

A Silent Voice Calls

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From set *Strixhaven: School of Mages*

Twenty-three students of Silverquill, the College of Eloquence, stood at attention along the outer edge of the Rose Stage, while six of them sat on their heels, doubled over in pain, struggling to muffle their heartbroken cries. Upright or not, they had each positioned themselves in a circle and watched together as the one considered the best of them—Killian Lu—readied a curse meant to tear Professor Razineth apart.



Killian, Ink Duelist | Art by: Ryan Pancoast

This morning's lesson involved an impromptu duel concerning the Seven Phonetic Attitudes: *tone*, *rhythm*, *pitch*, *placement*, *resonance*, *acoustics*, and *volume*. Killian, like his classmates, had assumed Razineth, the renowned proctor of the Intention & Subtext II course, was using this duel as a simple learning exercise. To their surprise, however, Razineth was unrelenting and vicious with his attacks. The sallow-faced kor inkmaster, with his elusive shadow-ink arm, easily overcame their protective heart charms and tore into their young spirits like a hot knife through butter.

Volume had been assigned to Killian. It was indeed the hardest of the attitudes to master, let alone control, and he knew the attack to come would take all of his energy, both to produce and maintain. Given his stellar reputation, the son of the great Dean Embrose Lu, this was, *of course*, a calculated assignment; one surely made in cahoots with his father, who was, *of course*, watching from a distance—always looking for any area of improvement.

Killian bent his knees and dug his heels into the ground. Slowly and steadily, he began to fill his lungs. Then, as if rehearsed in a mystical dance, he swept his arms through the air, summoning thick, inky ropes that swirled about him and fed themselves into three massive spheres high above the stage.

"Wow," said Razineth sarcastically. "Someone may have actually taken their summer meditations seriously." His voice was like a hiss, strident and snakelike, and his words were broadcast through his mercurial inkling that slithered above the stage.

Killian thought of his own inkling, Doco, for a moment and lamented his absence from the fight. Embrose thought the creature a distraction and urged Killian to never rely on others to fight his battles for him. *Doco wouldn't be fighting the duel; he would simply be helping me here and there.* Killian felt his teeth grinding together with frustration.

At the start of the class, Razineth professed that he would hinder himself to level the dueling field, using only voiceless consonants in the battle to show that great power can lie in the smallest things. With him, the simple sibilance of an *s* transformed his ink magic into sharpened daggers, and the pop of a *p* expelled earth-shaking blasts of cannon fire.

"Well?" said the professor, his face hard and unimpressed by Killian's display. "Power lies in the breath, boy. *Breathe.*"

Killian halted his movements at the command. The massive spheres of ink he had conjured were now frozen in time and hung in the air like dangling boulders.

"I'd happily oblige you, professor," whispered Killian, *"but the stench of your breath has handily poisoned the air!"*

Unbeknownst to Razineth, a line of ink, thinner than the width of a spider's web, had been snaking upward from the ground like a tall vine behind him, and at Killian's sharp insult it grasped hold of the professor, enwrapping his neck, his existing arm, and both legs. Four rapid-fire *s*'s between Razineth's teeth cleanly severed the ink shackles, but in the time it took for him to escape, Killian had already sent one of his onyx spheres hurtling down upon him. Moments before it made contact, Killian screamed into it:

"Hardly the time to applaud your efforts, when our duel has just begun!"

At the phrase, the sphere burst open, and where its pieces landed immediately sprang ink-made trolls wielding hammers and axes. In response, an endless *shh* exploded from the professor's mouth, summoning a tidal wave of ink which rushed out of his shadow-ink arm and covered him in a protective orb of blackness. Feverishly, the trolls hacked at the shield, but as they did, they were instantly absorbed and made it grow larger.

Killian quickly sent another ink boulder to the ground, screaming into it even louder than before. *"Shh?! That soothing sound of so much rushing water would ring better with you drowning in it!"* At his curse, the boulder morphed into a black column the size of a tower and solid as stone. The obsidian obelisk smashed down upon Razineth's shield like a smith's hammer to shapeless, hot metal, sending deep fissures down every side. Razineth responded with an alacritous flurry of *t*'s that, upon leaving his mouth, transformed into a thousand black arrows that decimated the column entirely. The display left Killian speechless. Seeing an opening, Razineth turned the arrows upon him.

"Decrepit parasite!" Killian imprecated, allowing his survival to momentarily trump witty repartee. *"Crooked serpent!"* At once every fragment of the crumbling column transformed into ravens that intercepted every arrow meant for his heart. Then, through gnashing teeth, Killian summoned all the volume and vitriol he could and spewed it into his final orb.

“WASTE OF MUSCLE! WASTE OF SINEW! SHARD-BORN UNLOVABLE BEAST! DECAYED AND WITHERED PEON! \linebreak MULLING VARLET TO SAY THE LEAST!”

The sky above them grew dark as the boulder flattened into a swirling disk that stretched on for what seemed like miles. A point suddenly appeared at its center, the start of a wild cyclone, and in less than a blink, it touched down, catching the professor in its torrent. Killian’s throat burned and he could taste blood, but he could not let up:

“CAUSTIC CARRION, RANCOROUS RETCH, \linebreak GROSS AND GLEEKING GASBAG! \linebreak BLIGHT AFFLICTED, WOE INFECTED \linebreak SMOLDERED, EMACIATED SLAG!”

Venom fortified his final push to win the day, and through the swirling maelstrom Killian spied Razineth’s silhouette battling his fit of power. He was winning! His eyes widened with expectation. He took in the six faces of the professor’s previous victims, expecting to see happy retribution in their eyes, but he found only sorrow—pity for another unfortunate soul soon to join them in their misery. And *he* would be the cause.

That is when Killian felt it—the searing pain of the blow that would end this violent match. While he was distracted, a soft *t* had leapt from Razineth’s tongue. He looked down to his chest, and there he saw the head of the dripping, black arrow that had run him through. He fell to his knees, struggling to pull it out before the ink seeped inside.

He looked out to his classmates one last time and caught the bloodshot gaze of Fannessa Fjyorne. Her attitude of pitch had been trampled by Razineth’s conjured herd of wild ink horses. They were not friends and hardly acquaintances; she was a new student, and they had barely exchanged even a nod of greeting since the start of the semester. Nevertheless, there was a gravity she possessed that drew his eyes to hers. She gave him an empathetic smile of solidarity. Killian was thankful for that.

In the next moment, the professor’s ink took hold. Killian was at once overcome with utter despair and sadness. The crushing yet familiar sound of his father’s hard-soled boots retreating from him echoed painfully in his imagination; he could even feel the weight of so many volumes of battle poetry his father would place in his arms. A long afternoon of study was indeed ahead. As tears fell from his eyes, he doubled over, and like the six who fell before, succumbed to a cruel defeat.

It took the better part of the afternoon for Killian to return to himself. He was unceasingly plagued by bouts of depression and terrible hallucinations, until the professor’s ink-tentacled curse had been peeled away from his spine and ribcage. Had he been struck by a second arrow, Killian would have surely torn his own flesh apart.

The final hallucination brought him back to the Loquacious Lyceum, the intense training ground hidden within the many corridors of the Biblioplex. The course was mandatory but meant only for the upperclassmen of Silverquill. Killian, at his father’s suggestion, had taken the test to enter and, as expected, passed with flying colors. The Lyceum housed an enchanted, ever-growing forest that overtook and suffocated anyone trapped beneath its leaves. To curse the flora without ceasing was the only way to escape certain death. This was a challenge that had been met by hundreds of inkmasters for decades, including Embrose, and Killian had survived it. In this curse-ridden memory, however, the plants cried out horribly, like wounded soldiers pleading for their lives as he was forced to level them without mercy. His heart ached at the sight of so much destruction, and he hated himself for destroying so many beautiful things.

Killian opened his eyes and found himself staring up at a kind-faced quillmancer nurse with gold light rippling around her. He was in the infirmary, resting on a soft cot. Sunlight poured in from the high stone windows that made the entire room shine with the nurse’s same golden hue—a brilliance

refracted in Dean Shaile's owlin-white wings. She was standing at the entrance to the room, watching as the nurse extracted another strand of Razineth's ink out of Killian's bare chest.

"Battle poetry," Dean Shaile began. "Such ancient magic only finds its way to the most diligent of Silverquill. Your father would be let's say mildly satisfied?"

Killian cleared his throat several times, feeling the weight of the duel still heavy upon it.

"Mages like you, son of the great Embrose Lu," the dean went on with an almost cynical smile, "can venture into unimaginable depths of potential—both the light and the dark. I caution you, though. You must learn to embrace the light every now and again. Better for the soul."

"White magic is not effective in battle, I'm afraid," Killian replied, just before the nurse removed a final strand of reawakened grief from his heart.

"On the contrary," replied Shaile. "Battle is when it is *most* effective. It can win the war."

Killian stared into the dean's kind eyes, expecting more. The advice she provided was never short-winded; it was always her goal to impart lasting wisdom through critical thinking. She and his father differed in that way, which fueled their contentious relationship. In the Dean of Shadow's purview, wisdom was only attained through negative reinforcement. How could they ever agree?

"Like a hole in a tapestry," she went on, "light can pierce even the most stubborn bit of darkness. But try as it might, though it can dim it at times, darkness can never pierce the light."

Killian reflected on her words for a moment, but his ponderings were interrupted by a pain in his hand. He winced, scratching at his palm.

"No rest for the wary, I suppose," Shaile said with a smile, familiar with this reaction from other Silverquill students.

Killian immediately hopped to his feet, grabbed his robes, and marched toward the door. Before exiting, Shaile stopped him with a soft hand to his shoulder.

"The cosmos is vast," she said with a touch of maternal spirit, "and Eloquentes are not the only ones who shape it. Don't spend all your magic in one place."

Killian headed straight for the docks—the fastest route to the Biblioplex, and his father would be by moat. The meeting place had been written on his palm in patriscrit, or parental ink, which Eloquent teachers and parents alike used to remind children of upcoming appointments or items they often forgot. Not to mention, it itched like hell until whatever written was said aloud.

"Semantics," Killian said. The patriscrit faded.

He arrived at Dock XVII just in time to see the Semantics-bound boat pushing itself away. Immediately, he broke into a sprint. Then, hitting the edge of the dock, he leapt from one foot.

"Like sturdy, somber, steppingstones, the waters 'neath my feet do hold."

Killian spoke the spell aloud as he soared through the air, and the waters responded in kind—rippling with white energy that formed several solid places for each airborne foot to land. Step, step, step. And with a final leap, he touched down on the boat's deck.

Killian preferred seclusion, but to his disappointment, he would not take this ride alone. Seated at the opposite end of the boat was another Silverquill student who turned at the thud of his feet and pulled back her hood.

"So *that's* how the great Killian Lu is never late for anything," Fannessa jabbed with a smile. "Light magic is good for something, I guess."

It was something his father would say.

Killian sighed as he took a seat across from her. Fannessa settled back, her two long dark braids swinging over her shoulders, and appraised him with lavender-tinted eyes that stood out against her mahogany skin. He gathered that she was the type who could effortlessly go from bubbly and animated to calculating and mysterious in a flash.

“So that Razineth, huh?” she began. “He really takes that course seriously, doesn’t he?”

“It is a serious course,” Killian replied plainly.

“True. But an arrow to the heart is pretty ruthless.”

“It was a successful duel.”

“Successful?”

“I learned a new weakness. I hesitated. It won’t happen again.”

Fannessa smirked, fascinated by his answer.

“Mercy is for fools,” she declared. He nodded on reflex. His father had said the same many times. As much as he tried to, though, it was a motto Killian could never truly get behind.

“Either way, you were really incredible today. Such dark, raw power. You could have killed a lesser mage.” She smiled. “Wouldn’t *that* have been a sight to see.”

“I wasn’t trying to *kill* him,” Killian said quickly. “I don’t want to kill I was just trying to win.”

Fannessa slid to the edge of her seat and leaned in even closer, taking in his new nervous energy. She watched as he pulled at the skin of his neck, massaging his throat.

“Did you hurt yourself?”

“No,” Killian said sharply. “I’m I’ll be fine.”

Her eyebrows raised as if some fantastic idea was forming. “You know, there’s an elixir a little birdie told me about that can heal a sore throat in minutes. I might know a girl who knows a guy at Bow’s End that can whip one up no problem.”

“Bow’s End is for slack-wits and procrastinators,” said Killian. “There are rules by which a Lu must comport himself.”

“So I’ve heard,” she almost sang with a devious grin. “Might have to break one. Or head to the infirmary again. Dean Lu wouldn’t like that at all.”

“I can’t.”

“Right.” She sat back, making no effort to mask her disapproval. “Strixhaven is, after all, an institute of learning. Nothing more.” She stood to her feet. “No rest for the wary, I suppose.”

The latter phrase caught Killian off guard. It was the one Dean Shaile had spoken to him just before he left the infirmary.

The boat suddenly butted against the Semantics Dock. With a graceful backwards leap, Fannessa slipped onto another boat passing by—one heading in the direction of Bow’s End.

“You should step out in the sun once in a while, Killian Lu,” she said, flipping her braids behind her shoulders. “We’re not meant to grow in the shadows.”

Killian sat for a moment as her boat disappeared and considered her words, knowing exactly to whose shadow she was referring. He felt a nervous heat rising on his skin as his mind turned over. Another shake from the boat, annoyed that he had yet to disembark, saved him from his spiraling thoughts.

He sprinted up the stone stairway leading into the Biblioplex and hurried across the open concourse. Weaving effortlessly through throngs of students engaged in jovial, non-academic conversation, he made his way to a high stone archway inscribed with the words *Hall of Semantics*.

"Killian Lu!" came a male voice suddenly. From the darkness of the archway appeared the lumbering body of Quintorius, a student of Lorehold.

"Hello, Quint," said Killian.

"All of Silverquill is talking about you and your duel today," Quintorius replied with intensely bright eyes. "Lorehold, too." He chuckled softly. "Well, just me. Volume is some very serious stuff. By the sound of it, you are a natural."

"You do love your research," said Killian, recalling how often he saw him to-and-fro through the stacks last summer. He practically lived in the library.

Maneuvering around the immense heap of books in his arms, Quintorius retrieved a thin tome with his elephantine trunk and offered it to Killian.

"Dobarius Egolt, the Mute Quillancer," Killian read aloud. "A mute?"

"He cast all of his spells using an ancient form of sign language when volume took his voice," Quintorius exclaimed. "He was incredible. In fact, he charmed an entire army to lay down their arms and shake hands in truce. He understood that death and destruction are notes any instrument can play." He tapped his trunk on the book. "The symphony of creation is far more dramatic."

He paused for a moment, as if surprised by his own words.

"How very *Silverquill* of me to say," Quint finished with another chuckle.

Killian felt another sting in his palm.

"I have to go," said Killian, pushing past him. "My meditations are about to begin."

The Hall of Semantics was forever cast in moonlight and steeped in a heavy fog. A candle shone through the milky haze, beckoning Killian forth, and he followed the light with quickened steps.

Embrose stood in the shadow of a high book stack, tall and menacing, his black robes flapping in a stiff wind that set the fog to churning. His skin was gray in the silver moonbeams, but the whites of his eyes pierced the murky air like stars. A short distance from him was a wooden table, and upon it, the candle that had led Killian there. The flame illuminated the pages of a thick bound book.

"You left yourself vulnerable, didn't you?" asked Embrose in a voice so deep it caused the ground to quake.

"I thought I had caught all of the professor's arrows, father," Killian replied, already knowing that no answer he gave would prevent the coming lecture.

"You thought wrong, didn't you?"

"Perhaps if Doco was allowed to fight at my side again—he always helps me in times of trouble."

"This is not a damn game of Mage Tower, Killian. Reliance on your inkling makes you dependent, weak, and *unfocused*." He stepped forward, eyes flashing. "Eloquents, the supreme arbiters of the cosmos and

enforcers of all magical contracts, are resolute and unwavering in their word. Eloquent, the prized role which you mean to attain after your time here, do not benefit—”

“From distraction. I know,” Killian said with a huff.

He turned his eyes to the floor to escape the disapproval radiating from his father’s hard face.

“Your breath was shallow today; your shoulders were raised to your ears; you were constantly sticking your neck out like some vastland daemogoth. You’re going to get yourself hurt or worse conjuring in such a way!”

“Apologies, father,” Killian spoke, doing all he could to hide the scratching in his voice. “I was not expecting to duel so soon. And with a teacher no less.”

“You should always expect the unexpected,” Embrose interjected fiercely.

“Light magic would be unexpected,” Killian spoke softly. “Perhaps *creating* something would be better than destroying it.”

“Pretty words of quillmancers and lumimancers will not save you from certain death!” Embrose roared. “Oriq hearts do not bend in battle; mage hunter souls are never mended. They must be broken!” Reams of ink exploded out of him like black lava and white fire from a volcano. “You are in line to be one of the greatest inkmasters in history. Because you are such, many enemies will try to steal away that greatness. You must never give them an opportunity!”

“*I got it*,” Killian whispered sharply to the floor.

“What did you say?”

Killian quickly straightened and lifted his head. “I said, ‘I understand, father.’”

In the tangible quiet to follow, Killian felt the muscles at the turn of the dean’s jaw flex several times—a surreptitious grinding of teeth behind a thin-lipped grimace. He felt his father’s piercing eyes studying him. Hoping to cut the tension, Killian shuffled to the table where he took a seat in front of the book, purposefully opened to a chapter entitled, “Threnody and Requiem: Lost Battle Poetry.”

“Your words must be like serrated daggers, cutting enough to peel flesh from bone. Eviscerate the prey you have come to hunt and feast upon it. That is the only way to defeat your enemies. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Dean Embrose.”

Embrose paused a moment before turning to leave, stirred by the stark formality in Killian’s words.

“This is for your own good, son. You will learn that one day.”



Crushing Disappointment | Art by: Andrey Kuzinskiy

Killian spent the rest of the afternoon reciting and memorizing the battle poems, which only continued to weaken his voice, both physically and emotionally. At his request, goblets of water appeared, which he drank feverishly. They had done little to nothing to aid his recovery but did all to activate his small bladder. Speaking was now a nearly impossible chore, and the pain radiating through his throat was becoming unbearable. *White magic could help me*, he thought. But admitting himself to the infirmary a second time would be nothing less than disgraceful, and he was forbidden to study it himself any further than the most basic of conjurings.

He laid his forehead on the table and stared helplessly at the floor. There, between his shining black boots, inched the book Quintorius had given him, moving completely on its own. When it finally came to a halt, a mass of black ink dribbled out of it, then formed itself into an inky bobble-headed creature—Doco, Killian's inkling.

Doco's onyx skin swam with the text of the book he had inhabited. He gave Killian an empathetic simper, hoping to lift his spirits with something other than battle poetry to read. Killian could not smile back. In fact, staring down at the book, he was suddenly filled with great trepidation. His voice was going, and he was a Silverquill. How could he ever perform without it?

His worrisome thoughts shifted to Fannessa. Perhaps he should take her up on her offer. What other choice did he have?

Resolved, he collected the book and Doco, slipped them into his robes, and exited the room.

In the shadow of the last Dawnbow stone, Killian watched from a distance as three Witherbloom students entered Bow's End Tavern. Heavy wooden doors swung open for them on their own, and the domed structure holding them exhaled with live, sweeping Prismari music. Before disappearing beyond the threshold, the third Witherbloom student looked back and noticed him.

Her green skin, shining gold eyes, and hair of damp leaves gave her away immediately. It was his friend Dina, also a second-year. The two of them had gone through quite the ordeal last semester in Detention Bog, but sadly, they had exchanged few words since.

“Are you waiting for someone, Killy?” Dina asked, still at a distance.

Killian cringed at the pet name, which sounded more morbid than cute. *Killy*. He hesitated to speak, feeling the scratch already creeping up his throat. He nodded instead.

“Do you think they may be inside?” she asked.

Killian looked around another time. Seeing no sign of Fannessa, he decided to approach.

“I’d love to catch up, but I can’t dither,” said Dina, holding the door for him. “I have a date. Our third. Something new I’m trying—making friends. Vickus is his name. He’s a fourth-year, and he’s almost nice.”

“Almost?” asked Killian.

“Nice to me, but he can be a bit of a brute. I made some tea for him,” she went on, presenting a green canister secured by a vine over her shoulder. “You can try it if you’d like. It’s quite strong. Best not to ask what’s in it. Unless you like the taste of vineclinger teeth.”

“That’s what’s in it?” asked Killian.

“Best not to ask. In we go.” Taking his hand herself, they entered.

Bow’s End was a large, circular building with a high domed ceiling. Windows allowed light to shine in around the perimeter, illuminating passageways to other halls, but the area within the circle was dimly lit, solely illuminated by floating candles that changed color with the notes of the music. The main bar was in the very center, and floating above it was the stage where the Prismari band played. Spread out around them were round tables and stools occupied by students drinking from frothing goblets and eating seasoned meats.

It took only a moment for Killian to spot Fannessa. She was seated by herself at the end of one long table like a great queen at a feast.

“I see who I’m looking for, Killy,” said Dina. “Wouldn’t mind if I left you, would you?”

“No—” Killian began to reply, but she had already started walking away from him.

Killian turned his eyes back to Fannessa and gave a soft smile. He quickly moved to her.

“Well, well, look who decided to make an appearance,” exclaimed Fannessa, “Killian Lu, the rule breaker and with a *girlfriend* no less?”

“Oh no! Dina is not she is not,” Killian stumbled. The pain in his throat, and Fannessa’s knowing grin, cut off any further explanation. He took a seat across from her, unamused.

“So did you hear?” Fannessa started again. “Razineth is planning to have duels with us once a week.”

“*Really*?” Killian asked hoarsely.

“Yep. So you’ll have to prove yourself again and again and again.”

Killian inhaled deeply, frustrated at the prospect, knowing that his magic would have to grow more violent.

“I guess that’s what it takes to be an Eloquent, huh?” she went on. “A life of duty. No freedom. Plus, you being Dean Embrose’s only son.”

"I'd like to take you up on that drink, if I may," Killian interrupted.

Fannessa smiled, amused by his desperation. "Say no more, *Killy*. Say no more."

Killian eyed her as she stood from the table and headed toward the bar. Again, she had said something he had heard in private, but a cool smile from her dismissed the thought. Maybe it was just a coincidence.

Escaping her gaze, he pulled Quintorius's book from inside his robes. Doco materialized from the pages and peeked out. The inkling gave a smile and a wink, happy to see Killian in a slightly better mood. Then, using its inky paws, it turned to a page in the book full of pictures—drawings of hands and fingers fixed in many different shapes and positions. Words of affirmation were written beneath each depiction: *kind-hearted*, *virtuous*, *love*, and many more. Killian made the sign for "light" under the table and closed his eyes. *Create something*, he thought to himself as he focused his intention. It took only moments until he saw the blackness behind his eyelids glow orange and felt the heat of the candles on the table intensify. It worked.

"Haven't seen you in here before, Lu," came a soupy male voice from over his shoulder.

Killian didn't have to look back to know it was a Witherbloom gloating at him. They always carried the scent of the Bog. This student, however, had spattered himself with something floral to mask it; hoping to impress someone perhaps. He sat up, slipping the book back into his robes.

"Dina tells me you two are close," said the Witherbloom, his tone suspicious. "She tells me you spend time together?"

"Spent," Killian replied. "In the Bog. I just helped her with a project."

He looked over to Fannessa and saw her watching the interaction, eager to see what would unfold.

"A project." The Witherbloom's tone turned threatening, his brutal, jealous nature revealing itself. "*On-going*?"

"Vickus," Killian heard Dina say from a short distance away.

Killian stood and turned around completely. The fourth-year was tall and wide-shouldered. Green, vine-like hair gripped his pale face, and his emerald eyes flashed in Killian's inky black ones. In his hand he held a thorny pest that had begun to wriggle.

"No," Killian said, giving one last attempt to assuage him. "She is just a friend."

Vickus smirked, flashing his vampire teeth, and the veins of his costume suddenly began to glow with green light.

"Two in one day, Killy," said Fannessa taking a seat. She then placed a goblet of bubbling purple liquid on the table and slid it over to him. He took it. "Someone's popular."

"Let's not do this," said Killian. "Please."

"No," said Vickus. "Let's."

The pest gave a screech as its life force left and entered his host. Green magic grew out of the fourth-year's back like a writhing tree, its leaves bending to form an enormous, ethereal bust of the deceased pest.

Ever prepared for magical duels to erupt, Bow's End transformed itself into an arena with tables and chairs floating to fixed positions around the circumference of the space; the students remained seated upon them, including Dina and Fannessa. The bar and the stage rose as well, leaving an open pathway for curses to flow between the duelers.

Killian knew word would travel quickly about this duel. It would be best to be heralded as the winner, especially in the ears of the Silverquill and his father. So, he quickly drank the contents of the goblet down, praying it would provide relief, and instantly, it did.

The warmth of the honey-flavored liquid coating his throat brought with it intoxicating, renewed energy. He gasped with surprise, feeling himself again. *No* better than himself—better than he had ever felt, as the drink swam over him and fueled his first attack.

“Oh, brutish Bog boy, now you say you’re green with envy, when all this time I thought you were green from inhaling your own stench every day.” As the words left his mouth, black currents of magic poured out of his back, transforming into the long, skeletal legs and thorax of a spider. The legs lifted him high above Vickus, who stared up at him with disdain. He heard delight and surprise from the crowd of students above them.

“Like a withering flower, you’ll wither, Witherbloom,” cursed Killian. Then, from his massive thorax, he spewed thick strings of ink that formed webbed bars around his opponent. Vickus dodged each attack deftly and fired thorny spell-orbs back at him. Killian avoided his assaults and returned curse after inky curse of his own.

Killian was shocked at the rawness of his own power—the danger in it. Every attack felt more destructive than the last, and each one was delivered without a shred of remorse. It was not long before the entire area was covered in the thick black webs born of his scourge.

Now Vickus was panting with exhaustion. The pest’s energy was nearly spent. In one final effort to defeat Killian, the young Witherbloom summoned a whipping bevy of tree roots from the ground that sought to overtake him. The move left him exposed for a moment, and seeing his opening (just as Razineth had done in class), Killian fired a sharp *t* from his tongue. The black ink arrow shot across the tavern and tore into Vickus’s chest. Wasting no time, Killian then wrapped Vickus in his webs, leaving him helpless as a fly.

“Jealous infinitesimal wart, putrid sack of melancholy,” Killian whispered, drawing near to him. *“Your precious Dina pities you. She is one creature you will never have, no matter how hard you try to cover your stink!”*

As he spoke, every ounce of ink stretching across the room, including the ink arrow, entered Vickus’s body. Killian watched as his opponent’s eyes faded from gold to black.

“Killy!” shouted Dina, her voice frightened.

He looked up at her, staring directly into a terrified face that pleaded with him to go no further. His gaze then shifted to Fannessa, who looked the opposite, beholding the battle with devilish delight.

“Make your father proud, Killian Lu!” Fannessa cheered, urging him to deal the final blow.

Killian turned back to Vickus, whose black eyes were now wide with terror, his soul breaking apart. His victim had begun to descend, and he was reminded of just how horrible it felt to be undone—to suffer alone in the dark.

I don’t want this, Killian thought, his conscience rebelling. *I don’t want to hurt you.*

Killian opened his mouth to call the curses back, but to his dismay, no sound escaped. He tried harder but felt mercy catch in his throat, as if something inside of him—something dark and malevolent, awakened by the concoction Fannessa had given him—was halting his efforts. He shot a second glance up to Fannessa and found her staring daggers at him, frustrated that he had not dealt the final blow. This was indeed her doing.

The time to save Vickus was running short. With no voice and no other alternative, Killian again retrieved the tale of the Mute from his robes and opened its pages. Doco, of the same mind and eagerly awaiting his opportunity to help, sprang into action, transforming himself into two ink-laden hands which signed a simple phrase.

You—are—enough.

From their first interaction, Killian saw a man intensely fueled by jealousy and a deep fear of being overlooked. Seeing Killian hand in hand with Dina had ignited both emotions. What would save him, what Killian could imbue in him, was confidence. That is what he could create and what would last.

Killian quickly repeated the phrase with his own hands, focusing his intention. At once, white light rippled out of him, moving the spider legs to retreat into his body. Then, just as the nurse had done to save him, he called the writhing ink spells out. But more than that, he infused them with pure white magic, enriched them with his good intention, and sent them back into the Witherbloom's heart. Vickus's eyes began to shine like two glowing suns, and his body rippled with healing gold light. His fear had been replaced by joy. Killian even caught a smile pulling at the young man's lips, before he laid his head down to rest. With that, the duel was over.

Applause rained down from above and music began to play again as the tavern transformed back into its previous state. Killian did not wait around for it to settle but bounded directly to the bathroom.

Once inside, he ran to the sink, turned on the faucet and began to scoop handfuls of water into his mouth. His throat felt like it was on fire, and each gulp only seemed to make the blaze grow.

"So what happened back there?" asked Fannessa slowly, her voice almost sinister, as she entered the room after him. She locked the door behind her. "You could have ended him."

"*Not . . . right*," Killian huffed, sticking his mouth back under the faucet.

"'Eviscerate the prey you had come to hunt and feast upon it.' Isn't that what your father told you to do?"

Killian shot her a fierce look. This was the third time she had quoted phrases said to him in private. *Had she been following?*

"Yes, I've been following you," she admitted. "We've been watching you for a very, very long time."

Killian began to back away from her, now confused and growing frightened.

"*What—was in—that drink?*" he demanded.

"Nothing in particular—a bit of ale, herbs, some Oriq magic to suppress all that guilt you carry."

Fannessa held out both of her hands and slowly walked toward him. A bright spark popped into the space above her hands that grew into a spinning ball of purple fire. The ball continued to expand and twist, eventually taking the shape of a glowing black helmet. Killian stiffened at the sight of it, recognizing the Oriq mask. Fannessa too became engulfed in purple flames that burned her Silverquill robes away, revealing jagged, gray Oriq armor underneath. The enemy had come to him, and when he was most vulnerable.

"An inkmaster with a conscience does not an Eloquent make," said Fannessa with a smile.

The helmet left her hands and floated over to Killian.

"Our leader sees great promise in you," she went on, "but the road to your true destiny is full of terrors no one at Strixhaven could ever prepare you for. Look at yourself now—your voice sacrificed for them, for Razineth, for your father's expectations. All that big talk and bravado for what?" She circled him as she spoke. "The power you called upon while dueling that pathetic Witherbloom *without* the countless

hours of training, *without* fear, *without* empathy, is what you'll need to become who you are meant to be."

"And that is?" asked Killian, eyes fixed on the mask.

"Free."



Tempted by the Oriq | Art by: Billy Christian

The mask lowered itself to Killian's hands. Slowly, he took it. A tense moment passed between them. It seemed the drink she'd given him had done a great deal more than empower him—it had made him unnaturally susceptible to her suggestions. Pressure building in his head made him feel as if his skull might explode. He wanted it all to end—the regret, the disappointments, the expectations—and in the silence, he entertained the idea of disappearing into the purple Oriq fire.

"Put the mask on, Killian Lu." She now stood at his back. A black helmet of her own manifested on her head, the final step in her transformation. "Join us. Together, we will destroy every obstacle in our way."

In that moment, Doco emerged, still swimming with the Mute's spells. The inkling hovered between Killian and the helmet and stared into the pained eyes of a friend desperately searching for an answer. With a nod of knowing, Doco melted into a wisp of ink and wrote out a simple message in the air in front of him.

We don't destroy. We create.

Killian inhaled deeply, feeling a weight fall from his shoulders—a sudden freedom that came with finally accepting who he really wanted to be. He slowly shook his head, declining the Oriq's offer. The mask immediately evaporated from Killian's hands.

"Pathetic little imp," cursed Fannessa. The sound of her ink magic sloshing above him swilled in his ears as it began to embody her words. Each blob gave a sharp hiss as they formed into jagged stalactites above him. "You're not worthy of the Oriq. You are a lowly, insufferable fool. And you'll die like one."

Suddenly, Killian heard screams and spell blasts echoing from outside. Another battle was raging beyond the door, but this one was far larger than the first.

“You didn’t think I’d come alone, did you?” Fannessa gloated. She stretched out her hand, her entire body swirling with ink and burning with purple fire. “Our mage hunters will wipe them all out including your little girlfriend.”

Doco morphed again into three hand symbols, and without turning around, Killian mimicked them with his own. *Light—bring—light*. At once the room rippled with blinding white magic. A swirling ball of gold light surrounded him, repelling the sharpened spears Fannessa launched in his direction. Everything the light touched seemed to shine like the sun. And like the sun, he rose high into the air.



Beaming Defiance | Art by: Manuel Castañón

Fannessa hurled her curses at him, but none could penetrate the light. Killian repeated the same gestures as he did to create the shield, and the ball of light grew until it finally overtook her, holding her fast. Drawing close, staring into her wild, frightened eyes, Killian tapped his tongue to the back of his teeth and released a soft *t*. An arrow, golden and shimmering, imbued with virtuous intention, was conjured. It glided softly through the air and sank into her.

I speak mercy into you.

She let out an otherworldly cry before the fires raging in her eyes receded into quiet pools of gold. Then, suddenly, the door to the room exploded. Like a stone catapulted, an armored creature with arthropodal limbs folded in on itself rocketed past Killian and across the room. As it soared over Fannessa, its folds opened, and several chittering legs collected her. Charging onward, it crashed through the wall and escaped into the sky.

Killian and Doco hurried after them, soaring through the massive hole left in the structure. They stopped just beyond it and stared up at the broken clouds the enemy had left in their wake. Fannessa and the mage hunter were gone. But a battle was still raging as two more mage hunters were on the attack. Teeth bared, the hideous creatures whipped their spear-like tails with incredible precision, slashing into the bodies of the students that engaged them. Any attack sent the monsters’ way was

dodged, as if they had expected the blow to come. The citizens of Strixhaven were quickly losing this battle.

Fortunately, Killian had studied these creatures; his father had made sure of it. The glowing spines stretching from their armored skulls were key to their detection of magic and enabled them to easily avoid attacks.

Doco sprang into action, stretching himself into twenty black blobs that revolved around Killian in a circle. Each one molded itself into the shape of a hand signal from the book as they passed in front of him, and Killian mimicked the symbol with his own hands. Faster and faster, the shapes passed into his view, and faster and faster, he copied them, until Doco was a spinning coil of black ink and the sign became fluent.

I speak peace into you now so light may drive the darkness out.

Just then, the intense glow of the mage hunter spines dimmed and was replaced with rippling whiteness. Blinded, the mage hunters wildly swiped the air with their talons, desperate to defend themselves from their invisible foes. Killian's spells flowed like water down their backs and along their tails, where it consumed their termini, immobilizing them.

"Killian Lu! He's got them!" Vickus shouted, now at full strength, thrashing at the beasts with thorn-laced branches. He locked eyes with Killian, and the two shared a moment of warrior's respect—a newfound camaraderie. "Attack with everything you got!"

The wounded mages followed the order, forming a massive circle around the shuddering beasts, throwing every spell they had in their artillery. The fifty students blasted a barrage of diverse magic from every college of Strixhaven into the monsters, penetrating their armor, splitting it open. The final attack came from Dina, who hurled an enormous ball of pulsing beryl magic at the horrid creatures and shattered them into pieces. With the monsters' demise assured, all mage eyes turned heavenward to Killian, in awe of what he had done. They had won, and he had made it so.

Killian settled against a wall a short time later, completely drained from the battle. He had given everything he had against Fannessa and the mage hunters, including his voice, which he still feared would never return.

"Although we are no longer in the bar," came Dina's voice from the other side of the wall, "you look like someone who needs a drink, Killy."

She slid around the corner in her typical carefree fashion, as if the battle had never happened. Her face was now glowing with enchanting green light that refracted the fluorescence of liquid she was pouring into a small wooden bowl. The odor wafting from the suspicious concoction was enough to make Killian's stomach turn over which it nearly did. But he didn't object. He prayed silently and prepared for the treatment she had to offer.

"One of the students I tutor put it in his head that my teas were *deadly*," said Dina, bringing a finger to Killian's chin and tipping his head back. "I disagree. My blends are ripe with herbs designed for healing ailments like your voice. This batch is one of my favorites and has only a *few* side effects. In we go."

"I wouldn't do that," called Vickus suddenly. His voice was lighter now, laced with a grin. "Herbs from the bog can make human organs melt sometimes. Better see a nurse." Dina eyed him over her shoulder as he approached them. "Oh, *and* it was a gift for me. Thank you, Dina. Need some help?"

Vickus offered Killian his hand, and Killian took it.

"The rumors are true," he began when Killian was on his feet. "You Silverquill are a vicious bunch. You know, before the mage hunters attacked, that girl you were with made it known to all of us that Strixhaven would burn and that all of us would perish at the hands of the Oriq. She said some truly evil stuff. Did she get away?"

The all-too-familiar sting of failure shot through Killian's chest. In spite of this awakening and acceptance of the incredible power that lived within him, he had let the enemy escape. His father may have been right. Light magic had not been enough to bring the enemy to justice.

"Good," said Vickus.

Killian eyed him, confused and taken aback.

"You *changed* her," Dina chimed.

Vickus, still holding Killian's hand, placed the other around it warmly. "If what she felt was anywhere near what you made me feel," Vickus went on, "she will never be the same. And that change will spread beyond her to the other Oriq, shifting their hearts, turning them from their terrible ways. You've created a way to bring them to the light. Not even the Dean of Shadow could deny that."

Killian smiled, nearly blushing from their commendation. Having heard the exchange, Doco emerged and perched himself on Killian's shoulder. The bubbling inkling gave his companion a warm nudge of congratulations, encouraging him to heed what they had said and believe them. The light he had denied for so long had done more than his black magic could ever do—it *created* change.

Rounds of applause in the distance drew Killian's eyes to the horizon. There he saw, beating in the brightness of the second sun, the smiling, battle-worn faces of his peers, his unconquerable comrades, who had witnessed the power of his light. Scanning the line of them, Killian suddenly caught his father's gaze. Embrose, arms folded and face stern, was standing amid the crowd, along with several professors, who too had arrived just in time to see him win the day. Dean Shaile and Razineth stood on either side of him, celebrating Killian's victory along with the others.

Killian straightened, holding his head high, and stared back into his father's eyes. This was not an expression of defiance but a gesture of peace—a hope for compromise between two opposing ideals that were finally meeting in the middle.

The cosmos is vast, and Eloquents are not the only ones who shape it. The words echoed loudly in Killian's mind, and with all his intention, he directed them into his father's heart. A flash of light flickered in Embrose's eyes. Killian could see the message had been received. But would it be accepted?

A brief moment passed between them before Killian saw the smallest of twinges pull at one side of Embrose's mouth—it was what one might consider the beginnings of a smile, a sign of mild approval. The action even raised his father's head ever so slightly, sending warm energy flowing in his son's direction. Suddenly, Killian felt a sharp sting in the palm his hand. He turned it over and emblazed in *patriscrit* over the pale skin.

"*I can create*," Killian said aloud.

As the ink faded, he breathed in the fresh air, now ripe with the hope of a new destiny ahead. The time had finally come for him to step out of the dark of the shadow and finally into the light of the sun. He was ready.