

Dyer's Seed

The priest was bent over his crops, content with their progress, pausing now and again to pull one of the weeds that grew as unnaturally fast as his mushrooms and bleached-white vines. Then he furrowed his brow, hearing the dogs bark. Someone must be coming.

He turned, straightened and strode towards the single entry to his holy grove. It was nothing but a gap in a thick hedge, but that hedge had long thorns, envenomed to give interlopers a painful itch from the slightest scratch. Standing there, timidly edging back from the dogs was a slender young woman with black skin and an uneasy expression. When she looked up at the priest, it deepened to fear.

He held out his hand in a consoling gesture and called the dogs to his side. "Please," he said. "Don't be afraid. What brings you to the holy place of Setekesh?"

"I..." she said, then looked away, then down. "I need help," she said. "My mother," she started, then tried again with, "My father said you..."

"Please," he repeated. "Come in with my welcome. It's clear you lack ill intent. Refresh yourself in the temple. Rest. Then tell your tale."

"I have a seed," she said, holding it up.

The priest knelt down beside her and looked in her hand. "Plant it then," he said.

She burst into tears.



The girl introduced herself as Dyer and she hadn't expected the priest to be so large. Her father hadn't warned her. She knew the reputation of the Setekesh cult -- magicians devoted to a goddess of magical abundance, twisters of flesh and experimenters with animal nature. The hounds of the grove had not only snapped their teeth at her, but waved short, sharp antlers.

She had expected monsters, but hadn't expected the priest to be one. In feature, he was human enough, though his skin was a shade she had never seen, somewhere between sand and rancid butter. He had an impossibly tiny nose and eyes with pointed pits at the inside corners. She had heard people of his race described and seen drawings, but never met one. Certainly they weren't known for being giants.

Dyer was tall and sturdy, but the priest was easily twice her height. He was younger than she had expected, with a tidy black and white beard and a simple robe of coarse green cloth. His enormous hands had stubby proportions and dirt under the nails.

"What brings you to this refuge?" he asked, leading her inside. For a moment, Dyer didn't answer. Her head was back, staring at the ceiling far overhead. It was open to the sky at the front. That roof, the walls around her, the doorways into other chambers and the altar at the front were all of wood, but living, rooted, twisted and

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entwined by no human hand. Despite being grown and still growing, they indisputably formed a hall, windows, seats and a front table. All was proportioned for her vast host. When she climbed into a springy, moss-cushioned seat, her feet dangled like a child.

"That seed. It was from a dyers' vine, unless I miss my guess? Rare," he said. She nodded.

"How is it that you share a name with it?"

"My parents... long ago, they visited a seer, who told them their fate would hinge upon dyers' seed. My father..."

"Knew it was a powerful medicine for the grim chill," he said. "Ah. Hoping to cheat fate, he gave you the name, thinking some child of yours might instead..."

"It didn't work," she sniffed. "My mother is very sick."

"Ah. So you make the pilgrimage here, where it could grow so swiftly that the ear could catch the sound of the vine swelling." He smiled. "Even now, it probably sprouts."

"Thank you so much! I've been so worried... everything's gone wrong..."

"There there," he said, as she started to cry once more. He reached out and plucked several midnight-purple fruits off the wall. "Here. Have some of these. You must be hungry from your journey. Have you traveled far?"

"From Deerwood," she said, biting into the fruit. "My father said you knew him. His name is Laws Winter."

The priest raised an eye. "That is a name I have not heard in some time. Why did he not come himself?"

"He tried." She almost began to sob again, but controlled herself with a visible effort. "He's had to hide in the forest for years. The army... they want his spells, they're afraid of him. But they could never find him."

"Certainly, an adept of the wood in trackless forests. Do you, too, follow his path?"

She shook her head. "I tried and tried. I could feel the flow, even draw it in me, but I could never shape it, never tame it. The climbing vine spell, drawing strength from a plant's roots, borrowing a tree's unbruising skin... I couldn't master any of it."

"It can take years of practice," he said. "Where is he now?"

"They took him! We needed to move fast, we couldn't take the long route through the woods. We tried to get through at Passford, hiding, but they found him and when they saw his green eyes they asked him questions he couldn't answer. He pretended not to know me and I slipped away."

"You've come all the way from Passford unaccompanied?"

Dyer lifted her chin. "I'm a fully grown woman," she said. "I can take care of myself."

"So he gave you directions to this grove, hidden far in the dark, and told you that his old friend Ishanki would take care of your troubles?"

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"Yes." She smiled at him. "And I'm grateful."

He gave a shy smile and made a minimizing gesture. "Let us go look upon your seedling," he said, taking her hand to help her down. They walked to the north side of the temple, and she smiled broadly to see the dyer's vine already poking through the soil.

"You say you have the sense," he said. "Do you feel anything here?"

"I haven't really paid attention," she said. "I'm sure you, your dogs..."

"Obviously. But try. Tell me what you find."

Dyer closed her eyes for a moment and said, "Oh my. Yes, the flow is strong here, stronger than I've ever known. It's... it's knotted and tangled..."

"Good..."

"Over in that corner? Is that right?"

"Let us go see." He smiled, and when they'd made their way through the bounteous garden she stopped at the sight of a ropy vine with a single melon swelling out from it. Even as she watched, the fruit swelled and distended grotesquely.

"Not long now," he said softly in her ear.

"What is it?"

At that moment, the fruit split, revealing a pulpy, fleshy interior and something moving within. Her host stepped eagerly forward, drawing a pair of leather gloves from his belt and putting them on. With uneasy awe, Dyer watched him lift a snake from within the fruit.

"You have heard of the deadly Turem viper, yes? It was difficult to acquire one for use as a dalaq-ta..."

"A dalak...?"

"...but worth it. Through sacrifice and the grace of the goddess, I have created a new serpent, one with all the qualities of the viper, but gifted with the obedient nature of a hound." He carefully stroked the serpent, which writhed around his hand in pleasure. "A viper that adores like a puppy. What tricks will we teach you, little one?" He clucked at it, then whistled once, sharply. "Will you crawl and hide in the rooms of the heathen and heretic, waiting to deliver your deadly bite? Or should I sacrifice you for a threefold conjoining, giving your offspring wings or the color shift of the chameleon?"

Something in his gloating tone made Dyer uneasy, and when she looked around she realized that his antlered hounds had gathered and were sitting, panting, patient. She began to edge back from them when the priest turned.

"Poor Dyer," he said. "Truly, misfortune walked backwards into your home, for it came with both hands full." He gently set the viper down by the rind of the fruit and took a step towards her. "First your mother falls ill. Your father, at long last, is captured by his enemies. And you, coming in trust to your father's old partner in infamy, are met instead by the righteous minister who replaced him."

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"Ishanki?" she said, voice trembling. "I don't..."

"That name is not mine."

Dyer spun to flee. The dogs howled as they launched themselves after her, but her deceptive host was faster. With one long stride he was upon her, his massive arm swung across the back of her head, and then she was in darkness.



"My name is Nasdin-Yeh," he said as Dyer came to consciousness.

"What?" Her head throbbed. She couldn't think. Her arms and legs were bound. She couldn't move.

"I am Nasdin-Yeh," he said, over a rhythmic rasping sound. "My title is 'Purifier' and I have removed the traitor Ishanki from this plot of sacred land. Unlike him, I am loyal to our great Empress. Unlike him, I have never fallen from the true practice of Setekesh's rites. Ishanki and those like him, the weak-willed and sentimental, have infected the recognized church, driving the truly dedicated and principled into hiding and shame. But our loyalty to the Empress cannot be hid and when we have gained her favor, she will drive out the pretenders and restore us to glory!"

"Why did you tie me up?"

He sighed, and the sound of scraping paused. "I'm trying to show you the larger importance of yourself, and me. Do you think it was an accident that led you here? If it is difficult, in this rural exile, to procure a viper for my conjoining, how much harder is a proper human sacrifice? Your father's fall to grief, your mother's illness, all these things are the will of the goddess!"

"Then your goddess is evil!" Dyer said it before she could stop herself, before she thought how the priest might react to blasphemy. To her relief, he only laughed.

"You think me evil for pursuing the greatness of my faith and my Empire. I think you evil for attempting to follow the footsteps of your nature-rapist father. Laws Winter," he sneered, "Master parasite, sapping the strength of nature for his own selfish gain." The grinding noise began again. "I suspect our relative positions show where the favor of the gods truly lies."

"What are you going to do to me?" she asked, her voice small. Her vision cleared, and she could see he was sharpening a knife. No, in his hands it was a knife. If she held it, it would be a sword.

"You, one human from a teeming multitude, are by yourself... nugatory. Forgettable. Unimportant, as one drop in a rainstorm. But what if an eagle had the reason and memory of someone so ordinary?" He turned a speculative eye on her, and Dyer felt her skin crawl. "I have a cat," he said. "It has been gifted with the poison bite

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of the rattlesnake, which is not so swift or sure as the viper, but it suffices. Cats are, of course, impossible to train. But one with your mind..."

"I'd save my first bite for you." Dyer tried to sound threatening. It didn't do much good.

"If you were to remember, I'm sure. But the hybrid can begin its life of service with an empty mind, one it will be my duty and my pleasure to fill." He squinted at her, tested the knife edge, then looked at the patterns of light and shadow on the floor. "Tomorrow is soon enough," he said. "I'm truly sorry that you must, necessarily, suffer the trepidation of the wait. If you like, I can give you something to help you rest."

"Another blow to the head?"

He winced. "That was unkind."



To his surprise and her own, Dyer eventually fell asleep. The exhaustion of her travels, coupled with a long hopeless cry, had tired her to the point that weary terror could make a seamless transition to uneasy dreams.

She woke to a flexing of her secret sense. It was not sound or light that woke her, nor touch or taste. It was not the scent of the breakfast that Nasdin-Yeh had made himself, but a feeling within, flowing, swelling.

Dyer knew this sensation. Someone nearby was drawing in magic, preparing a spell. Her father had taught her what this eerie, bodiless knowing meant, but the movement of power here was... strange.

When her father had failed to teach her the spell that would drain the strength out of a root and into her own muscles, the flavor of the force had been wild, coarse but vital. It had reminded her of pine scent. This power was vibrant, but it had a focus and intensity she'd never felt before. It entered the temple, not with the abandon of a daisy field throwing forth blossom, but with concentrated elegance. It felt, to her, like an army marching into Nasdin-Yeh's will.

"What are you doing?" she asked. He ignored her. He was chanting and brandishing the huge knife. Dyer threw herself forlornly into her struggle against the bindings on her wrists, but it was futile. A night of confinement had left her hands mostly numb. If she hadn't been able to break the bonds before, certainly she wouldn't now.

Instead of muscle, she tried to contort herself and slip free. When that failed she called out to Nasdin-Yeh that she was hungry, that she was thirsty. He ignored her, Dyer became tired and, to her surprise, she found that she was getting bored.

Yes, bored. She was waiting for a giant to cut her open, doubtless in some religiously symbolic way, but as she kept waiting for it all he did was chant, pray and gesture, over and over. To distract herself, she turned her attention to the flow of

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enchantment, and while that was diverting for some time, once she grasped the pattern he was weaving, she figured it would probably take until nightfall for him to complete it. Hours and hours, with no food or water.

She was tied around a tree that was at the front and in the center of the verdant temple, big around as one of her thighs, rising through the open ceiling to loom overhead like an upraised fist.

"Priest," she croaked with her dry voice. "I need a pot."

No reply.

"I need the *pot*," she repeated. "Surely you don't want me to just let go on your temple tree here. Do you? Isn't that sacrilege?"

He said nothing, but she could see him glancing over his shoulder, reluctantly. More importantly, she felt a waver in the pattern of his energy.

Narrowing her eyes, Dyer started to squirm and twist, reaching for the drawstring of her pants. When, through painful stretching, she got it between two fingers, she pulled until the knot released. She started to work the waistband down to her hips.

That did it. She felt the pattern of magic falter and then scatter, disorganizing into the normal background babble of unbound power.

"What are you doing?" He spun, his eyes dark and annoyed.

"I'm not about to soil my clothes," she said.

"You...! Oh, very well." He picked up his knife, cut her bonds and roughly led her outside, whistling up his dogs as he did.

Dyer watched and thought and hoped hard, but there was no time and no chance to mount an escape. The dogs were around her, the monstrous minister gave her no privacy. But she saw something that gave her a little taste of hope.

The dyers' vine was taller.



"You must think yourself clever," Nasdin-Yeh said, pacing in front of her. "You're not. Tomorrow will do as well as today, and hunger is only going to make you weaker. Your bright little mind will be emptied and put in a creature of my choosing, and you, or the best part of you, will serve holy Setekesh."

Tied around the tree again, Dyer paid only half attention. If she pushed with all her might, she could make the tree sway. The movement stilled as it pulled against the other limbs and tangled vines of the temple walls, but there was a fruit above her and she was hoping that with enough effort it might drop.

He turned back to glare at her and she stopped. "What of water?" she asked him. "You can't sacrifice me if I die of thirst."

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He opened his mouth as if to argue, but then shrugged and left. He returned with a cup, small as a thimble in his massive hands and only half full, but he held it to her lips. It wasn't in her mouth, soothing her swollen tongue, nearly long enough.

"More?"

"Why? So you can insult me clearly?" He snorted and left.

It took her another twenty minutes to get the fruit to fall, and ten more to maneuver herself to it and it to her lips. It was delicious.



The next day, Dyer tried to distract him again, but he ostentatiously stuffed his ears with cotton before beginning his chant. She called to him -- filthy names, blasphemy, sexual suggestions -- but his ears seemed truly stopped, and her voice was weakening anyhow. She frowned, passing the fruit's remains between her hands. It was a smooth wad, round and slightly spongy.

As he had the previous day, he faced the entry of the temple, then processed to the front, past her, studiously looking away. She turned and saw only his massive back. If it went as yesterday, he'd be occupied there for at least an hour.

Dyer whistled.

It took her a few tries before a curious dog poked its nose into the temple. She smiled and whistled and made kissing faces at it. It came closer, cautiously, and she waved the fruit pit for it.

"Fetch?"

She tossed it, best she could with tied hands, and apparently its nature was not so distorted that it had no taste for the chase. It ran the pit down and pounced.

"Bring it back now," she said, her coarse voice as encouraging as she could make it. Soon her wrists were tired and aching from the contorted throws, but she hoped the dog was her friend. Gritting her teeth she began to tease it -- pretending to throw but holding the pit back in her hand. Soon it was barking and jumping back and forth. It had eyes for nothing but that fruit core, dripping with slobber.

There was a game children played in Dyer's town, trying to kick a ball through a hole head-high on a wall. She'd always been good at it and, as the dog leaped and twitched she squirmed until her bound ankles were near to her bound wrists. She dropped it, caught it, worked it between her two feet...

...the dog was watching, entranced...

...she knew she'd have only one chance as she turned her body to aim...

"GO GET IT!" She convulsed from hips and thighs and snapped her feet forward in a double kick, sending the makeshift ball arcing towards Nasdin-Yeh's back.

He turned just before it hit him, and flinched back as his own creature jumped up. She felt his attention snap and she smiled. The spell was lost for another day.

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She didn't smile long. He hit her very hard.



Dyer did not fully wake. She slid from deep unconsciousness to a wordless muddle of images, her mother coughing out the red leaves of the dyer's tree, her father's back as the soldiers led him away, a kitten with rattlesnake fangs and Nasdin-Yeh looming above it all, no longer house-height but vast as a mountain or an ocean...

She opened her blurry eyes, but the sense she relied on more was that extra attention, that attunement to the pulse of the world and every identity in it. She felt the march of power and it was easy to tell where the priest was, and he was swollen with it like a tick, he had drunk far more of it than previously. Everything sounded false, distant and echoing, and all she could see were smears like a painting in the rain, but her sense of touch seemed heightened. She felt the twined vines around her wrists, not just on the surface but the pattern of power moving through them. She whistled for the dog, but the only attention it drew was Nasdin-Yeh. He turned and glared, and even paused in his prayer.

"You'll not cozen my hounds again. They're leashed."

Even as he spoke, Dyer could feel his draw was uninterrupted. She leaned back against the tree, then forward, and nothing happened. She tried again, and again, and then she lost herself in the movement, rocking like a child in mother's arms, full of food and comfort and waiting for nothing. She rocked and rocked and felt the tree start to sway in her rhythm. Then it was so simple to reach down to its roots and drain them, consume them, just as her father had taught. How had she never understood? It was so simple! Why wasn't everyone a sorcerer?

She inhaled a tiny fraction of that questing, stone-splitting strength and she leaned back hard when the tree was at its farthest extension, and she heard it crack.

It fell slowly, its roots instantly decayed through as if by years of worm-bore. She clutched the trunk and the other spell, the armoring one, it was easy too. When the roof cracked and sticks showered down, they bounced harmlessly off her. She laughed as the ceiling collapsed, and cast the third spell. It pulled the climbing prowess out of a creeper for the enchanter's use, and with that strength gone, the vines confining her turned to dust.

The temple was only partially fallen, its roof down but its walls mostly intact. She heard Nasdin-Yeh groaning and snarling, saw a heavy heap of wreckage start to heave as he struggled to get past it to her, but she was too quick. With her borrowed strength and power of easy climbing, she scampered up the north wall and through the hole.

She looked down at the dyer's vine. Curiously, she felt nothing as she uprooted it. She heard the priest blundering out the front, screaming that she wouldn't escape

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him, that there was only one gap through the thorns, but she didn't pay attention. It was the work of moments for her to climb the barrier he thought impenetrable.

She was hurt and hungry, dizzy and delirious. She had an angry giant behind her and a long journey in front, but none of that frightened her. Her mother was ill and her father imprisoned, but she laughed as she ran through the forest, laughed at the knowledge that this burst of energy would fail and she would likely collapse. Somehow, none of it troubled her, for she'd done it. She'd learned her father's lesson. She was an enchantress.

