

# Harsh Lesson

In the middle of the night, deep in the forest, it's pitch black. The only light around is the moon on this clear night, and the warm glow of a campfire. Beside it, sit two tents, a plastic cooler and two young men on a camping trip. The older one, Josh, sets a grill rack over the fire and takes some hamburger patties out and puts them over the fire, adding some cheese once they're about ready. He toasts some buns and then builds the cheeseburgers, handing one to his younger friend, Andy.

"Do you really think the rumors are true, what they're saying about a witch living out here?" Andy asks to Josh as he starts eating.

"Nah, that's a load of bull. It's probably just some hermit that doesn't like anyone coming 'round. There's no way she'd *actually* be a witch. That's silly, what is this, the 1600s?" Josh snickers.

"Yeah...I mean I guess you're right. Do you even know where that place is where she supposedly lives?"

"I think it's near here somewhere..." Josh quickly finishes the rest of his burger and stands up, looking around, then spots a column of smoke rising in the air not too far from their camp. "Oh! I think it's here!"

Andy gets up quickly, wolfing down the rest of his burger and looks at the smoke. "Oh, yeah! We should totally check it out!" He starts confidently walking in the direction of the smoke, but Josh grabs his shirt collar and yanks him back.

"Nah...if someone is living there, they probably want to be left alone, they're in the forest, y'know?"

"Aw, c'mon...just...we could play like we thought it was abandoned or something...not like we're gonna steal anything or anything like that!"

Josh lets go of Andy's shirt and sighs, "Okay, okay, fine. Let's just...just don't do anything stupid, okay?"

"No promises!" Andy gives a smug grin and then starts walking towards the smoke again, with Josh reluctantly following. The two of them keep walking through the forest, using the smoke trail in

the sky as a guide. Eventually they come to a clearing, and in the middle is an old cottage, one that looks like it was built hundreds of years ago. It has a single, circular window that's just a hole cut out of the cobblestone wall, with a wooden frame to keep animals out. The glow of a fireplace can be seen through this window, along with a shelf containing some jars. Some are empty, and some contain liquids of different colors. Josh slows his walking, but Andy seems pretty amazed at the sight. "Wow, someone *does* live here!" He smiles with almost a child-like wonder, then quickly approaches the front door of the cottage before Josh can stop him. He knocks on the door just as Josh is slowly coming up behind him. There's a tense silence, followed by the creaking of the door as it opens, revealing an older woman with silvery grey hair and wearing a forest green cloak. She flashes a smile that is somehow both warm, welcoming, and wicked at the same time.

"Well, hello there, what brings you two all the way out here?~", she asks with a curious and mischievous tone.

"Oh, we were—" Andy starts but is cut off by Josh, who steps in front of Andy and pushes him aside.

"We were...well we saw the smoke and just wanted to make sure everything was okay here...we didn't know anyone lived out here is all."

"Oh, how very kind of you...you two must be cold, why don't you come in for a while?" The old woman steps aside and gestures for them to step inside.

"Oh...well, that's very kind of you miss, thank you." Josh is the first to enter, and gestures silently to Andy to tell him not to touch anything, to which he nods. Once inside, the door is closed, and the full interior is now visible. To the right is a large fireplace with a bubbling cauldron that smells of spices and herbs. Beside that, is a table with a mortar and pestle that looks like it's well-used, and to the other side are some bookshelves containing many aged books. There is also a bed and a bucket full of water. Andy can't help but look around at everything in awe.

"So, ma'am...how long have you been living out here?"

"Oh, a while..." She says coyly, then moves to her cauldron as she resumes stirring it, presumably what she was doing before the two came over. "It's so much more peaceful here than in the city...lets me get my work done."

"Yeah...I bet...so um...what're you cooking there? It smells delicious."

“Why, thank you! It’s just a little...concoction. It’s a secret recipe!” She then waves her hand over the flame, and it goes out. Josh is about to say something but is interrupted by Andy.

“Woah, so you ARE a witch!” Andy cries out in disbelief and excitement.

The witch scoffs, and glares at Andy, “No, don’t use that word. I am an enchantress.”

“B-But you have the-the robe and the cauldron...you’re a witch!”

She snarls at Andy and approaches him rapidly while pointing at him, “I am NOT a witch!”

Andy backs up quickly, raising his hands defensively, “S-Sorry...I just—”, and before he can finish his sentence he backs into a bookshelf, knocking some of the filled jars over, and their contents spill onto the wooden floor, which begin sprouting vines.

The witch cries out in distress, seeing her potions go to waste. “You...you two...”

Josh quickly grabs Andy and starts walking towards the door, “Sorry...we’ll leave you alone now...I promise!”

“It’s far too late for that...” The witch waves her hand again and the door vanishes, leaving only a stone wall where it once was, as does the window. She then begins speaking an ancient, arcane language then points at both Andy and Josh at the same time, shouting one last word. Green electric bolts shoot from her hands and strike both of them in their chests as they are suddenly overcome with a warm, tingling sensation.

“What...what was that?!” Andy shouts, scared and confused.

“Just teaching you two a little lesson~” She cackles mischievously as thick, black hairs start growing all over Josh’s body, while Andy starts sprouting grey hairs, all growing thick but not too long. They both start panicking as they see the hair growing and start scratching as their bodies start itching. Shortly after this, they both start feeling a compressing feeling and a strong sense of vertigo as everything around them starts looking bigger, and their clothes start feeling looser.

“P-Please...stop this...I apologize for my friend being an idiot...” Josh pleads with the witch, but it is far too late. The spell has been cast. Josh and Andy’s jaws both slowly stretch forward, but only slightly so as their noses flatten against their new, short muzzles, turning pink and shape into a triangle. Their teeth grow sharper and tongues longer. They continue shrinking, and Andy starts looking even shorter than Josh than he usually does as he’s shrinking faster. Both of their bodies are now covered in fur as Josh’s palms and the soles of his feet swell with thick, pink skin to become paw pads.

“Oh, I couldn’t stop it even if I wanted to, dears~”

Josh’s heels rise up, popping back into a digitigrade stance, making it harder for him to remain upright, which is then further complicated by both of their backs tightening, forcing them to all fours. Both of their feet grow longer, while Andy’s feet remain plantigrade, but longer than before. Their arms move inward as their bodies continue shrinking, pants falling off and shirts hanging loose on their much smaller bodies. Andy’s ears start sliding up to the top of his head while becoming more circular, while Josh’s ears become longer and triangular, while resting atop his head and settling in his hair which is starting to merge with his fur now. Their fingers get stubbier, and nails grow longer and sharper into claws. Andy’s fingers and toes merge together until there are just three clawed digits on his feet. Josh’s thumbs shrink away until only dewclaws away, making his hands fully into small paws. Andy tries to cry out for help but can only manage to get out some squeaks.

Two of Andy’s frontmost teeth grow longer until they poke out from his lips, and they can both feel a pressure in their spines as their tailbone grows longer. Tails come out with Josh’s looking longer and a little thicker, while Andy’s is shorter and skinnier. Josh stops shrinking and shuffles out of his shirt, while Andy disappears into his, continuing to shrink for a few more moments, and then it’s all finished. Josh uses his mouth to remove Andy’s shirt, revealing a little grey mouse and a black cat on the wooden floor of the witch’s cabin.

Josh tries to plead with the witch, begging to be let free and turned back, promising they’ll never come back and clean up the mess they made. All that comes out is mewing, but the witch understands. She was in the middle of preparing another spell but stops and listens to Josh’s plea.

“Hmm...I don’t think I’ll let you go quite yet...but I’ll let you keep your humanity. You two have much to learn, however. Stay with me a little while...just for the night...and I’ll teach you how to respect my kind.”

They both nod eagerly, happy to be able to return home after all. The enchantress takes out some books and sits on the bed, inviting Josh and Andy to join her, which they do. She begins reading about the history of magic in the world, which ultimately comes to the stories of the Salem Witch Trials. She speaks with pain in her voice as she recounts how women young and old were persecuted for any slightly unconventional behavior, whether they were actual “witches” or not, they were all burned at the stake without a single fair trial. Almost all of her kind were wiped out as similar events happened

across the country, but they survived by isolating themselves from society. She goes on to explain how “witch” is a derogatory term, and is only used as a serious insult.

“These days”, she continues, “people don’t even know magic exists anymore. But that is very deliberate. We learned our lessons long ago and never interact with anyone unless they come to us, like you two. You made a severe mistake disrespecting me; however, I believe...at least one of you...can take my words to heart and maybe convince the other one to do the same.” She gestures to Josh. “You two shall rest here, and in the morning, you will find that you are back to normal and free to return to your lives as long as you never return, and you never tell another soul about what transpired here.”

Josh and Andy both nod. Josh yawns, then curls up, clearly feeling tired.

“Yes...it is quite late. We shall sleep now.” The enchantress waves her hand and all of the candles in the cabin go out, the door and window return, and the cabin falls dark. They all go to sleep and, in the morning, just as she said, Josh and Andy find themselves human again...although naked. They wake up and, upon realizing this, they scramble for their clothes, much to the enchantress’ amusement.

Once they are both dressed, Josh speaks up, “T-Thank you...I apologize again. May I ask your name?”

“Oh! My name is Esmerelda, you’re so kind to ask.” She gives a genuine smile, the first one she’s given since they’ve met.

“It’s nice to meet you, Esmerelda. We should go now. I promise to keep my friend in line here.”

“Yes, it is a good time to depart. Best of luck on your travels and remember our arrangement.”

“Yes, ma’am!” Josh and Andy wave as they leave the cottage. They quickly return and pack up their campsite and return home as quickly as they can, and they ultimately keep their word and never return to that forest and tell nobody of what happened, even closest friends and family.