

The One Hundred Steps

They were trapped.

Jek knew the key was critical but he didn't realize to what lengths the Dimir would go to get it back. Now, he and his sister, Vinni, crouched within the walls of the small apartment; they both knew help was not coming—not this far into the Ninth District. They were on their own.

He could see the motes of dust as they floated through the tiny shaft of sunlight that pierced the dark crawlspace. Alongside Jek was Vinni, her face a mixture of fear and hope. Out there were the mad albino and his warped henchmen, who slobbered like rabid dogs. Rakdos thrill-killers. Jek was fresh out of the Azorius Academy, but his instructors hadn't prepared him for a situation like this.

Jek had easily dispatched a host of gore-house thugs—too easily—when he realized they were only sacrificial swine used to drain his Azorius magic.

Now the albino had come to do the real job.

"Jek, Jek, Jek, Jek!" The albino screeched as he dragged his flayer's knife along the floor, leaving a ragged trail of splintered wood. "Wakey, wakey!"



A spike jester cackled and cartwheeled. As he ripped a hole in the wall, plaster and dust rained down and filled Jek's nose and eyes with grit. Vinni reflexively flinched and clapped her hands tight over her ears. Jek's mind raced. It was only a matter of time before the albino brought in a ragemutt to sniff them out. They had to move. Now. Beneath the din of the albino's taunts, Jek carefully slid over to Vinni and whispered in her ear. "He'll bring dogs. We have to move."



Vinni nodded. She loved her brother. When he returned from the Academy, she thought there wasn't a nobler person on Ravnica. He was on the path to becoming a hieromancer—a protector of people and the law—and she wanted to follow in his footsteps.

They'd be safe. Jek would get them out of this.

Jek slowly drew his short sword and took his dagger, the one with Azorius sigils etched into its blade, and pressed it into his sister's hand. Vinni closed her fingers around the leather-bound handle. It felt heavy and dangerous, which made her feel a bit better. She set her jaw and nodded. Jek took a deep breath and waited by the crack in the wall, his eye illuminated by the slim shaft of light.

The spike jester was in a glee-filled rampage—dangerous, but distracted—but Jek couldn't see the albino anymore, which worried him. They'd have to chance it. Jek slowly slid back the panel and whispered a spell. Crackling blue energy flared out and shackled the spike jester with glowing Azorius glyphs.



The jester opened his mouth to bleat some obscenity but Jek's boot collided with his head, making the bells on his hat jingle and his teeth rattle. The jester flew across the room and crumpled in a corner. Vinni ran for the door and paused as Jek slashed two other chainwalkers who had rushed into the room, left them slumped on the floor. Jek and Vinni ran down the slick, cobbled street and turned a corner, only to face the massive silhouette of an ogre blocking their path. Jek made a sharp turn and put his shoulder into a door. The jamb splintered and Jek pushed Vinni into the room. The ogre's chain whirred and caught Jek on the shoulder, sending his sword clattering down the alley. Two more barbed chains followed that slashed and entangled Jek. He struggled and fell to the stones, reaching for his sword.



Out of the corner of his eye he saw a pale fist strike out like a snake to send Vinni sprawling onto the threshold. From the shadows, Jek saw the mad albino smirk with gleeful malice as he stepped over Vinni and nonchalantly drew his blade.

“Jek, Jek, Jek. You have something that my master wants,” the albino hissed.

Jek sent a bolt of blue energy at the albino, but it fizzled and popped. The air smelled like ozone as the albino made a mock face of shock and disbelief.

“Ooooh? What happened?” The albino danced around as Jek tried to escape the ogre’s chains and shredded his cloak and skin in the process. “I’ll bet you practiced that little spell for months.” Then, as quick as a silver serpent, the albino plunged his flayer blade into Jek’s helpless body.

“Aww. Did that hurt?” The albino sneered as he knelt down and whispered to Jek’s face. “I’ll bet it did.”

“Shall I tear up the other one, Boss?” the ogre asked.

“The girl won’t pose much of a prob—” A slender blade with Azorius sigils appeared from the mad albino’s throat like a silvery tongue that spat jets of crimson across his pale flesh. The albino’s expression of smug confidence turned to shock as he struggled to stand up on legs that wouldn’t work. He tried to laugh but all that came out was a watery croak. He clutched at his gaping wound with numb fingers. The albino collapsed, face first, in a heap at Vinni’s feet

The ogre looked shocked and quickly tried to collect his chains, but they were snarled around Jek’s body. Vinni heard her brother weakly chant a spell with the last of his strength. The dagger she held burst into blue fire. Another pulsating wave struck the ogre, making his knees buckle. She lunged at the weakened ogre and peppered him with jabs from her dagger until the brute ceased to move.



Vinni rushed over to Jek, knelt beside him, and gently cradled his head in her arms. She started to say something but Jek weakly raised his hand and then fumbled in his tunic.

“Vinni. Take this. It’s evidence. Give it to Halok.” Jek placed an ornate key into her hand. It felt cold and had a Dimir guild seal on it. Jek’s breath came in ragged gasps between words. “Go to the Jeleenn column, the school of the hieromancers. They’ll take care of you now.”

Vinni sniffed back a tear. “Jek.”

“Be strong.” Jek’s hand slid to the floor. His eyes slowly unfocused as his last breath slipped away.

“Jek.”

Vinni stalked through the dangerous streets of the Ninth, bloodstained, disheveled, and grief-stricken. But something within her began to transform. Inside her, a steel spring slowly uncoiled, unwinding into a relentless determination that fortified her being and focused her will like a razor blade.

Nobody. Better. Get. In. My. Way.

She took alleyways and side streets, tears streaming down her face. A part of her hoped she would run into some gap-toothed Rakdos goon. Especially one who thought she’d make an easy target. She visualized unloading all her pain right into that goon’s belligerent face. The image kept her going through the dangerous journey out of the Ninth.

She eventually came to the base of the One Hundred Steps, the ancient, stone staircase that was the gateway out of the Ninth. Vinni climbed the stairs, slowly. It felt like she left some old part of her behind with each step she took—weakness, uncertainty, doubt. On every step, she left an old part of her being that didn’t serve her anymore. Every step was a hammer blow, shaping her will in a spiritual forge, until her mind lit up with purpose and clarity. She climbed up past the ungilded neighborhoods to the top of the steps, where before her stood the Azorius Guildgate. Beyond it was the wide avenue that ran for miles across New Prahv, eventually terminating into the Forum of Azor.



She stood at the top of the steps and walked across the threshold of the ancient gate to emerge on the other side, no longer a child. Even miles away, she could feel the power of the Forum of Azor. It called to her, as if millions of Azorians before her chanted her name in recognition. As if they had waited for untold millennia for this moment.

“I will not fail you,” she said to them.

The sun had just risen.



Rays of light hit the massive towers of New Prahv and they shone like white fire. Vinni walked past the Jelenn Column, past the hieromancer academy where her brother had studied for the past years. She headed straight for the Lyev Column, straight for the recruitment center of those who enforce the law—those who investigated Ravnica’s worst cases, who had their hands on the throat of lawlessness. She wanted the hardest training, the most feared sergeant, the most elite corps. And, most of all, she wanted to be assigned to the most dangerous districts.

She walked through the tall doors of the Lyev Column and strode across the vast marble hall, up the staircase to the third tier and straight to the Office of Admissions. The lines of applicants and assistants moved aside instinctively, as if pushed by her will.

She slammed the bloody dagger on the desk, looked the Clerk of Submissions in the eye, and spoke in a voice that filled the chamber:

“My name is Lavinia. I want to be an arrester.”

