

The Witch Who Would Be Queen

Once upon a time, the devil decided he wanted a wife who would bear him children. He called for all the women in his dark underworld to descend upon his throne for the opportunity to serve at his side and be his bride.

But being the devil, he wasn't looking for a woman who would be *nurturing*. No, cruelty would be critical and so he issued an edict: the first woman who could show how evil she could be with children would wear the queen's crown. But even in this, there was one caveat, and from his black, horned throne, he spoke to the women gathered: "Be mindful—imagination is key."

The women in the crowd whispered among themselves, imagined the possibilities of success or feared the consequences of defeat. At last, three witches stepped up to the challenge.

The first witch brought him children. Their skin hung from their bones from hunger, bruises traveled the length of their arms from abuse, and their eyes were sunken into their heads from despair. "I cursed them!" the first witch cackled. "I cursed them and they lived locked in a basement, starved of food, and shown no kindness." She clapped her hands with excitement, so sure was she that this would please her dark lord. "With their damaged spirits and fractured souls, you can mold them, my beloved! Make them into whatever you want, and they will gladly do your bidding!" she promised, spreading her lips in a toothless smile.

But "broken" children had been done before, and this bored him.

The devil snapped his fingers and the witch and the three children vanished in a blaze of crimson fire and fury.

"Next!" he cried.

The second witch came forth, but with no children in sight.

"No children?" the devil asked, curious.

"Oh, I've bought you children, alright," she said, her rank breath filling the air with the vile odor of decay.

"Yes?"

From beneath her many tattered and dirty robes she produced a bowl of stew. It bubbled with the blood of young children, and was made hearty with bits of flesh, the soft meat of eyes, and fingers to suck and chew.

"They came to me late at night, my lord, to rob me of my goodies, but little did they know that I would rob them of theirs!" The old witch guffawed, spittle flying from her dry, cracked lips. She presented the meal, kneeling before her dark master, head bowed in supplication, hands upward in servitude.

The devil released a mighty sigh and slapped the bowl away, spilling the thickened brew onto the fiery floor.

"This is nothing new!" he bellowed. "Witches eat children all the time!"

"Oh, but my lord, you didn't even tast—"

But the devil would hear no more. "Enough!" And with another clap of his monstrous hands, the second witch disappeared in a billow and flash of dark smoke.

“Next!”

The third witch approached, a crow on her shoulder and a black cat at her ankles. Her back curved with age, her fingers curled in knots, and her gray hair hung in strings in front of her face, obscuring most of her features. In her hands, she held a large box, but like the second witch before her, there were no children with her.

“But where are the children I seek?” the devil cried, infuriated by this particular lack of detail.

Demons and minions alike trembled at his tone, but the third witch stood firm, her face still in the wake of the great master, her eyes steady and clear behind her veil of hair. “Patience, my lord. I have the gift that you seek,” she rasped, and with deference, placed the box in his clawed hands. The heat from his hands disintegrated the box instantly, and suddenly he held an ornately decorated miniature carousel.

“What is this?” he asked, holding it up to the fire for a better look.

“A carousel, my lord. Children love them.”

The devil scratched his head with a long, hooved nail. “Why would you bring me this?” he asked. “It’s true, it is richly carved, but that doesn’t interest me. I want to see how you can make children suffer. This shows nothing of the kind.”

The third witch smiled, an evil slash that pulled at her lips and touched her eyes with a dark glint of malice. “With all due respect, my lord, I don’t believe you are looking closely enough. Do you not see that there are children on the horses?”

The devil brought the carousel closer and squinted his yellow eyes. “Why yes! There are in fact, children there!” The carousel was full of miniature children, some white, some black, some toddlers, some older. Many of them sat on the ponies, their mouths opened wide to express their emotions of glee. “Impressive, your artistry,” he exclaimed. But then he lowered the carousel. “Yes, impressive indeed, but still—”

The woman tilted her head coyly, arching her eyebrows. She waved her hands in the air, mumbled and croaked out an incantation:

What once was still,

A quiet lot,

Bring back to life

The raucous lot!

Fill our ears

With sounds of fright,

Of despair

This dark, dark night!

Suddenly, the carousel in the devil's hand whirred to life. The tiny, multi-colored jewels sparkled and glowed, and the tinny whine of carousel music pierced the air with the repugnant sound of happiness and gaiety. The devil held up the carousel and marveled to see the horses bobbing up and down as the carousel made its slow turn, round and round, while the children—

The devil lowered the carousel from his immediate line of sight and looked to the witch.

“What is your name, witch?”

“Gaia, my lord.”

“Gaia.” He said her name with a heavy, dark snarl that sent chills up and down her spine. “How did you come to this idea, Gaia?”

She snorted. “Children are fools, my lord. They look only to what will bring them pleasure, and in the land above us, they flock to the carousel. They're attracted to the pretty lights, the high-pitched song, and the promise of pony rides and cotton candy. They gather at this monstrosity for their own selfish amusement, and when they came to me—in my disguise as a carnival barker—they implored me to never let the ride end. It seemed only fitting to grant them their wish—in perpetuity.”

The devil nodded, holding up again the carousel. The children, which only moments before had been miniatures of fine porcelain, were alive, screaming and begging to be let out of the carousel. As the devil looked closer, he could see their wrists were tied to the support poles with tiny chains, which before had looked merely like bracelets. As the children pulled and yanked at the chains that held them, the stiff irons cut into their skin, sending blood dripping down their tiny arms and causing them to cry in pain as well as shriek for their release.

The devil watched the children struggle and listened to their pleas with great delight. He bellowed at the small boy who, in his quest to be free, jerked at his chains with such force that he slipped off his pony and dangled in a precarious position, with his arms now stretched above his head and the pony continued to bob up and down. He burst into laughter when a little girl, tied haplessly to one of the few benches, saw his giant eye peering into the carousel and screamed with sheer terror. And when another young child, perhaps nine, cursed his name, he smiled with gratitude.

Gaia gauged the devil's reaction, and took a step forward. “I can make the carousel spin faster, my lord. When it spins faster, their...*antics* become even more amusing.”

The devil put down the carousel and licked his lips with his forked tongue. He regarded the witch carefully, eyeing her from head to toe. “What other magic can you perform, Gaia?”

The old witch noted the hunger in his eyes and the girth of his member. Without preamble, she once again waved her hands into the air to recite another incantation:

What once was creased and wrinkled skin,

What once was old and frail and thin,

Make young and fresh and clean and new,

So that his lust I might subdue.

A dense, black smoke engulfed her and behind its veil, the old witch transformed. Her back straightened, and her gray hair darkened blue-black. Her fingers uncurled themselves, and the tattered silk of her robes fell from her frame. The breasts that had hung long and thin and useless plumped and became full; the dark space between her legs, once long forgotten, moistened and warmed. When the smoke dissipated, a vixen stood before the devil, and his member began to rise.

“This is the other magic that I can perform, my lord,” she said. Her eyes gleamed with both reverence and desire for her master before her. “This and much, much more.”

The devil nodded, pleased, and extended his hand to her. “Gaia, my wife-to-be, come stand by my side.”

Gaia took her new place by the king of darkness, and then he picked up the carousel where still the children screamed for freedom and begged for their lives.

“And now, my dear, make it spin faster, and we’ll watch them suffer. Together.”

And the new queen of the underworld did as she was told.