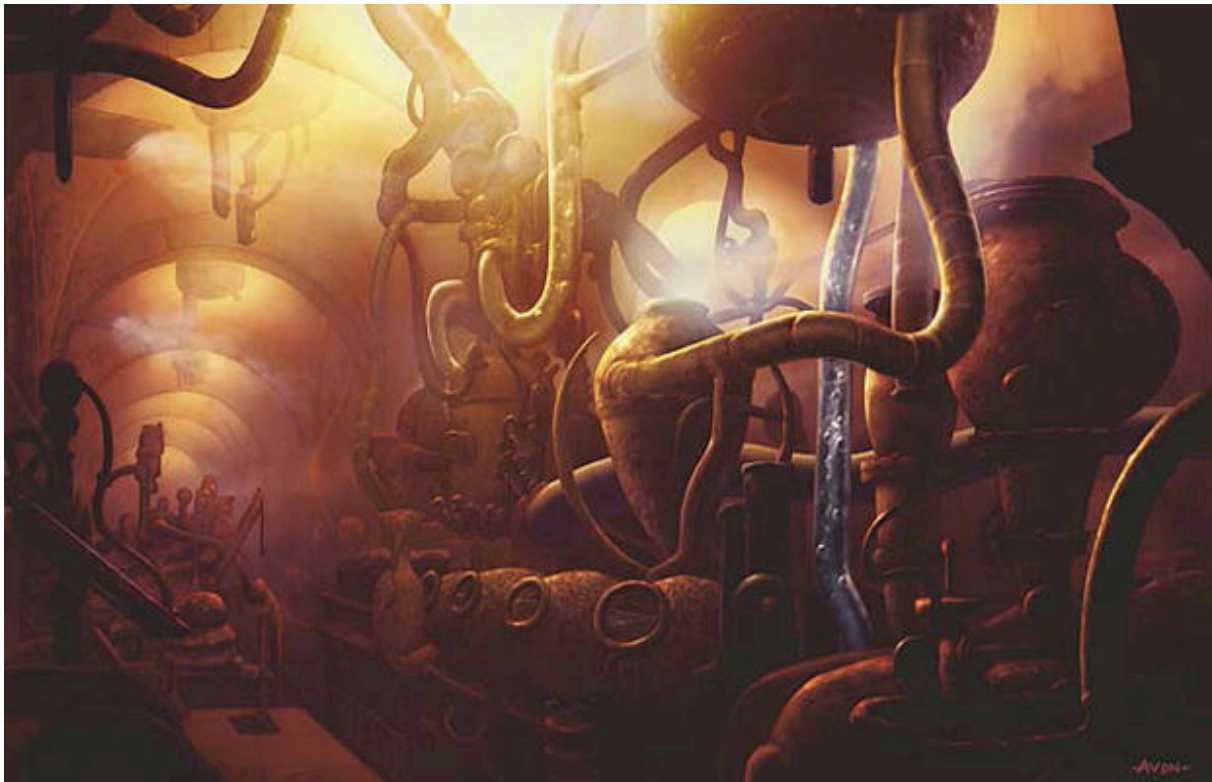


The Pursuit, Part 1

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From set *Dragon's Maze*

A layer of tension permeated the laboratory that made even the signature Izzet hiss of steam and the creaking of countless moving parts seem distant. For the aging guildmage, Madarrak, nothing existed at that moment except anticipation.



Anticipation, and of course the experiment. There's always an experiment. This one loomed in the middle of the laboratory, an enormous mechanical construct that resembled a suit of armor that could have been fashioned for an ogre. But in place of head or helm was an array of control levers, pressure gauges, and a seat, upon which sat a nervous goblin. He watched the goblin go through a sequence of turning knobs and flipping switches. All Madarrak needed was a breakthrough.

A faint whirring sound broke the silence. It started as slight hum but gained in intensity until it became a rumble, more felt than heard. The air became noticeably dry. "Here it comes!" said Castan, a vedalken attendant at Madarrak's side, who strained to be heard over the din. She flicked her goggles from her forehead to her eyes just as a bolt of brilliant blue electricity crackled into being, suspended between two conductor coils that protruded from the construct's shoulders precariously close to the goblin pilot. The strand of electricity danced frantically, and soon other bolts arced out into the lab, forcing Madarrak and his attendant to watch the display from behind a heavy wooden work table.

The goblin cranked a lever. The hulk stepped forward, its heavy footfall ringing as the sound of success in Madarrak's ears. It took another step. And another. It was walking, and it was stable, working just as he had designed it to work.

Then something unintended occurred. The construct picked up speed, and in an instant Madarrak saw it bound across the lab. Before being tossed from his seat, the goblin pilot steered it toward the door. Bursting from the lab with increasing velocity, the construct hurtled down the stone basement corridor and out of sight. Madarrak winced with each crashing step, and Castan ran to the open doorway in time to see the construct smash straight through the stone wall at the other end of the corridor and tumble to the floor, unmoving, in the heap of rubble it created. Errant bolts of electrical energy sporadically crackled across its chassis.



The cleanup went quickly, as destruction was routine in the testing facilities of the Izzet. With the strength of a dozen goblins and Yzaak, the hulking Cyclops in Madarrak's service, the construct was hauled back to the laboratory.

"You were very close with that one, Mentor," Castan said, picking through the rubble of the room. "The Bi-Pedal Conveyance Apparatus will get the attention of the Izmagnus."

"The Izmagnus means nothing to me. Only the attention of Niv-Mizzet matters. But we are close. We will simply have to, um..." Madarrak trailed off. Something in the debris caught his eye. In the gap formed by two fallen wall stones, a light was flashing.

Castan tried to complete her mentor's thought, "Yes, we will fix it. I believe the issue is how the intake of mana is being regulated. Clearly the system could not handle it, but I have a few ideas about how this can be remedied. Mentor?" Madarrak held a plank of wood in his hands, which he used to leverage one of the stones aside. The light, emanating from a palm-sized disk, continued to flash in regular intervals, and Madarrak scooped it up from the splintered remains of a small wooden box that had been smashed to pieces in the collapse. "What did you find?"

"I'm not familiar with it," said Madarrak.

Mentor and attendant stood and observed the flashing light long enough to discern a simple pattern in its regular pulses, which it cycled through over and over again.

Madarrak turned the object over in his hand, and he saw the Izzet dragon icon etched there. Below the dragon were etched three tiny circles, arranged so each one made the corner of an upside down triangle. As he intently studied the shapes, hoping to divine their meaning, or perhaps recall some distant bit of relevant information, the object jolted out of hand and smacked him on the forehead.

“Mentor!”

The old mage reeled backward, and with a force of its own, the object slid toward the hole in the wall. Before it could get far, Castan pinned it under her boot.

Madarrak sat on a stool, hunched forward, with his hands on his knees. This was the highest he'd been in Nivix, the towering guildhall of the Izzet League, in many years. Niv-Mizzet, the Firemind, the Dracogenius, was discussing the object he had found, perhaps even discussing him. The old man's fingers tapped as he waited.

He heard a door creak open, then close. He rose to see a vedalken man, adorned in the signature Izzet blue and red stripes, leaning on a mizzium cane. The vedalken spoke as he closed the distance between him and Madarrak. “Have you ever heard of a hypermana focusing lens?”

“I'm sorry, Chamberlain Pelener?”

“No matter. I didn't think so.” The vedalken, Niv-Mizzet's chief attendant, reached Madarrak. “But you have heard of the chemister, Erno Zslod, correct?”

“Of course,” Madarrak said. “I was new to the League when he vanished while conducting an experiment. I heard he was talented.”



“Quite true. He disappeared testing a hypermana focusing lens, and after some time, it was obviously assumed that something had gone terribly wrong.” The chamberlain reached into his pocket and pulled out the blinking object. “As it turns out, it was not wrong, but an unintended success. You see, Niv-Mizzet recognized this. The Dracogenius explained it to be a homing mechanism, a receiver, created to locate something over even vast distances. You have seen this move, seemingly of its own will, correct?”

Madarrak his touched bruised forehead and nodded. “You see,” continued the chamberlain, “this one belonged to Erno Zslod.” He indicated the three circles on the object. “Apparently, it was sealed away by his attendants along with much of his equipment, and it would have stayed hidden if not your boon of a catastrophe. Niv-Mizzet was transfixed by this for more than moment, Madarrak. He said that the only way this could continue to function was if something still existed to be found. Erno Zslod did not disappear. He teleported. Niv-Mizzet wants you to find Erno Zslod and whatever transported him away, and he wants you to bring them back.” Chamberlain Pelener handed the pulsing object back to Madarrak.

When Madarrak returned to his lab, he wasted no time preparing to depart on his mission for the guild leader. “Castan,” he said, “prepare my things.”

Castan poked her head out from behind a colossal book. “Hmm? Oh, while you were speaking with Niv-Mizzet, I was able to fix—”

“I did not speak with him directly, but we are now on his errand and we are to depart immediately. Quickly now!”

It was quiet outside the cacophony of the Nivix, but in the dank tunnels of Ravnica’s Undercity and interconnecting sewers, the quiet was palpable. The walls were slick with algae that swallowed any noise, giving the air a certain thickness. With a great sense of purpose, Madarrak took long strides into the darkness. Both Castan, a lanky vedalken, and Yzaak the Cyclops, struggled to keep up.



The sewer stretched on for miles, moving ever downward, the trio's steps guided by the regular pulsing of the receiver that struggled against Madarrak's grip. They passed through the tunnels that occasionally opened up into vast caverns, where the darkness pressed in on them. Where the light of their lamps pierced the dark, the architecture resembled twisted reflections of Orzhov cathedrals.

Moisture dripped from the unseen ceiling. A drop landed on Castan's head, slid down her neck to run down her back. She shuddered. "Mentor, you've said nothing for hours."

"With good reason!" Madarrak lashed out in a whisper. "We are close now. All the more reason to remain silent." With a sudden burst of force, the receiver lurched out of the guildmage's hand, clattered to the floor. "Ahh!" He scrambled after it, but it slid out of his reach and across the stones in short bursts of motion. Yzaak leapt forward to protect his master, knocking Castan aside with his bulk. She stumbled, lost her footing, and the weight of her pack pulled her off balance and to the floor, which met her with a soft squish. She quickly moved to prop herself up with her hands, but when they pressed against the floor, a greasy gelatinous substance oozed between her fingers and covered her hands. Eyes widening, she inhaled sharply to scream, but she only sucked in a putrid fume that made her gag and double over in the filth.



“Get up!” rasped Madarrak. “Quickly now!” He had regained possession of the receiver, which he now gripped with both hands. Castan looked at her mentor, who stood, gazing out into the darkness. “We have to move.” Her eyes followed the beam of light cast by her mentor’s lamp. At the other end, eyes stared back. Castan rose to her feet.

“A rot farmer. He may not be interested in us. Let’s keep moving.” Madarrak once again followed the lead of the receiver. The Cyclops fell in line behind. Castan lingered for a moment, just long enough for her to catch a second pair of eyes in the darkness. She quickened her pace.

The insistent receiver brought them to a stone archway that was different from previous passages, in that carved upon the keystone was the insectoid symbol of the Gulgari guild. Madarrak placed a hand on the Cyclops’s shoulder, a habit clearly practiced many times, for Yzaak stooped without verbal instruction so that their faces were level. “Yzaak,” Madarrak said, “wait here. Keep this way safe for us.”

“Mentor?” said Castan, “We do not know what lies ahead. Would it not be wiser to keep Yzaak close?”

“Nonsense. We know what’s ahead. It’s what we came for, and it’s very close now. I do not want that Gulgari scum following us.” Madarrak walked under the arch and again into unknown darkness that would have swallowed him whole if not from pulsing light of receiver that illuminated his frame. “Besides, we are mages of the Izzet League, not cowering pups,” he called back. Castan set her jaw, took a deep breath, and followed the light of her lamp after her mentor, leaving Yzaak behind.

The passage narrowed, though the ceiling remained high enough to be of unknown distance. The ground here was broken up by several crevasses from which thick gray-green vapor billowed. Following a narrow path between the gaps, Madarrak and Castan carefully picked their way across the uneven surface.



At the other end of the passage, where it diverged in opposite directions, the receiver's light suddenly intensified to an almost blinding luminance. It broke free from Madarrak's grip and took off down the path to the left. The old guildmage broke into a sprint. "Quickly now, Castan!" They ran after the glowing disk, which dizzyingly caromed off the walls, floor, and ceiling as it flew. Madarrak's breathing became labored, he struggled to keep the receiver in sight, but he did not break his stride. Castan was right behind him, and they were led through various twists and turns in their pursuit. There was no time to mark their path.

The chase came to an abrupt end when the receiver came to rest on a pile of detritus and muck piled up in an alcove that had been cut into the stone wall of the chamber. The pursuers caught up to it. Hands on her knees, Castan took a moment to catch her breath. Her mentor, however, descended on the pile, digging into it, working furiously to unearth the contents beneath.

"Mentor," Castan put her hand on Madarrak's shoulder. The word came to the old man as a distant murmur. "Mentor. Madarrak!" Cranky, as if woken in the middle of a dream, Madarrak turned to Castan, who was motioning to the wall where a series of crude markings had been scrawled. Madarrak was disinterested, dismissing the distraction with the wave of a muck-caked hand. Nothing else existed at that moment but his redemption, his acceptance back into the Izmagnus. It was buried beneath the filth. He just had to dig. His fingers scraped against metal. His eyes widened, and in a frenzy, he cleared away enough muck to reveal the contours of a helmet. It resembled Yzaak's, complete with a single, circular viewing glass which he wiped clear with a sleeve. Mesmerized, he stared into his own likeness that reflected off the glass.

After a moment, a red glow began to swell from behind the pane. Gradually, it took on the shape of a human face that was distorted in anguish.

The face spoke. Its voice was muted through the glass, but the words still clear. "You should not have come."

"Erno Zslod?"

"You should not have come."