

Merry Christmas Waff! You said you liked Tolkien and Possums so I cooked you up this short fantasy story. I hope you find it to be an enjoyable read!

The Possum, the Alligator, and the Witch

Possum stood at the edge of the swamp, shifting from paw to paw. The seed of regret that had been firmly planted in him had grown into a weed rooted firmly in his gut. He did not want to enter this tainted place. However, he did want the witch inhabiting said swamp dead. Possum was not at all a violent person, but he had been left with no choice. The sickness that had befallen this swamp was spreading, and every day inched closer to his woodland home. All of his neighbors were perfectly content to pack up and move to a place where the witch's rot had not spread, but not Possum. No, Possum had his cozy tree hollow that perfectly overlooked the stream he so dearly loved to fish at. That tree had been his home for as long as he could remember, and there was simply no chance of him ever finding a suitable replacement.

There was also the issue of transporting his things. You see, Possum was a collector of human oddities. His neighbors seemed to think him more a hoarder of garbage, but what did they know? To him, the things he stowed were of great value. From the empty bottles and fabrics to the long butcher knife he had strapped to his back. The knife was awkward to carry as it was almost as long as he was. The straps he had attached to the wooden handle were made from common vine, and didn't hold the knife to him well. Although a little rusty, the blade still had some sharpness to it and the handle fit perfectly in his mouth.

The longer he stood at the entrance to the swamp the more his doubt grew. He was just a little creature with a knife and a hint of a plan. Was he really going to waltz into this dreaded

land, happen upon the witch, and kill her with a kitchen knife? Taking a deep breath, Possum smothered the hesitation and crossed the threshold separating his peaceful homeland, and the witch's swamp. No witch was going to take away his home.

It was obvious to him at once upon entering the swamp that this was a dead place. No birds sang, no crickets chirped, only silence. Traversing the swamp proved to be a struggle for him as he could barely tell solid land from the stagnant pools of water. He lept from rock to log, from dead tree limbs to hanging vines. Eventually, he found a mostly stable, though not completely trustworthy, trail through the swamp land.

As the hours passed, he began to tire. There was no way to tell where he was going through this swamp. The trail always seemed to lean left as if he was walking in one giant circle. He had no instruments of direction in his possession and any direction the sun could have given was blotted out by tree cover. He had always been a leisurely possum, fond of cozy activities. Crawling through muck and navigating obstacles was not something he was at all physically prepared for.

Spying a formation of white rocks along the trail, he sat himself down to rest and ponder his situation. Wiping the accumulating mud out of his fur, he considered turning back. What direction was back though? He had stuck to this trail for some time now, but would he recognize where he started on it? The dread in his gut rose just a little. Being lost in this swamp might do him in before the witch could. He stood up to pace back and forth, flip flopping in his mind over possible outcomes. Reality was that he was stalling. He knew he had to continue on the journey, but thinking about all the things he'd rather do appealed to him more.

His procrastination was cut short by a lightning bolt of fear that shot through him. From out of the silent swamp came an unplaceable, guttural noise. The noise was repetitive and near.

Possum's instincts kicked in at once as he collapsed to the ground, mouth agape, tongue dangling. Possum, reluctant witch hunter, was playing dead.

It didn't matter though as Possum quickly realized. The source of the noise had been next to him the whole time and it knew he wasn't dead. The formation of white rocks he previously had been sitting on were not rocks at all, but bones. Moving, living bones pulling themselves together out of the moist earth to form a torso with two arms and what was left of a skull.

The Skeletal torso stood on its arms as if they were its legs and began to move towards Possum. Its jaw dropping and rising, letting loose its terrible wail from phantom vocal cords. Possum was up in a shot, scurrying faster than he had ever in his life. He peeked over his shoulder only to see his skeletal pursuer moving with unexpected speed. Tears were streaming down Possum's eyes now as he ran. He was going to die here; he just knew it. He should have found a new home far far away from dead swamps and deadmen.

Possum dove off the tail and into the thick underbrush of the swamp. He fought and tore through the mud that wished to pull him under, and the plants that slashed at him. He wasn't moving as fast as he had been, but neither was his attacker. Unlike Possum, the torso was not as dexterous when it came to navigating the land and would repeatedly find itself in pools of stagnant water. This obstacle didn't stop it from wailing, and no matter how much distance Possum put between it and him, he could still hear its screams.

Out of breath, Possum collapsed onto the ground. He lay there breathing deeply, eyes shut tightly. Was the skeleton still coming after him? He thought he could still hear it wailing just behind him. Maybe if he kept his eyes shut it would never find him. Possum waited and waited, and as his heart rate dropped, the wailing dissipated. Opening his eyes reluctantly he did not see the soft mushy ground he expected, but water soaked boards. Standing up, he took an inventory

of the world around him. He had collapsed on a dilapidated dock that jutted into a large body of water. In the middle of the water there was a little island with what looked like a crude little shack sitting on it. There was no doubt that he had reached the witch's lair. In him, a feeling of accomplishment sprung up so strongly that he almost leapt with joy. The deed may not yet be done, but he had come farther than the doubt in him had suggested.

Just as quickly as the joy had appeared, the fear returned. Possum's ears perked up at the subtle clink of metal coming from the water. His eyes and ears darted across the water desperately in an attempt to pinpoint the sound. He hadn't noticed it at first, but only a few feet from the end of the dock a dead tree jutted out of the water. Wrapped around its trunk was a chain that fed into the water. The end of the chain was moving ever so slowly toward the end of the dock.

Then, he saw them. Two yellow orbs sitting just on top of the water gliding towards him silently. He wasn't going to run this time and he wasn't going to play dead. He slung his knife round to his front and bit into the wooden handle. If he couldn't deal with whatever treachery this was, then what hope could he truly have against a witch. This time, he was ready.

The orbs slid just out of view beneath the end of the dock. Possum braced himself and bit hard on the handle, his eyes watching the chain. Whatever abomination was in the water had stopped moving and was waiting at the end of the dock. Then, with a terrible roar and explosion of water, a great reptile leapt out and onto the end of the dock. Those terrible yellow orbs for eyes, wide mouth full of swamp stained teeth, and a long scaly body. It was like some terrible wingless dragon. Around its body, a leather harness was tightly strapped, and to it the long chain attached. Possum was paralyzed with terror. The dragon leapt a foot towards him.

“BOO!” the dragon shouted at Possum.

With that, the knife slid out of Possum's mouth and he fell over onto his back, mouth agape, tongue dangling out the side of his mouth. Much to Possum's surprise and shame, the dragon roared with laughter. In fact, the incident had caught the dragon so off guard that he was thrust into an absolute laughing fit. He rolled back and forth on his scaly green back, tears rushing from his glowing eyes.

"You're too much, oh you're just too much!" the dragon cried in laughter, trying to regain composure.

The paralyzing fear that had sent poor Possum into a state of faux death had subsided and a new feeling had taken its place, anger. The dragon's laughter had filled Possum with such indignity and fury that he returned to his feet and returned the knife back to his mouth. Possum had new eyes to see his adversary. It wasn't a dragon at all, it was an alligator and a portly one at that. The Alligator had almost completely collected himself when he saw that Possum had returned to an attack stance. This once again sent the Alligator into a fit of laughter.

Possum charged towards the Alligator and threw himself into the air with a twist as to direct the tip of the blade down towards the Alligator. With a thunk the Possum and blade landed on the dock. The Alligator had rolled in laughter just in time for the blade to completely miss and embed itself into the dock. The Alligator took notice and quickly returned himself to his feet.

"Now, now, there is simply no need for that little fella." the Alligator said in a jovial tone. Possum ignored him and angrily pulled on the knife, struggling to dislodge it from the dock. "Oh don't be like that. Here little fella, let me help you."

Possum hissed at the Alligator in a futile rage. The Alligator rolled his eyes and with his long snout pushed the Possum out of the way. The Gator tilted his head to the proper angle and

gently grabbed the knife handle in his jaws, pulling it out of the dock. He let the knife roll out of his mouth towards Possum whose face was contorted into a very sour expression,

“There's really no need to be so upset,” The Alligator scolded, “you’re just such a strange sight in these parts.”

Possum said nothing and returned the knife to his back ignoring the reptile slobber that clung to it.

“Yeah, I only ever see the occasional adventuring fool who thinks they’re going to rid the swamp of the Mistress.”

Possum continued to ignore him and walked to the end of the dock looking for a way to get across murky water.

“Wait,” the Alligator said with a hint of laughter, “do I detect another witch hunter?”

“Yes!” the Possum shot back angrily, “I have come to slay the witch and put an end to her evil that threatens to engulf my home,” Possum turned to the Alligator, “And if you try to stop me from that I will slay you too!” With that the Possum put the knife back in his mouth, ready for the Alligator to strike at him.

A smile sat firmly on the gator's toothy mouth, “There’s really no need for that my little pal, perhaps we can strike a bargain.”

“*Goh hon*” the possum mumbled through the knife in his mouth.

“For being such a wonderfully silly marsupial, I am willing to cut you a deal. You need to get across the water and I need my freedom. Unfasten my harness and I'll give you a lift to the Mistress's shack, deal?”

Possum hesitantly took the knife from his mouth and returned it to his back, “Why should I trust an Alligator?”

The Gator's smile grew wider. "My little pal, I'm not like those other gators who snap their jaws at any little thing that moves. No, I'm a thinking alligator and all I have done for the past five years is swim in circles thinking. My arms can't quite reach the back of this harness to free myself, and my need to eat has put me in a state of servitude to the Mistress. I don't want to eat every fool who comes around, but that's just how things are."

"Why haven't you tried to make this deal with any of these adventures?" the possum asked in a dismissive tone.

"They never gave me the chance to offer it. They always start swinging their swords before I can get a single word in."

Possum looked at the Alligator hard and weighed his options. He could always swim across the water, but there's no telling what other devious creatures might be swimming beneath the surface. Although not said aloud, it was also apparent that there was an "or else" clause attached to this deal.

"Fine, I'll undo the harness and you take me across the water." Possum said through a sigh.

"That's my little pal!" The alligator exclaimed with great enthusiasm. "Just climb on to my back, undo the straps, and then we'll get swimming."

Possum scurried over to the Alligator and then with a brief moment of hesitation climbed onto his back. The Alligator's harness had four straps that met in the center of his back and were all connected by a single metal ring. Attached to the ring was the chain leading to the dead tree.

Possum examined the harness, looking for a way to unfasten it, but couldn't. How the witch had put this thing on the Alligator was a mystery to him, but not one that his knife couldn't

probably solve. He slung his knife around and very carefully slid it between the Alligator and the first strap.

“What are you doing little pal?” the Alligator asked, the playfulness of his voice completely absent.

“There is no fastener on this thing, I have to cut the straps” Possum shot back in annoyance at the implied suggestion he might be some sort of back stabber. Possum stopped what he was doing, perhaps that wasn’t the worst idea in the world. He quickly shook off the thought. That just wasn’t the type of possum he was. “This might feel a little strange.”

Possum shifted the sharpened side of the blade against the harness and began to push and pull the blade like a saw. The dull side of the blade pushed down on the Alligator’s skin making him obviously uncomfortable, although he didn’t complain. It took time, but Possum was able to saw through each strap as he repeated the process over and over again. After the last strap of the harness fell to the dock, Possum found himself sitting breathing heavy on the Alligator’s back.

“Ah little pal, you are a friend indeed! It’s a shame I have to be the ferryman to your demise instead of a more pleasant location, but a deal is a deal.” Possum didn’t have a response, he was low on energy and not even the imminent danger was enough to pep him up. “Just climb up on to my noggin and have yourself a rest and I’ll carry you over.”

Possum climbed onto the Alligator's head and as soon as he did, the Alligator with an explosive movement ran off the dock and into the water. Possum tumbled off of his head and into the warm thick water of the swamp. He thrashed about in the water looking for anything to grab on to. On any normal day swimming was not a problem for Possum, but he was at that moment completely disoriented and without strength. His little feet flailed wildly in the water until they struck something hard. The submerged platform was just close enough to the surface that

Possum, planting his feet firmly on it, was able to lift himself above the water. From beneath the water he could hear, ever so faintly, the familiar sound of the Alligator's giggle. The platform beneath his feet slowly rose to the water's surface and then continued to rise until the entirety of the Alligator's head was above the water.

“Sorry about that,” the alligator said through his giggling, “the rest of the ride will be much smoother.”

The Alligator lowered his head into the water, leaving only his eyes and the very top of his skull above the surface. They began to glide through the water in the direction of the witch's island. Possum sat down wringing the foul smelling water from his fur. There was a faint noise emanating from the Alligator's mouth the Possum took to be speaking, but there was no way to properly make out this subaquatic filibuster. That suited Possum just fine. He was so mad at the reptile he wouldn't speak to him even if he could understand what he was saying.

As the shack grew bigger and bigger with every passing second Possum's thoughts raced. What was he going to do about this witch? He had killed his fair share of insects before, but not a full blown human, let alone a witch. There very well might not be a witch in this shack at all, he optimistically thought. This notion was then promptly crushed by the memory of all the words the Alligator had said about the “Mistress”. She was there all right, and he definitely couldn't walk through the front door.

“Are you going?” the Alligator whispered, a bit confused. Possum was brought back to reality. He had been so lost in thought that he hadn't even noticed the Alligator's head was fully out of the water and they were right next to the island.

“Yes, I'm go-”

“Shhhhh, you don't want her to hear you.” The alligator interrupted Possum.

“Oh, right, yes I’m off.”

Possum felt for his knife to make sure that the weight on his back was not simply an illusion, and feeling the metal blade, stepped down the Alligator’s snout and onto the island.

“This is goodbye little pal.” the Alligator said almost solemnly. The Alligator began to turn and swim away.

“Wait, why not help me? You did say she had you tied up for five years. Doesn’t that make you want any kind of revenge?” Possum pleaded. It was a Hail Mary to get the Alligator to join him, but he was desperate.

The Alligator stopped and turned back to Possum. “A fool's errand is a fool's errand, why cut my freedom short to become a pair of boots?” A smile returned to his face, “However, little pal, if you were to perhaps be in some way successful, that would be a very funny outcome.” He began to fight back the giggles rising inside of him. “I can’t help you, but I won't instantly run off. I'll wait from a safe distance and if you walk out of there alive, I will give you a ride all the way back to whatever madhouse you crawled out of.”

With that the Alligator turned and glided back towards the opposite shore. Possum couldn’t help but feel a little bit dejected. The Alligator’s help could have really evened the playing field. Still Possum had a duty to perform and perform it he would.

Turning towards the shack he began to consider his options. The shack itself was less of a building and more the colossal stump of some ancient and long gone tree. Rotting planks of wood had been crudely placed in whatever gaps the hollow stump had, but it was hard to tell what was plank and what was stump as layer after layer of moss had grown over the whole thing. From the side Possum was on he could see a single piece of roundish glass stamped into the side as a crude window.

He began scaling the side of the shack. The thick layer of moss gave him something to latch onto and with hardly any difficulty at all he made his way up and to the side of the window. Ever so slowly he moved so that one of his eyes could see into the witch's abode.

It was a dark filthy hovel, lit by candles that had been sat in great piles of yellow wax. In the corner there was a stool and a small table with a few books lying on top of it. Next to it a dusty straw mattress on the dirt floor. In the center of the shack there was a lit fire pit and on top of it a rather meager cauldron. Possum was a little bit disappointed to not see some sort of caustic glowing goo bubbling inside of it like he had imagined he would find. Instead it was some rather unappetizing looking stew. What did meet his expectations was the witch bent over said stew stirring it.

She was a chilling site; her long white hair was a matted mess. Her skin was wrinkled to a morbid degree, like the loose skin on some ancient hairless cat. He couldn't see any warts, but that didn't mean there weren't any hidden under the folds of her wrinkles. The clothes she wore were obviously as old, and unwashed, as she was. He could make out a few esoteric looking symbols on her robes, but their severe fading made it impossible to truly identify them.

It then caught his eyes. Directly above the cauldron was a hole in the roof. That was it, that was his plan of attack. He would drop from the ceiling and plunge the knife into her as she leans over her cauldron of slop. It was a perfect plan.

Possum removed himself from the window and made his way up the side of the shack to the roof. His feelings of uncertainty were long gone as he was filled with the first bit of confidence in himself he had felt since starting this journey. The hard part had been getting here, the rest would be easy. In his mind he was only minutes away from making his way back to his cozy tree and all the treasures stowed inside.

He hoisted himself on to the roof and tiptoed towards the hole. He stopped about a foot away from it and placed his knife firmly in his jaws. He cautiously made his way over to the hole's edge and peeked below. The witch was in the perfect position hunched over the cauldron, but she could move at any moment. Possum threw himself down the hole, knife tip perfectly aimed for the witch's back!

Now as Possum flew through the air he noticed something very strange. In his hastiness, he had jumped with such force that his back had developed the slightest bit of vertical spin. Confidence turned to dread as his knife began to change orientation. All he could do was watch in horror as his knife shifted from kill shot, to being pointed directly at the ceiling.

Possum careened into the witch's back, knife not even making contact with her. The force of the collision caused the witch to let out a surprised screech followed by one of actual pain as she fell over her cauldron, spilling its boiling contents on the floor, and on her.

Possum on the other hand had landed out of the splash zone, his head ringing from the impact and the witch's screeching. He picked himself up and looking around tried to figure out where his knife had landed. With a quick survey of the room he found the knife had landed on the opposite side of the room. He glanced over to see what state the witch was in. She was still on the ground screeching with such intensity his vision blurred.

Bounding across the floor Possum made for the knife. His only hope was to get her while she was still down. Just as he made it to the knife something grabbed him from behind and pulled him away. It was now his turn to screech. Victory had been so clearly in his grasp and was now being dragged away.

Turning around expecting to see the witch holding him by his feet, he was shocked to see nothing. The witch was still on the opposite side of the room. She was no longer screeching, but

her black marble eyes burned with rage. In her outstretched hand was a wand and Possum was being pulled to it.

From the tip of the witch's wand Possum dangled, his eyes fixed on her's. She was really an abomination against God. It wasn't just her ghastly appearance or the fear of death that made Possum believe this. No, it was the palpable evil that radiated from her. The taint that spread from her and throughout the swamp. His body was filled with a burning sensation and his mouth had an overwhelming metallic taste. It felt as though his skin was melting and at that moment, Possum wished for death.

The witch grabbed him with a steely grip and with her wand, returned the cauldron and its contents back to the fire pit. The fire reignited with a fury and in moments the stew was at a roaring boil. A wicked smile had replaced the furious look she had previously as she held Possum over certain death.

Closing his eyes Possum resigned himself to his fate, but at the splintering crash reopened them. The witch was no longer looking at him, but instead the 700 lb Alligator that had burst through the front door. Possum was as shocked as the witch was, as the Alligator charged with great speed and force, latching himself to the witch's leg.

The witch resumed screeching, this time worse than previously. She threw poor Possum across the room as she tumbled to the ground. Possum hit the wall hard and then the floor, his vision dazed and his body bruised. Fighting the pain, he was back on his feet. His vision had cleared just in time to see his Alligator friend go sailing through the air back out the door he had crashed in through. The witch was back to standing on what was left of her two feet and began to hobble toward the exit. She had forgotten all about Possum, her attention fully placed on her much deadlier reptile assailant.

Possum, noticing he had landed only inches away from his knife put together a new plan. Scooping up the knife in his mouth he made for the wall next to the doorway. He scurried up it as quickly as possible. The witch at that time had almost made it to the door, but she spotted Possum and raised her wand at him. The Alligator however, was back for round two and came charging back through the doorway once more. The witch shifted her wand away from Possum and back to Alligator.

At this moment, Possum leapt off of the wall. Soaring through the air he twisted his body just perfectly to direct the knife tip at the witch, and gave a silent prayer. The knife found its mark going through the witch's chest as though it were paper. Her body collapsed to the ground, breaking Possum's fall.

It took a monument for the event that had unfolded to properly register for the two animals. Just when they started to realize what they had done they would unrealize it. Witch killing was just not the kind of thing possums or alligators did. They had done it though, and the evidence was right in front of them. Only when the two had traversed their way to the edge of the now brightening swamp did it finally take hold. The witch was dead, the taint on the land was fading away, and a Possum and an Alligator were the ones to thank for it.