

## The Witch of Almand Woods

Mark had heard the stories. Ages and ages worth of stories had evolved over the years, starting as far back as the first Europeans to settle in the area. Legend said that if you went wandering in the Almand Woods for too long, you would stumble across a witch at her cottage and she would grant your deepest desire for a price. The first story Mark had heard was when he was out camping with his older brothers in an attempt to scare him from sleeping. He hadn't slept that night, but out of curiosity rather than fear.

The older he got, the more curious Mark became. The oldest folk legends about the Witch of Almand Woods suggested she was always there. Yet, her appearance aligned more with English Folklore than any Native American depictions of witches. Mark had spent most of his high school years studying the witch, even using the subject for papers in history and English classes in his senior year. He investigated myths and legends from around the world as part of his college major to contextualize his obsession. His brothers mocked him for focusing on the witch, even going so far as to suggest he go Bigfoot hunting. Mark was content with his hobby and every summer he came home, he would go hiking in the Almand Woods, half hoping to find his witch.

One hike brought him on the well-labeled Red Trail. Mark had walked this trail dozens of times, each root and stone familiar as if he were walking around his parent's house or his dorm room. He was pretty sure he could walk the trail blindfolded, but he loved these woods too much to allow himself to not see it. He loved these woods and the simple peace they provided for him, always constant and always safe.

His wandering was interrupted when he saw smoke. Camping wasn't prohibited in Almand Woods, but Mark knew how high the risk for forest fires was these days and inexperienced campers were more dangerous, in Mark's opinion. After debating for a moment, Mark decided to go and investigate the smoke.

Stepping off the trail, Mark made sure to keep his eyes open for anything that might betray him. He knew the trails well enough, but the woods were a wild thing that no amount of grooming or trimming could control. Mark had grown up in these woods, but he still knew that he needed to be safe. He knew the woods well enough. Or so he thought.

The cottage had never appeared on any map of the woods that Mark had seen. There was an abandoned cottage, but that was much closer to the parking lot and left to rot in the rain. This cottage looked well looked after: the stone walls were still standing, the thatched roof looked new and the plants surrounding it were green and bright. The most surprising thing was the woman sitting outside, tending a boiling pot of stew. She looked up from her cooking and long brown hair covered half her bored-looking face. She was wearing grey robes that looked smoldering in the summer heat, but the woman didn't look uncomfortable under the heavy garment. The woman looked up at the sky and gave a little smile. "You're early..."

"I'm...sorry?"

"Early, not sorry," the woman said. "I wasn't expecting you for a little while yet. I hope you don't mind if I cook a little while we talk."

"Are you—you can't be the..."

"Almand Wood Witch," the young woman smiled brightly, bowing a little. "I know you've been looking for me."

"I confess, I have," Mark said, sitting across from her. "So, the stories are...true?"

"And so it is," the witch smiled. "Whatever your heart desires, I will provide for a price."

"Respectfully, I don't think I want anything from you..."

The witch furrowed her brow, surprised. She was too pretty for a witch, in Mark's opinion, but most 'traditional' descriptions of witches were unflattering caricatures. The witch's pale green eyes studied Mark, looking for some hidden quality that Mark wasn't sure if he should try to hide. "That's not how it works," the witch shook her head. "Everyone who finds me always finds me because they want something--"

"And then they have to pay a price that is either too much for them to bear or one they weren't expecting to. You—the Witch of Almand Wood—is known for using people's greed as a way to punish them with exactly what they ask for."

"You know your history..."

"It's been a passion project of mine for some time," Mark said. "Though you look good for... 206?"

"It's not that simple," the witch said, stirring her stew. "I don't know how much you

know...”

“Then that’s what I want,” Mark said. “To know your story.”

“My story?” The witch asked. She scrunched her face and tapped her chin. “No one’s ever wanted that before. I suppose it has to come at a fair price.”

“Well then the price will be the time it takes you to tell the story,” Mark said, setting his pack down. “So, the shorter it is, the less I have to give you.”

The witch surprised Mark with a short laugh. She sat on her stump and folded her legs, looking deep into the fire.

“I lived not too far from here,” the witch said. “My family had a few cows and chickens...an old nanny goat named Belle who would headbutt me if I wasn’t paying attention to her. It was a simple life and we were happy for a while. But then my father decided I was of marrying age and a dowry was more money than the cows could make us. So, he started asking around and tried to find me the best husband.

“They picked someone they thought was acceptable. A gentleman with a farm and a promising career. But promises don’t hold their weight compared to bad business. We were satisfied, I suppose, but he often blamed me and our children for his poor money management. Back in those days, you didn’t get divorced and if I chose to leave him, I would be dead. So, I endured, but with an ember of resentment in my heart.

“I was in these woods, picking mushrooms for my family. I stumbled across the witch. She wasn’t what I expected for a witch, welcoming me kindly and telling me everything I wanted to hear. I suppose that’s how witches had to work in those days. By the end, she asked me what I wanted and that she would give me anything in the world as a gift. I told her the truth: I wanted my life back.”

“You’re not the first witch?” Mark asked

“No,” the witch shook her head. “You were right about a price people were unprepared to pay. The witch snapped her fingers and the wind blew up around us both. Then, I was dressed in her robes and she was wearing my clothing. You never get something for nothing. In exchange for my life back, the witch took the empty life: my children, my husband, my home. It all belonged to her when I took my life back. And I had to take her place here.

“The first few days,” the witch explained, ladling stew into a bowl and passing it to Mark, “I did try to escape. But the woods need a witch, no matter how unwilling. I tried walking away from this house, but the trees and landmarks twisted, betraying and leading me astray. I tried following the river home, but it kept leading me back to this house. I spent days doing the same loop: waking up, walking in one direction trying to escape and ending up back at the house by the end of the day. I resisted, naturally, but I started sleeping in the house rather than spending my nights curled up by the fire.

“The house took care of me,” the witch paused to look fondly at the house behind her. “The pantry was always full and the garden cared for itself. I must have inherited the witch’s house spirits as well as her powers.”

“So you can cast spells?” Mark asked, taking a bite of the witch’s stew.

“Some,” the witch nodded. “It took time to understand them, but there are many volumes of magic in the witch’s house. Would you like to see them?”

“Nice try,” Mark smiled. “But I only paid for the story.”

The witch smiled and nodded. “Fair is fair. But yes, I did learn magic. And I was able to use it...once the woods decided I was ready, I suppose. When I was able to do the magic needed, it started sending me people.”

“The woods sent you people?”

“Lost children, hunters...and, of course, those who sought out the witch of the wood for their gain.” Mark felt his blood go a little cold, but relaxed when the witch smiled. “No, Mark, I don’t think the woods sent you here to punish you. There’s nothing wrong with a little curiosity. But those who sought the witch for power? For their reasons? They were the ones I saw fit to punish, though in ways they might not expect. A man wishes for money and I give it to him, but he spends it all too fast and suffers for it. Another demands the hand of the most beautiful woman in town, but she’s a wretched bore beyond her beauty and he grows discontent with her. The punishments fit the crime, but no one speaks ill of their fortune when they deserve it.”

“So you grant good wishes, too?”

“People always prefer a cautionary tale,” the witch shrugged. “The wishes I granted for the good were inconsequential. Sometimes, it was a way home and I would give those freely.

Sometimes, a person would want to share a meal and shed their sorrows. But they never asked for enough to demand retribution.”

“But the only people who come to you want something?” Mark asked, he took a bite of stew, crushing a bit of potato in his teeth.

“You can imagine my surprise when you said you wanted nothing.”

“Maybe I wanted to see you,” Mark shrugged. “And maybe I want to see you again.”

The witch smiled and rubbed her cold hands together. “I’d rather you don’t come looking for the witch. I’d rather you come looking for me.”

“And who are you?”

“Emily.” A smile crept across her face. “My name is Emily.”

“Then maybe our paths will cross again?” Mark stood, putting his backpack back on his shoulders. “Will I be able to find my way back?”

“You paid me with your time for my story,” Emily shrugged. “That fulfills the agreement. You can leave, but I don’t know if you’ll ever find me again. I don’t get many return visitors.”

“Then I hope I see you again,” Mark said, turning back to the woods. “I certainly want to.”