



The Mana Bond

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Taste the Magic
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“We’ll be executed within the hour, master,” said the apprentice. “We’ve got to think. There must be a way to break out of this cell!”

“No use,” said the master. “Our mana bonds have been cut off. They’ve severed our connections to the land, meaning we have no access to mana. No mana, no magic.” The master snorted. “But count your blessings—they’ve left us fresh gruel.”

“But we’re wizards. We can reestablish our mana bonds from here, can’t we?”

“It’s not that easy, boy. Mana is a wellspring of mystic energy that surges through a location, providing the raw fuel required for our magic. Not everyone can sense or tap into that energy—only those with magical aptitudes, such as wizards. But even wizards must become familiar with a given land to call up its mana reserves. That’s why we spent all last summer traveling across Kephalai—to make you familiar with many, many places, so that you could form a connection with them. We weren’t just sightseeing, boy, if that’s what you thought.”

“No, I remember, master. It was a journey like no other I’ve ever taken.”

“And the last one you’ll ever take,” the master said quietly, as if far away. He watched as a beetle made its way across the stone floor to the bowl of gruel. The beetle paused at the lip of the bowl, its antennae wiggled briefly, and then it waddled off into the darkness of the cell.

The apprentice held his knees and rocked back and forth on the rough stone, causing the leg irons to clink against one another. He must get his master to help him think a way out of this. He couldn’t let this truly be their last hour.



“I remember my first bond quest,” said the master, his eyes far away. “I wasn’t too much older than you are now, but my master was *ancient*. Despite her age, she took me to the Tornadoic Steppes, way up in the northeast. It was even storm season, but she said that made it a purer source of white mana, and that I needed to learn about pure sources like that. She said all the mana around the Lyceum was dull and lifeless, and that it would never lead to any decent magic. I had formed simple bonds to the lands near the campus, of course—Lyceum Forest, the Wetland Trail. ‘Prosaic,’ she called them. So she took me up to the Steppes, and wind tore at our skin and hair, and I formed my first true mana bond. It was the year she died.”

This won’t do, thought the apprentice. He’s giving up. I’m losing him. I have to do something. Keep him talking—rile him up. “But any land can make mana, right? There’s nothing special about the Steppes.”

It worked.

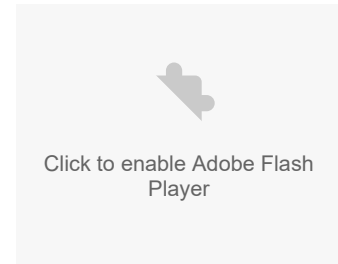
“No, boy, I told you a thousand times,” the master snapped. “Mana doesn’t just come out of any ground. You couldn’t plant a little weed garden and expect a font of green mana to well up out of it. The land has to be infused with *meaning*—either the meaning that nature builds into the world inherently, or a social, emotional meaning. A centuries-old stand of magnificent redwoods, supporting an entire web of living creatures—that will bloom with green mana, sure. Or a tomb where the dead have been laid to rest for generations, and loved ones have cried bitter tears into the flesh-nourished mud—of course you’ll be able to call up black mana there.”

“So it’s a matter of time. Land that has been established for a long time, whose characteristics don’t change for many years, creates mana.”

“No. Not time. I told you—the flow of mana follows *meaning*. Import. Significance. A young grassland will flood with white mana even in its first season, if it is an *important* grassland—like down in Foltessa, the meadow that grew over the burned wasteland where the fire elementals fought. That battle changed the history of



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elementalism in that region—it made the pyromancers establish their Code of Spellcraft. Imagine—pyromancers with a written code! That was an important meadow, Foltessa was. The mages drew courage from its pure white mana that very spring, and knew their Code was right."

The apprentice pushed at the bowl of gruel with his foot. "But... importance. Significance. These sound like human concepts, like humanoid values we instill in the land. What can be important without people? A stand of trees—that can't be important all by itself, with no one to imbue it with meaning, can it?"

The master just laughed.

"Quiet in there!" grunted a guard through the window of the cell door.

The master and the apprentice fell silent for a while. The master stared into space, his eyes turning glassy. The apprentice saw this, and spoke in a low voice.

"So, master, tell me again. How does the mage summon up mana from a far-off land? How can one retain a connection to that land, long after one has left its location? And how—"



The master scowled, shaken from his reverie. "That's the magic of the mana bond, boy. It's the cord that ties a mage to a mana source. Once a mage learns enough about a place, it touches something deep within him. As his soul awakens to it, it aligns itself with the timbre and rhythm of the place. Some people think of it as the connection between the stars, or as the structure of music. Druids call it 'hearing the voice of the land.' That's a poor analogy, but it's as close as anything else."

Three beetles scuttled across the cell floor toward the bowl of gruel. They climbed into the bowl, gathered tiny morsels of food in their jaws, then marched off again into the darkness.

"Why does it persist? Why can it work at a distance?"

"The same reason a melody persists in your heart, or a loved one persists in your memory. The land takes residence in you, becomes a part of you. And time and distance can't diminish your connection. You're bound to that land forever after and can call upon its mana as you need it."

"Except now."

"Except now," agreed the master.

"Our captors—how did they sever our mana bonds? How did they cut us off from those lands we've visited? I still remember them—I remember all those places we saw on our travels across Kephalai. The Scorched Isles, the Vizier's Tower..."

The master snorted. "You *remember*? You remember nothing. Eyeball-images and ear-sounds, from the idiot senses of the flesh. Your *soul* remembers nothing of those places. That's what our captors have done—they've wiped out those bonds between soul and land. Your—my—my mage self has lost touch with itself. My inner eye has... gone blind."

No. "You're not blind, master. You can forge new bonds! You just need to reach out from here—our cell must be near someplace with enough mana to—"

"It's no use. Don't you think I'd have tried? There's nothing around here that I can connect with. I don't even know where we are; no windows, no breezes, no sound. I'm lost. I'm finished, boy. They'll execute us soon, and it'll be over. Let's just sit a while."

"But—"

"Sit."

A line of beetles was marching across the cell floor now, gathering tiny bits of gruel from the bowl and marching off with them again. They formed a glittering procession that led into the gloom of the cell.

The apprentice couldn't help following the beetles with his eyes. They were disappearing into a crack in the cell wall. The apprentice dragged his chains so that he could get closer to the crack, and saw that the bricks were old and loose in the mortar in the small area around the beetles' entrance. With his fingers he chipped some of the old mortar, and was able to pry back one brick, then another.

Beetles scattered, upset by his work. "Master," he said, but kept working. The guards hadn't noticed him yet—he'd have to work fast.

In moments he had revealed a dusty hole in the wall about the size of his head, but it was so full of debris that he couldn't see anything through it. He cupped his hands and scooped rock and dust out of the hole in the wall. It fell freely into the cell.

He gasped.

There, showing through the hole as the debris fell away, was a human skull.

It was upside-down and dented by rocks. It must have been a prisoner from the adjacent cell, who had tried long ago to tunnel into the old stone between the cells. It was an escape thwarted by a cave-in—and after the man died in the attempt, they must have just patched over the hole, walling him up in there rather than extracting him for proper burial. This prison wall was the would-be escapist's coffin.

Gruesomely, the glittering beetles had been using the skull as a nest—the apprentice saw larvae squirming inside the dusty skull cavity, recently fed by bits of his master's gruel.

He saw that other than some loose dust and gravel, the wall was packed solid, with the prisoner's body firmly in the way. Even if he could have gotten free of his leg and wrist irons, he wouldn't be able to fit through the hole—which probably only led to the next cell anyway.

The apprentice slumped. He was just as trapped as ever.

But then, an idea crossed his mind.

"Don't worry, master," he said. But his master had been staring into space again.

The apprentice closed his eyes, and sat quietly for a long while.

When the guards unlocked the cell door and walked in, they saw the apprentice and his master, both sitting motionless on the cell floor. One of the guards held his razor-sharp sword's edge to the master's neck as the other unlocked the master's manacles. The master didn't resist, and sat there dully as they freed him for execution.

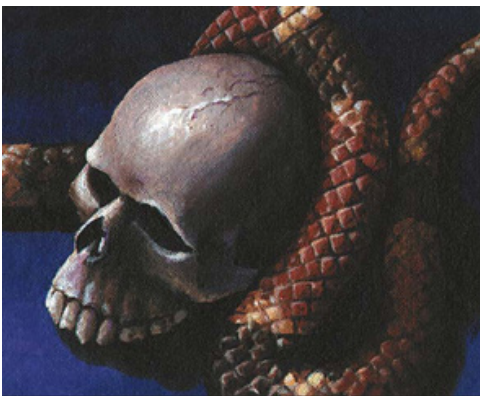
They turned to the apprentice and performed the same procedure. Sword-edge to the throat. Keys clinking in the manacle locks.

The apprentice looked up with dark fire in his eyes. The guard holding the sword groaned horribly as his gut inexplicably slashed open and intestines spilled out onto the cell floor. His sword clattered to the floor, and he collapsed in a heap like a marionette.

The other guard looked on with horror, the keys shaking in his hand. He moved to draw his sword—but beetles had swarmed up his legs and torso, and were covering him. He tried to scream, but beetles clogged his throat. Each of them tore tiny morsels of skin away from the guard, and he withered before the apprentice's eyes. The beetles skeletonized the guard as he fell to the floor next to his cohort.

Free of the shackles, the apprentice rubbed the raw skin on his wrists. "Master," he said. "It's time to go. It's like you said, master—mana can flow from any location, as long as it's important. Meaningful, like this prison. It doesn't take time—only *meaning*." He glanced at the prisoner's skull embedded in the wall. "Thank you," he whispered. "I'll remember you. I'll be connected with this place of death forever."

The apprentice threw his master's arm over his shoulder and helped him to the open cell door.



Letter of the Week

I just wanted to say that after all the suspend nonsense of Time Spiral, it is nice to go to Lorwyn where all the instants and sorceries make sense. Instead of a highly flashy spell like Arc Blade, there are instead spells like Eyeblight's Ending, which to me is much better conceptually and artistically (badass elf trumps recurrent Shock any day). I am wondering if non-magical looking spells are here to stay, or if hyper-magic will muscle out non-magical art again in the future? (Non-magical: Sygg, River Guide, a merfolk who knows how to avoid being seen; Hypermagical: Arcanis the Omnipotent, with the blue lightning/fire emptying out of his sleeves representing his magical omnipotence/excesses.) Will plain old everyday magic find a place in Magic?
-John

Thanks for your great question, John. Here's a secret: The answer to just about every question of the form "will we do such-and-such in the future" is "probably." That's not being flippant—in order to keep the game going in new directions all the time, we have to at least consider every creative idea or artistic style as fair game. Now, note also that "will we *stop* doing such-and-such in the future" is basically the same question—and has the same answer. The pendulum swings one way for a while, and **Magic** is full of sky-tearing dragons and reality-sundering wizards. It swings the other way for a while, and **Magic** is about kithkin preparing little concoctions of herbs and

changelings mischievously appearing in cribs. No matter what kind of "magicalness scale" you like, or any other conceivable measurement of the game and its flavor, it's probably only a pendulum-swing or two away.



All that said, I'd argue that both low-magic and high-magic art concepts have been part of every set of **Magic**. *Morningtide*, for example, has low-magic concepts like **Dewdrop Spy** (a faerie who literally has a little telescope made of a rolled-up leaf) and **Morsel Theft** (a boggart stealing a pie off a windowsill), but it also has its share of impressive high magic like **Sigil Tracer** (a merrow conjuring up glittering patterns of energy in the air) and **Mind Shatter** (a kithkin's head dissolves into a mass of shrieking crows). **Cloak and Dagger** (literally a cloak for shroud, and a dagger for +2/+0—that's a great concept partly because the card was designed around the name) on the one hand, **Lightning Crafter** (a boggart shaman summoning up a raging ball of electricity) on the other. I bet you can find examples of each scale of magic in just about every set.



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