



SMASHING GLASS . . . a tiny thud . . . then distant laughter.

Those are the blurry noises that the tree man wakes up to most mornings. His paper-thin eyelids flicker open and a deep crease chisels itself into his woody forehead. After all this time, he still can't get used to the stone throwers.

Propping himself up on a crooked arm, he struggles to drag his bulky legs off the edge of the bed. He sits there for a while, yawning from between cracked lips, trying to wake himself up, wondering what new misery today will bring.

He spots the missile lying on the carpet amid the debris of shattered glass, stones and bricks, and shakes his gruesome head slowly. He dreads the neighbourhood children. Their teasing is getting worse. He wonders how much more he can take. His knotty chin rises, revealing a neck of twisted veins. He prays to the heavens for the strength to carry on.

A rap sounds at the door, making him shudder. He covers his ears and sits perfectly still, hoping that his tormentors will go away.

The knocking begins again, harder and louder. His heart pounds faster, his twig-like hands begin to tremble as he gulps the musty apartment air.

"Leave me alone!" he roars.

"It's Nancy Travers from the *Brinkerdale Review* . . . I telephoned about an interview. I hope I'm not too early?"

He uncovers his ears — it was for real! That voice on the end of the line last Friday was not a girl pulling a prank after all. This is the first woman he has spoken to since the curse began infecting his body.

"I'm coming," he calls anxiously, pushing himself to his feet. He shuffles to the door, his knees creaking. Hunching, he consults the peephole. A radiant young woman in a blue business suit is standing there, embracing a black folder.

The tree man sighs. Nervously, he brushes down his robe and tidies his vine-entangled hair. For a moment, he wishes he could fit into proper clothes. But he abandons the notion as he peers down at his root-long toes. He opens the door.

The woman's eyes immediately bulge in shock and a faint gasp escapes her mouth. She begins backing away.

"Please don't go!" the tree man says desperately, holding out a claw of twigs. "Now you see what I face every day."

The reporter stops. She approaches him with caution, her eyes exploring his disfigured body.

"I'm sorry," she says timidly.

He opens the door wider and invites her in. She hesitates.

"I won't bite," he smiles, shedding a leaf.

She watches in amazement as it floats to the floor.

"Do excuse my moulting," he jokes.

"You'll have to come in if you want a story."

"Oh, yes . . . of course," she says. At last, she enters and he closes the door behind her.

"Let's take a seat at the table, shall we?"

He pulls out a chair. She nods, rests her folder on the table, and sits. He pushes the chair in and sits opposite, his hawked nose flexing, taking in the rose fragrance of her perfume. She can't help but stare in fascination.

"W-what on earth happened?" she stutters.

"Nothing much," he shrugs. "I just chopped down a witch's tree when I was a kid. A real wicked old hag she was," he laughs.

Her eyes wander through the maze of wrinkles and crevices furrowing his bark-like skin. He talks on with reluctance, explaining what happened in bits and pieces. With each pleasant nod she gives, he opens up a little more. He watches her take a pen and flick open her folder to write. Left-handed, he notices, like him. Smart woman.

"Can't a doctor do something?"

He throws his head back and scoffs. "They think I'm a freak of nature. They don't understand. They just want to stick me in a lab and study me."



"How about the witch? Can't you beg her to turn you back?"

"She died after I hacked down her tree."

"How are you going to break the spell then?"

His eyes glisten and shy away. "I don't know . . ." He gets up and offers coffee. She accepts. He proceeds to the kitchen, dragging his root-feet. She looks away.

He brings the coffee and sits back down. She cringes faintly as he pouts and slurps.

"There is only one way, but it's a long shot," he says. "After the witch was buried, I broke into her house and found her book of incantations."

The reporter chokes on her coffee and clunks the cup on the table.

"Are you OK?" he asks.

"Yes, it just went down the wrong way. What's this about a book?" She keenly picks up her pen and prepares to write.

"The only way I can break the spell is by kissing her."

"Kissing her?" Her eyebrows rise. "But she's dead."

"That's right, she did die. But I checked her grave last week and found she had clawed her way out . . . She's come back to life."

"But that's impossible!" The reporter shakes her head.

"No it's not. She's no ordinary witch — she's a tree witch. Her cold heart pumps sap, not blood, and she has supernatural powers that you wouldn't believe. I read all about her and her evil deeds. Over the centuries, she's fooled thousands of innocent victims just like me."

"How?" the reporter asks, frowning.

"See, she planned it all along. She knew that I would cut down her wretched tree.



That's how she operates — that's how she stays alive. She plants a tree; it keeps her alive for a hundred years or so. Before it gets too old, she tricks a child into chopping it down. Then, just before she dies, she steals the child's life force and replaces it with the tree's entity. For years after that, the child slowly turns into a tree while she rejuvenates in her cocoon-like tomb. Then one day, when she feels strong enough and her seedling is ripe, she rises from the dead to finish the job. And so the cycle goes on for eternity."

"Wait a minute . . ." The reporter tilts her head. "Are you saying she's going to come back and plant you?"

“My word. She has to!” The tree man nods vigorously. “If she doesn’t embed my roots in the ground soon, she’ll surely perish.” He glances from the reporter’s pen to her folder, sensing something strange about the way she’s writing. She’s now right-handed. How can that be? he wonders. He’s never seen anyone write with both hands so naturally. Curiously, he looks at her notes and his eyes widen — the words are back to front, just like in the witch’s book of incantations!

In a moment of intense silence, he scans her face for a glimmer of evil. The reporter blushes and looks away. He notices something terribly wrong with her eyes. They’re too rigid and dull, almost doll-like. She doesn’t seem to blink much and when she does her eyelids aren’t in unison. But she hides it well . . . oh, very well. Only a witch can be that cunning. There’s one sure way to tell, though. He has read that the witch is cursed with warts on her scalp.

“But I’m prepared for her,” the tree man says confidently, and points behind the woman. “In that closet I’ve got something special tucked away . . .”

Instinctively, the reporter turns her head. Swiftly the tree man leans across the table and parts her hair. His lips tighten when he sees that her scaly scalp is covered with a thick rash of scabs and warts.

“What are you doing?” she shrieks, turning around. He quickly meets her lips with a firm kiss.

“How dare you!” she snarls, pushing him away.

Now he sees the ferocious green glow in her eyes. In seconds, her skin flakes and shrivels into bark. “Arrgh! I’ll get you for this!” She winces in pain, clutching at her stringy hair. He watches as her body twists and grows knotty. Suddenly a warm, refreshing sensation tingles through his own skin. He touches his face and feels the wrinkles smoothing out under his touch.

“I beat you!” He rejoices, examining his softening hands. “I’m human again, you hear? A man!”

