Nikita Kalabin

Monster

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The morning promised sunny weather. It was early summer, warm, though there was a slight chill in the morning. Victor had come to the forest to pick early mushrooms, but he was more drawn to the charm of the wild nature. He enjoyed leisurely strolls through the forest, musing on his own thoughts and enjoying the wondrous landscapes of the summer forest. On this weekend, he had come to a familiar spot, not far from the city, where he had been many times.

It had rained during the night, but it had already dried up, the birds were singing, and all the inhabitants of the forest were going about their usual business.

There were no mushrooms yet, and Victor watched with pleasure what was happening around him. Stopping in a small clearing, he heard behind him, right next to his ear, a sharp, rapid sound of air cutting through. Someone or something had flown very close and very fast. Victor turned around before he could spot the source of the sound.

"A nightjar," he thought. "Not finished his night hunt yet." A few seconds later, a dark speck appeared at the very tops of the trees on the other side of the clearing. Flying across the clearing in three leaps, along a jagged line in space, the bird disappeared into the forest. "I wonder how fast it flew?" Victor wondered. "What distance? About a hundred meters. It flew for two seconds, tops. Fifty meters per second. Three kilometers per minute. One hundred and eighty kilometers per hour. No, guys, there's no bird faster than this night swallow."

A broken rowan tree caught his eye near the slope. It wasn't even broken, but neatly trimmed and leaning toward the straight trunk of another rowan tree, also broken and lying nearby. "Someone clearly made this structure," Victor mused. "I wonder what it could represent? The cardinal directions? No. This straight line in the grass could indicate the direction of the road, and this slanted one could indicate the road's location on the terrain."

At the bottom of the enormous slope flowed a small river, or perhaps a large stream. He decided to go down to spend some time by the water. Approaching a small pool, Victor slipped on a patch of grass-free bank and fell into the water.

The river at this point turned out to be surprisingly deep, and the mushroom picker found himself chest-deep in water. He tried to take a step toward the shore, but felt his boots sink into the soft riverbed. Trying to free his right foot, he sank his left foot even deeper into the muddy bottom. The strong current brought the water up to his neck. The small river, only a few meters wide, proved to be very treacherous.

"What are you going to do?" Victor said out loud, trying to break free from the fragile captivity.

The water seemed to be rising, and an unpleasant feeling of helplessness set in. Trying to free himself, Victor occasionally sank under the water, his breathing becoming ragged.

"It's no use calling for help," he thought. "There's no one around."

Suddenly, he saw a huge dark figure on the shore, and then a tree branch directly in front of him. Grabbing a branch, Victor pulled it toward him and began moving toward the shore. Then the branch began to move away from the water, tugging him hard, before jerking sharply and slipping out of his hands. Victor fell onto a flat area next to a slender young birch tree. After catching his breath for a few seconds, he turned his head and was stunned: something huge and dark stood before him. Victor sat down on the grass near the birch tree and saw before him a huge man covered in long, brown hair. Hair, not fur. His skin was black, and he significantly outstripped a large man. Enormous, defined muscles spoke of his incredible strength. He sat on a log, right by the water, and looked at Victor. Surprisingly, Victor felt no fear at all; even his surprise had passed; instead, a strange sense of calm had settled in.

"Who are you?" Victor asked.

"The one who saved you," came the answer.

"With this birch tree?"

"This one."

"Thank you... and how did you end up here? Where do you live?"

"It's nearby."

"Well, we’re almost in town," thought Victor.

"Near the city."

It suddenly dawned on Victor that he wasn't speaking through vibrations of air. Neither was his interlocutor, but Victor could hear them.

"Why are you alone in the forest, and what are you doing here?" asked the giant.

"I pick mushrooms and go for walks. I like to walk alone in the forest."

"How many mushrooms do you have?"

"I don’t have any mushrooms yet, I haven’t found any yet."

"But you said you were picking mushrooms?"

"Well, I haven't found it yet."

"You haven’t found it yet, but are you already collecting it?"

"I’m already collecting, but I haven’t collected it yet."

"Everything is like this with YOU because YOU are evil."

"Who are YOU?"

"Do you like to go for walks alone because you have no one to go with?"

"I just like to walk alone. After all, you're alone too. Right?"

"No, that's not true."

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"Where you live, there's a lot of aggression. You're even very aggressive towards each other. Greed and aggression thrive among you. Where I live, we respect each other. Do you want to live where I live? You can come with me."

"I remembered: I have mushrooms," Victor "said," taking off his backpack. He pulled out a jar of pickled honey mushrooms and a container of baked potatoes.

"You came to the forest with mushrooms to pick mushrooms? And you've already forgotten about them?"

"I didn't pick these mushrooms; they were picked and prepared by other people. I just bought them at the store," Victor replied, handing his lunch to the giant.

"So much work just to eat," he grumbled, accepting the gifts. He deftly opened the jar and sampled the mushrooms.

Victor was suddenly overcome with eloquence and sincerity:

"Where I live there is not only aggression and greed, there is also love, loyalty and conscience."

He began to emotionally "tell" his companion about human friendship, how people care for each other, and the noble deeds a person is capable of for others. Victor was even surprised by his own eloquence and noted that perhaps it was due to the influence of his companion. Meanwhile, the giant listened attentively to Victor and finished his baked potato, deftly peeling it.

Suddenly, Victor felt as if he sensed something like a signal coming from somewhere behind him: "He'll tell everything. Let me deal with him."

And the giant, without taking his eyes off the potatoes, "answered": "Don't you dare, he'll forget all this."

Victor didn't turn around. The giant, having finished his potatoes, rose to his full, enormous height.

"Thank you. Your potatoes are delicious."

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Victor woke up sitting next to a birch tree. In front of him lay his backpack and a food container containing a single potato.

"What was I sleeping about?" he thought. "And someone ate my food?"

He ate the potato. For a moment, he thought he'd seen an interesting dream, in which he saw a huge creature.

"Or maybe it wasn't a dream?" Victor thought. "Oh, come on, that's nonsense. And how long was I asleep? My clothes are completely wet, which means I 'swam' recently."

He packed his backpack and confidently walked up the hill toward his car's parking lot. His wet clothes made his movements difficult and constrained. He was haunted by an uneasy

sense of timelessness. He'd also left his phone in the car. He emerged onto a forest road; his car should be parked somewhere around here.

"What time it is?" he thought. "And why is there no one around?"

The sound of a car engine could be heard through the trees, then the car itself appeared on the road. Victor felt more confident. He waved twice at the approaching car and addressed the driver:

"Excuse me, could you tell me the time? I forgot my phone."

The driver, a middle-aged man in camouflage, answered with pleasure:

"It's already eight."

"Thank you very much! Good luck!"

Hearing human speech, Victor felt completely revived and came to his senses. "I wonder if it's eight in the morning or eight in the evening?" he thought. "It doesn't really feel like evening."

Victor's car appeared around the corner. As he climbed in, he felt safe. It was indeed only eight in the morning, though it felt much later. Victor was happy to head home, eager to get this strange journey over with.

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The sun was setting. By evening the wind had died down, but in places it continued to play softly and silently with the grass.

Victor and Alexander were sitting with fishing rods on the lake.

"If the fishing is as sluggish tomorrow, we can head home early and stop by to pick some mushrooms," Alexander said disappointedly.

"Where to?" Victor asked.

"Well, to Sosnovka, for example, for the whites."

Victor tugged the rod, checked the bait, and cast again.

"What do you think?" Alexander persisted.

"I don’t think it’s advisable to go there."

"Why is that?"

"It's not safe there."

"What is it that makes it unsafe there?"

"I met a yeti there."

"Who?! A Yeti or something?! Ha-ha-ha. Have you eaten mushrooms before this?" Sasha laughed.

"Completely sober."

"Do you believe in them?"

"Into mushrooms?" Victor joked.

"Oh, these yetis of yours!"

"What do you mean, "believe"? They're as much mine as they are yours."

" You probably imagined it."

"That's what I thought at first. I thought I fell asleep from exhaustion and dreamed it. But I didn't understand who ate my potatoes and mushrooms."

"So there were mushrooms after all?" Sasha chuckled.

"And a few years later I remembered," Victor continued, as if he hadn't heard his interlocutor. "Just don't tell anyone, this is between us. Deal?"

"Well, that goes without saying," Sasha responded confidently. "But what will people think of you?"

"By the way, we can stop somewhere else for mushrooms. There will be some along the way. So, do you want to stop by Sosnovka?"

"I would have gone home today, there’s no bite anyway…"

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All day, Victor had been haunted by the question of why his old acquaintance, Alexey, had arranged a meeting with him. They'd known each other for a long time, having once lived in the same neighborhood. They hadn't spoken for a long time, despite having mutual friends. Then this morning, Alexey called and arranged a meeting for the evening to discuss some important, off-the-phone business. Alexey had a bad reputation, and Victor wasn't particularly keen on talking to him, but he was curious about this million-dollar deal he'd hinted at so cryptically. Alexey suggested meeting at a restaurant, but Victor insisted on meeting in the park.

Victor arrived early for the meeting, as had become his habit. Autumn was already in full swing. Red and yellow maple leaves rustled softly in the tree branches, quietly weaving a beautiful carpet of color across the green grass. A few minutes after the appointed time, Alexey appeared in the distance.

"Hey, buddy!" he shouted, approaching the bench where Victor was sitting.

"Hello, Lyokha!" Victor stood up in greeting.

"How long have you been here? Still not frozen? The weather isn't summer anymore, even though it's warm today."

"Nice weather, sunshine. What's wrong with you?" Victor asked, getting down to business.

"Nothing happened. Does something have to happen to run into an old friend?"

"Well, you said there was business."

"There really is a case. Yes. Well, anyway. I just happened to hear that you saw a yeti in the forest?"

"Just don't tell me that's why you called me," Victor chuckled.

"Yes, that's exactly why. Can you tell me where?"

"Well, I don't know where they're seen? In the forest, maybe..."

"Obviously not in the library. Where exactly? There's a lot of forest!" Alexey insisted.

"What difference does it make, my friend? What does it matter to you? And who told you all this anyway?"

"Well, that's what people said. They asked me not to say it."

"Oh, they asked me not to say..."

"Well, there's the whole idea of catching a Yeti. There are people who will find buyers. The price tag is in the millions of dollars," Alexey said, looking closely at Victor.

"What are you talking about? What's the price tag? What kind of people? How are you going to catch him?"

"Consider the buyer already there. Catching it is a matter of technique. There are special drugs, I studied, I know them, and I have connections. It's loaded into a gun, they even bring down elephants."

"Don't you feel sorry for him? He's alive, actually, and he probably has his own plans."

"What other plans do you have? He's a big monkey, he'll be even better off with people."

"He's no more ape-like than you are. And he won't get anything good from humans."

"It doesn't matter, Vitya, if everything works out, your share will be about half a million dollars! Vitya, listen, half a million dollars. What difference does it make whether it's a monkey or not? And what stage of evolution it's at? I don't care at all. People will figure it out eventually. The main thing is that you can make money on this. A lot of money!" Alexey exclaimed heatedly.

"Are you curious about what stage of evolution you're at? Maybe you could ask people and let them find out?"

"Just think what you could buy with that money. It's a lot of money, Vitya."

"Where will I get them from, Lyosha?"

"You'll get them when we've sorted everything out," Alexey answered confidently.

"So you'll give them to me?"

"Well, yes."

"Do you even believe this? Would you give anyone five hundred thousand dollars?"

"What do you doubt?"

"Listen, what happened to that guy you were doing business with?"

"It was a hunting accident."

"You used his money to start a business, I think? And was it borrowed money?"

"So what next?"

"Do you help his wife and children?"

"What difference does it make? What does this have to do with anything? What nonsense are you talking about?"

"Alexey, do you really think that anyone will believe you that you will give away half a million dollars?"

"Vitya, are you trying to offend me? Keep in mind there's a lot of money at stake here! And the people involved are serious, too. I'm not trying to scare you, but anything could happen..."

"What kind of stuff?" Victor chuckled.

"Well, a shot of truth serum, and you'll tell me everything you know and don't know. Just understand me correctly."

"Well, take a risk."

"Well, what about ..."

"Lyokha, what are you even talking about? Some yeti, some injections! You set up a meeting for business, and here you are, collecting some nonsense! You're not injecting yourself with anything? Come on, write the letters."

Victor stood up and quickly walked away.

"Vitya, think about it! Think about it carefully!" Alexey shouted after him.

Victor stood by the fountain and then walked down to the beach by the bay. A light, fresh breeze blew in his face. "Maybe there really is something wrong with us?" he thought. "Why this endless, exhausting pursuit of material possessions? Including those of others? If this isn't our fundamental mistake, then why do we do it? What's the point?"

The sun was setting over the bay. The cries of seagulls faded into the gathering twilight. The water in the bay, still sparkling blue in places, turned into a mirror, shimmering with whimsical colors.