

## Joey and the Witch

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The day was clear and sunny, with barely a cloud in the sky. The singing of birds and light rustling of branches in the wind echoed throughout the forest. For most it would have felt relaxing, even inviting. Joey wouldn't be letting his guard down so easily, though.

The grey kangaroo was a member of the local guard, and had volunteered to deal with a problem that had plagued the area for years—Oberon the Ravenous.

Oberon was a thylacine witch who more than lived up to his title. Allegedly he lived in a cottage deep in the woods, and used his magic to lure hapless travelers off the main road to their doom. Some claimed he fattened his victims up, others insisted he merely swallowed them whole on the spot. All Joey knew for certain was that Oberon was eating people, and needed to be stopped.

Few others had wished to risk battling a witch, but a strong sense of justice had finally driven Joey to act. He'd put on his best armor and his sharpest sword. Enchantments had been purchased to protect himself from spells Oberon would undoubtedly attempt to unleash. Joey even had bundles of extra charms hanging from his belt just in case. He was as prepared as possible considering he knew little of his opponent.

Despite limited information, Joey inevitably found himself stumbling upon a bright, beautiful clearing. An idyllic cottage stood in the clearing's middle. From a glance there was nothing out of the ordinary about it, nothing particularly ominous. He wondered if he had made a mistake, had simply found the dwelling of an innocent hermit or woodsman.

Joey quickly shook his head to clear his mind. No, this was the place. Oberon's magic was obviously trying to make the home look as inviting as possible, the perfect trap for anyone lost in the forest. Fortunately Joey wasn't about to be fooled so easily.

With the utmost caution the kangaroo approached the cottage, eyes chasing after every perceived hint of motion in his peripheral vision. As he got closer and closer he kept expecting spells to shoot out the windows or the door to swing open and Oberon stroll out. Instead all remained quiet. Perhaps the witch had grown complacent after being ignored for so long. Joey would gladly accept any advantage he could get.

Eventually Joey reached a window and peeked inside. He saw a small living room, no fire in the hearth and plenty of book-filled shelves lining the walls. No skulls or creepy effigies like he'd feared, but Joey admitted he'd let his imagination run a little wild when he was envisioning Oberon's lair. The kangaroo guessed that even a witch would enjoy simple comforts. There was no sign of Oberon himself.

Joey could have waited, but he was increasingly worried that the longer he lingered the greater the chance he'd be discovered by Oberon without realizing it. Getting ambushed by a witch could very well be an impossible challenge to overcome. To win he'd need to catch Oberon off-guard, and brute force was in his favor.

After mentally preparing himself, Joey started his raid. He snuck up to the door and carefully checked its handle, finding it unlocked. Soon he was inside and creeping through the house. Past the living room was a kitchen, and Joey could see someone leaning over a table, their back to him. They were shirtless, with orangish-brown fur and black stripes down their back. Even from behind Joey could see the curve of their plump belly, soft love handles sticking out from either side. It had to be Oberon—and he was completely oblivious to the kangaroo's presence.

Joey continued forwards at a quiet pace, slowly unsheathing his sword. He was at the entry to the kitchen now, Oberon still distracted. The witch would be dealt with in seconds, their reign of voracious terror finally ended. There'd no longer be anyone growing fat off the innocent travelers in the forest. Joey could already imagine the hero's welcome he was going to get upon arriving back home with the news.

The guard darted through the doorway, sword ready to strike true. The instant he crossed the threshold a cascade of powder fell upon him, freezing his movement and temporarily blinding him. Joey flew into a coughing fit as a tingling sensation surged throughout his body. He was covered in the unknown substance that reminded him of flour. On instinct Joey shook himself to disperse the powder, but it clung to him persistently. Oberon remained focused on the table, despite the commotion mere feet behind him.

Then a cloud of gas enveloped Joey. Immediately he knew something was wrong—*very* wrong. His head spun and the coughing returned, and he swore the floor was rushing towards him, as if he was falling. In seconds the cloud dispersed, and where Joey had been there was now a feral, three foot tall wallaby in his place.

Sword slipped from a grip unable to hold it while armor and clothing slid right off the smaller creature. Joey couldn't believe what was happening. He looked himself over in a panic and tried to shout out, but no words came out, only animalistic squeals.

Unable to wield any weapon and denied the protection and wards of his armor, Joey felt suddenly and utterly helpless. A feral wallaby couldn't defeat a witch, no matter how lucky he got. Terror and embarrassment vied for dominance. His quest for justice had ended in the blink of an eye.

Oberon began to chuckle, and turned around. He towered over Joey's new form, a menacing sight. Joey cowered.

“So they finally bother to send someone my way and *this* is all they can manage?” Oberon mused with a grin. “I almost feel insulted. Clearly you knew I was proficient with magic—I had to litter my yard and living room with spells to strip your protective wards, and even then it was almost too little. A couple more charms and you might have been able to still hold up your sword.”

Joey's mind was filled with curses. He knew he should have been fleeing, but fear kept him in place—along with plenty of magic.

“I wonder if you were just a scout to test my abilities? Or maybe everyone else was too afraid to confront me? Not that I care either way. Nothing in this forest escapes my attention, I can see it all through my crystal ball.”

Only then did Joey spot what was on the table, what Oberon had been focused on. A crystal ball. So he'd been doomed from the start.

“Even if a whole army was sent at me I'd simply twist and turn their sense of direction so they'd never find me.” Oberon's grin suddenly widened. “Except for the ones I deemed delicious enough to have over.”

Oberon reached down and grabbed Joey, picking him up with ease. No matter how much the wallaby wiggled and thrashed he couldn't free himself from the thylacine's grip.

“It's amazing how the simplest transformation can turn someone into the perfect snack!”

Oberon licked his lips and opened wide, giving Joey a clear view of his throat right before shoving the wallaby right in. Joey wiggled to no avail as his head and then his shoulders were swallowed. Every gulp seemed to pull a large portion of him deeper into the witch, Joey vanishing from sight with frightening speed. He really was just a snack to Oberon.

Soon enough Joey had been reduced to a swaying tail, which Oberon slurped up like a noodle. His plump gut swelled outwards from the meal, bouncing wildly from Joey's struggles. Even with his diminished size Joey still left a sizable bulge in the thylacine's middle.

All the kicking and punching was merely an internal massage to Oberon, who sighed and let out a modest *uorrrrrrrp*. He cradled his rowdy gut, wobbling and prodding it as he snickered.

“You know, *hero*, might favorite part about eating someone isn't the taste or how filling they are, or even the calories,” Oberon said, kneading his belly. “It's the digestion~”

Within Oberon, Joey shuddered. His captor's voice was somewhat muffled but painfully audible, and nothing the witch was saying gave him comfort in the darkness.

“The sensation of a meal squirming frantically as digestive juices seep into their fur and tickle

their hide, as glirks and gurgles echo throughout their prison, as they *feel* my stomach trying to break them down into something more useful.” Oberon practically moaned just describing Joey's fate. “And it's a slow process, too. I've had prey take an entire week to finally fall unconscious. Admittedly you're a bit on the small side, but I'm sure you'll succeed in providing me plenty of entertainment and last a few days in there. At the very least I'll give you plenty of fresh air.”

Joey's struggles intensified, much to the joy of Oberon. The wallaby made as much noise as he could in protest.

“Now *that's* what I wanted to feel! Fight your inevitable fate, insist you aren't food and weren't meant to end up on my waistline! Convince yourself help will arrive to save you, up until the last possible moment!” Oberon cackled. “I haven't been blessed with a dinner guest in days and it's left me needy.”

Joey's true ordeal had just begun.

Oberon waddled back into his living room, letting his bulging belly sway with every step and jostling about the wallaby within. The witch endeavored to ensure Joey wouldn't get a moment's rest. He plopped down in a chair, one paw always idly rubbing or prodding or wobbling his belly. If Joey tried to ignore him he'd just poke harder.

Then there was the constant teasing. Always referring to Joey as food and guessing how many pounds he'd gain from the wallaby. Complaining that he might be too small of a meal, that he should have kept him a bit bigger to sate his hunger longer. Oberon acted as if his stomach was like a king's spacious bedroom, emphasizing over and over again how comfortable it surely was, how surely Joey would have escaped had he not been satisfied. It was excessive and endless.

And of course Joey's “room” was an uncomfortable mess regardless of Oberon's teasing. Even after the wallaby's eyes had adjusted to the dark he could barely see a thing, not that he was sure he wanted to.

While the stomach would stretch if he pushed hard in any direction, it naturally snapped back to a confined space the second pressure was off it. This kept Joey curled up at all times in an awkward position that prevented him from evading the stomach's many hardships. All the walls were slick and slimy, constantly coating him in what he knew to be digestive juices. They hadn't started to sting or burn yet, but it matted his fur and caused him to slide around even more.

The stomach had been warm since the moment Joey slipped into it, and the heat never waned. It was like a foul sauna. The shallow pool he was sitting in did nothing to cool him off, being lukewarm. Every time Oberon prodded or wobbled him from the outside the liquids splashed him. Joey had never really thought about what it would be like to be swallowed whole, but it was somehow worse than he could have ever imagined. He was just being toyed with by the smug witch.

Hours passed, and Joey gradually grew exhausted from the persistent jostling inflicted upon him by Oberon, who proved more than capable of holding a one-sided conversation. The wallaby felt his eyelids grew heavy, and experienced a brief moment of relief as he passed out.

A thunderous belch and the shaking of the stomach woke Joey from his ineffective slumber. He pressed against the fleshy walls in confusion before his memories returned to him. His struggles and hollering renewed with frustrated vigor.

Oberon smiled wickedly as he felt his gut bounce in protest. “Good, you're awake! I'd begun to fear I hadn't given you enough air during the night, but I guess you just needed a little extra beauty sleep.” He patted his middle a couple times with a paw. “I do hope it was as restful as mine was. Nothing helps me snooze well quite like a full belly.”

Joey replied by squirming even more, though he settled down once he realized he was mostly dunking himself in digestive juices. Originally he'd thought the witch had been lying about taking days to digest meals, but surviving overnight had proven otherwise. The reality of his predicament was starting to set in.

“Though I guess I wasn't *that* full. You are just a snack, after all,” Oberon continued. “Course I

always keep a fully stocked pantry for just such circumstances! I do hope you don't feel too offended by me enjoying some breakfast—I'm sure you've got plenty of room down there to spare.”

Joey's prison swayed as Oberon waddled somewhere, muffled screeching coming from outside. Suddenly he felt pressure from below, behind, and ahead, as if he were being compacted. Oberon was sitting in a chair, but what was his belly pressed against?

More faint scraping, and then Joey felt something mushy land on his head. More and more mush pelted the unfortunate wallaby, whose wiggling intensified. Becoming the appetizer to a regular old meal only flustered Joey worse.

Up above, Oberon made loud, exaggerated noises as he scarfed down the sizable breakfast he'd spent all morning preparing. He made sure to give his gut plenty of rubs in between bites, and was especially fond of teasing the lump he suspected to be Joey's head.

“I swear my appetite's just getting stronger and stronger these days! Used to be that I could gulp down someone your size and be content for days, but now I may have to start doubling up on meals just so I don't wipe out my pantry keeping my stomach happy!” Oberon kneaded the side of his middle, grinning as he felt Joey attempt to shift away from his teasing.

“Course it doesn't help that I have a particular fondness for wallaby. They're a natural prey for us thylacines, you know?” Oberon said. “I can't look at one and not treat it as mere food~”

Oberon wished he could see the look on Joey's face, whether it was embarrassment or rage. He couldn't completely rely on the wallaby's voice for cues since he couldn't talk anymore.

Within minutes the large plate had been picked clean, multiple glasses of juice having washed it all down. The breakfast had turned Joey's pool into a deeper muck.

“That'll do for now, though I wouldn't be surprised if I need to have breakfast the next couple days as well just to sate my hunger while you're readied for digestion!” Oberon laughed, his whole middle jiggling in the process.

The rest of the day wouldn't prove much better for Joey—digestion was slowly starting to kick in. It began as a tingle, barely noticeable. The walls of the stomach had gotten slimier, more stomach acids leaking in. Joey didn't feel pain—at least not yet—but just knowing what was happening caused him to squirm and whimper more frequently.

“I know it's hard for you to keep track of time in there, but I thought you'd be delighted to hear that a whole day has passed since you became a delectable treat!” Oberon's voice was an unwanted intrusion in the darkness. “The first day is always the laziest, as my stomach prepares to soften you up. Now the real fun begins~”

Another evening of endless teasing, another night of restless sleep. On the second full day of captivity, Joey woke to an itching sensation all over. What was worse were the occasional *blurrrrrrbles* and *glrrrrrrrrns* that had started to fill the cramped, dark prison. It was as if Oberon's stomach had joined in on the verbal teasing. He desperately tried not to think too much about the sounds of his own digestion.

With the digestive juices more active, the sludge he was stuck in the day before had become more of a soup. Joey couldn't help but imagine Oberon's stomach like a cauldron, the lid of which he couldn't possibly hope to lift off. The thought made him feel even more like food than he already did, which frustrated him to no end.

Meanwhile Oberon was simply going about his normal routine as if it Joey had always been a part of it. He washed, he cleaned, he read, but—most of all—he made sure Joey never forgot where he was and what fate awaited him. Oberon's tone shifted from friendly to joking frequently. It was all a game to him, a fun way to pass a few days. Joey had no way of talking back yet Oberon continued chatting at him anyway, sometimes acting as if the wiggling wallaby had actually answered.

For the most part, Joey's anger and determination had collapsed into dismay. He whimpered and whined rather than hollered, his internal shoves a bit more desperate. In turn Oberon had begun teasing him gentler, occasionally treating him as a pet. The act often left Joey too flustered to do much at all.

It was morning again when Joey felt the first patch of fur fall off his body and into the goop that surrounded him. He'd known things were only going to get worse once the digestive juices had started bubbling, more noise to fill his prison. The gurgles were louder and more frequent, unavoidable reminders of his eventual digestion.

Oberon drummed on his noisy gut with both paws, unintentionally forcing out a modest *uorrrrrrp*. A tuft of fur came out along with the stale air, prompting a snort from the witch. "Ah, I see you're coming along nicely in there," he said, squeezing his middle and gulping down more fresh air. "With how toasty it must be I'm sure you don't mind the shave."

Joey wiggled and whined, which only seemed to hasten the loss of fur. Not like he could remain perfectly still with Oberon constantly nudging him from every angle.

A second burp, more wallaby fur in the air. "Once all the fur has been—*braaaaaap*—dealt with, there'll be the light acid tan of course. Ha, I always get a bit belchier around this point, I blame the bubbling."

The wallaby wanted to growl, but all he could manage was a whimper, one nearly drowned out by the churning around him.

That day seemed to drag on the longest for Joey, the greedy pool of digestive juices chaotically stripping him of fur. His submerged legs and tail shed the most, but the acids managed to coat him entirely to some degree, leaving bald patches all across his body.

In an effort to escape the gurgling he'd resorted to focusing on whatever other noise he could. Sometimes it was Oberon's breathing, others the nearby thumping of his heart. The outside world seemed so far away despite being obnoxiously close.

The strain of being slowly digested over days had weakened Joey to a degree, but his strength hadn't left him completely. He didn't want to think about how much longer it would take.

Throughout it all, Oberon still hadn't grown bored. Paws danced over his large belly, exploring every inch of the wiggling mass at all hours of the day. He adored watching Joey react to being lugged around for new tasks, from gardening to modest exercise. Oberon couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun with a meal. The added joy of his latest meal having been purposely sent to defeat him only enhanced the experience as far as the witch was concerned.

"It's a shame I'm not welcome in town, because I'd love to take you shopping at the market and see if anyone realizes this is more than a simple ball gut," Oberon teased, pressing down on his middle. "I'd wear a concealing robe to hide the lumps and wiggles, and if your whimpers reached someone's ears I'd merely claim to be suffering from indigestion after eating something that didn't agree with me! I doubt any would notice, though."

Though he whined, Joey didn't disagree. At least he'd be denied such humiliation in reality. His ordeal was bad enough as it was.

The itching had become stinging. The whole stomach bubbled around him, his prison turned into a cauldron. Joey had been trapped for days, but one question dogged him: how many more would he have to endure?