

Testing the Dark Waters

Nicky Drayden

From set *Guilds of Ravnica*

Not all mad scientists are born into money. Some of us have to earn it, and sometimes earning it isn't pretty. As I walk through the sewers beneath the Tenth District, knee-deep in sludge, I ignore the bits of solid waste bumping up against the repellant spell covering my uniform. Instead, I focus on the palatial sprawl of the undercity—the mesmerizing domes, stately columns, and an ornate arch inset with a relief depicting the signing of the Guildpact. It's a dangerous sort of beauty down here, and if it weren't for the noxious gasses and half-million gallons of urine and liquified excrement flowing steadily downstream, I'd say it were charming.

"No time for gawking, I'm afraid," Kel'teth bellows, and I notice I've fallen several paces behind my Gulgari guide. He's the most laid-back troll I've ever met, probably because he's constantly taking nibbles from that patch of iridescent mushrooms growing around his armpits. Eyes calm yet alert, he urges me forth.

A rat's swimming in the sludge next to me. A scream wells up in my throat, but I tamp it down, not wanting Kel'teth to think I'm unfit for this task. A rat's nearly the same as a lab mouse, right? Except lab mice don't have those froth-coated fangs. Those menacing eyes. That *mesmerizing* squeak. I'm overcome with the urge to pet it, right there on its furry snout. My hand reaches out, shaking, just a little closer

A chunk of pitted cement flies past me and hits the rat square in the head with a *sploosh*. It squeals one last time, then sinks down into filth-ridden oblivion. I shake off the all-consuming thoughts I'd had. What the—

"Sewer sirens," Kel'teth says, dusting his hands together. "Rabid as all get-out, but they can't attack you unless you put your hand in their mouth. Best avoid them."

"You know, information like that would have been useful *before* I started the assignment," I say, wiping away the sewer backslash from my lips.

Kel'teth laughs. "If I'd gone and warned you about every little thing that could kill you in the sewers, we definitely wouldn't be having this conversation right now."

I stick closer to my guide as he briefs me on the eight different varieties of flesh-eating water plants that thrive down here and gives me tips on how to avoid getting electrocuted by eels. As we continue, I notice shadows lurking in dank corners, behind pillars, under bridges, and decide that maybe knowledge *isn't* power. I tune out of Kel'teth's lecture and start concentrating on the gear this side job will earn me—my very own ballast of arcane induction. One of those solid mizzium ones, with the dynachromatic retaining bell and double-inversion/instant conversion canister. Real Izzet ingenuity right there, not like the borrowed one I'm lugging around. I'll be able to do analyst jobs like this one three times as fast—detecting and identifying mana traces with ease, which will leave me with more time to spend in the lab.



League Guildmage | Art by: Svetlin Velinov

We cut through a series of keyhole archways, make our way around a moss-covered rotunda, and finally we arrive at our destination. It's massive, and nearly as impressive as the two-story portico it's wedged against. It's a giant raft of coagulated fats and solid waste clumped together into a single mass, clogging the water's flow. Just one of the many fatbergs plaguing the sewers of the Tenth District.

Kel'teth clasps his fingers together, puts them down at knee-height, then gestures at me to take a step up. "After you!"

"Wait. You want us to actually get on that thing?" I adjust the bulky canister I'm carrying on my back, trying to keep the weight evenly distributed.

"Well, you're not going to be able to see it properly from down here. Besides, eels will be coming out of their nests soon. They don't usually attack people, but they'll shock the ever-lovin' chitin out of anything when they're groggy."

I don't need any more convincing and hastily hop up onto the fatberg. Most of it looks hard like rock, though some patches look waxy, some parts have mounds oozing fatty gel, and all throughout, broken and discarded objects protrude from the berg's surface. The entire raft bobs slightly, making me nauseated—though in all fairness, I've been pretty close to vomiting since I first stepped foot down here.

"See," Kel'teth says, "normally, we fly a couple of drakes in to vaporize the bergs, but they've become impervious to electrical magic. This one's been bombed a dozen times, and not a scratch on 'er." He pats a fat protrusion lovingly. "Impressive, isn't she?"

"She's a beauty, all right." A dry heave escapes me. The anti-nausea spell is wearing off for sure. We'll have to make this inspection a quick one. "So, I'll just look around and see if I can find any traces of what's causing this. Okay?"

"Take all the time you need," Kel'teth says, settling down upon the berg. He pops a mushroom cap into his mouth, then molds a fat mound, fashioning a pillow behind him. A relaxed smile smears across his face as he leans back with both arms propped behind his head.

I unholster my ballast rod and tap the mizzium-plated canister slung upon my back. A hum starts up—the background noise of trace amounts of mana dispersed in the air. I grip the rod and wave the receptor coils around, collecting mana remnants until the round glass bell fills with the purple crackle of electricity. The energies cancel out, and the hum fades down to nothing. I'm ready to begin. I aim the ballast's copper receptor coils at the surface of the fatberg, sweeping in slow, steady strokes, back and forth. The canister raises in pitch, a sharp *zip* sound that indicates evidence of an artifact. Dig marks in the berg show it's long gone, though, probably scavenged by Golgari reclaimers.

I keep moving forward. The dreck of the sewers knows no guild divisions. One moment, I'm stepping over a pummeled warthog mask from some Gruul festival, and the next, I'm wincing at the sunburst helmet of a Boros soldier cracked right in two. Eventually I find another spot where an artifact once sat. From the warbling moan my ballast emits, I can tell it's a common Rakdos artifact, likely a half-burned effigy of an unfaithful lover or of an unscrupulous neighbor who'd borrowed a fire poker and forgotten to give it back. Definitely not something with enough magic to affect a whole fatberg.

But then the ballast starts making an odd sizzling noise it's never made before. It gets louder and louder as I reach the end of the berg. I look back at Kel'teth, fast asleep. I should probably wake him and ask him to show me forward, but whatever's causing this sizzle is powerful. Arcane. And something the Izzet League hadn't rigged my canister to recognize. That either means they hadn't discovered it yet or they knew about it and wanted to keep it a secret. Both options are equally appealing. And equally lucrative.

Look, I know why I was hired for his job—figure out what's causing the electric-proof fatbergs and report back to the Golgari so they can fix it, but here's the thing: besides working this job in my spare time, I serve as an attendant to Master Dax Foley, a high-level chemister specializing in arcane metallurgy and practical alchemy. I'm stuck at the bottom rung in the laboratory, one of two humans among a couple dozen vedalken attendants, and I spend most of my day sorting cable connectors and degreasing the turbines and trapping rogue elementals siphoning energy from our lab equipment. I've got ideas, though, more ideas than can fit in my head, but so far it seems like I'll only get to move up when someone dies or retires. The way the other attendants are gulping down rejuvenation spells, neither of those things are going to happen in a long, long time. So, if I'm going to make a name for myself, I've got to take risks.

I step into the sewer water, then follow the sizzle down several pipes, each narrower than the one before. I come to a dead end, water flowing into an old and ornate grate rimmed with ancient code and held fast with rusty bolts that probably haven't moved since Niv-Mizzet still had his egg teeth. Turning back isn't an option, though, not when I'm so close. I release the safety clasp on my canister, and a backflow of stored raw mana slips out and swirls toward the grate. The canister drains, causing the aged metal to glow red hot, and as it expands, the bolts shiver then pop loose into the water.

Three hard tugs, and the grate comes free. I set it to the side and duck in. The flickering light still caught in my glass bell casts dancing shadows upon the curved walls of the tunnel. Shiny surfaces reflect light, but there is one spot ahead that's as black as pitch, floating upon the surface of the sewer water. Threads of magic swirl around it, an ominous red with sparkles of white. A spatial rift.

Too late, I notice several eels headed toward me, weaving their way through the patch of strange plants growing around the rift. I scramble, trying to remember what Kel'teth had said about avoiding electrical shocks water's too shallow here to dive, and there's nothing to grasp onto so I can climb out. Left without options, I hold my ballast rod out in front of me. The entire surface of the water lights up. Electricity flows into the receptors, but they're meant for siphoning trace amounts of mana from their surroundings, not taking the full brunt of an electrical shock. The energy travels up the rod, and the bell explodes into shards. The cannister starts screaming bloody murder, so I unhook it and sling it as

far as I can. It hits the water, and seconds later, an explosion of electrical magic fills the sewer. For a long, long moment, my entire body seizes up and my world goes white.



Steam Vents | Art by: Jonas De Ro

Finally, my thoughts congeal. I look around, neck stiff, skin smoldering. The rift is fine, and so are all the plants around it. Like nothing happened to them. Not a single leaf burnt. Not a single petal scorched. Contact with the rift must have imbued them with immunity to electrical magic. The same immunity must have seeped into the fatbergs over time. I take a few plant samples, shaking with the magnitude of this discovery. Never again will I be ordered to sterilize goggles or spit-shine furnace grates.

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't noticed the pressure mounting within the Izzet League lately, although where it's coming from, I don't know. The Izmundi have been demanding more significant discoveries and faster results, so much so that chemisters have resorted to running experiments day and night for fear of losing their labs. Well, I've got their significant discovery right here, so I'm storming over to see Master Dax, right now, and demanding that he gives me the promotion I deserve. And soon after that, I'll be the one giving him orders.

Turns out the best ideas aren't formed when you've just had ten eels' worth of electricity jolting through your brain. Making nonsensical ultimatums to your boss, drenched in sewer water, frizzy hair gone white at the temples, and dragging four hundred zinos worth of broken and illegally borrowed lab equipment behind you well, that just leaves you standing at the front steps of the Lightning Rod, a box full of your desk belongings in your arms.

I'd watched as they revoked my access spells, took the infinitum key amulets from my neck, stripped me of my gauntlets. Now I'm just a bare-fingered stranger to the building, all the checks and credentials that separated me from Dimir infiltrators trying to steal our inventions and Simic biomancers looking to poach chemisters for their labs, gone. Master Dax can take my job and strip me of my title, but he can't revoke my dream.

So, I've started a laboratory of my own in the boilerpit that runs beneath my apartment building. It's steamy down here, and it reeks of rust and ingenuity. I've scavenged most of the lab equipment I need,

erecting a pair of makeshift mana coils fashioned from of mizzium scraps hammered thin as paper. They're holding for now, though, sending arcs of purple light nearly to the ceiling. I've baited traps for the electrical elemental I've heard flickering past in the quiet of night. Yeah, the lab isn't much to look at, but it's coming along. All I'm really missing is one last thing.

A knock comes at the door.

In that box of desk belongings, I'd managed to sneak something past the Izzet guards who'd escorted me out of the building—lab mice. Dead ones. Their little furry corpses tainted with the residuals of experimental magic. With the right coaxing, they often don't stay dead, which makes them highly valuable to Gulgari reclaimers. I'd traded with a young reclaimer, six ripe mice for him to find me a blastseeker willing to wield magic creations in an unsanctioned lab for an unconscionable amount of money. I don't expect much, but anything's better than risking blowing up half a city block trying to do it all on my own. Again.

I answer the door. She's even less than I expected, slightly built, and doesn't look like she could lift a spectral converter if her life depended on it. But after my own experiences of being discounted again and again, I know people can be much more than they seem. I smile. "You're here for the blastseeker position?"

"I'm here if you're paying," she says, a gleam in her eye. "Tamsyn Sweeney. Call me Tammy, and we've got a problem."

Straightforward. I like her already. "You've got experience?"

"Five years working at the Crucible as a blastseeker. After that, two in the Foundry."

"References?"

"None that would be caught dead talking to the head of an unsanctioned lab."

Fair enough. "How about a practical test, then? Just to see if we're compatible?"

We work for three hours straight, getting all the components of my experiment set up. Tamsyn is meticulous. She helps me hypercharge the mizzium coils, cranking the handle with a fervor I've only seen in goblins. Then she slices my rift specimens with incredible consistency. I lay them in a shallow trough of rarified vacuole penetrants and then watch as the rift magic separates from the cellulose. Tamsyn even helps me to bolster spectral fields on the electrical orbs we'll use to administer the shocks. Finally, after we've run the serum through the centrifuge and filtered out the organic contaminants, we dispense it to the mice.

We wait a full five minutes for the serum to take effect, then Tamsyn hefts the spectral converter with ease and conjures an orb of electricity. It bobs in the air like a ball of honey-colored lightning. The mouse looks anxious with those pale, pink eyes, then Tamsyn lets the orb rip. The mouse lights up like a fire elemental, so bright my goggles warm around the edges. Electricity surges with a violent force into that tiny creature, and it doesn't even twitch a whisker. It's completely impervious to electricity.

"Not even a single strand of fur is scorched. This is amazing! We have to take this to the—" I stop short. We can't do anything with these results. No one's going to take this finding seriously, not without humanoid trials. And I can't conduct those without board approval.

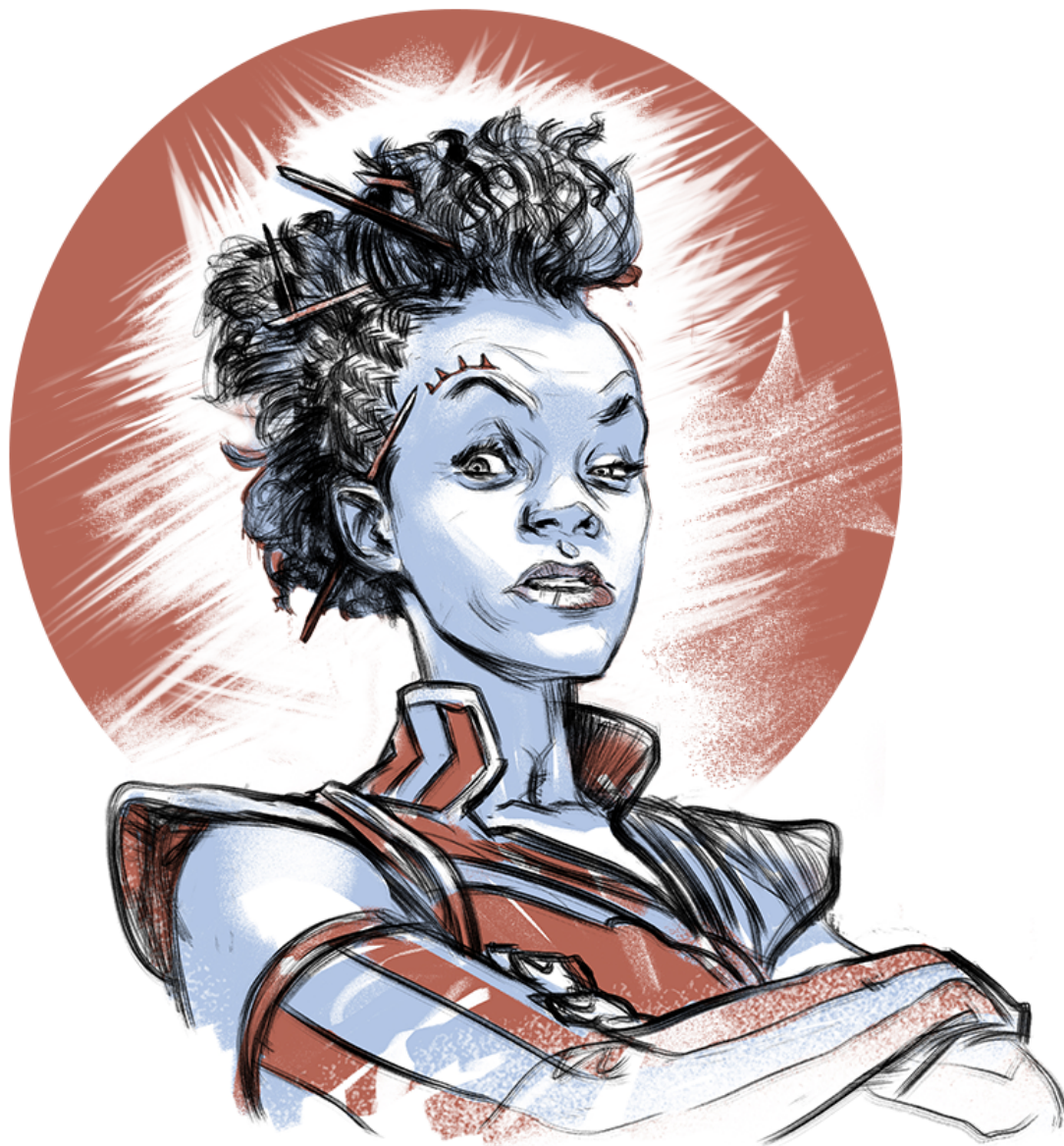
"What?" she asks.

"Nothing." I say, biting my lip. Greatest discovery of my lifetime, and I have to sit on it. I'll apply for official sanctions, of course, but that'll take months. The Gulgari will stumble upon the truth well before that, and all of my dreams will be dashed once again. I sigh, then go to euthanize the mouse for dissection, not my favorite part of the job, but you get used to the killing.

"I've got it," Tamsyn says, stepping in front of me. She puts a white rag against the mouth of a bottle of stonemaker vapors, turns the bottle over, then expertly smothers the mouse so fast, it doesn't even realize what's happened. The way she moves, so comfortable in her own skin, you can tell she's got tons of lab experience.

"If you don't mind me asking," I say, a little hesitant, "why do you want to work in an unsanctioned lab? With skills like yours—"

"Skills like mine got my last chemister killed. It was an accident, but the board didn't see it that way. They took away the things I held most dear." Tamsyn holds her bare palms out. The discoloration from the amplification stones imbedded into the gauntlets she'd once worn are painfully familiar to me. My heart nearly reaches for hers, but I stiffen up, keep emotion out of it. I can't afford to hire her, even with the pittance I'd advertised. Now is not the time to complicate things.



Art by: Wesley Burt

"Well, thank you for coming," I say. "I'll let you know about the job next week. I've got a couple more applicants to interview."

"Are you serious? After what I just did?"

"It was impressive, I'll admit, but it's only fair that I—"

"I need this job, Leighbet. Maybe I'm desperate, but you are, too. That's why we'd make a great team. You've got the big ideas, but you need someone who's good with details and who knows how to game the system. Sanctions aren't the only way to get laboratory approval. I know some people who know some people. I can get your lab declared an Innovative Niche Workshop."

"You know how to do that? How?"

"Hire me, and I'll tell you. You've got something special here, and I want to be a part of it. Please, you won't regret it."

Oh, I know I'll regret it, but you can't dangle lab approval in front of a self-proclaimed chemister and expect her not to bite.

"I'll take care of you, you'll take care of me," Tamsyn says. "Long as my paycheck is on time, we've got no problems, right?"

"Right," I say. Izzet League likes its oversight and its protocols, but the rules are made to be broken.

Tamsyn has worked wonders. The Laboratory of Elemental Metastream Dynamics and Coil Field Fractalization is now one of the labs officially recognized by the Izmundi. Yes, it's a mouthful, but Tamsyn had said that the more descriptors I used, the less likely it would be for someone to scrutinize what we are actually doing.

My incredible blastseeker steps into the lab and catches me admiring the place. "A couple things I need to tell you. Nothing big," she says. "If anyone comes knocking, asking for a Master Chemister Becham, tell them she's away at a conference and won't be back for a week. And the official number of attendants we have is twelve. Memorize their names and the errands they're out running. Each has a backstory to make them more believable. Lastly, if you're caught and interrogated, you never knew me."

I laugh. "Did you blackmail a member of the board to get this pushed through, or what?"

She doesn't laugh back.

I keep laughing, but more like a chuckle now. "But you didn't, right?"

"I thought you were serious about your science, Leighbet." She stares me down. I don't dare blink. "I took the liberty of putting out an ad for test subjects. They're all in the waiting room."

"We have a waiting room?" I peek out the door into the hallway, and sure enough, three goblins and two humans are out there sitting on wooden crates. I give them a tight-lipped smile, then duck back in the lab. "You got people to actually show up? For free?"

"I mentioned two hundred zigs in the ad."

"Two hundred zigs? Each?"

"This will work, Leighbet, and when it does, money will no longer be an object."

I nod, her certainty reassuring me. I carefully measure and administer the serum to each of the test subjects, documenting everything. Someday, historians will want to know more about the discovery that propelled me from humble attendant to master chemister.

Tamsyn and I stand shoulder to shoulder, waiting nervously for the serum to kick in. My gut churns if this works, no *when* this works, I'll go directly to the board myself to give them a demonstration.

Tamsyn steps up to the first subject. “I’m going to give you a slight shock. Please tell me if you feel any level of discomfort.” As brusque as she is, she’s great at putting the test subjects at ease. Even the hard edges of her facial features seem softer.

The goblin nods—kind of cute with her long, sloping nose, bright yellow eyes, and brass rings in her left ear. Tamsyn picks up the spectral converter, dials it down to one, and conjures up an orb no bigger than a coat button. Gently, she urges it toward the goblin, who is shaking, her green skin gone ash gray. The orb hits her in the shoulder, then vanishes without note.

“Did you feel anything?” Tamsyn asks her.

“No!” she says, nearly jumping out of her seat. She settles, looking bashful. “Sorry, this is my first time being a test subject. I’m a little nervous.”

“You’re fine,” Tamsyn says with a reassuring chuckle as she sets the dial to four. “Okay, I’m going to try a slightly larger shock. Remember, please let me know if you feel any pain whatsoever.” The orb is the size of a drake egg now and hits the goblin in her chest this time. No effect.

“A bit of a tickle, maybe?” the goblin offers.

“Okay, this is going to be a big one. You’re sure you’re okay to continue?”

The goblin nods again, with more confidence this time. Tamsyn dials all the way up to eight, and as the full-sized orb nears our test subject, it’s me who’s shaking.



Invert // Invent | Art by: Mathias Kollros

The blast hits her in the head—a surge that should have knocked her unconscious, but she sits there, mouth agape. “I felt something. Like a tap to the forehead.”

“Did it hurt?” Tamsyn asks, offering the goblin a cup of water to calm her nerves. The goblin drinks it down rapidly, still trembling.

“Not a bit. This is amazing. What was in that stuff you gave us, anyway? I mean, I know you can’t tell me I’m trying to get an attendant job myself. It’s so competitive out there, but I’m not giving up!”

"I'm sure you'll be on the other side of these experiments in no time," Tamsyn says. "Now, if you'll have a seat back out in the waiting room, we'll finish up with the other subjects and then get your payments processed."

"Sounds great!" The goblin shuffles off, a lightness in her step.

The other four tests go exactly the same, successes all around. For good measure, Tamsyn rams five quick bursts into the last subject's chest, no response. Tamsyn and I look at each other.

"This is it," I say. "We've done it!"



Radical Idea | Art by: Izzy

"We have."

"This is perfect! Only the test subjects are all out there waiting on their money." This isn't going to be pretty, but I can tell them the paperwork still needs to be processed, and it'll take a few days. I'll hit up some early investors, and then—

"Leighbet." Tamsyn says my name like I'm an impetuous child. "Imagine what would happen if we let them go out into the world with rift-tainted magic. It'd be traced back to the source, for sure. You used to be an analyst. You know how relentless they are. Then where would that leave us?"

"But what can we do about it? Quarantine them all? For how long?" If the League gets wind of the source of the rift magic, all my leverage is gone. I could kiss my career prospects goodbye. Then, slowly, slowly, I see what Tamsyn is trying so hard not to say. This is still my project. I am in charge. If an order like this is coming, it has to come from me. "There's only one way we can ensure that these finding don't get out," I say.

Tamsyn nods.

I think of the lab mice I've euthanized over the years. Hundreds. Thousands. At first, it was hard. I felt awful, but I guess it became routine at some point. We're not talking mice here, though, we're talking people. Five souls, standing in between me and greatness. If I do this, if I step over this line, there's no going back. My brain whispers to me—all these horrific thoughts, and I'm listening to them,

then entertaining them, and finally agreeing with them and those small steps have made the leap to villainhood more accessible.

It will take both of us to hold them down while we press the cloths to their faces. I pick up the bottle of stonemaker vapor. Four doses for each test subject should be enough. Then I remember the light in the eyes of that chatty goblin girl, with her own dreams and aspirations “Tamsyn, sorry, I don’t know if I can do it.”

She seems disappointed but not surprised. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to. I already gave them all a hyper-concentrated dose of sleep elixir laced with an ethereal death accelerant.” Tamsyn carefully stacks the five empty cups and tosses them in the waste bin. “They went gently, peacefully. It’s not like we’re *complete* monsters.”

I’m fully unprepared for how cold my heart feels in the stifling, steamy heat of the boilerpits.

I’m not sure what I’ve gotten myself into, but I know how to get myself out. All I need is two thousand zigs to pay Tamsyn the money I owe her, then I’ll shut down the lab, have a mind mage wipe my memories, and get on with my life. My options are limited, and my time is short, but there’s one way to get money in a hurry. I scour the postings for test subjects at the Crucible, looking for the highest paying experiments. I sign up for as many as I can and hope for the best. The first couple go without a hitch—the twenty injections down my spine barely hurt, and that minor explosion when fire and water magic had mixed I hadn’t really needed all my eyelashes anyway.

The third experiment, I find myself trekking through the heart of the Simic Combine. To say that I have reservations is an understatement. Pushing the boundaries of elemental science is one thing, but tinkering with bioengineering gives me pause. It’s dangerous. Unnatural. But Simic biomancers pay test subjects three times as much as Izzet chemisters do, so I soothe my fears by imagining the seven hundred zigs soon to be clanging in my pocket.

Their labs make my skin crawl, great vats of blue-green liquids, silhouettes of something moving inside with more arms and legs than anything ought to have. The amount of paperwork they make me fill out is daunting—a full medical history, a psychiatric profile, and a liability waiver requiring the contact information for my shaman in case of emergency and a description of burial rituals, should the worst happen. I’m on the penultimate page of the final questionnaire when I come to a stumbling block:

Have you been exposed to any regrowth helixes or irradiated enchantments in the past seven days?

My hand trembles, but I mark “no” even though I had a dose of each in my experiments this morning. I can’t afford to skip out on this one. They administer the test, hooking me up to a half-dozen hoses and tubes, delivering their mystical potions to my veins. I immediately feel lightheaded.

“Everything’s all right? Are you okay to continue?” the lead biomancer asks. He’s human, but reptilian scales glisten all along his skin. His lidless eyes are as black as that spatial rift had been, and I fear I might fall right into them.

I swallow my nerves and nod. Every single one of my arm hairs starts to itch as Simic magic transforms me from the inside out. The tingling sensation hits me in the marrow of my bones, and before I know it, my teeth are reshuffling, becoming jagged and ragged like a mouthful of fangs. My spine is twisting, growing, each vertebra lengthening, reaching out into sharpened points, and the warm brown of my skin turns an ashen gray, rough like old leather. I stare at my hands as silver-blue claws erupt from my nailbeds.

“Something’s definitely not right,” the biomancer says. “You’re sure you haven’t been exposed to regrowth helixes lately?”

I try to answer him, to admit that *maybe* I had, but there's so much froth spilling out of my mouth, I can't talk through it.

Disoriented and terrified, I rip the tubes from my arms. The biomancer tries to subdue me, but I drag my claws through his lab coat, through his scaly flesh, then flee as fast as I can. I rush down the corridor, hundreds of bloated faces staring out at me from fluid-filled growth vats. The corridor opens into an atrium with a large reflection pool that casts shimmering light all around me. I feel like I'm drowning. I fight my way to the exit, gasping for breath as the air hits my face, but I don't stop running. There's only one place deserving of a monstrous wretch like me. The sewers.

I cower in the deep shadows of a bridge pile, half submerged, half out of my mind. I'm so hideous, even the sewer sirens won't come near me. I think this is the end, that my life can't get any worse, but then Tamsyn rounds the corner, spectral converter conjuring an orb that lights up the sewer. Shadows dissipate, and I am seen.

"Leighbet," Tamsyn says.

"Tamsyn," I reply. "I'm still short on your paycheck, but if you give me more time, I can—"

"You know this isn't about money."

Yeah, I got that feeling. "Back when you told me about accidentally killing your chemister that was a lie, wasn't it?"

"You got me."

"You killed him on purpose?"

"There was no chemister, Leighbet. I never was a blastseeker." Something foreign ripples beneath her skin, and that feeling I'd had, about her moving so comfortably within her own body, all of that drains right out of my head. "And I never worked in the Crucible or the Foundry. Too many deterrents and security measures. But small labs like yours are easy to infiltrate, and if you time it right, you can catch a genius on the rise "

"You really think I'm a genius?" I say, then shake off the stroke to my ego and concentrate on what's important. "You're a shapeshifter?" And then I realize. "A Dimir spy."

"In the flesh," Tamsyn says. Her skin ripples again. "At least close enough to it."

Damn. And she was so good in the lab. Really knew her stuff. I take a deep breath. "Now when you said 'genius,' did you mean in a literal sense, or—" But before I can get clarification, I catch a glimpse of something approaching us fast—wings crack like sails bitten by storm winds, yellow eyes burn like fire. An arc drake, sent down here to break up the fatbergs, is flying right toward us. Electricity crackles on its breath, then I see it take a big inhale. "Drake!" I scream.



Crackling Drake | Art by: Victor Adame Minguez

“You think I’m really falling for that?” Tamsyn says. The electricity within the converter pointed at me warbles a deep and menacing tone.

I don’t have time for fear. My mind’s cycling through the electrical safety rules my sewer guide had briefly covered: *Able to climb, get out in time. In the water, dive like an otter.* I dive deep, hold my breath, and hope for the best.

Electricity is unpredictable, indiscriminate, and a natural-born killer. It snakes through the sewer water, through me. My entire body clenches up so tight, I feel like I’m about to snap in half. Finally, when it releases, I’m overcome with a thirst so intense that I must force myself not to guzzle mouthfuls of sewer water. My heart’s okay, and my brain mostly, but I don’t mistake my luck for any sort of mercy. I’m struck again, this time in the gut with a fist. My lungs expel the air I’m clinging to as “Tamsyn” rams into me. Bubbles escape to the surface, and I try to do the same, but she’s got a hold of me, dragging me back down. I scratch and claw my way back up to the surface, and she butts her forehead into my chin, and while I’m trying to shake it off, she’s conjured another orb.



House Guildmage | Art by: Winona Nelson

“A mind like yours is a terrible thing to waste, but your serum is a Dimir discovery now. Goodbye, Leighbet.”

I don’t know why, but the thought of losing credit for my discovery scares me worse than the thought of losing my life. I look down at my claws—sharp, intimidating. I’m no berserker, and until now, I didn’t have a feral bone in my body, but that doesn’t mean I’m going down without a fight. I lash out at Tamsyn, swinging at her face. She ducks, then sends an orb straight into my stomach. I hunch forward with the pain it brings, a deep, pulsing cramp that makes the edges of my vision go white. I push past it, make another go at it. My claw catches skin this time, barely, drawing a line of pale-green blood. Almost instantly, the wound knits back together. She dials the spectral converter two clicks past the max, then conjures a giant orb and moves it slowly toward me.

This isn’t working. I’m a thinker, not a fighter. If I’m going to best her, it’s going to have to be with my mind. I back up as she approaches, but then, something squishes behind me—a fatberg completely blocks my exit. I’ve got no choice, so I turn, sink a claw into the top, then sling myself up onto the surface. I’m completely exposed, but I’m faster up here, and I’m able to duck as she fires at me.

Tamsyn is trying to mount the fatberg as well, but I rock back and forth, making it more difficult. She slips back under the water. I try to make a run for it but trip over an old welding jar. It’s heavy and made of thick glass. I start looking around, surprised the reclaimers hadn’t scavenged this fatberg yet. Among the usual debris and trash, I catch sight of several objects that could be useful with a little inventiveness and elbow grease. I look at the welding jar again. Only a few remnants of solder remain inside, but the jar itself can serve as a retaining bell. If I can find enough pieces, I can build a makeshift ballast to absorb the shock from Tamsyn’s orbs.

Her head peaks up, and she lobbs an orb at me. It grazes my leg, which goes stiff and hurts so bad, I’m barely able to stand. I raise the welding jar like I’m about to throw it at her, and she ducks back under. I don’t have much time. She won’t fall for that twice.

I shuffle over to an old trident wedged into the berg. The shaft is splintered and already plucked of its inset stones, but I can still feel the sizzle of magic working through its veins. It would make an

excellent rod for my ballast. Two cracked mana coils might work as receptors. I don't think anyone's ever tried that, but I have to make do with what I've got. The solder is old, so I poke it back to life with a small jolt of crafting magic. Finally, it creeps forward, joining the bell to the trident, and just as the final piece worms its way down to the coils, I look up and see Tamsyn has found her way onto the berg. I heft my ballast up to fight, but it's nowhere near ready.

I point over her shoulder, and my eyes go wide. "Not again!"

I dive flat, like those drills you learn as a kid to minimize your chance of getting struck by lightning when an arc drake is on the loose. Tamsyn looks back over her shoulder, squinting into the darkness, and then I jump up and seize both my ballast and the moment as I take a fierce backswing then throw my entire body into it as the welding jar makes contact with her jaw. She spins, once, twice, then plunges face-first into the gritty sewer water. Nice hit. Would have knocked out a human, but a shapeshifter, I'm not so sure.

A proper ballast would have a cannister to store the charge, but there's no way I can jury-rig something that complicated. But if the Warwitt-Isley principle of microfractural gains and allowances holds true in less than ideal circumstances, I might have a chance if I can find something to redirect the energy. I see a piece of refuse that might work, half buried in a mound of fatty gel. I step over and wrench it free. It's the end cap to an old boiler tank—a rusty mess on the bowed-out side, and the inside is mizzium plating painted on so thin it wouldn't be worth the effort to remove. All those years of spit shining furnace grates finally comes in handy, and in no time, the mizzium gleams, providing a nice, concave surface for the magic to flow across.

Tamsyn catches me off guard, coming up from the far side of the berg. I don't have time to attach the cap, so I just hold onto it for dear life. When the next blast orb comes, I meet it with my makeshift ballast. Electricity slides into the receptors, up the rod, then collects in the bowl of the cap. For a brief moment, both Tamsyn and I stand there, stunned that it actually worked, but then she's barreling toward me with a vengeance, arms outstretched, another orb ready to fire. Before my charge can dissipate, I sling it at her, and the blast surges forth and hits her in the chest.

Her whole body lights up. The impact sends her flying in one direction, and the cap goes careening in the other. I blink away the ghost images of Tamsyn temporarily burned into my retinas then see my real enemy trying with all her might to get back onto her feet. But before she can, I jam my knee into her back, pull her head up by the hair. The feral monster inside me reels, demanding revenge, but when I look down at my arms—my skin is smooth again, my nails are nice and blunt, and I realize the awful effects of the experiment have worn off. I am back to my normal self but I still feel *changed*, and I'm pretty sure I can't blame it all on Simic magic.

"This is my discovery," I hiss at her. "I can't let it fall into Dimir hands."

"I won't tell anyone, swear it," she pleads.

"I know you won't, Tamsyn," I say to her, and I become like lightning—unpredictable, powerful, merciless—all those things that make it both beautiful and deadly. Like with the mice, the decision to kill is easier this time, and as Tamsyn's vertebrae snap, I take comfort that she doesn't know pain for long. I step back and watch her corpse as the spells that held her human form fade away. The body lays there, a treasure for the reclaimer that will eventually happen upon her. I gather what's left of my makeshift ballast to take back to my lab. A little tinkering, and I'll have *two* discoveries to bring before the board, and if they don't accept my findings

The monster inside shifts beneath my skin. Together, we will make a great team.