

Gone with the Witch

Together, they sifted through what remained of the once impressive dwelling that housed the Order of Mystics. Alchemical paraphernalia lay strewn about the deserted hovel that was mostly underground. The entrance was little more than a pit, surrounded and concealed by a ring of exotic trees whose large roots served as camouflage for the tunnels that branched off from the walls of the crater and led beneath the earth. Fezerius had thought the construction quite ingenious, whether natural or contrived, and had been intrigued since the first time he saw it. Of course, he hadn't been able to explore all of the tunnels, at least not until now. For the secretive witches coven had barred them with magical barriers that were breachable only by them. But they had long since fled, apparently to another plane, fearing retribution from Nekron, should he ever return from his banishment to the Abyss.

Fezerius pondered how his own wife, Kylianna, could have committed that unfathomable act. Aside from the Overlord of Narrek, Nekron was the most feared and powerful demigod on the material plane. Fezerius knew that Kylie was powerful as well, but had never dreamed that she could perform such a feat, especially knowing that all banishments were temporary in nature. And though they had been initially attempting to thwart the Overlord and his plans for conquest, Nekron could have easily been played off against the iron fisted tyrant. But now the Ice Lord was gone and the Overlord controlled Morkoth. At least he had destroyed the Wizard Hunters...

"Fez," came the call from his wife, "I think you had better come and take a look at this."

His wife. Now that he thought about it, was she really his wife? The ceremony had been performed here, at the coven, by the Witch Mother herself. It was a ritualistic magical bonding ceremony that he had never experienced before. It was a very somber occasion to all involved, but to his knowledge, none of them had any official power and they certainly weren't representatives of any church that he knew of. So, was it binding?

Fezerius pondered this as he made his way down one of the formerly protected tunnels, the barriers having disappeared with their creators. Kylie had already been exploring these, foolishly in his estimation. Who knows what magical traps or curses could have been left behind to prevent meddling with their most sensitive equipment and sacred chambers. Surely, the witches intended to return to their domain some day and woe to any who were found to have disturbed it.

He entered a rather large and spacious chamber that was dark, but for the candle that Kylie held in her hand. From the chalky markings and various bric-a-brac scattered about the floor, Fezerius was able to deduce that this was some sort of divining or summoning room.

He approached Kylie cautiously, attempting to ascertain what it was that she was staring at so intently in the corner of the room.

"Look, Fez," Kylie pointed, "It's us. You and me."

Fezerius squinted hard, barely able to make out the two little shapes that stared back at him. In the dim candlelight he saw two small dolls, crafted from clay and twigs, dressed like he and Kylie were dressed. Each was about two hands high and lacked facial features, but he knew that he was looking at an effigy of himself. It all made sense. Everything that had happened since he met Kylie had been contrived. The witches had been guiding his course, using him to accomplish their

goals. Even Kylie herself had been manipulated by her own mother. But was she a pawn in this part of their game or an accomplice?

Fezerius opened his mouth to confront her with this realization, but was interrupted by the sound of Fezbane, Kylie's canine familiar, barking from outside the cave. And when he barked, there was trouble.

Kylie gave Fez a pensive look, then closed her eyes to concentrate on connecting with Fezbane's mind. *What is it, boy,* she asked telepathically.

It looks like figures, coming towards us, Fezbane said, *I think they're---*

Fezbane's voice was suddenly muted in Kylie's mind. Something had happened to cut them off. If Fezbane had been hurt or injured, Kylie would know it, painfully experiencing the wounds through her empathic link with the dog. So he had either gone out of range or...

"What is it?" asked Fezerius. What have you gotten us into now? was what he wanted to say.

"Someone or something is out there," Kylie whispered. "I've lost contact with Fezbane."

Fezerius winced at the mention of the appropriately named dog. Kylie had enough charms, natural and magical, to keep Fezerius close by, but the dog was always there to keep him from getting too close. "Well, let's go out there and see before we get trapped in here," he said anxiously.

Kylie nodded and began to creep her way towards the tunnel entrance. Fezerius followed, but not too close.

They both jumped, startled, when they heard the sound of Fezbane resuming his protective barking. Kylie rushed out, eager to make sure that he was okay.

“No, wait!” Fezerius warned, but it was too late. He decided to follow her as quickly as possible and meet his fate together instead of alone.

What he saw when he reached the entrance frightened him, but only for an instant, having grown accustomed to the thought of his own impending doom. Standing around the rim of the crater were twelve dark figures, silhouetted against the grey of the twilight sky. Some of them held gnarled staves, dangling with fetishes and talismans. All of their faces were concealed, either by hood or by shadow. Fezerius felt the aura of magic in the air. It seemed that the former occupants of the Order had returned, though Fezerius did not see Melinda, Kylie’s mother, among the group. And if these were the same people, why had Fezbane barked?

The foreboding figures stood there silent, looming over Fezerius, Kylie and Fezbane for an interminable length of time. Nothing was said as the trio stared back at their guests. Even Fezbane’s barking had ceased and he began to whimper.

“Well,” Kylie demanded, “who are you?”

Fezerius winced again, amazed at Kylie’s lack of tact. She’d always had a knack for opening her mouth and inserting a fireball.

“It is unfortunate that you do not recognize me,” came a crackling voice, “after all, you spent so much time in my home.”

Fezerius shot a look at Kylie, seeking an answer to the riddle. Kylie’s eyes had gone wide, apparently in recognition.

“The Coven of the Witch Mother,” Kylie answered.

Fezerius merely hung his head. He felt his face beginning to get hot, more out of anger than fear.

“We have come to claim this sanctuary,” said the ancient voice, “You may join us or leave, but you will not stand in our way.”

That sounded like a fair proposal to Fezerius. He looked up at Kylie to see her staring defiantly at the Witch Mother.

“No,” replied Kylie, “This is our sanctuary to use as we please until the Order returns. I will not let it fall into your hands or any other’s. It is under our protection.”

What was she saying?! This was the second most powerful group of witches in the Ancient World. And she wanted to fight them? Then he realized that, in Kylie’s mind, she had already single-handedly defeated Nekron. What were a group of invading witches to her? He hoped she realized that Nekron was only a single target. Here there were twelve.

The old crone raised her staff and pointed it at Fezerius. This was it. He would be vaporized and it would all be over. But no magic came at him.

“And what of that one,” queried the witch, “he is not one of us. Or one of you.”

“He is my husband!” Kylie shot back fiercely.

“Does he bear the mark?” inquired the crone.

“Yes,” answered Kylie proudly. “Show them Fez.”

He really wished she would stop calling him that. It reminded him of a stupid little hat that his uncle used to wear. But right now he wasn’t particularly fond of the idea of hiking up his robes in front of a bunch of sadistic witches. His hesitation was noted.

“Just do it Fez,” Kylie pleaded, “I’ll go first.”

Kylie pulled aside her robes and revealed her inner thigh, scarred by the mark that symbolized their union through the Order. Still, Fezerius stood there, unmoving.

“Fez, what’s wrong?” begged Kylie.

“It matters not,” cackled the Witch Mother, “Your symbolic rituals hold no meaning for us. He does not practice our methods, nor see the world as we see it. His ways are not

ours, and no amount of marking or brainwashing will change that. He is not...pure.”

It seemed even the Witch Mother was savvy to what Fezerius had realized was happening to him. He was, and had been, nothing but a tool for the past year.

“Leave now, wizard, if you choose to go,” demanded the crone, “It would seem that this one desires a different fate,” she said, pointing a bony finger at Kylie.

Fezerius had always been a follower, the quiet type, content to let those in his company make decisions for him, as long as they allowed him to pursue his goals. It had been so with his former friends, who were now dead, as it had been with Kylie and her companions. But those decisions, it seemed, at least of late, had taken him into directions and situations that he did not relish one bit. He had nearly lost his life, searching for a way to combat the magical vortex that threatened to consume the world, which turned out to be no less than the wrath of a vengeful god. In the end, his efforts would not have mattered, as the power to stop it lie in the heart and innocent soul of a little girl. And as if that wasn't enough, he had been plunged into a war against the Overlord of Narrek, a demigod in his own right. This wasn't how he had wanted his life to be. Nor had he planned on being married, at least not like this, and so soon. He still had much to accomplish, and he doubted that Kylianna felt about him the way a wife should feel about her husband. Maybe witches only married for convenience, or a conjoining of powers. He didn't know. He didn't want to know.

Fezerius turned to leave, only to find the dog at his heels, tugging on his suede boots, as if asking him to stay. It wasn't out of loyalty, he knew. It was simply because the dog knew what Kylie's wishes were. Fezerius looked sharply at Kylie, silently asking her to call the dog.

“Fezbane, come,” she acquiesced. “So that’s it,” she said, turning to Fezerius, “you’re just going to leave?”

“What do you expect?” he asked, louder than he had ever spoken before. “I’m no warlock, or even a great sorcerer. I can’t throw around magic like some demigod. I’m just a simple enchanter who’d like to do some quiet research in a library somewhere. Maybe invent a few spells, something to leave behind and be remembered by. No, I’m through with this running around and fighting. The only thing I’ll end up getting out of it is the business end of a lightning bolt! You’d be smart to give it up while you still can. Maybe if your brain wasn’t so full of spells and incantations there’d be room for some common sense! Why don’t you go find your friend, the Duke, make nice with him and go settle down somewhere, make a decent life for yourself before its too late?”

Kylie was shocked. Fezerius had never spoken so loudly and so fervently before. She could feel that he really meant it too. But that didn’t help or change the situation.

Fezerius climbed out of the pit, as the circle of witches parted for him. He was really going to do it!

“Fez!” yelled Kylie at his back, “You can’t just leave me here with them! What am I supposed to do?”

Fezerius turned to face her, and with a cocked eyebrow said “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.”