

Experiment One

Kelly Digges

From set *Gatecrash*

The entrance to the lab was an unassuming hatch set in a dank, moss-covered wall. Liana had to double back twice to find it, and when she knocked on the door it swung open with a creak.

“Hello?” she said.

She double-checked the address, took a deep breath of musty air, and stepped inside.

As her eyes adjusted she realized it wasn’t completely dark, but dimly lit by green bioluminescent globes hung from the ceiling. Her footsteps echoed off of cold stone.

From the depths of the lab came an aimless humming.

“Hello?” she said again. “My name’s Liana. I’m to apprentice to Master Ozbolt. Is he here?”

The humming stopped.

“Liana,” said a raspy voice from another room. “That’s a lovely name.”

She frowned, but said, “Thank you.”

“Ozbolt, on the other hand,” said the voice. “That one’s a bit odd. Almost unpleasant, don’t you think?”

A slight and disheveled man, baseline human from the looks of him, stepped into the room, wiping his hands on a spongy-looking rag.

“Call me Florin,” he said, smiling from beneath an impressive pair of eyebrows, and all semblance of menace evaporated. “My first and altogether more welcoming name.”

Florin blinked and looked around. “Ghosts and gods, I’m sorry. It’s dreadful in here.” He touched a mossy patch of wall, and the globes hanging from the ceiling brightened and whitened until the light they cast seemed almost like sunlight.



“A pleasure to meet you, Master Florin,” she said.

“Master,” he snorted. “Oh, if you insist.”

He was an older man, perhaps the age her father would have been, with thinning hair and a stubbly chin. For a master Simic biomancer, aging naturally could be called eccentric, although it didn’t seem to extend to anything really extravagant like a stoop or a limp.

“I’m guessing you don’t take many apprentices,” said Liana.

“Hardly any,” he said. “I can’t say I’m in much demand, and the speakers don’t think much of me, either.” He sniffed. “Presumably, I’m your punishment for something.”

“Not at all,” she said. “I told them I was more interested in compatible philosophy than in any particular field of research, and Master Murat put your name forward.”

“Philosophy,” he said, eyes twinkling. “Now that’s another matter entirely. Tell me about yours.”

“The power we wield over life is staggering,” she said. “And we have a responsibility to create more with it than biological curios. We can make things, like your lighting system here, that can improve people’s lives. We can give them medical treatments unlike any others. We can make life in this city better, for everyone.”

“Ahh,” he said. “Dangerous ideas. Much simpler to toss a few animals together and see what comes out. Much safer. That gets you appointed, gets you publicity. Gets you research grants.”



He grinned.

“But if you’re not here for those things—if you care more about your philosophy than you do about your career—then maybe, just maybe, you can make a real difference in the world.”

“In that case,” she said. “I think I’m exactly where I should be.”

The rat’s front left leg was missing below the elbow, but that didn’t seem to slow it down any. At last, Liana’s gloved hand closed around it, and she lifted it from the pen, ignoring its squeals.

“Subject 23 is ready,” she said. Subject 23 wiggled its whiskers and chittered at her.

“Proceed,” said Florin.

Liana dipped a swab into the vial of ooze in front of her and carefully swabbed it on the stump of the rat’s missing limb. She held the animal out so Florin could wrap a bandage around its ooze-covered appendage, then she set it in a new solitary enclosure.

It wasn’t hard work, but it was a bit nerve-wracking. She hadn’t asked Master Florin where he’d found so many injured rats, but she suspected it had something to do with the Izzet lab tech who stopped by every week or two.



“That’s the last of this batch,” she said, peeling off her gloves.

“Excellent!” said Florin. “I think we’re making progress with this.”

Liana nodded and stripped off the gloves. “This” was an innovative limb-replacement therapy. She’d heard of efforts to graft on new limbs, some of them successful, but this was different. They were using a mimetic ooze to read and ultimately recreate the pattern of the missing limb. It struck her as dangerously close to the forbidden use of cytoplast to transfer genetic material, but Master Florin had assured her that the ooze itself wasn’t contributing or transferring anything, and that left them clear to proceed.

So far, mostly they’d just gotten rats with goo on them, and a few had died of complications. One of them had grown a wing; they’d marked that batch for further testing, although it smacked of contamination more than anything else.

Master Florin stripped off his own gloves, washed his hands in a basin, and beckoned for Liana to follow him into the other room. She knew what that meant.

A few days into her apprenticeship, Liana had pointed out his habit of engaging in philosophical debate right after a bout of practical experimentation.

“Of course,” he’d replied. “The problem with philosophy is that it’s easy to get too abstract. Always get your hands dirty first, to remind you that somebody has to turn your ideas into action.”

“Why do we do what we do?” he asked her now.

She took a breath before answering. She’d learned early on that an ill-considered answer could send the conversation down an unproductive path or, worse, result in homework. A willfully ignorant answer, on the other hand, could do wonders to clarify the question.

“The Fathom Edict states quite clearly—”

“Fah,” said Florin with a dismissive wave. “I already know the prime speaker’s answer to the question. I want to hear yours.”

Personal philosophy, then. Altogether more interesting.

“I’d say Simic, as a guild, operates out of a desire to understand and protect natural life,” she said. “You and I, more than most, are conscious of the fact that natural life includes sentient life.”

“Very much so,” he said. “But what, exactly, does it mean to ethically protect sentient life? The sharks and the crocodiles have no plans of their own; the same cannot be said of people.”

Liana frowned. “True. Then... I suppose the best we can do is try to lift their burdens, give them the chance to live better lives. We can’t tinker with people the way we do with animals.”

“We can’t tinker with *gt;other* people,” said Florin.

He took a deep breath, always a sign that he was about to launch off on a story.

“I knew an Izzet chemister once. A very smart woman. She had a dozen brilliant ideas, any one of which she could have spent a lifetime developing. Naturally, she couldn’t pick just one, so instead she built... well, she called it a ‘neural chronaccelerator.’ Typical.

“She spent years building it, and when she finally got it running, she insisted on trying it out herself. It wasn’t because of a sudden attack of ethics; Izzet test their devices on hapless goblins all the time. It was because the thoughts she was most interested in accelerating were her own, and she couldn’t wait to get started.



“A few hours later, she was dead. Brain fried clear through. But in that time, she took notes, copious notes, on her accelerated thoughts. They found schematics for revolutionary power systems, treatises on experimental theory, and blueprints for devices whose purpose they’re still trying to figure out. In one afternoon, she’d done lifetimes’ worth of scholarly work.

“My question to you is this: did she do the right thing?”

The idea of throwing away her whole life all at once made Liana cringe. But the benefits...

"I wouldn't fault anybody who didn't want to do it," said Liana. "But yes, I think she did the right thing."

"Good," said Florin. "I think so too. But I would imagine her success didn't look quite the way she'd imagined it. That's the real lesson of her story: When you seek to improve the world around you, you start by improving yourself. And when you improve yourself, you may change in ways your prior self would find surprising. Even disturbing."

He leaned forward in his chair, and in that moment she saw something alien and terrifying in his eyes.

"Are you prepared for that?"

"I... I think so," said Liana.

"Good!" he said, and the moment passed, and he was once again a harmless, eccentric old man. "That's enough for today, I think. Maybe you can spend the afternoon with your friend Jovan."

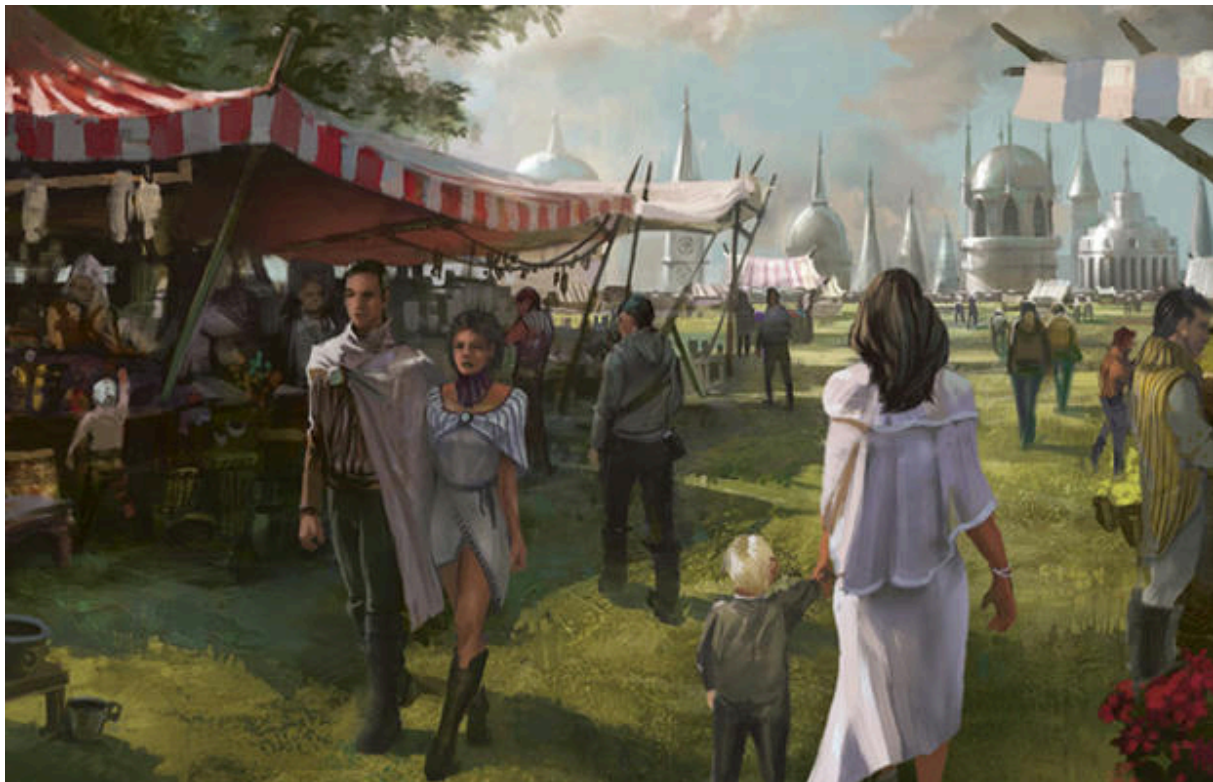
"What... what makes you think I'll see him?"

Master Florin rolled his eyes.

"Biomantic powers," he said, wagging his fingers. "That, and the way you've been talking about him lately."

Liana blushed. "Is it that obvious?"

The Master just rolled his eyes again and shooed her out of the lab.



The next day, Subject 23's ooze-graft had started to grow. Within a week, the rat was scampering around on four paws—three furry, one gelatinous. When Liana showed Master Florin, he smiled bigger and brighter than she'd ever seen.

"In that case," he said, "I'd say we're finally ready to begin."

In fact, his cryptic announcement was somewhat premature. It took several more days of testing and tweaking before Master Florin was content to proceed with the secret project he called “Experiment One.” And even then, he told Liana to take a few days off while he got the lab properly set up.

She returned to the lab on a gray and rainy morning, her cloak just barely keeping out the wet and the chill.

Inside, it was eerily like her first day at the lab: dark and dank, with no one in sight. She hung her dripping cloak by the door.

“Master Florin?” she called.

There were lights on in the specimen room. The lab had looked this way the day she’d arrived, but now she couldn’t shake the feeling that it meant something was very wrong. She walked toward the lights.

The specimen room looked much the way it had when she left: rows of cages, tables with equipment, and several ooze vats growing the organ-replacement mixture.

Then the ooze in one of the vats... moved.

The floor was slick, and she planted her feet carefully as she walked over to the vat. She peered in over the edge, ready to push herself back if it moved again.

There were shapes and colors in the ooze, impurities that shouldn’t be there. A reddish cloud, a dark spindle...

Ribs. Human ribs.

Then the ooze lurched upward, sickeningly fast. She flung herself back along the scum-slick floor as a dark shape rose out of the vat.

“Florin!” she yelled. “Are you here?”

Then the shape opened its eyes, and she understood. Master Florin was here, or had been.

The ooze had taken his shape, just as it had taken the shape of the rats’ missing limbs. It had recreated the dome of his head, gelatinous, hairless, and two translucent arms hefted his bulk above a tangled mass of ooze. Through the surface of the thing’s skin she could see bones and a dissolving web of organs. But the face... the face was unmistakably his, and the eyes were as bright as ever.



“Hello, Liana,” said the thing that had been Florin Ozbolt. Its voice still held a rasp.

She crawled backward, found dryer ground, and scrambled to her feet beside the door.

“What have you done?”

“What I have always done,” said the ooze-thing. “I have bettered myself.”

“Better? How is this better?”

He laughed, a familiar sound made horrible in the mouth of a mound of ooze.

“I can think better now,” he said. “My glands are gone. I can scrape sustenance off the floor as I move. Think of it! No hunger, no adrenaline, no lust, no fear.”

The thing was sliding slowly forward, its eyes locked on her, tendrils of ooze writhing beneath it.

“Already I can see how my experiments were flawed. I was trying to replace organs after they were lost. Now I see that the real problem is the frailty and folly of our natural organs, including the brain. Especially the brain.”

“This is sick,” she said. “You need help. We’ll talk to the council. They can heal you.”

“I am healed!” he cried. “I told you, my dear. To improve the world, improve yourself. And when you improve yourself, the changes may surprise you...”

“Even disturb you,” she said. She shuddered.

“You wanted to make life better,” he said. “I never questioned your dedication. Come, my dear. Into the vat. Remake yourself, and we will remake this broken world.”

He lurched forward, reaching out for her.

She turned and stumbled through the darkened lab, past her still-damp cloak, and out the door, down the street, heedless of the rain.

She did not dare look back.