

The Chains That Bind

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“I don’t know why I’m here,” said Maraff, taking another sip of tea. “I don’t need tutoring, and definitely not from another student—no offense.”

“None taken,” said Dina, her eyes trained on the notes left by Professor Tivash: *Despite being a Quandrix hopeful, Maraff shows an uncommon affinity for summoning. Pity that his poor attitude makes him prone to mistakes.* She looked up at the sound of Maraff’s empty cup clinking on the saucer and reached over to her teapot, warming on the waning embers of the fire. Normally, fires wouldn’t have been possible in the Sedgemoor bayou due to the dampness, but Professor Willowdusk had enchanted this space to be an ersatz office for Dina’s tutor duties. It suited Dina. She preferred the buzz and bubble of the bayou to a stodgy lecture hall in Widdershins.



Dina, Soul Steeper | Art by: Chris Rahn

“More tea?” Dina offered.

Maraff held out his cup. “Thank you,” he said, taking a swig after it was filled. “It’s possible that Professor Tivash has a vendetta against me. I’m definitely his best student. Why else has he not placed me into his advanced classes? Dealing with other first-years is like being in a room full of babies.”

Needs focus, read Tivash’s final note. *Requires proper motivation to maximize potential.*

Dina refreshed Maraff’s cup again.

"You have real talent as a counselor," said Maraff, eagerly downing the amber brew. "Magic isn't for everyone, and my keen instincts tell me you're better off pursuing other avenues."

Dina topped off Maraff's cup one last time.

This is fine, she thought.

Approximately three and a half minutes later, Maraff was on the ground showing no signs of his earlier braggadocio. "I'm dying!" he wailed.

"Don't be silly," said Dina, standing over him as he scrounged for ingredients. "Spiders coming out your ears is hardly deadly." She thought about it for a second. "Unless they're venomous. Are they venomous?"

"Aren't you supposed to know?!" Maraff squealed.

"I'm fairly sure they're not," she said. "Fairly anyway, you remember what you're looking for?"

"Mugwort and lanny fern root?"

"Very good!" said Dina. She stepped back to allow Maraff some space. Despite his infantile sobbing, she was sure that, at the very least, he wasn't going to forget the antidote for attercop charm any time soon. "While you're doing that, I'll schedule our next session. Next week, same time?"

Dina ran her hands across the smooth walls of Widdershins Hall as she walked through its corridors. The main hall for each Strixhaven college endeavored to embody the college's mission, and in this, Widdershins succeeded wildly. At least, that's what most students at Witherbloom College were led to believe. Life and death. Growth, rot, and rebirth. Dina wondered how many Witherbloom students were aware that the trees housing their classrooms and sleeping quarters were not only alive but listening as well.

Dina entered the laboratory where the deans of Witherbloom College, Professors Lisette and Valentin, gazed into a crucible being heated by a floating blue flame.

"It's not working like you said it would," spat Valentin. He spun around in his characteristic huff and paced to the back of the room.

"Give it time," said Lisette. Her voice flowed slowly, like honey.

Valentin clacked the sharp ends of his fingers together. "How much time am I expected to give?"

"Enough time—oh, hello, Dina."

"My session with Maraff is done. Is Professor Tivash in?"

"Intercollegiate meeting," Lisette said. "Why he insists on attending those is beyond me."

Valentin twirled on his heel, returned to the crucible, and grunted after looking into it again. He glanced over to Dina but didn't address her. "Tivash likes the refreshments, Lisette. Lime cakes, elderberry pies."

"I'm sure Gyome can arrange to make anything he wants in the kitchen."

"Yes, but you see, Tivash adores being doted on," Valentin explained. "These treats are waiting there for him, as if by the grace of a benevolent universe. Small things quiet small minds."

"You can leave his notebook with us," said Lisette. "We'll get it back to him."

Dina placed Tivash's book onto the central table, sneaking a look at the silvery liquid churning and frothing in the crucible. Lisette added a pinch of volcanic ash, causing the mixture to hiss and change color to a deep orange. In other circumstances, Dina would have asked them to explain the spell they were casting. But not right then.

She had other business right then.

"Okay," said Dina, "I'll be going now."

"Off to the Prismari party?" Lisette called out. "All the professors are going, too. If you're not in a hurry, we can go together."

"Hmph," said Valentin.

"Most of the professors," said Lisette.

Dina looked out the window into the courtyard below. Students gathered together under the archways formed by the hall's massive roots, dressed in their most garish Witherbloom garments: some masked behind gauzy veils that swayed like spiderwebs when they talked, others festooned with pouches and belts holding spell components.

Standing out were the dryads, who bore a special love of this pageantry. In their Vastlands home, they had no need for clothing and, at Strixhaven, remained dressed only out of a sense of propriety. However, these kinds of social affairs gave them license to indulge in the novelty of fashion. It was customary to see dryads traipsing and prancing about, adorned with exotic textiles paying tribute to the groves and dales where they were born.

Dina pulled her plain brown cloak around her shoulders.

"No, thank you," she said. "I have work to do."

"Work? This late?" Lisette said, frowning. "You should spend time with your friends."

Ever since she'd brought Dina to Strixhaven two years ago, Lisette had been on a nonstop quest to make introductions with anyone who remotely shared Dina's interests in collecting spores, molds, and fungi (there weren't that many, and most of them wanted to be alone, too). This mission had expanded to anyone who breathed and could speak.

"Do you give all your charges such awful advice?" interrupted Valentin. "Young Dina shows drive, unlike some of the more unfortunate members of our studentry."

"Having friends is awful advice?" Lisette said. "Even you have friends!"

"Oh? Who?"

"Me!"

Valentin rumpled his brow and cocked his head in thought. "Well, I'm terribly sorry for giving you the wrong idea. I beg your forgiveness."

Lisette shook her head. "Dina, go have some fun."

Dina considered that trudging across Sedgemoor into the forlorn Detention Bog probably wouldn't count as "fun" to Dean Lisette. Then again, there was nothing about attending a party at Prismari College that struck Dina as enjoyable. Lisette couldn't seem to understand that all the opportunities were there if Dina had actually wanted to commiserate with other students. Libation-filled nights at the Bow's End were always available for those who didn't mind waking up in the morning with the con-

sequences of questionable decision-making. And for last-minute cram sessions, there were all-nighters at Firejolt Café with other try-hards.

Dina understood that Lisette felt responsible for her. She'd told her as much whenever they sat down for their weekly tea. But maybe Dina just didn't want to do those things. And maybe there were tasks that held more importance.

"Good evening," said Dina, laying her hand on the Asenath tree. It had been one month since she'd first discovered this particular tree, one month since she'd started on her own secret project. Its spindly branches overlooked a lazy creek, and its broad, hollow trunk ballooned out to make a perfect, if cramped, workshop. The tree's location deep within the bog ensured that her work would remain secret for as long as possible. The entire area had been enchanted to block scrying into or out of it—all the better to prevent students from using the time to chat with friends rather than think about their mistakes. Even so, Dina was hasty in stepping inside and resetting the glamor that obscured its opening.

"What do you do for fun?" she said to the tree as she sat down.

The tree didn't respond. They seldom do.

Dina cast a simple ghostlight spell, illuminating the spell reagents arranged in a circle around her. In the center sat an old tome, its cover made from thin metallic plates scalloped like a knight's pauldron. Delicate chains bound the supple vellum pages together into a work whose craftsmanship was unequalled by any set of hands on Arcavios.

It is said that the Strixhaven Biblioplex is the most complete archive of magic in the Multiverse. All manner of spells, from the lowliest hedge wizard's anti-itch cantrip to a demon's ritual for harnessing the power of a dying sun, are recorded and stored somewhere under the library's vaulted arches. No one save for Strixhaven's Founder Dragons, and perhaps the Oracle of Arcavios herself, knew exactly how the Biblioplex carried out its function. Nevertheless, most patrons understood that a sought-after grimoire was more likely to hunt them down than the other way around.

On the day that Dina discovered this particular book on the shelf, it seemed to beckon to her, begging her to read its contents. She did, drawn at first by her curiosity and then by the gravity of what she'd stumbled upon. Part manual, part journal, it captured the meditations of an unnamed mage fascinated by life, death, and the realms locked between them.

She opened the book to its final page.

I have trod upon the skulls of mighty lords; commanded boundless armies who obey without fail. Yet no conquest can turn the tide against my own desire for what I want—what I have always wanted. Not the mere escaping of death, nor the mere facsimile, but true life from lifelessness. That is the ultimate proof of power, the most definite testament to godhood. I have been told by those who deemed themselves wise that the most anticipated ends are sweet only so long as they remain unattainable.

I will prove them wrong.

These words prefaced an incantation meant to bridge the transition between living realms and the void, a place of ineffable darkness where, according to the book, the souls of the hopeless dwelled.

One by one, Dina read off spell components, pulling the corresponding ingredient from the circle and placing it into a bowl. Some, like luna moss, had been easy enough to obtain in the bayou. Others, such as a knuckle bone from a woolly sloar, required Dina to access the personal laboratories of Witherbloom's professors. This wasn't difficult, especially with Lisette and Valentin so wrapped up in their own projects. They never noticed their ingredients being skimmed away. A pinch of this, a slice of that.



Art by: Randy Vargas

“The root of the esis tree,” she whispered, her finger at the bottom of the ingredient list. No plant on Arcavios bore the name *esis*, nor did any leaf she knew of resemble the delicate, feather-like shape drawn on the page.

For weeks, Dina searched fruitlessly. Perhaps *esis* was an archaic name for another species of plant. Or the drawing was not as accurate as it could have been. These inquests all led to dead ends, forcing her to concede that there were no *esis* trees on Arcavios. What about obtaining it from places outside Arcavios? Dina shifted her research to arcane rituals that theoretically could enable travel from one plane to another—from Arcavios to a place where *esis* groves were plentiful. Without fail, these spells were almost impossible to understand, far above her ability to craft, and promised painful fates worse than death.

Her search had stalled, and it remained that way until that very day, in her potions class just before her session with Maraff. While Professor Onyx droned on about the distinctions between atramentous and achromic elixirs, Dina’s eye spied something notable about the terrarium at the back of the room. Whether by an aspect of the light or a preternatural instinct, Dina was drawn to the clump of small ferns in the far corner. Among them was a single seedling whose ghostly white leaves matched that of the *esis* tree. When class released, she flew into action, extracting a sliver of root amidst the hubbub of students gossiping over that night’s social gatherings.

Sitting in her workshop, Dina gazed at the piece of *esis* root in her palm. It was barely larger than a human fingernail, pale white, and still supple. *Such a small thing*, she thought, then dropped it into the bowl with the rest of the ingredients. All that remained was binding the spell. Picking up her knife, she pricked her fingertip and squeezed a single drop of blood into the mixture. A few minutes spent pulverizing the ingredients produced a poultice that glowed like faint moonlight.

Carrying the book in one hand and the bowl in the other, Dina emerged and proceeded to her next destination, her ghostlight spell dutifully lighting the way. The evening had brought the bog to life. The acrid smell of soaked bark had grown bold. Things, just out of eyesight, slithered through mud pools. The shiver of wet leaves overhead told her she was being watched from the branches above.

She recalled nights like this when she was younger—quietly glorious but tinged with an impending sense of doom. When the Brittleblight came for her glade, like it had done for many across Arcavios, few noticed its effects. Those who made the glade their home began to fall prey to a subtle yet persistent melancholy. Over years, its grip quietly tightened, stealing dreams and replacing them with despair. As minds were overtaken by misery, bodies followed. Animals lay down and never rose again. Dryads grew fragile and decayed into husks.

At the very end, there was no grass.

No flowers.

The birds did not bring their sweet songs.

Insects had stopped skittering.

All color had turned to gray; everything was silent.

Despite the efforts of scholars across Arcavios, no one knew the genesis of the disease or how it found its way into a habitat. Lisette was one such scholar, and it was she who had arrived at Dina's glade to rescue her before the sickness could take a permanent hold. But even Lisette's formidable expertise couldn't save the glade itself. Now Dina potentially had the ability to change that, though it wouldn't be easy.

Dina followed the creek to a den of twigs and mud where a family of pests made their home. Most Witherbloom students merely tolerated the pests. They couldn't avoid them completely—pests were an incredible source for magical energy. But the little wart-ridden creatures were not the most pleasant to be around. They were cold and slimy and flagrantly violated decorum around manners and personal hygiene. Dina didn't mind any of that.

"Hello Bastion, Vedredi, Kiara, and Nenioc," she said, greeting the pests rolling in the mud alongside the water's edge. "How are you today?" The pests, much like trees, rarely answered direct questions. But they did flop around, splashing mud onto Dina's cloak. "I'm here to ask you for a favor," she said. "I need you to take a short trip for me." There was a tug of anxiety as she applied her poultice to the pests—ten in all—who gathered around her. They trusted her, perhaps loved her in their own way. She stroked Nenioc, named for her glade sister who had passed years before. The pest burped and licked Dina's hand. "If I succeed, you'll be back here. Like you never left."



Art by: Randy Vargas

She placed the spellbook on the ground, and on each pest, she traced a spiral, the symbol of all life radiating from a unified point. Then she began to recite the words. The first few syllables were easy enough to announce. The subsequent words, however, brought with them a sensation like a dull mallet tapping on the inside of her skull. Dina persisted, focusing on a sensation that brought her joy—the feel of the rough bark of her father tree, the first being who greeted her after she was born.

If her experiment proved a success, she'd be able to go back to where her glade had been and bring it back. Bring them back. All the plants, animals, and dryads, just as she remembered. *L ife from life-lessness.*

A snap broke her concentration. Across the clearing, a dead tree fell with a crash, its trunk bisected cleanly by something. Dina closed the tome, snuffed out her light, and ducked down in the mud close to the water's edge. There was no moon out that night, and the starlight could only barely penetrate the bog's haze.

No swamp creature could have done that precise damage to the tree trunk. It had to be someone from Strixhaven.

"*Dissatisfied?*" a voice shouted. "Do you even know the meaning of that word?" A second later, a sleek, black projectile hit the ground in front of her. *Ink magic?* she thought. Another shadowy bolt came out of the night and splashed into the mud precariously close to the water's edge where the pests were blissfully playing. It was absolutely ink magic, the signature spell style of Silverquill College. But what was someone from Silverquill doing out in Detention Bog? The answer was obvious: it was a student, one who was being punished.

"You weren't even there! Where the hell were you?"

Inky coils reached out from the darkness like twin claws, gripping a pair of high tree branches and ripping them down to the ground. This time the trees did speak. Their howls filled Dina's mind. *What did we do? Why is this happening?* Their wails of pain spurred her to action. She crawled out of hiding and cast her ghostlight hoping that the sight of another student would give the intruder pause.

Unfortunately, her sudden appearance had the opposite effect.

“Who’s there?” the voice screamed, and a moment later, a wave of inky force was rolling toward Dina. Instinctively, she chanted the syllables of the summer charm, a spell that originated with the dryads, but one which all nature-oriented mages have since included into their repertoires. It was enough to shield her from the brunt of the wave, but its sheer strength still knocked her onto her back. Footsteps rushed toward the spot where Dina lay. A moment later, a pair of hands pulled her back to her feet. A young man dressed in the black and white garb of a Silverquill student stood in front of her, a look of shock on his face.

“I didn’t see you.”

“That’s because it’s dark,” said Dina. “Human eyes don’t adjust well to the lack of light.”

“No, I mean “

His voice trailed off, and his eyes strayed from Dina to a point behind her.

The pests! Dina’s heart dropped. *If they’re hurt* Dina prepared for the grisly scene and turned to look. But instead of dead pests, sitting on the ground was a jet-black sphere of ink magic quivering as if alive. Prominences of green mist leapt from point to point on its surface.

“What magic is this?” the young man asked in a whisper.

Dina didn’t answer. She watched as the sphere shuddered and then sprouted tendrils that burrowed into the soft ground of the bog. The dirt under her feet started to shift and roil like miniature fingers clawing the bottoms of her boots.

“We can’t stay here,” she said.

“You haven’t answered my question!”

Without another word, she took the young man’s wrist, pulled as hard as she could, and ran away from the site, dragging him behind her. His answers could wait until later, not that she had any. The ritual had to be performed delicately and with precision, and now it had been corrupted. The trees bellowed with thunderous shrieks. *The void! Where have you sent us? So much pain. . .*

Their anguish brought Dina to her knees. This time, it was the young man picking her up and pulling her along until they came across a thicket where they took shelter.

All around them was the sound of tree limbs thrashing.

“Now answer my question,” he said.

Up close, Dina recognized the young man as the son of Dean Lu, the more vocal and charismatic of Silverquill’s deans. They had the same steely, resolute countenance when they talked. Dina had seen it many times (from the back rows, of course) when Dean Lu would give his fiery speeches on commitment and duty at all-college assemblies.

“Your name is Killian,” she said. “Your father—”

“Don’t talk about my father,” he snapped, then softened his expression. “We have other things to deal with right now, starting with the truth. What was that back there?”

There was no use in hiding things. Dina produced the spellbook from her satchel.

Killian cracked the book open and leafed through its pages. “Forbidden magic,” he said.

“I know,” said Dina. “That’s why I was hiding it out here, where no one was supposed to be.”

"That doesn't change a thing."

"Except you destroying my one chance—"

"At what?" he said. "What were you trying to do?"

Dina stopped short of saying it: *To save everything I ever loved in this world*. It was the kind of statement that sounded either megalomaniacal or at least deeply ridiculous, even if it was the truth. So she sidestepped his question.

"Wait, do you hear that?" said Dina.

Killian stopped and listened. "No."

"Exactly. We should go back and look."

Emerging from the trees, Dina and Killian traced their steps back to where the pest den had been, this time using a radiant orb conjured by Killian as a light source. Though only a short time had passed, the effect of Dina's spell was clear. Deep gashes marked tree trunks and the soft ground, as if a great beast had raked its talons across the landscape. The trees around the area had been severed at the stump or uprooted entirely. There were no signs of the pests, and the only remnants of their den were splinters floating on the surface of the creek.

"We have to go," said Dina. "Dean Valentin is at Widdershins. He can help us."

Killian shook his head. "I'm trapped here all night." He turned his right arm over to show Dina the Silverquill sigil on his wrist. It was a detention token, a brand that prevented students from simply eschewing their mandatory stays in Detention Bog. If they tried to escape, the token would react with the landscape to force the student back toward the bog's center. "That's what I get for letting a Prismari player steal my inkling from right under my nose. I cost my team that point, and Silverquill lost the Mage Tower match. That's my father for you."

"He gave you detention for a game?"

"No, he gave me a detention for not *applying myself*," he said. "You should go back. I can handle myself."

"I'm not leaving you out here alone."

"Then help me fix your mistake."

"*Our* mistake," said Dina. "Remember that part with yelling and the careless spellcasting?"

"Fine," Killian said. He pointed to a patch of ground at the far end of the clearing. A fresh trail strewn with battered branches had been blazed through the bog. "It's moving. I'll lead the way."

"You do know that if something attacks us from the front, you'll likely be hit first," said Dina.

"Sure, but—"

"So, it's not in your best interest to be in front of me, nor is it in my best interest to have the light source so far ahead. What if I get ambushed from behind?" She motioned to the width of the trail. "We can walk side by side. Doesn't that make more sense?"

"I was just trying never mind."

Spellbook in hand, Dina skimmed pages as she walked. The ritual was clear in its intent. As pests were repositories for magical energy, her professors conjectured that their essences were as primordial as elementals, that they may have been related to every living thing on Arcavios. One of the simplest spells taught to all Witherbloom students drew forth the magical essence of a pest, converting it, body

and soul, into pure magic. The ritual from the book promised a conduit to harness this magic and convert it back into its original living state.

Back here. Like you never left.

“Find anything?” asked Killian.

“No,” said Dina. There were no unbindings, no counters included with any of the spells inside. “It’s almost like the mage has been trying to do the same thing again and again.”

“Raise the dead?”

“Restore the living.”

“I wonder who they lost,” said Killian.

“Who did you lose?”

“How did you am I really that transparent?” Killian hung his head and smiled at her behind long strands of hair. “My mother died when I was very young. But I can’t even say I lost her. I hardly remember her.” He swept his hair back onto his head and continued to walk down the path.

Dina knew better than to take his nonchalance at face value. She knew what it was to lose those she loved, and moreover to have that ache of the *never knowing*. It was a profound awareness of how empty you would always be, like a whirlpool draining into a bottomless chasm. No width of smile or depth of laugh could hide that wound from those who also bore it.

“I didn’t know my mother, either,” Dina said, catching up. “Everyone from my glade is gone.”

“Your entire family?”

“Dryads don’t have families,” Dina explained. “At the end of her life, a dryad finds a tree that is similarly close to its end. She rests at its foot, allowing the earth to reclaim her body, and, eventually, a new dryad emerges from the tree knowing nothing but her name—the same one as her mother’s. We don’t have parents like you, but we still have community—our glade sisters and all the plants and animals.”

“But they’re all gone.”

“Yes. When the blight comes, few are spared.”

They continued to follow the trail as it widened into another clearing. As soon as they stepped foot into it, a low growl emanated from a patch of bushes a short distance away.

“Is that it?” said Killian, his hands ready to direct an inky bolt toward a threat.

“No,” said Dina. She sniffed the air. “It’s a vineclinger.”

“What? How do you know?”

“Musk lemon. It’s what they eat. It gives them their smell.”

Killian breathed in. “Is that what that stink is?”

Lumbering out from the bushes was a hulking creature whose features, other than its powerful arms and large black claws, were obscured by tufts of long, stringy hair. As soon as it spotted them, it tried to roar, but its bellow came out as a pained gurgle.

“It’s hurt,” said Dina, pointing to patches of blood on its hair. “We need to help it.”

“That’s a wild animal!”

"I know." Though she'd wanted to approach the vineclinger in peace, Killian did have a point. Its gait was unsteady, and its movements were sluggish. Any sudden movements would rattle it. Even a weakened vineclinger could break every bone in hers or Killian's body with a single swipe. "Back me up?"

Killian nodded.

"It's okay," Dina whispered, walking forward slowly. "Let me help." She placed her palm onto the beast and chanted an incantation to quell the magic invading the vineclinger's body. But the corruption was too strong for her to uproot. Dina doubled her effort to eject the infection, but this only caused the vineclinger's massive arm to tense, eliciting a howl of pain. It swung out at Dina with its claws extended.

Acting quickly, Killian pulled her away with one arm and with his other arm peppered the vineclinger's face with barbs of ink magic. It wailed, stumbled backward, and fell onto its side, lying motionless save for its labored breaths. Killian helped Dina up, and together, they approached the beast. Black wisps of Killian's magic wafted off the vineclinger's body.

Dina knelt down and brushed away clumps of bloody hair from the vineclinger's face. It whined and moved its eyes to follow her movements. "I need to know what you saw," she said to the beast.

"Is it?" Killian started to ask.

"My magic isn't strong enough to heal it," Dina said quietly. She placed the back of her hand to the vineclinger's forehead. Communing with flora came naturally to dryads—that's why they made perfect nature wizards. But establishing rapport with animals was much harder. Dina began to concentrate by imagining that she was floating down a long, dark tunnel. Upon reaching the end, she found herself looking down onto the clearing from the treetops—the world through the vineclinger's eyes. An abrupt snap of a twig caused her vision to refocus onto a creature creeping into the clearing below. It moved like a great worm, gouging a path in the soft ground. As it moved, it took earth, rotten vegetation, and half-devoured carrion into itself to grow in size, strength, and speed.

Dina could only watch as the vineclinger bounded from branch to branch to confront the creature. Once on the ground, the vineclinger sprinted toward it and sunk teeth and talon into its body. Dina tasted the dirt on her tongue, felt fragments of bone crack between her teeth.

The intruder's counterattack was swift. From its body, long black tendrils emerged to impale the vineclinger and batter it against the trees. Dina experienced every shred of physical pain that the vineclinger had endured, its confusion at being tossed around like a leaf in a gale. Ultimately, the creature discarded the vineclinger in the brush, content to proceed on its way.

Dina let go of the vineclinger, her whole body aching from phantom fractures and lacerations. "It's headed northeast," she said, steadying herself. "Toward Sedgemoor."

"Toward school? Maybe it's drawn to magical energy?"

"Or it's looking for a purpose," said Dina. "It was just born, and it doesn't know why it's here or what it has to do."

"Like a giant murdering baby?"

"*Our* giant murdering baby."

Killian sent his radiant orb farther down the trail, and they followed along. Dina couldn't get the vineclinger's memories out of her head. If that thing escaped the bog, countless students would be in danger, not to mention the wildlife that had already been imperiled. Yet, the experiment had been a success of a sort. Was that creature not a new life from the aether? Could it be anything but a sign

that these magics held promise for true resurrection? How much good could the dryads of her glade bring back to Arcavios? How much wisdom could they reclaim from the abyss and bring back to the people?

And who would she be willing to sacrifice to see them return?

Killian's hand clutched onto hers, breaking her fugue. "C'mon! I think I see it!"

Dina looked ahead. In the far distance, Killian's orb had indeed illuminated a colossal shape that had wrapped itself around a patch of tall ancient Sylvatica trees. Though it was dark, she could have sworn that its silhouette looked twice the size that it had been when it fought with the vineclinger. Why had it stopped and settled in this part of the bog? Did it know that they were coming for it?

Had it been waiting for them?

Killian snuffed out his light spell and pulled Dina off the trail and behind a stack of felled trees. "We can't just run in there," he said. "Wait—that black orb that we first saw. That thing's body is made from the swamp, but its heart—"

"Your magic," said Dina.

"And yours, too," said Killian. "If we could just access its heart again, we could break the spell, counteract a piece of it, causing the whole thing to fall apart!" He thought for another moment. "I think I might be able to cancel out the ink magic, but I'd have to be right next to the orb for it to work. Could we burn the body away?"

"No, the bog is too damp," said Dina. "But I have a plan."

Killian smiled. "Care to share?"

"With you?" asked Dina. "Oh. That would probably be a good idea, right?"

The second to last thing Dina said before she and Killian parted ways was "Eat these," as she pressed a handful of dried tea leaves into his palm. "You'll be able to see better in the dark."

Killian crunched them up in his mouth and swallowed them. A moment later, his eyes took on a faint blue hue. He blinked and looked around him in astonishment.

"This is amazing! Why didn't we use this before now?"

"Lionspaw has side effects on humans," said Dina.

"Such as?"

"You should stay close to the privy tomorrow."

"Oh."

"The next day, too."

And then came the last thing she'd say to him before they enacted their respective parts of the plan.

"Don't die, okay?" Dina told Killian.

"I won't. I like my odds."

Things like "the odds" didn't seem to slow Killian down in the slightest. He was impulsive and reckless, traits that Dina had always considered negative. At the same time, she wondered what it was like to be able to say something with that sort of confidence. Whether it be blind, foolish, or deserved, that poise

was a trait that Dina had never possessed but had always wanted—for nothing else than to convince herself that she was doing the right thing.

Now she was by herself once more, stepping through thistle patches to circle around the abomination. Somewhere on the other side of the grove, Killian was settling into a good vantage point to wait until it was time to play his part. The stench of rot filled Dina's nostrils. Being this close to the monster's body was like being buried under layers and layers of dead vegetation. She didn't dare touch it directly. Prematurely provoking it from its sluggish state could have proven fatal. Instead, Dina sunk her hand into the dirt a few steps away from the creature and began reciting one of the first spells she learned at Strixhaven.

Nature, Lisette had explained, *is drawn to balance. Magic is simply a way to slightly alter this balance without destroying the elements you're working with. The key is to start small. A mountain can rest on a single pebble. An ocean begins as a drop of rain.*

Dina breathed in, and with every breath, she imagined her mind extending outward to the smallest elements of water and earth, plant and bone—all the things that the creature's body was made of. She imagined splinters curling around each other and seizing taut, bits of earth glomming onto each other and holding fast like granite.

Beware of taking too much on, warned Lisette. *Nothing is without cost.*

In class, Dina had been able to turn a handful of dirt into a sculpture of her favorite flower, the mantis orchid. That feat had required several pests to empower her spell. But now she was without that extra supply of magical energy, forcing her to use the next best power source—herself. She continued chanting, forcing the words out through gritted teeth. Every part of her body erupted in a torrent of pinpricks like thousands of nettle stings underneath her skin.

The creature began to move. It attempted to unmoor itself from the trees, only for sections of its body to break off and shatter when they hit the ground. Black tentacles sprung out from these deep gashes, but they were notably sluggish, sloughing off chunks of rotting vegetation with every movement. As long as Dina could maintain her spell, the creature would be slow and brittle, a perfect target for Killian's part of the plan. She peered past the dark mass in front of her to spot her companion. No sign of him yet. Suddenly, a pair of irregular appendages sprouted from the thing's body and started to probe the gaps between trees. With enough time, it would eventually find her. That is, if her own spell didn't kill her first.

"I don't *apply myself*, huh?" With Killian's yell came two sickle-shaped blades of pure ink magic slicing into the body of the creature. Debris sprayed off its body. "Maybe you just can't accept who I am!" Two more bolts sailed out from the darkness to cleave off more of the creature. Their plan was working! All he had to do was work his way to the monster's core. But he had to be quick. Dina's chest felt like it was being pierced by a thousand flaming swords.

"You're so self-righteous!" Killian leapt up onto a fallen log and let loose another bolt of ink magic, this one taking the shape of a hammer which he hurled directly at the monster. More of its body broke off and shattered. "You're always willing to tell others that they're not worthy, not right for *your* school!" He flipped off the log. "This is not *your* school! This is *our* school!" Killian spun around, conjuring an inky blade extending from his arm and bringing it down onto the creature.

Dina had never been to a Mage Tower game. Did all the players move as fluidly as Killian did? His actions formed an exquisite pattern, a dance as dazzling as it was forceful. Unfortunately, Killian's final maneuver had brought him too close to the creature, close enough for it to shift its mass and rake him across the chest with a pair of shadowy claws.

“Killian!” screamed Dina as she watched him crumple to the ground. She broke her spell and ran to Killian’s side, dodging a flurry of blows from the monster. Dina dragged him away from the creature to the foot of the nearest tree and spoke an overgrowth enchantment aloud to compel the tree’s roots to wrap around him. Then she stood up and turned to face down this adversary of her own making. The creature’s body shuddered as it shook off the effects of Dina’s petrification charm. It reared far above her, showcasing an immense maw of splintered bone on its underside.

And then, like a great tidal wave, the creature crashed down upon her.

Dina stood amidst the tall reeds that tickled her nose. Water caressed her feet up to her ankles, and the cool mud snuggled her toes. The scent of sweet citrus permeated the air, prompting her to take a deep breath.

Home.

“You’ve always loved strawberry season,” she heard someone say. To Dina’s left, from beyond the tree-line, stepped forth a figure that was both alien and intimately familiar all at once—a tall beautiful dryad who almost seemed to flow through the air. The tips of the branches crowning her head were black and cracked. Her skin had turned from green to a lurid assortment of russets, ambers, and mottled grays. “You recognize this place,” she said, stroking the tree next to her.

There was no way Dina couldn’t recognize it. This was her glade, and more specifically, the tree she crawled out of when she was born. All the details were as she remembered. Perfectly so.

Too perfect.

“Are we really here?” said Dina.

“Does it matter, love?” said the dryad. “This is what you’ve desired, is it not?”

“It is,” said Dina. “Everything as it was before the Brittleblight. I want “

“Me,” said the dryad, sitting down at the foot of the tree. “Once you start asking for the improbable, the impossible doesn’t seem so out of the question.”

“Do you know how long I’ve wanted to talk to you?” said Dina. “How long I’ve looked?”

“Yes. In the wrong places, and for answers you know already.”

“That’s not true! I want to know why I am the only one left! Why me over all the others? There needs to be a reason!”

“A reason?” said the dryad. “You mean proof that you play some pivotal role in the schemes of an unseen architect? I wish I had an easy answer, if only to give you peace.”

“But why else am I still alive if not to bring the others back?” said Dina. “I’ve found a way!”

“Have you?” the dryad said. “And how do you know that they want that?”

“I “

Dina searched for a rebuttal but found herself without words. For so long, she’d held on to her fading memories of home and later coupled them with the determination to rescue all that she’d lost. Clinging to that wish had been enough to help save her own life. In time, it defined what she stood for, who she was. But what if it was wrong—a violation not only against nature itself but also the very ones she wanted to save? “Then what am I supposed to do?”

"You can help those who need it right now." The dryad looked to her left, and Dina followed suit. There, entangled in a cage of roots, was Killian, his face wracked with pain. "Does he mean something to you?"

"We've only just met," said Dina. "He's my friend."

"A nice place to start. Of course, there is a matter of your present situation." The dryad leaned her head on the tree trunk and closed her eyes. "It's time to be whole again, my love."

Dina understood. She shut her own eyes and projected her mind outward as far as she could, past the boundaries of this memory and into the black heart of the creature she had birthed into the world. Envisioning her own body floating in this void, Dina focused on the single drop of her own blood that had bound the spell together. She let herself be pulled toward it until the drop was in front of her, suspended in the air. She reached out and touched it with her fingertip, the sensation of sharp teeth creeping up her hand. Suddenly, her entire arm felt like it had been plunged into a sea of ice. The chill raced up her neck to her face and into her nose, eyes, and mouth.

Then she was falling. Falling endlessly. Falling forever.

Dina gasped for air and flailed her arms out at the dark shapes cast upon the wall. Grasping her bed-covers, she took stock of her surroundings. Gone were the environs of Detention Bog, replaced by the soft golden light radiating from a lantern set on a bedside table. Dina recognized this long room as the infirmary in Widdershins Hall. Alongside Lisette, she'd attended to bedridden students as part of her lessons on advanced healing. Sitting on a chair a short distance away from the bed was Dean Valentin, who stared at Dina from under the hood of his cowl.

"I was too hasty in complimenting you earlier," he said.

"Where Killian—"

"Is recovering in his own room," said Valentin.

"How did I get here?"

"The boy is tenacious, dragging you all the way from the bog with a festering wound. Not to mention a particularly nasty case of lionspaw poisoning."

"What about the bog?"

"You're referring to the forces you've been meddling with?" he said. "Rest assured, if there were still a threat to students there, you wouldn't be here right now. You would be dead, as would young Mister Lu."

Valentin knew everything. And surely Killian would have been obliged to tell the Silverquill deans all that had gone on in the bog from his point of view. Dina, on the other hand, was sure that her time at Strixhaven had come to an end. She knew why she had made the choices that she made. She just wished there had been a different outcome. Then again, perhaps that was the only way she would have learned to let the past rest. A cost paid.

"I know you're disappointed," said Dina. "I didn't mean—"

Valentin sighed. "Disappointed? In truth, I'm very unsurprised. None of you students ever mean for things to go badly, especially when they do."

“As soon as I’m able, I’ll take my things and leave.” Dina leaned on the side table to get out of bed, but pain shot through her body, forcing her back down.

“You do know that this is an institution of learning, eh?” said Valentin. “I trust that you have learned something this night—that *you* are the student, and *we* are the instructors. *We* painstakingly assemble lessons, and *you* follow them to the letter. Venturing outside of that dynamic is fraught. Such a lesson will be valuable in your future coursework.”

“So I can stay?”

“Hmph,” he grunted. “Above all else, Strixhaven is a place for new beginnings. Often that comes in the form of second chances. None of us are faultless, Miss Dina.” He paused and clacked his fingers together. “And I am among the last who deserves to chastise others for their missteps.”



Art by: Andrey Kuzinskiy

Professor Serafina Onyx blew air at the flame, causing it to dance. At the beginning of the night, the candle on her desk had stood tall and solid. But by the time it had melted down into a nub, she had only graded a handful of her students’ exams. How long had it been since she herself was subject to the judgment of an instructor? Lady Ana had been a strict mentor, one widely recognized for her prowess in the healing arts. And what did that get her? A husband who left her. Children who shunned her. A swift end at the hands of a patient charged to her care. And worst of all, being utterly forgotten by everyone save the person who hated her most. Onyx dipped her quill into a jar of ink and proceeded to cross out a whole page of the exam in front of her. In the margin, she wrote one word: *Pathetic*.

Barging through her classroom door came Lisette, fellow Strixhaven professor and dean of Witherbloom College. She marched up to Onyx’s desk and dropped a heavy tome onto its surface.

“I believe this is yours,” said Lisette, her eyes lit with fury.

Onyx gasped at what she saw before her. It’s not that she thought the volume would elude her forever. She had all the time in the Multiverse to scour the Biblioplex’s shelves. Rather, she hadn’t expected it

to come into her possession in such a convenient manner. Yet, there it was—one of the reasons why she was at Strixhaven wasting effort on ungrateful brats who already thought themselves wizards of esteemed repute.

She didn't want to alert Lisette to her excitement. It was, after all, best to stay calm and collected, especially in the face of a potential enemy. Anyone—a friend, a family member—could swiftly become an adversary. Onyx had learned that too well and too often.

"Your collegiality is appreciated," said Onyx, a slight smile on her face.

"I know who you are—what you are," Lisette threatened. "And I'll die before I stop trying to get you as far away from this school as I can."

Professor Onyx sat back and danced her fingers across the book's cover. "That can be arranged, Professor."

Without another word, Lisette stormed out, leaving Onyx alone with her prize. She flipped through the book, occasionally pausing and reading over the contents to reminisce. She remembered the names of those who volunteered as her test subjects—if not in life, then assuredly in death.

Onyx stopped on the final page and read over the spell. It, like all the others, had been a failure. *Life from lifelessness*. With her fingertip, she traced the outline of the esis leaf, caressing its edges like the cheek of a long-lost love. A black rot spread outward from where she touched it, consuming all the pages in the book, leaving nothing but the chains that had bound them.