

Expectations

Nik Davidson

From set *Dragon's Maze*

Oana clutched an armful of scrolls as she sprinted down the echoing halls of New Prahv. She was late. That was almost a given. Her busiest days were scheduled out down to the minute, but never accounted for time to make it from one appointment to the next. By the time the sun had crested the skyline, she had already begun her daily descent, falling further and further behind the relentless march of hours.



Azorius Guildgate | Art by Drew Baker

This is your reward, she thought, a complicated and useless mix of emotions accompanying the words as they passed through her mind. Oana had been “promoted” out of the Sova Column research teams for her treatises on inheritance law, but her new position had proved no prize. She was now a defender, tasked with helping the accused through the impenetrable passages of Azorius law, and ensuring that their rights were honored and upheld. She burst into the courtroom at last, her well-rehearsed apologies ready to be offered once more.

From high on his dais, Arbiter Johvann III droned on, oblivious to Oana’s late arrival, or apparently, her prior absence. She sat down next to her client, a nervous vegetable merchant who had been arrested two weeks before. Oana spread a few scrolls out on her table and tried to figure out how much she had

missed. She was only a few minutes late and, thankfully, the official preamble to a trial could last for quite some time.

Arbiter Johvann's ceaseless monotone conveyed his absolute disinterest.

"...previously established by precedent, the role of those who engage in mercantile efforts is augmented by law to promote exchanges in which both the buyer and the seller, at all times, maintain an equity of information and understanding. While a party's theoretical knowledge or ignorance cannot be ascertained (save for magical means which are governed under statutes relating to magical divination of the presence or absence of knowledge), it is forbidden for any party to a transaction to engage in verbal or material efforts to misrepresent the true and factual nature and value of the goods, services, or promise of future goods or services at hand." Johvann paused to stare at the vegetable merchant, his drooping face devoid of emotion.

"Arrester Petri, please recount the testimony that you encoded regarding the incident which led to the detention of the accused."



Council of the Absolute | Art by Zoltan Boros

A young Lyev soldier rose. "Seventeen days ago, in the west end of the Rowan Lane market, the accused made the following public announcement from his vegetable stand, and I quote: 'Fresh vegetables for sale.'"

The soldier sat back down. Johvann began to rub his chin in consideration.

Oana, utterly confused, stood to object. "Arbiter, my client's records conclusively show that all of his goods met the threshold of 'fresh,' in that they had been harvested no more than nine days before, and in every case, my client was willing to sell or barter for each and every item on display. I don't see anything in my client's conduct or declaration that could be considered remotely criminal."

Johvann turned his tired, empty gaze on Oana, and waved his hand. Glowing runes began to scroll across the air front of his dais. "Pursuant to the recent proclamation regarding the Legal Uses, Designations, and Exchanges of Therapeutic Materials, a number of species of plants had their official mercantile designation changed from 'vegetable' to 'medicinal supply,' including several of the comestibles that your client offered for sale. Your client does not have the proper permits to sell medicinal supplies. Offering these medicines for sale under the label of 'vegetable' is both misleading and potentially damaging to public health."

"But I've been selling these same vegetables for years!" The merchant looked to Oana, his face pleading and filled with fear.

"Incorrect. For the last fifty-seven days, you have been selling *medicinal supplies*. Here follows my summary judgment: You are found guilty of selling medicinal supplies without a license. Your stock will be seized and destroyed, and all of your market permits are summarily revoked. You will be barred from seeking further market permits for a period of one year, and no permit for the sale of medical supplies shall be granted for a period of no less than three years. After this time, you may apply to have the prohibition on permits revoked, and should the revocation be granted, you may then apply for a new provisional vegetable sales permit."

Johvann's runed gavel slammed down and Oana's client was led away.

Oana slammed her fist on the bar, rattling her mostly empty glass. The vedalken behind the bar raised a polite eyebrow.

"And I just sat there, like an imbecile! If I had had more time to prepare, I would have been ready to argue the classification change!" Oana was ranting to nobody in particular. The bartender was making a show of attention and the other patrons granted her wide berth. "There's ample precedent to allow for a retroactive permit change, or even a public health exemption! But I wasn't ready. It's not the system that's broken. The system works. *I'm broken*. I can't keep up, and a decent man lost his business because of me."

As Oana finished her drink, an identical one slid across the bar, clinking against her empty glass. She looked over to see a young man wearing mildly extravagant clothing. His eyes and grin were sharp and bright.

"You did your best, yes? Surely that counts for something." There was something about the man's voice that at once calmed and worried her. Her shoulders tensed, but she turned to face him.

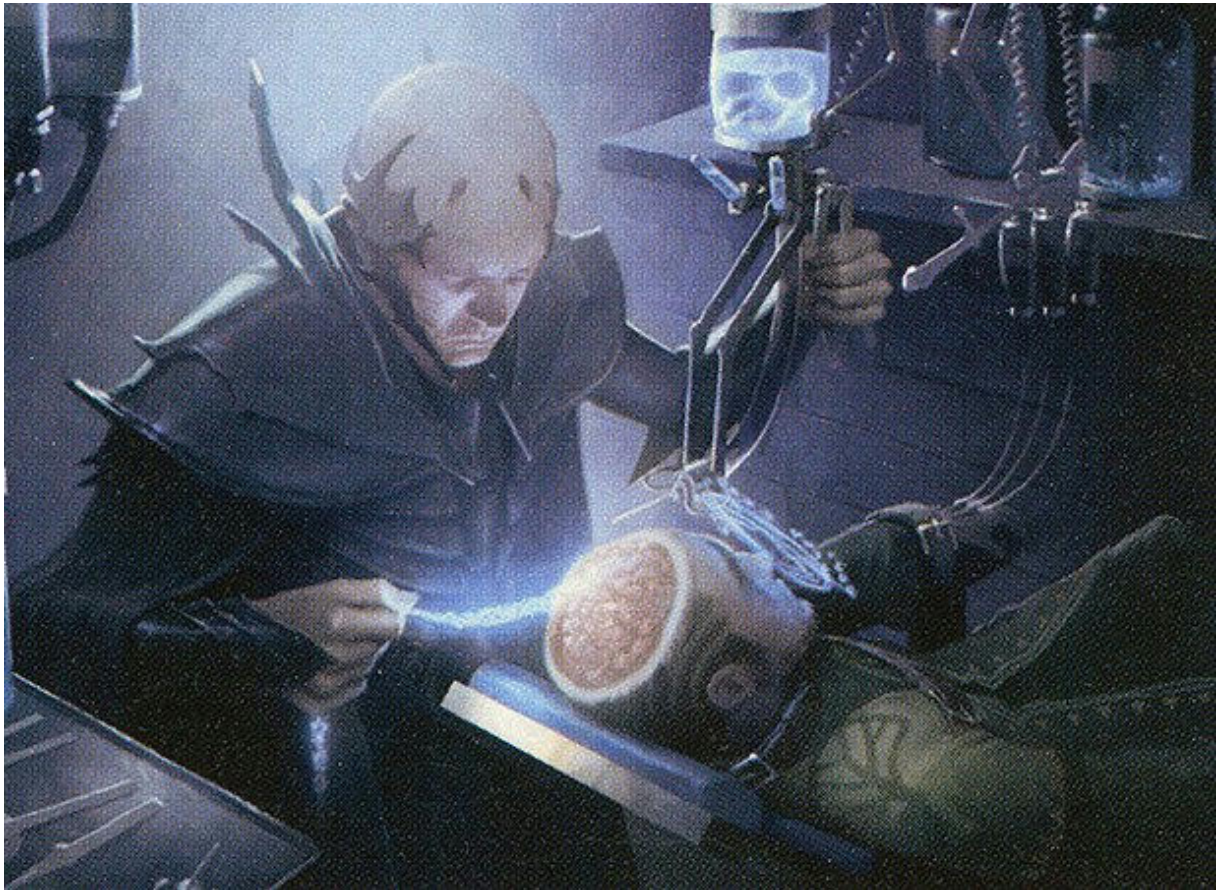
"You did what you could with the time and tools at your disposal. That's all we can ever do." The young man extended a black-gloved hand. "My name is Tarem. I have a proposal for you."

Oana paused. Something in her wanted to flee from this place as fast as she was able, but she could think of no rational reason to not hear the man out. She shook his hand. "Oana."

Tarem nodded. "Oana Vitellius, granddaughter of the famous arbiter, Otho Vitellius II. They say that you share his passion and ability."

Oana frowned. "His passion, maybe. But not his skill. He never would have botched such an easy case." Again, her instincts flared. He had set a verbal trap, and she had walked right into it.

"Not his skill? Well, I have good news for you. An associate of mine is able to perform a very specialized type of magic. It can transfer the memories and training from the dead to the living. The more the donor has in common with the recipient, the more successful the procedure tends to be. In the case of a grandfather and a granddaughter with a shared profession, I imagine it would have a remarkable effect."



Trait Doctoring | Art by Clint Cearley

Oana was suddenly very conscious of her own heartbeat. She knew what she was hearing was wrong, but she *wanted* it. She closed her eyes for a long moment.

“Dimir.” All the pieces fell into place and she spat out the word with as much disgust as she could manage. “How dare you even suggest the defiling of such a great man? He spent his life dedicated to ensuring that your kind met the punishment you deserve! You come here, offering me this poisoned gift to bring me down? Let me be very clear. I will continue his work, and I will *earn* the right to destroy you. If I ever see you again, you will spend the rest of your days in chains!”

Tarem’s smile never wavered. “A thousand apologies, Defender. I wish you all the good fortune you deserve.” The Dimir agent bowed politely and made an unhurried exit.

In the pit of her stomach, she knew something was wrong. But she pushed it aside, settled her tab, and went home.

That night, Oana slept better than she had in years. The following day, spurred on by her newfound drive, she earned four acquittals, and argued a fifth client’s sentence down to probation and a trivial fine.

Five trials, three client meetings, and two pretrial hearings in all. And she wasn’t late for a single one.

Arbiter Oana Vitellius I tucked her graying hair into her traditional judge’s cowl and smiled at her reflection. She was proud of what she saw. Her chambers were decorated with the memorabilia of thirty years of service to the Azorius—guild awards for diligence as a defender, the documents detailing her confirmation as an arbiter, and various other awards and commendations. But more important to her were the framed letters and mementos from former clients, and from defenders she had mentored over the years. Her chambers were adjacent to her court, and she could hear people filing into their seats. It

was common knowledge she always started her trials fifteen minutes after they were scheduled to begin. She felt a little bit guilty and rebellious every time, but the thankful looks of the harried defenders who barely made it through her doors in time were worth it.

She enjoyed a few bites of the standard Arbiter's breakfast—a plate of fresh fruit. The fruit was provided to New Prahv (bypassing the market) at a fair rate by a former client of hers, and it tasted sweet every single day.

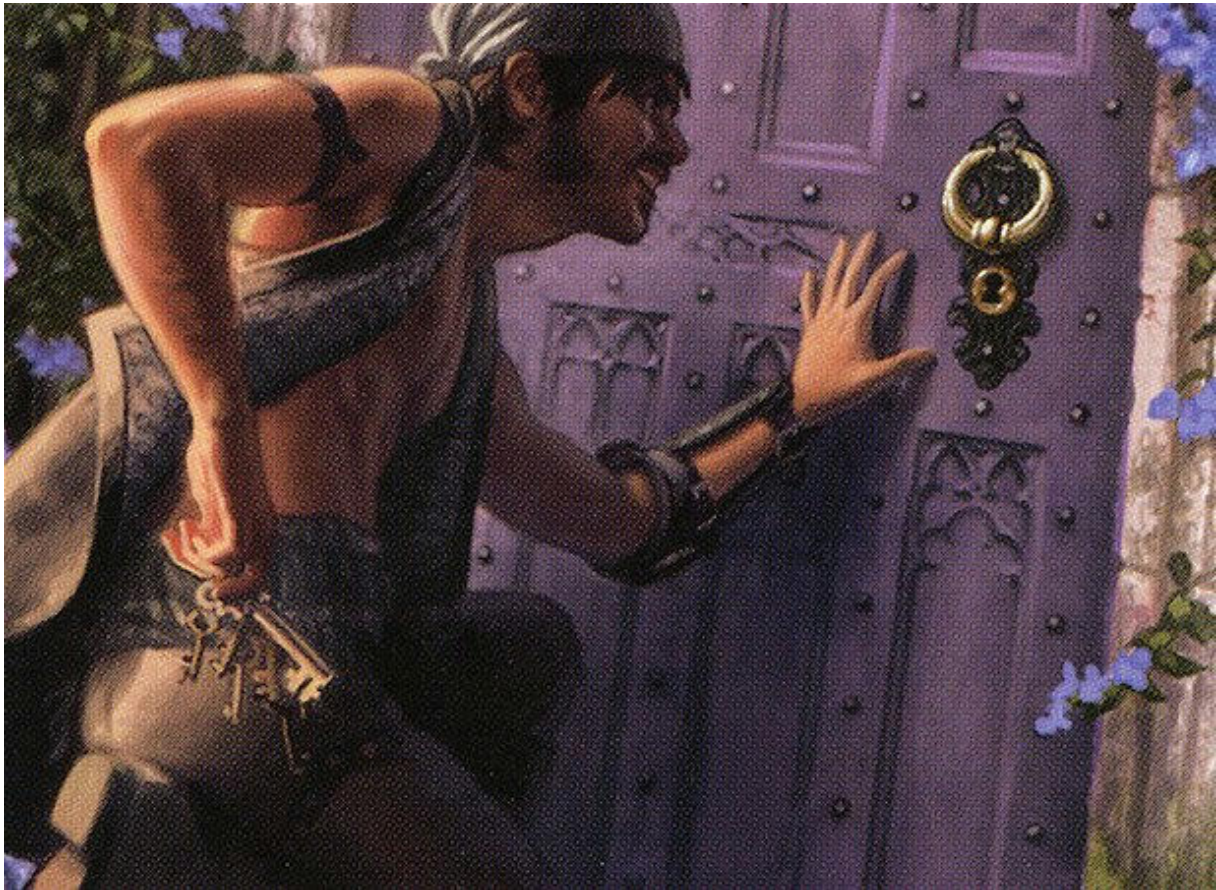
After her last case of the first day of each month, Oana made a pilgrimage to her grandfather's crypt. She would tell him all about the issues that she had resolved since her last visit, and about the latest decrees from the senate. Oana was never quite comfortable here. She spoke too fast, she stumbled over her stories—under the stern gaze of the statue of Otho Vitellius II she felt like an unworthy child, even now as she approached sixty and her achievements had nearly matched his own. Tonight, she spent most of her visit sitting in silence. When she left for home, the streets were nearly empty.

Oana opened the door to her home and breathed in the familiar air. Her home was modest, considering her station. She had never been motivated by wealth or comfort. Every furnishing was made to last, and every object was in its proper place. It was a place of quiet and calm, but tonight, something was wrong. There was someone else there.

With a quick gesture, she illuminated her sitting room. There, in her favorite chair, sat a man whose face she had not seen in forty years. Tarem. He hadn't aged a day.

Anger flared. "Do you remember my promise, Dimir? Because I certainly do. I'll see you given to the Æther for this!"

The vampire bowed his head in mock apology. "I do recall your promise, Arbiter, in great detail. And I am here to collect. Tomorrow, you will hear a case involving a theft from the Izzet League. The accused is a man of no importance to you, and you will find him innocent of all charges. This will mark the end of our transaction."



Keymaster Rogue | Art by Winona Nelson

A cold, sharp sensation travelled down Oana's spine. Something was very wrong. "You speak nonsense. By the authority of the Azorius Senate, I place you under arrest for breaking and entering, and for attempting to coerce an arbiter!"

Tarem stood, offering his wrists meekly to her. "Of course, Arbiter. But will you honor me with the answer to a question first?" His grin was sharper than ever. "*When was the last time you saw your granddaughter?*"

The illogic of the question gave Oana a brief pause. She had never married, and had no children, let alone grandchildren. It didn't make any sense... and then an image swam uncalled into her memory.

She was looking down at a young girl, no more than seven. The eyes were familiar. *Her eyes*. She was looking at herself as a child, which meant...

Oana felt as if a great hand had seized her skull, and lifted her into frigid darkness.

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“There is no precise legal precedent for something like this. But, inheritance law is defined extremely broadly.” Oana’s mind was racing, and she spoke rapidly, mainly to herself. “While magics relating to the modification of memory are tightly regulated, there would be no injured party in such a transaction. Vitellius is dead already. I could make the argument that such experiences are nonphysical transactable commodities, and would rightly fall to me as his heir. Distasteful, certainly. But legal. I believe it would be legal.”

Tarem’s grin broadened. “I suspected you might be amenable. If you so choose, we can perform the spell tonight. Be aware that we will need to make minor modifications to your recollection in order to ensure that the new memories are integrated smoothly. And then there is the matter of payment.”



Notion Thief | Art by Clint Cearley

The world swam, and the sight of her sitting room returned.

Oana had collapsed on her floor. Her face was wet with tears. “One favor to be named later. And I agreed.”

“Yes. Yes, you did. Goodnight, Arbiter. I’ll show myself out.”

It didn’t take long to come to a decision. It’s what her grandfather would have done, after all. Oana spent the next morning writing her letter of resignation and her official statement of confession. She filed the paperwork to recuse herself from all of her upcoming cases due to conflicts of interest, and then paid a visit to one of the young defenders she had mentored for years.

It would take a long time for her to decide what she could believe now, and whether she had been right or wrong. But either way, she was going to need a good lawyer.