

Episode 1: Ghosts of Our Past

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

The sky over Karlov Manor danced with a dizzying array of colors, brought to life by shimmering cascades of magic. The Orzhov had purchased every Izzet pyrowork in the Tenth District, creating a profligate display of power and plenty. *See?* it said, even to those not fortunate or favored enough to have obtained an invitation. *See?* We have so many resources at our command that we can spend them on frivolities. Ravnica is safe now: we do not need to worry and conserve for wartime. It was a calculated expenditure, and every burst of colors or illusionary blossoms falling from the sky reminded the people living in the shadow of the Orzhov Syndicate who their saviors were.

The gates stood open, admitting those guests who had chosen fashionable lateness over polite promptness, while lower-ranking guild members checked invitations and identification, making sure no one snuck inside. A few servers in toned-down versions of the more elaborate uniforms worn by those working the interior walked back and forth with trays of equally less elaborate starters, sharing the rare largess of the guild with the less fortunate. Teysa, newest head of the Syndicate, stood on the manor's highest balcony, watching the gathering throng and sipping from a glass of strong coffee laced with bumbat.

Soundless as ever, Kaya stepped up next to her, stopping when she reached the rail. Her glance downward was more calculating than Teysa's proprietary appraisal: where Teysa looked like she was measuring the value of the people below them, Kaya looked like she was assessing how long it would take them all to escape should things go wrong. Also, unlike Teysa, her hands were empty.

Teysa slanted her a sidelong glance, eyes raking along the length of the barely presentable Planeswalker's form. Kaya had swapped her adventuring clothes for proper Ravnican attire, black and white with golden accents, the symbol of the guild a pale splash across the right side of her chest. If not for the tension in her stance and the way her gaze darted from place to place as she assessed the plaza, she might almost have looked as if she still belonged.

"You should have a drink," said Teysa. "You make me look like a miserly host when you walk with empty hands."



Art by: Chris Rallis

“But you *are* a miserly host,” Kaya protested without rancor. “Or at least a calculated one. Every zib you spend on this gala will come back to you a golden zino, or you’re not the person who outmaneuvered me and seized the reins while my back was turned.”

Teysa smiled. “I missed you. You’ve always seen me so clearly.”

“Clarity gets easier with distance.”

“Yes, and you were distant when the invasion came to Ravnica.” Teysa’s smile sharpened like the knife it was. “You owe me this night, Kaya. No matter how far you’ve traveled, you’re Orzhov enough to pay your debts. When Ravnica needed you, you weren’t here.”

“If I’d been here instead of defending the Multiverse, neither of us would be here now!” snapped Kaya. “Don’t you dare act like I stopped caring about Ravnica because I couldn’t be here. I was”—her voice faltered, turning thick in her throat, and she glanced down at her feet—“I was doing my best.”

“Yes, and tonight, you do your best for *me*,” said Teysa. “The Agency has helped us to control and contain the chaos that followed the ... unpleasantness. Without them, we’d have far more than two useless guilds on our hands. All ten might have been gutted by the invaders, and then what would have become of our plane? So tonight, you smile when I say smile, and you bow when I say bow, and you remember your debts to the Orzhov, if you don’t want to remember your debts to me.”

This time, Kaya’s answering look was akin to a snarl, teeth clenched in an expression that seemed like it might actually hurt. But she nodded her acquiescence, and when Teysa touched her wrist, she didn’t flinch away.

“Come, old friend,” said Teysa. “I would be a poor host if I didn’t attend to my other guests, and I haven’t seen you eat a thing all evening.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Kaya. “Being here unsettles my stomach.”

“If you faint because you’re too stubborn to eat, your debts remain unpaid,” said Teysa. “And even if you’re too stubborn to enjoy the evening, I oversaw the menu, and I refuse to miss the strudel.” She walked past Kaya to the door, leaning heavily on her walking cane. Clearly expecting obedience, she didn’t look back.

“I pay my debts,” Kaya said in a low tone and walked after her.

The balcony door led to a well-appointed library, the walls lined with a ransom of rare books and gilded manuscripts. Two lower-ranking guild members flanked the doors, keeping the party guests from “just happening” to wander into a space they had been asked to avoid. Teysa nodded to them as she passed, a small, cool smile on her lips, and they stood at straighter attention, honored by the attention of their Syndicate’s leader.

Neither of them gave Kaya a second glance, even as she dropped her symbolic coin into the plate held by the one on the left. She matched her pace to Teysa’s, looking back at them.

“How quickly they forget, huh?” she asked.

“The world moves on even when you’re not in it,” said Teysa, beginning to descend the wide, gently curving stairs toward the ground floor. Revelers dotted the lower steps, goblets and small plates in their hands, jockeying for the sliver of advantage granted by a higher physical position. Teysa nodded to each as she passed, her small, cool smile never wavering. Kaya knew that smile. Teysa called it “number twenty-four: you are honored by my attentions.” She had a moment to admire Teysa’s unflappability, and then they were at the floor, cutting across the hall to a narrow side door, which opened onto the packed courtyard.

The blast of sound and color from the outside wiped the moment away, replacing it with a dazzling array of Ravnica’s elite. None were so gauche as to yell or otherwise express delight at Teysa’s arrival: nods, smiles, and small lifts of people’s glasses were all that she received as she led Kaya out into the cool night air, settling one hand on the taller woman’s shoulder in a proprietary fashion.

Too quietly for anyone else to hear, she murmured, “Don’t embarrass me tonight. Remember why you’re here.”

Together, they moved into the crowd.

[hr /]

The people in the courtyard had arranged themselves in almost concentric circles, with each circle made up of people considered slightly less important than those on the next circle in. The outer circle, nearest the doors, consisted of low-ranking guild members, most sticking to the groups they’d come in with, uneasy with the idea of trying to craft alliances in such a public place. No such barriers existed on the next circle in, where the mid-ranked guild members swirled, moving from conversation to conversation with the grace of the socially adept.

Not every guild prized social acumen the way the Orzhov or Simic did, but even the Izzet and Gruul had their public speakers, and those had been the members chosen to represent them at what was clearly being treated as the social event of the season. Kaya was abstractly surprised not to see Ral Zarek, who she would have expected to find representing his guild. Perhaps it was considered unfashionable to invite a Planeswalker, unless you had them properly leashed.

No awkwardness or bad manners here: only the dazzling whirl of Ravnican society, their very presence a reminder of everything that made Ravnica worth preserving. *See?* they seemed to say. *We are still here, and we are still glorious, and we deserved salvation.*

Through it all, Teysa guided Kaya, pulling her effortlessly through the tiers of society until she reached the innermost ring. It had formed around the great form of Ezrim, the massive archon having occupied the center of the courtyard, where he was apparently deep in conversation with Lavinia, current head of the Azorius Senate.

The highest-ranking attendees among the guilds stood at a respectful distance in their own circle, chatting among themselves while they watched with predatory interest to see whether Lavinia was about to escalate their discussion to the level of verbal conflict.

“Ezrim has never belonged to any guild, but as an archon with several known associates among the Azorius, Lavinia always assumed he would one day see sense and join the Senate proper,” murmured Teysa, her words intended for Kaya’s ears alone. “Imagine her displeasure when after the invasion, he took on leadership. Insult to injury, most of those associates followed him. A stroke of luck for the city as a whole if you ask me—he’s a brilliant analytical mind, above reproach, and not bound by guild affiliation.”

Kaya frowned. “If he can’t be affiliated with the Senate, why is Lavinia pestering him?”

“Who knows? Maybe she’s trying to win him back. Oh! Tolsimir!” Teysa turned, suddenly all smiles, her hand slipping from Kaya’s shoulder.

Kaya seized the opportunity to duck away, moving toward a server with a small tray of bacon-wrapped asparagus spears and neatly plucking one from the assortment. The server, who wore Orzhov colors, looked at her with awe and a small measure of fear.

“You’re her,” he said. “Our former leader. The Planeswalker.”

“I am,” said Kaya. She took a breath, steadying herself. “Teyssa asked me to attend the gala.”

“I didn’t *ask* you to attend, dear. You’re the next best thing to a guest of honor,” Teysa said, looming behind her and whisking her away before the server could swallow his awe enough to say anything else. “There aren’t many people here for you to meet—you know them all, of course, from when you actually spent your time at home, with us—but there are many people you need to *see*.”

Kaya didn’t resist as Teysa pulled her toward Tolsimir and Aurelia, who were apparently deep in a conversation about the absent Dimir. Judith stood nearby, shamelessly eavesdropping as she sipped from a flute of something pale and sparkling, a cruelly amused spark in her eyes. She was dressed in black and red, as always, standing out sharply against the more elegantly attired crowd.

As Teysa approached, Tolsimir was saying sharply to Aurelia, “It’s naive to think that Lazav is dead. That man will outlive us all. I don’t know what he’s planning, but he’s planning *something*. Teysa, tell her Lazav isn’t dead.”

“As a fellow guild leader, I would be overstepping to attempt to summon his spirit without better cause than my own curiosity,” said Teysa smoothly. “I can, however, confirm that I haven’t seen him among the departed, although it’s been very busy, with all the spirits of the recently dead trying to settle their affairs. So few of them can afford the service.”

“Is there no way to extend them credit?” asked Tolsimir.

“We’ve extended enough credit toward the resolution of this crisis,” said Teysa. “Would you have us bankrupt ourselves for the masses?”

A vast topiary panther lumbered by, its leafy tail swishing over their heads as it continued on its vegetable way. Judith laughed.



Art by: Xabi Gaztelua

“Yes, the risk of bankruptcy is plainly *very* near indeed.” She flicked a hand in a dismissive gesture, brushing the topic aside as she inserted herself into the discussion. “But I see you’ve brought your trophy of the evening. Hello, Kaya. How have you been? Started any invasions recently? Were you aware that whenever you’re in the city, all the guilds activate our crisis management divisions?”

“We didn’t start the invasion, we stopped it,” said Kaya. “Ravnica is part of the Multiverse. It always has been, even if it used to be possible to pretend that Ravnica stood alone. What impacts other planes will impact here. We fought as hard and as swiftly as we could.”

“Ravnicans died,” said Judith, levity gone.

“So did Planeswalkers,” said Kaya. “I lost friends in that fight, same as you did. Not only to death, either. Ravnica doesn’t grieve alone.”

Judith opened her mouth to answer and stopped as Kaya looked at her. There was a wall behind the Planeswalker’s eyes that hadn’t been there on their last meeting, an unbreachable barrier keeping Kaya in and the rest of the world out. It was as if she had slammed shut at some point during the invasion and had yet to remember how to open. Unsettled, Judith looked away.

At the center of their loose circle, Ezrim’s mount rose, shaking its great wings to resettlement the feathers, and prowled away, Ezrim seated firmly on its back. Teysa returned her hand to Kaya’s shoulder.

“You’ll have to excuse us,” she said. “It’s almost time for the keystone event of the evening, and it wouldn’t do to risk our hero missing the moment.”

Kaya glanced downward at her feet.

“You do keep things ticking away by the numbers,” said Tomik, appearing at Teysa’s other elbow.

Judith’s smile returned, more assured now. “Oh, look,” she said. “Three leaders of the Syndicate in a line. Which one do you suppose balances the books best? Or—I’m sorry, Tomik. Is it Izzet now, for you?”

“My husband’s guild is not my own,” said Tomik stiffly. “Teysa, we’re needed on the grand balcony.”

“Duty calls,” said Teysa, pulling Kaya with her as she turned away.

“You owe me for that,” murmured Tomik once they were far enough from the other guild leaders to not be overheard.

“I didn’t need a rescue,” said Teysa. “Even if I had, I had a hero at hand. Kaya would have saved me.”

Kaya said nothing, allowing herself to be pushed along. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the people they passed reacting to her presence. Some shied away, as if her spark might turn contagious and whisk them off to other planes when they were needed here. Others watched with disdain, or with avarice. None were emotions she was used to seeing on these particular faces, and she found it best not to react, not to let them know she saw.

Teysa’s hand was an almost comforting constant, guiding her through the crowd, even if she did insist on introducing Kaya as “Orzhov’s own hero of the Multiverse” every time the opportunity presented itself. Tomik, at least, seemed to understand Kaya’s discomfort: how could he not, when Ral was one of those who grieved the losses Ravnica would never know, the lives lost, the sparks extinguished, all to feed Phyrexia’s endless hunger? He walked in silence, not joining Teysa’s self-serving introductions, but not stopping her, either.

After a journey that felt at least five times longer than it was, they reached the shallow set of steps leading up to the grand balcony. Ezrim was already there, and Kaya felt a pang of envy for how effortlessly he’d passed through the crowd. No one wanted to interrupt an archon on a mission. A guild leader and a so-called hero, however, they felt perfectly comfortable stepping in front of.

Teysa began to climb the stairs, leaning more heavily on her cane. Tomik stepped back, unable to assist his superior without it looking like a comment on her fitness, even as her hand on Kaya’s shoulder gripped tighter, using the other woman for stability as much as anything else. Kaya glanced at her.

“Is it hurting you?”

“No,” said Teysa. “Stairs just grow more challenging as I get older. Nothing worth fretting about. Here!”

As they reached the top of the stairs, Teysa stepped away from Kaya, gesturing her toward a spot in the line of Orzhov lawmages and actuaries who had come to observe. Tomik moved to the line as well, settling to Kaya’s left and giving her hand a reassuring squeeze. She shot him a brief smile and thus missed the moment when Teysa stepped up to the balcony rail, casting an unobtrusive enchantment that amplified every word she spoke until it filled the entire courtyard.

“Citizens of Ravnica, welcome to Karlov Manor!” she said.

The crowd applauded, some politely, others with more enthusiasm—although none showed more enthusiasm than the goblin in gaudy finery who had stationed himself near the dessert table, forcing anyone who wanted something sweet to subject themselves to his attempts at networking. Teysa’s expression hardened for an instant when she saw him, before snapping back to perfect unblemished serenity.

"I know I asked a great deal of you all, when I requested you step away from your own guilds and duties for an evening of Orzhov hospitality, and I hope we have lived up to your high expectations. Tonight's purpose is twofold. Tonight, we celebrate Orzhov's own former leader, Kaya, for her role in the salvation of Ravnica and the Multiverse during the Phyrexian invasion, during which she fought with us!"

A more restrained wave of applause met this statement. Recognizing her cue, Kaya took a half-step forward and waved, biting the inside of her cheek the whole time. As if that fight were something to be celebrated. Survival, yes, but the battle, no.

The applause died down. Kaya stepped back. Teysa smiled at the courtyard once more. "But perhaps even more importantly, tonight we honor the members of the Ravnican Agency of Magicological Investigations."

This time, the applause was raucous, and rolled on and on, seemingly without end. Teysa stepped aside, ceding her place to Ezrim, who moved into position with a gravitas that was only tangentially connected to his imposing size. Half-mantling his wings, he looked at the crowd and rumbled, "We are privileged to serve the city of Ravnica in whatever means are open to us. By helping to bring order to the chaos the Phyrexians left in their wake, we have done no less than should be expected of any citizen.

"But as we have served the city, the city has also served us, and we have been honored by your support—and yes, your funding."

Laughter rippled through the crowd. Teysa, who had acquired a flute of kasarda from a passing server, offered him a smirking salute, taking the ribbing with good spirits. Kaya couldn't help but think Ezrim would pay for that later, behind closed doors. Teysa would absolutely tear strips out of an archon looking for restitution if she thought she had cause.

That was why she was so well suited to lead the Syndicate. Better suited than Kaya had ever been. Ezrim was still speaking, but the names he recited meant nothing to Kaya. The first six or so were clearly people not in attendance, as none appeared to accept their honors. The next three stepped out of the crowd and up to his side, standing proudly as he set a heavy hand on their left shoulder and thanked them ceremonially for the part they'd played in the investigation.

They looked pleased by the praise, and even more pleased by the small purses handed to them by Teysa, who didn't flinch at the act of giving money away. The guild clearly stood to profit even more from this show of unity than Kaya had been assuming if cash rewards were a part of the proceedings.

Ezrim cleared his throat. The sound rolled across the courtyard like the beginning of a storm.

"Many of you were present last month, when a Gruul god broke loose of guild control and wreaked havoc across the Ninth District. Anzrag could have continued his rampage for days, had we been reliant on the guilds for immediate support. But the quick thinking and actions of Investigator Kellan and his team brought the rampage to a halt, and the god has been properly contained within an evidence capsule. Kellan, please approach."

The crowd applauded again as a slim, dark-haired man in a blue tunic and coat stepped up to Ezrim, clearly uncomfortable with the eyes of the crowd upon him. Kaya could sympathize.

"The Agency thanks you, Ravnica thanks you, and I thank you," said Ezrim, placing a hand on Kellan's shoulder. Kellan managed a nervous smile before Ezrim took his hand away and Teysa handed him the purse. Then, with a speed barely shy of impolite, Kellan fled the balcony for the stairs, brushing past Tomik and Kaya.

"Wish I could do that," muttered Kaya. Tomik laughed, quick and unamused.

“Teysa has you on a tight leash tonight.”

“I’m her ‘hero’ for the evening,” Kaya sighed. “I don’t want to be reminded of the invasion at every turn, but she says I owe the guild for not being here when it happened, and honestly, she’s not wrong.”

“Ral—”

“Ral wasn’t on New Phyrexia. Ral didn’t see how bad it was going to be. Jace ...” She shuddered, shaking her head. “For weeks, I saw him every time I closed my eyes. He fought as hard as he could, but he lost. And because of that, we all lost.”

“It was an impossible fight.”

“Maybe.” Teysa was still distracted talking to Ezrim, having dispelled the enchantment amplifying their voices. Kaya eyed them. “I think this is where I make my escape, at least for a little bit. When Teysa asks where I am, tell her I went to raid the buffet, will you?”

“I will,” Tomik said.

“Thank you.” She turned on her heel and slipped into the natural gaps the crowd formed as it eddied. Halfway down the stairs, she passed Kellan, now smiling uncertainly at Zegana and Vannifar as they fixed him with too-sharp eyes, taking his measure. They looked ruffled and unhappy, as if he had interrupted something by coming too close to them.



Art by: Uriah Voth

Kaya knew the pair had been on poor terms since Vannifar unseated her predecessor. Seeing them here together was odd.

“Are you *quite* sure you’re not that detective Proft everyone’s been talking about?” Zegana asked.

"I'm sorry," said Kellan. "I'm not sure precisely who that is." His eyes, darting wildly from side to side, fixed on Kaya. "But I've been meaning to speak with the hero of the hour. If you would excuse me?"

He ducked between the pair, not waiting for their reply, and rushed to Kaya's side. Kaya looked at him, bemused.

"What did you need to talk to me about?"

"Getting out of here," he said. "Forgive me, but I look for clues for a living, and your expression tells me you're as uncomfortable right now as I am."

Kaya blinked, startled into laughter. "No wonder they honored you. I was heading for the buffet. Escort me?"

Kellan took her arm with visible relief, and the pair descended to ground level, where—somehow, impossibly—Teysa was waiting next to the buffet, her attention fixed on the gaudily dressed goblin as intently as a cat might fixate on a bird.

"—payment," she was saying, as the pair approached.

The goblin looked nervous. "I acquired my invitation through legitimate means."

"I didn't say you hadn't," said Teysa. "Only that there might be better uses of your resources than worming your way into a celebration unrelated to yourself. Think, Krenko. You owe the Karlovs."

Not the Orzhov: the Karlovs specifically. Interesting. Kaya focused on Krenko, eavesdropping without shame.

"You'll get your money, Karlov," said Krenko, nervousness fading. "In full, and with the agreed-upon interest. For tonight, I'm an invited guest, and this reflects poorly on your hospitality."

"I think what you need is *focus*," said Teysa. "A lack of distractions, perhaps."

She would have said more, but a ruckus broke out above them, catching everyone's attention. On the balcony, Ezrim watched impassively as three members of Teysa's security dragged away a shouting centaur dressed in the colors of the Gruul Clans. The centaur was clearly enraged, struggling to break free.

"—no right!" he howled. "Anzrag is *our* responsibility, *our* god, and he must be returned to us! He acted only according to his nature!"

Kaya turned away from the scene, focusing on a distressed Kellan. "Nothing ever really changes, does it?" she asked. "It puts on a new coat and calls itself remade, but it's all the same under the surface."

"I don't quite understand. I'm sorry," said Kellan.

She shook her head, with a small, bitter laugh. "It's fine. Just realizing that all that really changes is the faces you don't see anymore. The people who leave you."

"You mean Yarus? He's been trying to get us to release his god since we detained him. We've tried explaining that we'll release Anzrag to the Azorius once our investigation is complete, and he should talk to them, but he doesn't seem to care."

On the balcony, Yarus's shouting had been replaced by silence. Kaya turned to see him dragged toward the gates, still fighting his captors but no longer howling. Instead, he glared murder at Ezrim, never taking his eyes off the massive archon.

Aurelia walked up to the buffet, wings half-mantled, and Kaya had time for one bitter thought about how all the people she most wanted to avoid seemed to be following her before Aurelia was heading

for Teysa, saying in a cutting tone, “This investigation should be in the hands of the Boros. We know how to maintain peace without causing unrest within the guilds.”

Kellan made a sound that could have been interpreted as a scoff. Aurelia wheeled toward him, wings spreading wider, and as Teysa moved to intervene, Kaya saw her chance. She ducked around the buffet and through the door on the other side, passing servers with fresh trays of canapés as she made her escape toward a set of stairs half-concealed behind a marble column.

It wasn’t until she reached the top of the stairs without anyone stopping her that she paused, took her first unrestrained breath since the party began, and asked herself where she was going. Back to the balcony where she’d been with Teysa, high above all the chaos and the noise, where she could think. Moving faster, she retraced her earlier steps, pausing only to bribe the guards at the door, and stepped back out into the evening air.

The sky was beautiful, although the ongoing fireworks blocked the stars. She would have liked to see the stars. She had always liked the Ravnican stars. She leaned against the wall, closing her eyes.

She could leave. It would be so *easy*. Unlike some of the people she cared about, her spark still burned as bright as it ever had and would reach across the Blind Eternities to carry her wherever she wanted to go. She could return to Kaldheim, see how Tyvar was adjusting to his new limitations, or head for Dominaria, or Innistrad, or Alara—there were no limits. She didn’t have to stay here.

She felt herself begin to reach, desire becoming reality, and stopped, opening her eyes and digging her heels into the balcony. Teysa might make her point in the worst possible ways, but she was also right: when Ravnica needed her most, Kaya had allowed her own sense of what mattered to take her away. If she’d stayed, she might have been able to shape the Orzhov into more of a force for good. If she’d refused her position on the strike team so someone else could hold it, maybe they would have been successful. There was no way of knowing, but if she’d stayed here, she might have changed everything.

Kaya moved to the edge of the balcony, resting her hands on the rail, and looked down. The conversation by the buffet had escalated to arm and wing waving and raised voices, but Teysa wasn’t there. Neither was Judith; no matter how she scanned the crowd, the woman’s eye-catching red and black eluded her.

Her breathing leveled out as she watched the people move below, safely distant, unable to reach her. She had just started to feel like she might be able to go back downstairs when a footstep from behind her caught her attention, and she turned to see Teysa approaching.

The other woman wasn’t smirking, for once. Teysa wore an expression of uncharacteristic seriousness. “Kaya, there you are,” she said.

“I just needed a moment to breathe,” said Kaya.

“I understand. This is a lot to deal with, even for me, and I know the invasion hurt you as much as it hurt us, but I’m glad I found you.” Teysa took a deep, oddly unsteady breath. “There’s something I need to tell you. Something important. And I needed to catch you alone.”

“We were alone before.”

“Not really.” Teysa waved a hand. “Before the gala began, there were people lurking to make sure I didn’t need anything. We needed to be *alone*.”

“All right. What is it?”

Teysa started to reply as a scream rang out from inside the manor, drowning out her words and shattering the moment.

Kaya didn't pause to think before running toward the sound. This time, if Ravnica needed her, she wouldn't let them down.