

The Witches Bound: Abzu

Alys, the Witch of Abzu, ducked under a wooden support strut as she strode down the dank and muddy tunnel, illuminated by the magelights dancing around her. When she had heard that her emerald mine had been taken and its soldiers killed or scattered, she'd assumed a plot by one of her fellows to draw her out. But when she had arrived, it was just a scraggly collection of rebels. She'd impaled some of them on spikes of stone and buried others up to their necks to be made examples of later, and then chased the survivors into the mines. It might have been more efficient to just collapse the tunnels from the outside, but she wanted her emeralds, and there was some amusement to be had in chasing vermin to ground.

As she came around a bend in the tunnel, she saw a handful of terrified rebels cowering behind minecarts, clutching makeshift weapons. She smiled broadly, strolling down the path towards them and imagining what they saw. Alys was small and skinny, barely over five feet tall, with olive skin and a dark brown ponytail. Without her magic, she'd been overlooked and spat upon, but with it her height didn't matter. Wreathed in blue-white light, her eyes the shimmering blue-green of the ocean depths, she wore a diaphanous blue gown and filigree silver sandals, the mud and dirt sliding off them like water with each step. Her breasts had been tiny, but she'd used magic to give herself a respectable bodice, and her face bore a cruel smile at odds with her innocent expression. "What to do with you?" she asked lightly. "Bury you alive? I could just close off this branch, leave the new miners to listen to you beg in the dark. Perhaps, if one of you kills the rest, I will keep them as a pet."

She took three steps forward, and felt the shift in the stone above her a moment before the ceiling collapsed on top of her. It was a valiant effort, she had to give them that. If force of arms couldn't stop a Witch, the rebels must have reasoned, perhaps a mountain could.

It couldn't, of course. But it was a good attempt, and it deserved a show. With an exaggerated yawn and a wave of her hand, Alys directed her full magical might upwards. Wind and rock blurred, and the rockfall above her exploded into dust, blasting upwards through the mine in an eruption visible for miles as a plume of grey dust. Alys started to look back at the rebels, but her smirk vanished as a massive flood of something sticky that had been hidden in and among the rocks cascaded down from the hole, coating her from head to toe.

Alys took a deep breath. She looked down at the goop covering her. "Is this *sap*?! You have ruined my hair. And my dress! Oh, I was thinking of going easy on you, but now you are going to *wish* you'd killed yourselves! You are going to *dream* of dying from starvation!"

She raised a hand, gathering energy to pull the tunnel down and pin the rebels. Instead, she felt her arcana flow into the sap coating her. Almost immediately, the sap coating her hands and feet bulged outwards, forcing her hands into tight fists and causing her beautiful slippers to explode into silver shrapnel; fragments were caught in the expanding sap, with the rest cascading to the ground around her. The eruption at her feet pushed her a couple of inches into the air, and Alys yelped and instinctively tried to cast a flight spell to escape. This time, the bulging sap flowed up her arms, locking them at the elbows in a bent position.

“What the hell is this?” Alys yelled.

“Your divine punishment, Witch of Abzu.” The voice came from behind her, and Alys turned to see a statuesque woman wearing black and gold armor.

“Templars,” Alys growled. “I might have known. I thought your Order had crawled back into the shadows after the drubbing Sylvaen gave you.”

“We retreated,” the Templar acknowledged. “We spent the next ten years gathering resources, pooling knowledge with other rebel groups, and laying low. We knew that when we struck, we needed to strike at all of you at once.”

“And your choice was to prank me?” Alys scoffed. She took the full power of her magic and directed it outwards. She would eradicate this goop and then take her time with the templars. If she hadn’t been so frustrated, she might have thought twice about it, but she was certain that whatever spell they could concoct couldn’t withstand her power.

She was wrong. Her energy flared through the sap coating her, and it exploded into life. It ran up her legs and down her arms, and she fell forward with a squawk of rage; moments later, a hardening spike of amber shot out from underneath her dress, tearing it at the stomach as it planted itself in the ground to keep her from hitting the ground. She looked down in horror as fragments of blue cloth scattered through the rapidly-hardening sap, her dress torn to shreds by the power of her own spell. She was now lying on her stomach, hardened amber coating her chest and back, totally exposed to the rebels and Templars surrounding her aside from the cloud of tiny blue fabric sitting still among the gold.

She forced her head up to glare at the Templar, as sap dripped from her forehead into her face. “When I get out of this, I’m going to drown you in your own blood,” she spat.

“I doubt it. You see, Alys, we studied your magic. All of you. You chose to replace pieces of your soul with a channel to the wind, stone, and sea. If we kill you, you will simply regrow in the depths, hatching from a geode fully healed. But you’ve never used your magic to transform living flesh. You can’t manipulate the living directly.” The templar stepped forward, running a glove along Alys’s hair mockingly. “This amber was grown

from a divine tree, carefully sculpted over years to feast on arcana. You used too much of your magic to feed it. You belong to it, now.

Alys narrowed her eyes at her captor. If magic couldn't save her, she had one trick up her sleeve – she had enhanced her body to a superhuman degree. She strained to bring her arms out, to grab this mocking woman and pull her into the sap to drown. But the sap was too strong. Instead of pulling out, her arms were pulled back, elbows pressing together in the small of her back. Her legs bent painfully across her back, until her feet were pressed into the back of her head, the globes of sap coating them blending with her sodden hair.

Despite herself, Alys let out a gasp of pain, and as she did the sap dripping on her face sprang to life. It surged down her throat and nostrils, coating them with a thin layer of amber. Her eyes widened, and more sap pressed into them, forcing them open. Within moments, her face was frozen in a rictus of pain, staring helpless at the Templar. She tried to force herself to be calm. They'd made a mistake. When she couldn't breathe, her essence would slip through the amber to be reborn. But... why wasn't she feeling darkness closing in. She could feel her panicking breaths stilling as the amber poured into her lungs, but the sensation of drowning never came. Instead, she only felt a terrible pressure, pushing on her body from inside and out.

"Oh, you didn't think we were fools, did you?" The Templar woman laughed. Her voice was distorted through the sap now pouring into Alys's ears, faint and echoing. "I did tell you it was divine amber. It will sustain you, fill your lungs and stomach and use your own mana to keep you alive. Perhaps, one day, your tainted soul will finally give up and die, but I think you will be in there forever."

Alys tried to reply, but the amber filling her throat prevented her from making even a sound. Worse, she could feel it pressing into her genitals, flowing up through her passages and applying the same terrible, crushing pressure to her nethers that she was feeling in her chest. There must be a way for her to break free. But even the minimal motions she had managed before were fading. The amber was growing harder by the second, cooling into a smooth egg that covered her from head to toe, a naked statue staring endlessly forward.

The Templar looked her prey up and down. The amber coating Alys ran from her outstretched mouth, curving gently up over her feet and hands and down across her breasts and belly. There was a smooth, clean hole around the Witch's mouth, and another at her crotch, filled with a thin layer of amber plunging deep inside her. "Most of the Witches will need to be kept in quiet, secret places," she said, making sure to speak loudly enough for Alys to hear her. "But this is a living prison, impossible to break, and you are a pathetic excuse for a Witch. We will keep you in our temple, an offering to the gods. Supplicants will make use of you, and although the amber will keep them from

truly touching your flesh, you will still feel it. A living trophy to our great deeds, for all the world to see and to scorn.

Alys desperately searched for a spell that could pull her out, teleport her away, cut off her own air and let her escape through death. But every time she reached for her power, it drained away before she could shape even the most basic cantrip. She stared helplessly at the Templar that had snared her so quickly and completely, and felt the humiliation wash over her. She was doomed.

Something in her eyes must have registered, because the Templar leaned over. “Yes,” she said. “Don’t worry. You’ll have plenty of visitors, and I’ll be sure to let you know how the lands we free from your rule celebrate, and how quickly they forget you.”

She stood, turning away. “Box it up and take it away,” she said to her soldiers. “The next thing the Witch sees will be her new, and permanent, home.”

Alys tried to scream as the soldiers lifted her and placed her in a straw-lined box. The last thing that she saw was the smiling faces of the soldiers, as she faintly heard them discussing what order they would take her in, and then the top of the box closed in and she was sealed in darkness and silence.