

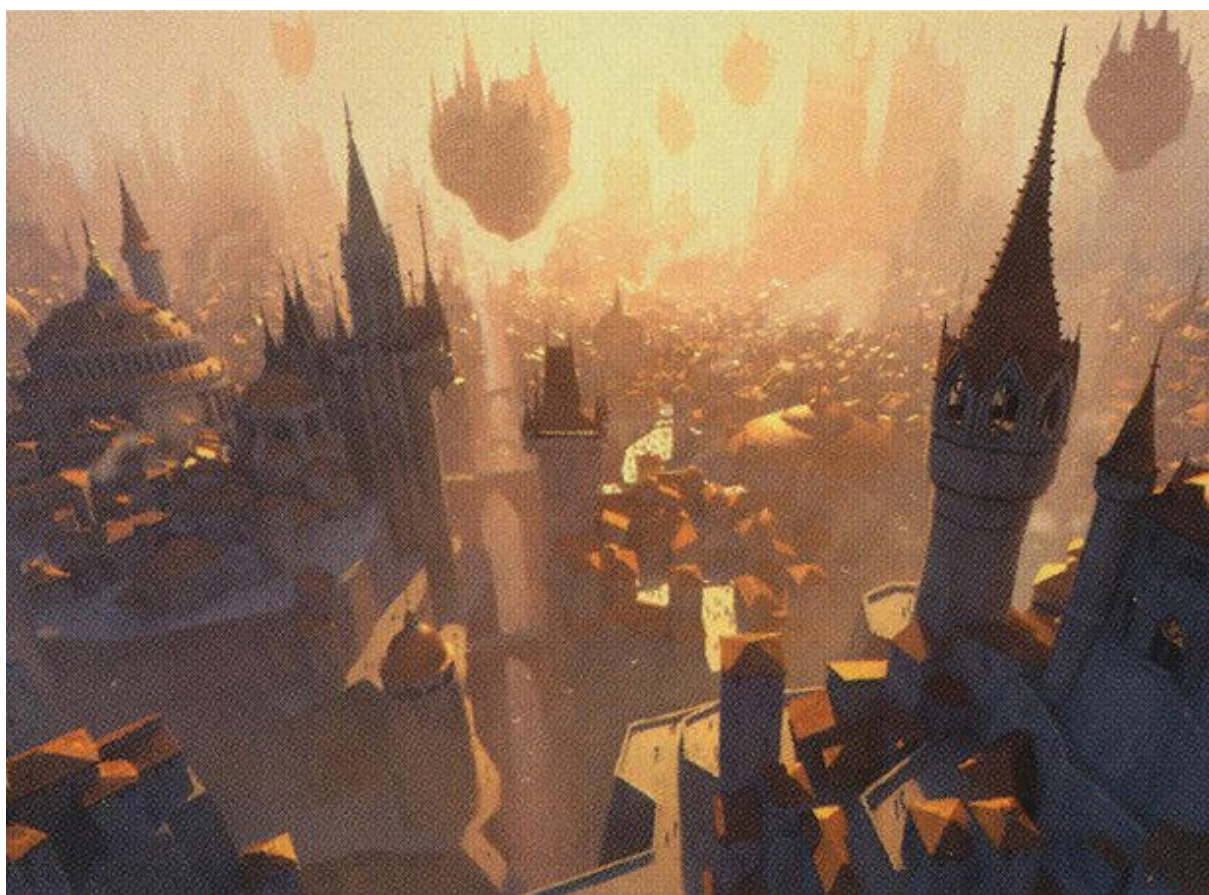
Rogue's Passage

Tom LaPille

From set *Return to Ravnica*

Tanek awoke lying shirtless on his back. The smoke-masked sun was already high in the sky, and the exhaust pipe next to him blasted a long jet of steam.

He looked around—the others who slept on the rooftop were long gone. He checked his left pocket for his coin purse, felt behind his head for his balled-up shirt and through the hole in his right pocket for the razor tied to his leg. Everything still there. Good.



Plains | Art by Richard Wright

The roof had been a lucky find. In good weather, it was much better than sleeping on the ground, and when it rained there was enough of an overhang to curl up under. Those who slept on the rooftop occasionally traded tricks, although not too often. He liked it there. It felt safe. Or at least as safe as one could get.

Tanek's stomach growled and he felt lightheaded. Paying for food was always disappointing, but working on an empty stomach was too dangerous. He sat up, pulled on his ash-stained shirt, and dumped his ratty coin purse out onto the rooftop. Someone had shaved the edges of his Boros-made five zino coin, but not enough that most people would notice. He was saving that one for an emergency. The three one-zino coins were of Azorius mint and a relatively new design. The symbol extended higher off

the face than it did on the older coins; someone with a sharp knife and a steady hand could probably shave it down, although he hadn't seen anyone try it yet. There were also a few fifty and twenty-five zib pieces. He could get a stick of grilled meat and an apple for forty zibs. That would have to be enough for the morning.

He descended a broken ladder off the side of the rooftop, jumped to an awning a few feet away, and climbed down to the street. It was amazing that most people didn't think to try to get up there, but then again, most people didn't know that alley existed. He trotted down the alley to a dead end, crawled through a hole in the wall just above ground level, squeezed between two bushes, and emerged onto the street.



Rogue's Passage | Art by Christine Choi

Tanek made his way through the busy streets to the smelting district marketplace. An onslaught of sounds and smells, the marketplace served as both a place for the guildless metalworkers to sell their wares and a place where their hired help could buy lunch. It was also something of a thief's paradise, although there weren't so many pickpockets around that the authorities paid attention. Tanek knew most of them, and a few who lived on the rooftop with him were already at work. Migen was talking to a tall man while Erika darted away holding something. Ivo crouched in a nearby shadow, watching. Tanek smiled and melted into the crowd.

It wasn't quite lunchtime, but some workers on break were already there. A pack of jabbering goblins in brown uniforms mobbed around a pastry vendor and a hulking minotaur in an ash-stained smock haggled with a woman selling whole, roasted chickens. There were also a few guild members present, although in this unaligned part of the city they stood out like spires in the skyline. An elf wearing green and white spoke with a swordsmith and a stuffy-looking vedalken woman in Azorius colors

negotiated with a jeweler. There were also a few Boros patrolmen—at least three Tanek could see. They were observing someone. Tanek prepared to bolt, but they weren't looking at him.



Armory Guard | Art by Karl Kopinski

As Tanek pushed his way through the crowd, the object of the patrol's attention came into focus. Two chunky Orzhov thugs with shaved heads were harassing Busa, Tanek's favorite chicken vendor. All three men were talking in raised voices, their arms flailing, but Busa was clearly on the defensive. Someone with an uncovered basket of fruit paused while walking by, distracted by the row. Tanek grabbed an apple off the top and pocketed it, then slid toward the racket.

The toadies had moved on by the time Tanek got there, but the rest of the crowd was still leaving Busa a wide berth. Tanek approached with a sheepish smile. "One stick."

"Twenty-five zibs. Actually paying today, eh?"

He shrugged. "I can't work on an empty stomach." Busa put a stick of nearly cooked chicken on the grill. "And besides, I like your food. What was that about?"

Busa's face fell. "Ambroz's thugs again."

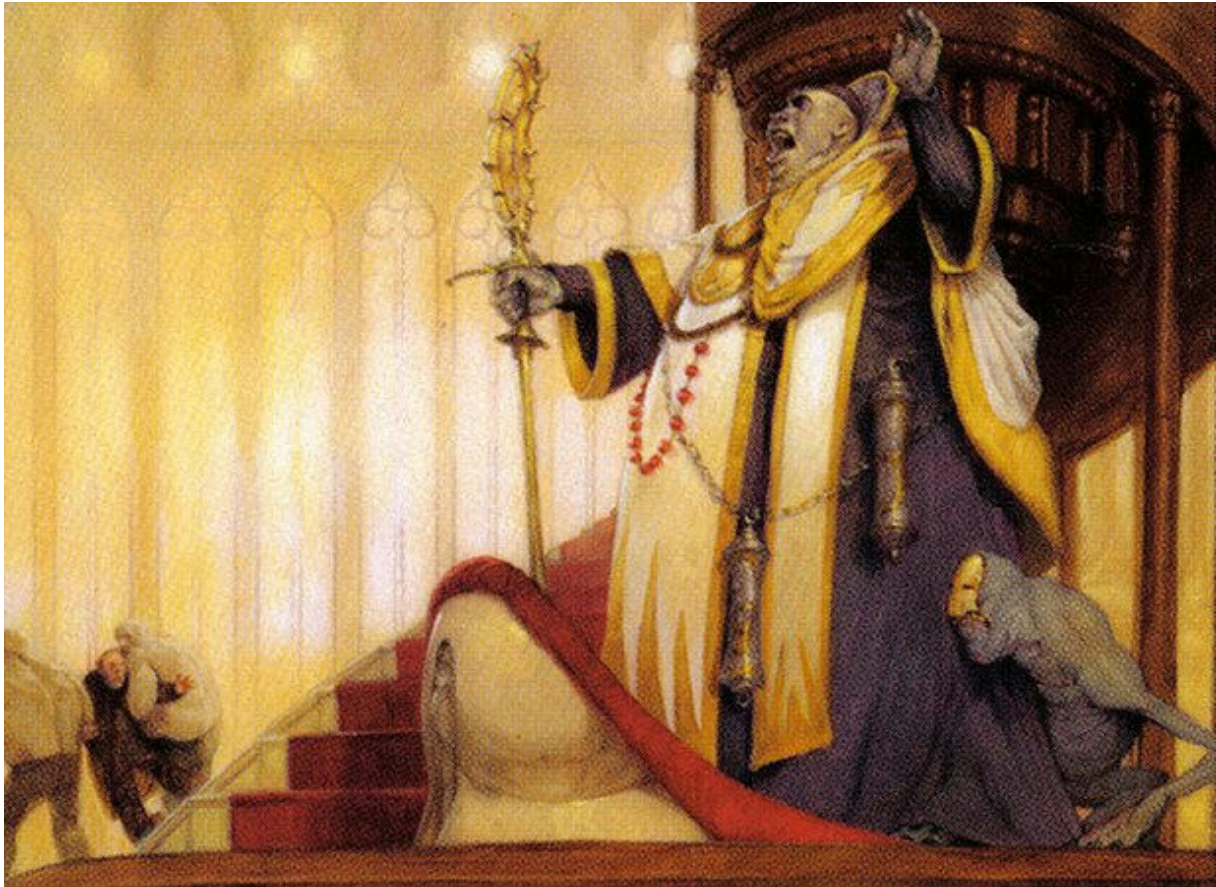
Tanek screwed his face up as he handed Busa a coin. "I think you mean Master Benakov's thugs."

Busa laughed, but his eyes betrayed fear. "They're getting braver. Today they doubled the rate and said they'd cut my daughter's toes off if I didn't pay on time. And they're not just doing it to me." They both looked a few stalls over, where the same two thugs were having the same conversation with a candy seller. "I can't imagine this is good for your type either, with the Boros around."

Tanek took the stick of meat. "Nope. Wish I could do something about it." A pair of viashino with hungry eyes sauntered toward them. "Well, see you later."

He sat down on the curb and began to eat, savoring each bite with half-closed eyes. As he finished the meat and started into the apple, a practiced voice pierced the noise of the crowd. "Make way, make way!"

The crowd parted. An armored guard in an Orzhov surcoat came first, followed by a fat man in black and white silk robes, followed again by a beautiful and barely dressed woman who held an umbrella over him. A balding servant brought up the rear and approached the fat man, gesturing with an open hand. "Master Benakov, the pastry merchant you were inquiring about is this way."



Orzhov Pontiff | Art by Adam Rex

The fat man threw his head back. "Lead me to him."

The procession of pristine black and white walked past Tanek. At the baker's stand, Benakov stood perusing the pastries on display for two whole minutes before selecting one. He took a too-large bite, and the cream filling squirted down his chubby face. His umbrella holder dabbed it off with a cloth as he chewed, nearly getting it on his ridiculous high collar. "Oh my, this is quite good." He took another bite. "You should harve one," he said to the servant, his mouth full. "It's farntarstic."

The man bowed like a puppet. "I am not hungry, but thank you."

"Very well. Let us return to my office." The guard turned around, leading the way back through the crowd. Benakov turned as well, and the drape of his robes revealed to Tanek a small bag-shaped bulge hanging at his right hip.

There was a stray board on the street a few feet from Tanek. He grabbed the board, reached through the hole in his pocket for the razor, and palmed the it. He turned to judge the alleyway behind him. If he remembered correctly, there were two dogleg turns, then a dead end. The wall there would be tough to climb, but not impossible. He turned back to the street, waiting to pounce.

Just as Benakov was about to pass in front of him, Tanek tossed the board in the way. The fat man tripped, falling flat onto his face. Tanek was on him in an instant, cutting the right side of the man's robe and the string that held his coin purse in place. Benakov yelled. Tanek grabbed the purse and darted into the alleyway, but caught a flash of white and red behind him. As he rounded the first corner, he heard footsteps closing in. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him. He managed to slip the pouch into his left pocket before he hit the second corner, but nearly tripped over a bucket of water as he rounded it.

The back wall of the alley was twenty feet high, and there were fewer handholds in the black and gray stone than he remembered. He dropped the razor and began to climb. The footsteps behind him kept coming. A bucket of water bounced off the wall above him, dousing him and the smooth stone. He tried to keep climbing, found no purchase, and fell onto his back. In an instant, the heel of the man's boot was on his neck, followed by the point of his sword.



Art by Eric Deschamps

The man sneered. "The money."

Tanek's eyes went wide. "I... don't have it."

The sword's point pushed into Tanek's neck just enough to draw blood. "The money."

"Okay, okay." He reached into his pocket and handed over the pouch.

The pressure on Tanek's neck loosened, and the man's face relaxed. "Why did you do this?"

"That lump of a man threatened my friends."

"Your friends?"

"Busa the chicken vendor. And others, too. Those thugs you were watching are Ambroz Benakov's men. You may be watching now, but you won't stop them when they come back in the dark. They're mean. They torture you and cut your kids' toes off. Anything to get your money."

The Boros legionnaire shook the coin pouch. "And you thought taking this would stop him?"

Tanek thought. "I... I don't know. I didn't think—"

"I can tell." The legionnaire pocketed the pouch and took his foot off Tanek's neck, but kept the sword at his throat. "What else do you know?"

"Benakov didn't show up until a few weeks ago. No one paid him until the pastry seller's wife disappeared, and everyone has since then. He just doubled the protection rate today. Between them, and now you, things are way too dangerous."

The man sheathed his sword and almost smiled. "I don't normally like parasites, but you're not so bad." He reached down with one hand. Tanek grasped it, and the man pulled him to his feet. "I'm Radomir of the Boros Legion. It's too bad you weren't such a good climber, but at least I got the money back."

Tanek blinked. The Boros man smiled. "Can you write?" Tanek nodded. "If you find out more, drop a note in the empty planter on the roof of the goblin forge. I pay well, and I'd rather not see someone whose heart could be in the right place stealing from his 'friends.'"

Radomir turned on his heel and began to walk away. Tanek took one step after him. "Are you paying me for today?"

"Oh. Good point." Radomir took the purse from his pocket, dug out two coins, and tossed them back toward Tanek; the coins clattered onto the ground between them. "I suppose most of the money will have to be good enough."

Tanek scrambled to pick them up. They were both ten-zino pieces, of Orzhov mint, with pristine milled edges still intact. His eyes went wide. By the time he thought to thank the man, Radomir was already gone.



Conjured Currency | Art by Steve Argyle

Twenty zinos. Not a great haul, but enough to live on comfortably for a week or two. Maybe enough for a new shirt, too. Tanek put the coins into his pocket, retrieved the razor, climbed a different wall, and went rooftop to rooftop until he was far enough away from the marketplace that descending to the street level was safe. From there, he made his way back to the two bushes, crawled through the hole in the wall, and climbed up to the rooftop.

Erika and Migen were already back. “Hi Tanek,” Migen chirped.

“You’re wet. Did that guy catch you?” Erika asked.

Tanek thought for a moment. “No, but I dropped the money.”

“Aww. We did great today!” said Migen.

“It’s amazing what you can take from people when they’re distracted by a sad little girl,” said Erika with a gleam in her eye.

Who had they stolen from? Hopefully not Busa. Tanek had stolen from Busa before, but that was a long time ago. Could he do it again? He wasn’t sure.

“I need to go. I’ll see you later.” Tanek turned away.

“Okay,” they said in unison. He climbed down from the rooftop. He wouldn’t see them again for a while. Definitely not today, at least. He needed a different rooftop. One with more space to think. And hopefully one closer to the goblin forge.