichens. "This is the biggest oak tree I've ever seen," said Jonathan, circling the trunk. "It must be hundreds of years old."

"And a great place to camp out." Benny sat underneath on a fat root and unfolded a rumpled piece of paper. Jonathan was still admiring the tree. "Yo, nature boy." Benny caught his attention. "According to this, we're only half a mile from Greeson's Lodge. And how did you know it was an oak?"

"Just because I don't know everything about plants," Jonathan began.

"Yeah, from the looks of your back yard, you've got the old black thumb," Benny said with a grin. "Let's head for the lodge, whaddaya say?"

"Well, one thing's for certain," Jonathan said as the woods thinned and they found a trail towards civilization. "We're not likely to find anything supernatural in this place."

Benny looked around. "Oh, I dunno, buds. Looks like troll country to me."

Jonathan had learned long ago not to encourage Benny's random fantasies. "All I'm interested in right now is some food and a hot shower."

Greeson's Lodge was a small rustic log building. The lobby had a stone fireplace, log furniture, and brightly-colored woven rugs. The owner, Ada Greeson, a large pleasant woman with untidy gray hair twisted up on top of her head, was glad to have guests for the night.

"Not too many people up here this time of year," she explained, handing Jonathan a key. "You fellas hunting or fishing?"

"Uh, neither," Jonathan said hesitantly, but Benny jumped in.

"We're investigating the Brown Mountain Lights," he said. "Know anything about them?"

She laughed. "I've seen those things dozens of times, dearie. Everyone has."

"So what's your theory?" he asked.

"Boogeymen," she said, eyes comically wide, and Benny joined in her laughter. "Now seriously, son. I think it's just the way the light bounces off the clouds around here. Could be some marsh gas or lights from the highway or just some little mirage."

"Yes, the United States Geological Survey has conducted two separate and formal investigations, and they didn't find anything," Jonathan put it.

"But if you're looking for something really spooky, you oughta see if you can find the treasure oak," she continued.

"Treasure oak?" Benny repeated, his face alight. "Would that be a very large tree with two big branches?"

This time the woman's eyes were wide with true alarm. "You've seen it?" At his nod, she said, "And lived to tell the tale. You boys must lead charmed lives."

"Yeah, we do," said Benny, leaning forward eagerly. "So what's the story here?"

"There's a thing living in the tree," she said in a low voice.

"Trolls, I told ya," Benny said to Jonathan confidently.

"Not a troll," the woman insisted. "A spirit, an evil spirit."

She had Benny's full interest now. "So you're saying this tree is haunted?"

"It killed Able Hill."

"How long ago was this?"

"Thirty years or so," she replied. "But lots of strange things have happened since then. The tree's never in the same place twice. People get lost, hurt. Jennie Dickens never was the same after a night in that forest. Turned her hair snow white."

"How'd it kill that guy, Able Hill?"

Mrs. Greeson spoke in a whisper. "He was found dead beneath the tree – with a huge splinter in his heart."

"Whoa," Benny breathed.

Jonathan sighed wearily. "I've already been through the murderous plants routine, Benedek, and you remember how that ended."

"But this is different!" he protested. "We're talkin' evil spirits here."

"The man probably had a heart attack. You know how people like to embellish things." He caught Mrs. Greeson's eyes and colored. "No offence, ma'am."

"I'm just saying what I know," she said firmly. "That's a deadly tree."

"I say we check it out," Benny said excitedly.

"And I say the whole thing is nonsense: trees, lights, everything. I'm going to bed."

Benny turned his grin back to Mrs. Greeson. "You'll have to forgive him. He's cranky about close encounters. We were right under this oak you're talkin' about!"

Jonathan tried to ignore Benny's excited chatter, but he could hear him quite clearly, even down the short hallway to their room. Leave it to Benedek to find the one person in the area with a ridiculous story. There was nothing deadly about that tree. It was a beautiful tree, a splendid specimen. People could be so preposterous.

He took a welcome shower and then pulled a thick stack of papers out of his pack. He was deeply involved in them when Benny sauntered in later, grinning broadly. "Quite a story here, Jack. Ten times better than any mysterious lights. How's this?" he sketched some headlines in the air. "'Killer Trees Stalk America.' 'Dozens Felled by Deadly Oak.'" He plopped down on one of the beds; then abruptly sat up, having thought of another. "'Woodman, Don't Spare That Tree!'"

"I suppose this means I can return to Georgetown?" Jonathan said, sifting through his papers.

"How do you figure that?" Benny asked.

Jonathan found the paper he was looking for and pulled it out of the stack. "Since you seem to be – branching out on your own, I see no reason for me to stay."

Benny was incredulous. "You don't wanna know about this tree?"

Jonathan gave him a look over the top of his glasses.

"Okay, okay," said Benny, "but I think you're missing out on a great opportunity here, Jack."

"A haunted tree?"

"Could be a new species. Get your name in the botany books." He saw Jonathan was more interested in his papers. "I'm beginning to think this is the MacKensie version of a security blanket," he remarked. "Can't you go anywhere without hauling a pile of midterms around?"

"These are not midterm, they're research papers."

"Whatever."

"Unlike some people, I have legitimate work to do. I agreed to come investigate the Brown Mountain Lights. I did not agree to investigate a killer tree."

Benny hopped off the bed. "Leave the papers and come check out some wildlife. Couple of real pretty campers came in just after you left."

"No, thanks."

Unfazed by Jonathan's disinterest, Benny headed for the shower. In a few minutes, the cheerful strains of "Heard It Through the Grapevine" could be heard over the splashing water. Jonathan doggedly kept to his work, pausing only to give a clean Benedek in a radiant outfit a brief glance.

"Last chance, Jack," said Benny, giving his hair a final apt.

"I really need to get these done," he replied.

Benny shrugged. "I'm gone," he said, and was out the door.

Jonathan sighed with relief as he checked the last paper and put it on the neat stack. There. At least the weekend wasn't a total waste. He'd get back to Georgetown tomorrow, have time to finish the lecture notes for the next honors seminar, possibly work a little on his own paper. He yawned and stretched, noticing it was close to midnight. Well, Benedek must have found his campers.

He put on his pajamas, climbed into bed, and turned off the light. He was almost asleep when a nagging little thought occurred. Suppose Benedek went to find that tree? Yes, that was more like it, Benny wandering the forest at night, falling off a cliff, disturbing a bear or a mountain lion.

Nonsense.

He went to sleep. His conscience gave him half an hour and then woke him. It was almost one in the morning. Thunder rumbled softly. Jonathan pulled on his sweatshirt and jeans and went to the lobby. No one was there. The fire was a handful of orange coals. He checked the register, finding his signature and Benny's and two feminine scrawls beneath, Wendy and Trudy. Hmm. So far, so good.

"Can I help you with something?" asked Mrs. Greeson, entering with an armload of logs.

"Oh, I – um, no," he stammered guiltily. "Just couldn't sleep."

"Storm probably woke you," she said, depositing the load of wood by the fire. "Told those girls it was gonna rain, but they went on anyway."

"Went on?" Jonathan repeated apprehensively.

"Said they had to get to Morganton tonight."

"So they didn't stay? They aren't here?"

"They left right after supper," she said, straightening. "Something wrong?"

"By any chance was my friend with them?" he asked.

She thought a moment. "He had dinner with them, that's all I recall."

"Thank you," said Jonathan, hurrying back to his room.

Benny frowned as he tramped along the rough pathway, the beam of his flashlight making erratic patterns in the dark wood. He and Jonathan had come this way, he was sure of it. Now where was that tree?

The Phantom Oak. Now you see it, now you don't.

The sound of thunder made him pause, and in the sudden gust of wind, he pulled his jacket closer. Great! A storm. Perfect conditions for apparitions, spooks, and trolls. Couldn't have picked a better night.

Suddenly it loomed out of the dark, its Medusa-like tangle of branches swaying, reaching out.

No wonder there are stories about this thing, Benny thought, approaching cautiously. "Nice tree," he said, tentatively patting the trunk. "Good tree."

She moved slightly within the tree, roused by the warm touch of a hand. Was that a voice? A friendly voice?

There was someone here. A man, small and cheerful. She watched him curiously, sensing no threat, no danger.

A particularly violent gust of wind and Benny forgot his hesitation, huddling under the tree, letting the wide trunk block the cold wind and sudden stinging raindrops. Odd, it was warm on this side of the tree. He pressed a hand to the rough bark. It was warm. And there was something suspiciously like a heartbeat.

He sat very still, listening to the wind howl in the branches. It was his own heart, wasn't it? Yeah, sure. He'd been walking for hours, trying to find the tree. It should be thumping. He put his hand back to the bark and his other hand to his chest. He waited.

There were two separate rhythms.

Chills went down his back, cold shivery chills far removed from wind and rain. Okay, so it had a pulse. It was alive. Trees were living things. Maybe this one was more alive than usual. Visions of himself lying dead, impaled by huge splinters, danced briefly in the darkness. Then he tried to talk himself out of such notions. This was a warm friendly tree, wasn't it? Sheltering him from the storm.

When he saw the uneven gleam of a flashlight, he felt absurdly relieved. "Over here!" he called.

"Benedek?" came a querulous voice.

"Yo! Dr. Jon to the rescue," he replied cheerfully.

The light came closer, and Jonathan, rumpled and glaring, stepped out of the shadows. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Benny smiled disarmingly. "Just communing with nature."

Jonathan let the light flicker over the branches of the tree. "This time of night.?"

Benny wiggled his fingers. "It's when the trolls come out," he said mysteriously. He frowned. "So what are you doin' out after dark?"

Jonathan shook his head at the sight of Benny lounging casually among the tree's large twisted roots. "I'm not sure. Are you planning to spend the night here?"

"Nah."

"Well, come on, then."

Benny made a token protest, as well as some snide remarks about his partner's cautiousness, but he was glad to get away from the disturbing presence of the tree. He looked back once thinking how much like fingers the branches seemed to be.

The same voices. She smiled, having enjoyed the conversation. They were different, these men, not like the rough loggers, the rowdy frontiersmen, the silent Indians, that she had seen come and go in the forest. They were not like the people who lived here now, gruff suspicious people with fear in their eyes. If the small man had stayed, she might have shown herself. Somehow, he seemed like a man who would understand. The other man, too, who had admired her so. She had not heard such kind words in centuries.

The storm had blown itself out by the time Benny and Jonathan reached the lodge, but they were both wet and cold.

"Of all the stupid stunts," Jonathan grumbled, toweling his damp hair.

"Hey," said Benny, peeling off his jacket. "Who asked you to play Saint Bernard? Maybe I wanted to see what happens at night under the Tree of Death."

Jonathan's gaze was calm. "Then why did you come back with me?"

Benny shrugged. "Nothin' much happening tonight."

At breakfast, Jonathan noticed a surly-looking man hunched in a corner. The man gave them a glare and buried his head in a newspaper.

"A real morning person," Benny remarked, snapping open his napkin. "Hey, this looks good. I love country ham." As he dug in, he noticed Jonathan looking blearily at his plate. "Too early for fried eggs, Jack?"

Jonathan nodded, reaching for his coffee cup. "An evening spent in the cold wet woods, does little for my appetite."

"Okay, so we'll check out this tree in the daylight."

"I am not going out there again. I am going home."

"Jon-Boy, I'm telling you, this thing's alive! That was a heartbeat I felt last night."

"Of course it's alive," Jonathan said, exasperated, "but what you heard was your own heart."

"Nope, it was two distinct rhythms." Benny poured a generous helping of ketchup on his eggs. "You do what you want, buds. I smell a big story here."

Steadfastly avoiding the sight of Benny's breakfast, Jonathan took a sip of coffee. "Fine."

Benny scraped up his food with customary gusto. When he'd finished, he gave Jonathan a salute and went out.

"Can I get your something else?" Mrs. Greeson asked Jonathan. She began clearing the table.

"No, thank you," he said, resignedly taking the bill.

"I see your friend got back all right."

"Yes, he'd just gone for a little walk." He noticed how her eyes flickered anxiously toward the other table and the grim man. The man abruptly pushed his chair back and left. "Is there some problem?" Jonathan asked.

"Elbert Parker's his name," she said in a low voice. "I let him stay around to help me with things, but he's a little loose in the attic. All this talk about that tree's got him stirred up."

"Why is that?"

"Claims it belongs to him. He doesn't like other people asking about it or looking at it. I don't know where he gets the notion. His family and the Hills never got along, so maybe he feels Able's death was some sort of magic. It's pitiful, really."

Jonathan sympathized and paid the bill. Back in his room, he carefully tucked the papers in his knapsack and debated. Should he wait for Benedek to come back? I am not walking back through that forest, he told himself sternly, but. . .

All this talk about the tree's got him stirred up.

It wouldn't hurt to find Benedek and tell him to go easy on this story. Elbert parker looked like a formidable opponent. That's it. Tell Benny to back off, then come here, get our things, and go home. That should do it.

Once more he tromped up the narrow path to the woods and followed a faint trail to the clearing. The tree stood, vibrant and green against the morning sky. There was no sign of Benny. But Parker was there, holding an ax. He advanced, murder in his expression.

She saw the menace in the man's eyes and the gleam of some weapon. She shuddered in horror. Once, long ago, a man had carved his initials into her bark, and just that slight scratch had ached for months. The man named Jonathan had to back away until he stumbled against her side. She could feel the warmth of his body, the tension.

"You're not going to cut this tree," he said.

The other man laughed a short harsh laugh. "I was hopin' you'd say, 'Over my dead body,' because I'd love to oblige ya."

"Just wait a minute." Jonathan tried to reason with him. "Think. This tree is hundreds of years old. You don't want to destroy something like this."

"Don't I?" he snarled. "You listen to me. This is my tree. I can do whatever I like."

Jonathan could have sworn he felt a tremor run through the solid trunk at his back. "Your tree? What do you mean?"

"It's mine, I tell ya. And I'm tired of people coming round here looking at it, telling tales about it. It done me a favor killing old Able hill. That's how I know it's mine. Now I'm gonna chop it down."

"No," said Jonathan. "Not this tree."

The man laughed. "Who's gonna stop me?"

Jonathan kept his eyes on the wicked double blade. Could he grab the ax, wrest it from the man? As he was planning his move, Parker swung out, and suddenly, he had no choice. He grabbed the handle, holding on as Parker cursed, trying to break free. Abruptly, Parker lunged forward, bringing the handle tightly against Jonathan's throat, forcing him back until he slammed into the tree. With a gasp, Jonathan slid to the ground, stunned. Through dimming eyes, he saw the man swing back to chop into the oak.

"No. . ."

An unearthly scream split the forest. One of the huge branches cracked free, landing on Parker with a crash. Jonathan coughed in the cloud of dust and wood chips. The man lay crushed beneath the branch, hands still gripping the ax.

Casting an anxious glance upwards, Jonathan staggered to his feet. He immediately sat down again, dizzy. The forest rotated, faded, and came back into focus. It was then he saw the slim young woman. She knelt by him, her filmy green gown and long dark hair flowing about her as if lifted by underwater currents.

"Thank you," she said softly. "Thank you for helping me."

"Helping you?" Jonathan said, confused.

"This is my tree," she said. Her eyes were the dark green velvety color of moss and filled with odd lights. "My home. My life."

"Your tree," he repeated, not certain he was hearing correctly. She nodded, her hair drifting lazily about her elfin face. "How did you get here?" he asked. "I didn't see anyone else – and Parker – is he --?"

She nodded again. Jonathan slowly got to his feet and walked over to the lifeless form buried beneath the branch. The branch was fresh clean wood with sign of rot or decay. "What could have caused it to fall?" he murmured. The young woman wavered before his eyes, and he noticed something he had missed in the continually swirling folds of her gown, the long tendrils of her hair, and his own dizziness.

She had only one arm.

Another wave of dizziness threatened to overwhelm him, but he managed to stay upright, the woman's graceful hand again at his shoulder. "W-who are you?"

She saw his wondering gaze and smiled. "It will grow back."

"Jonathan? Yo, Jon-Boy!" Benny's anxious voice echoed through the trees.

"Over here!" he called. The slim woman's figure seemed to fade into the tree. Jonathan blinked, reached out, his hand closing on air. He was leaning against the tree, bewildered, when

Benny came crashing through the brush and skidded to a stop at the sight of Parker.

"I heard a yell and--" He whistled, impressed. "Talk about bein' out on a limb! You okay, Jack?"

"Fine," he replied, rubbing the back of his head. "Just a bump."

Benny walked around the fallen man. "This guy came after you with an ax?" he said, amazed. "How'd ya do it, Jon? What, the branch was rotten, right? Great timing!"

"Something like that," Jonathan said. "We should report this right way."

"Yeah, right," said Benny, rubbing his hands with glee. "Another victim of the Phantom Oak!"

At home, Jonathan sat at the kitchen table, staring unseeing at the lecture notes in his hands. Benny was in the living room, calling in a lurid account of the murderous tree, so he had plenty of time to finish. But still he sat, thinking, wondering.

All right. He'd hit his head. He'd done that hundreds of times, and it usually resulted in a colorful hallucination. The young woman, though. . .her arm. . .the branch. . .it was all so logical in a bizarre sort of way. A spirit of the tree. A dryad, of course, like Eurydice in Greek mythology.

No. You hit your head. You're lucky to be alive, instead of chopped to bits or spiked by a branch. Finish your notes.

But the woman's grateful smile had warmed him all the way through, warm and soft as a summer breeze causing the leaves to dance. She had been as real as these papers in his hands. He had felt a true sense of regret when she faded away. He'd gone back after the police had finished, after the ruling of accidental death. Benny had wanted some pictures, and he had wanted – well, to see her again, to talk with her, find out more about her. But the tree had been silent.

Some little sign that you were real, he thought. That's all I want.

A series of bounding footsteps told him Benedek had returned. "Aren't you through with that yet?" Benny asked. "Jordy says he's got a hot lead for us in Jersey."

"Just a minute," Jonathan said absently.

Benny prowled restlessly, anxious to be on his way. "Hey, Jack, thought you told me that tree out back was dying."

Jonathan glanced up. "Well, I thought so. It hasn't done anything in months. I was going to dig it up." He got up to see what Benny was looking at and stopped, amazed.

The little cheery tree in his backyard was full of blossoms.

"Is it time for that to bloom?" Benny asked, curious.

Jonathan smiled in wondering delight. "Well, hello," he said softly.