

# Episode 6: Explosions of Genius

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

12. 01. 2024

“Where are we going, exactly?”

“All will be clear in short order.”

“Mmmm ...” Etrata tapped her chin and grabbed Proft’s arm. Before he could react, she pulled him into a nearby alley, spun him around, and pressed his back against the wall. He blinked as she loomed over him. She wasn’t taller than he was; looming should have been impossible, and yet, she was accomplishing it.

“No,” she said in a level, reasonable tone. “All will be clear right now, or we’re not going any farther. I’ve had to prevent one attempt on your life. If it hadn’t been someone who knows me, that would *not* have ended well for you. So, you’re going to tell me where we’re going, or we’re not going there.”

Proft raised an eyebrow. She didn’t flinch. After a long, strained silence, he sighed and glanced toward the street, apparently checking to see if their little altercation had attracted any unwanted attention.

Seeing that they were alone, he turned back to Etrata. “I’ll need you to release me first.”

Grudgingly, she let go of his arm. Proft rubbed the spot she’d been gripping as he shook his head.

“Is such violence a common means of discussion among House Dimir?” he asked. “It seems a bit ... blunt.”

“Only when the person we’re dealing with is immune to seeing sense,” she said. “Where are we going?”

“The powder I found in your chamber is like nothing I’ve encountered before. We need to have it analyzed by someone we can trust not to be working against us.”

“You told me we were going to see a friend of yours,” said Etrata. “Not that it would involve walking down the street in broad daylight. I’m a fugitive.”

“Yes, and apparently I’m a marked man. Your point would be?” Something in Etrata’s expression must have told Proft he was on thin ice, because he continued: “Kylox is ... a sensitive individual. After some issues with espionage and patent theft, he has become very attuned to anything that smacks of subterfuge or deceit. With him, you’re *more* likely to be seen and intercepted if you attempt to come in via a back route or hidden passage than if you approach openly.”

Etrata blinked. “That may be the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.”

“He’s brilliant, really, just paranoid—if it can be called paranoia when every one of his wild assertions has eventually proven true. Regardless, any other route could do us material harm.”

“And we’re going to him, not someone else, because ...?”

“We can’t go to the Agency without revealing my involvement in your escape. We can’t go to the guilds until we know who set an assassin on my trail. This is someone I trust implicitly, who fears discovery enough to understand any requests we make for circumspection, who will ask few questions. There’s none better in this city, I assure you.”

Etrata frowned. “I still don’t like this open of an approach.”

“We’re nearly there.”

“You need to start telling me things. You can’t hold them back just because you want to look clever when you reveal them.”

Proft smiled, very faintly. “I’ll take that under consideration.”

They left the alley for the street. At the corner, Proft turned, then turned again, heading down a narrow lane between two shops. Etrata followed. When the lane branched, he turned again onto an even narrower sub-street barely wide enough to allow the shops on either side to open their doors.

The street ended at a blank wall. Proft touched the wall, almost in imitation of Etrata at her hideout, then backtracked three storefronts to a door with a small plaque identifying it as a bookkeeper’s office. He rapped his knuckles against it and stepped back, waiting. After several seconds ticked by without anything changing, he frowned and knocked again.

He waited longer this time. When he began to step forward again, Etrata held up a hand to stop him.

“I’m sturdier than you are,” she explained, moving to try the doorknob. “If this thing is set up to shock or poison me or something, I’ll probably be fine. You wouldn’t be.”

“A valid reason, if not one I particularly care for—oh, hello.” The doorknob twisted easily when she turned it, and when she let go, the door swung silently inward. “That’s unusual. He never leaves the door unlocked.”

“Lovely,” said Etrata. “So we’re probably walking into a trap.”

“I certainly hope not,” said Proft. He pushed past her, stepping into the darkness beyond.

Etrata sighed and followed.

As soon as they were both inside, a series of linked tubes around the edges of the room lit up as the lightning elemental contained inside began darting back and forth, filling the air with a jittering, flickering light. There was a break in one of the containment units, which probably explained the flickering; under ideal conditions, the elemental’s light would have been steady enough to work by. The light was still enough to reveal a small workshop, the sort of place maintained by a single inventor for their private use, cozy and compact—and destroyed.

It looked as if an entire gang of people had passed through, smashing everything they could get their hands on. Scraps of paper and bits of blueprint littered the floor. The active tubes were clearly a backup system; larger tubes lower on the wall had been smashed, adding shards of glass to the debris.

Proft moved to the center of the room, not saying a word. The crunch of glass under his feet and Etrata’s quiet exclamation of general dismay were both swallowed by the silence. Proft stopped to take another look around before pressing his index fingers together, resting them against his chin, and bowing his head in apparent concentration.

Thin blue lines spread outward from his feet, racing across the room to crawl up the walls and across the ceiling. They met there, knotting together in an elaborate network of delicate tangles. The space between them lit up blue-white, until the entire room was bathed in a magical glow, Proft at the center.



Art by: Daarken

“Hmm,” he said, lowering his hands. “This isn’t correct.”

The light pulsed, and the workshop was no longer destroyed. It was perfect and pristine, cluttered as Izzet workshops almost always were, but with no sign that anything more dramatic than a late-night brainstorming session had ever happened here. The light steadied, flicker fading as the containment system was restored. Slowly, Proft began pacing around the outside of the room, occasionally ruffling through a stack of light-limned papers or adjusting a pencil that Etrata knew for a fact wasn’t actually there anymore. Finally, he paused in front of a patch of wall, squinting at it before looking at the floor.

“Etrata, your assistance, if you would be so kind.” He snapped his fingers, and the light shattered around them, replaced by the wreckage of the workshop as it actually existed. Etrata hurried across the room to stand beside him.

He was looking at the floor when she got there, or more specifically, at a capsized bookshelf covering a large section of the floor. “What do you need?” asked Etrata.

“I need this moved.”

“And you think I can do it?”

“I do.”

It was a simple statement, made with such assurance that Etrata was bending to move the bookshelf aside almost before she realized she was going to agree. It was made of good, sturdy hardwood and had clearly been designed to stand up to the rigors of the workshop; as she hoisted it off the floor, books and small boxes fell from the shelves, landing around her feet.

Moving the bookshelf revealed a rumpled rug, which had been almost entirely obscured. Proft nodded satisfaction and crouched down.

“This is normally where you would say ‘thank you,’” said Etrata.

Proft ignored her, flipping back the edge of the rug and revealing ... absolutely nothing.

“Your secret door was Izzet work,” he said, standing again as she set the bookshelf on its base. “Try the same patterns here, if you would be so kind.”

Etrata looked at him suspiciously but got down on her knees and began drumming her fingers against the floor. The first several taps sounded solid. The next sounded almost hollow. She looked up again.

“No one builds a hidey-hole like an Izzet inventor, but once they have a mechanism that works, they tend to keep it until someone else manages to come up with something better,” said Proft, taking a step back to give her room. “It’s always amused me that Kylox was so angry about spies in his last shared lab. He’s as big a thief as the rest of them.”

A square portion of floor dropped several inches with a loud click. Etrata kept drumming, rolling her eyes at the same time. “Oh, and I suppose you like having people who are smarter than you around while *you’re* trying to work?”

“I wouldn’t know,” said Proft, as the floor dropped again, this time all the way, revealing a trapdoor. He stepped forward, offering Etrata a hand up. “It’s never happened. Shall we descend?”

---

The trapdoor led to a ladder; the ladder led down into the boilerpits, distant firelight illuminating the web of tangled pipes and exposed steam vents. The air was hot, heavy, and remarkably fragrant.

Proft took a satisfied breath, then coughed. “Breathe shallowly,” he advised. “This isn’t the sewer, but filth still sinks, regardless of the intent.”

“I’ve been here before,” said Etrata. “Which way?”

“Kylox never leaves Izzet-controlled territory if he can help it,” said Proft. “This pipe runs in two directions. That way, he leaves the district. This way, he moves deeper in.” He began walking away from the district. Etrata followed without hesitation.

They had gone about ten feet when Etrata grabbed Proft by the shoulder. He stopped, looking back at her. She gestured downward. He glanced at the ground.

“Yes, the tripwire. I saw it,” he said.

“It’s too obvious. There’s probably—”

“A pressure plate on the other side. I anticipated that.”

She threw up her hands. “Why am I trying so hard to keep you alive? Clearly, you don’t need it.”

“No, but it’s sweet of you.” Proft turned, scanning the pipes until he found a break in the pattern. “This way. I believe we’ll find our host in short order.”

They squeezed through the gap he’d spotted, following the series of bends on the other side until it opened into a larger chamber. There, hunched over a makeshift drafting desk and writing furiously, was a red viashino, facial scales reflecting the pallid light of the lantern on the desk’s edge.

“Hello, Kylox,” said Proft. “You’ve looked better.”

Kylox's head jerked up, eyes widening behind their magnifying lenses. "Alquist!" he exclaimed, dropping his pen.

Seen more closely, he obviously hadn't escaped the destruction of his workshop unscathed. He was missing several scales, his clothing was torn and disarrayed, and the short spikes atop his head looked as if they'd been brushed backward, creating a prickly hedgehog effect.

"How did you ...?" he asked, then stopped. "Why am I asking? You'll have some nonsensical answer that ends with you here whether I want you here or not. What do you want?"

"I found a substance I want you to analyze," said Proft, as calm as if this were a perfectly normal place to have a conversation about science.

Kylox didn't appear to agree. He gaped at Proft. "Get out," he said.

"What?"

"Get out. No matter how many favors I owe you, I'm not doing this right now." He cast an anxious glance at the passage they'd come through. "Were you followed?"

"No," said Etrata with certainty.

"How did you get here?"

"The door in your workshop," said Proft. "Really, Kylox, if you would just—"

"How did you open that? Why—no, never mind." Kylox rose, gathering an armful of papers from the desk, tail swaying as he moved toward a small shelf jammed below a row of pipes. "I don't have the equipment here to do what you need, Proft. Go. I'll send a message when it's safe."

"If you tell us what happened, perhaps we can help," said Proft.

"You can't help," said Kylox, glancing around as he stacked his papers. Everything about the inventor radiated anxiety: the way he stood, the way he moved, the tenor of his voice. "I was working—I was working on something secret. Something no one was meant to know."

"What sort of something?" asked Proft.

Kylox whirled, exploding into motion. The spikes on his head rose in agitation. "No, no! Not you! I can't tell *you*! I can tell Ezrim. Only Ezrim. Can you get me to him without being seen? Is that within your power, oh great detective?"

The way he spoke the words, they weren't praise. He turned them into a cutting insult, and Etrata glanced to Proft to see how the man would react.

His expression hadn't changed, and didn't as the sound of footsteps echoed along the tunnels, racing toward their location. Kylox's eyes widened.

"They're here," he moaned. Then, in a much softer voice, he commanded, "Leave me. *Hide!*"

Proft moved then, grabbing Etrata by the arm and pulling her with him across the room to a bank of unusually dense piping. He let her go to grab a section of the grid, pulling down and yanking it toward himself. It swung outward, and he jumped inside, Etrata close behind.

When closed, the false wall of piping was solid, with only a few gaps through which they could see the room. They watched in silence as a group of goblins poured through another hidden passageway, surrounding Kylox, who flinched away from them. Proft tensed. The goblins produced thin lengths of mizzium chain, wrapping them around Kylox, who said nothing and only allowed himself to be taken.

Proft slumped against the wall of their narrow hiding space. Etrata kept her eyes on the attack. Something moved in the corner, catching Proft's attention, and he glanced toward it, watching a spider creep down the wall and vanish back into shadow.

When he looked back, the goblins were gone, and Kylox was gone with them. He frowned and gestured for Etrata to open the wall again.

The two stepped back into the now abandoned chamber.

"Do you allow all your friends to be taken captive like that?" demanded Etrata.

"Kylox is a coward in many ways," said Proft, scanning the area. "He wouldn't have suggested we hide if he thought we could help him. We were well outnumbered. He doesn't know your capabilities, but by allowing himself to be taken, we can now follow and hopefully recover him. Come along." He strode across the room, heading for the entry the goblins had used.

On the way, he paused by the shelf Kylox had been next to, just long enough to grab a small, unornamented wooden box and tuck it under his arm. Etrata frowned. He didn't pause, and in the end, she had to follow.

---

Being back on the busy streets of Ravnica was more of a relief than Kaya would have believed before visiting the moor outside of Vitu-Ghazi. Ravnica was supposed to be a place of constant sound and motion, life without end, even when it ended. Open spaces and green places were for Kaldheim and Dominaria, not for here. Not for the plane that had become her home.

She knew these crowds. Even after everything, she knew these people, knew the way they moved and hurried from place to place ... knew when something broke the pattern. The people behind them weren't moving the right way. She set a hand on Kellan's arm, guiding him toward the nearest alley.

He started turning toward her, and she tightened her grip, still facing forward.

"Say nothing," she said pleasantly. "We're being followed."

Kellan blinked, letting her lead him away from the crowd. Once they were in the alley, they turned, waiting.

It was a short wait. A group of six people in long, dark robes followed them, too quickly to have arrived by accident, and fanned out to surround the pair. One of them had a hefty hammer. Kaya frowned.

"What is this?" she asked. "An ambush, or a staring contest?"

The nearest robed figure lunged. Kaya danced back and kept moving as the other five joined the fray, all six attacking at once.

Not in unison, but not in the convenient one-by-one pattern so many groups seemed to use, either. Three grabbed for Kaya, the other three lunging for Kellan. Kaya turned partially insubstantial, letting the first attacker charge right through her, his own momentum carrying him into the nearby wall. He impacted with a sickening crunch.





Art by: Durion

Drawing her daggers, Kaya focused on the others who had decided she was the better target, shifting her weight to her rear foot while she waited for them to come at her. They were both substantially larger than she was, making speed her best asset in this fight. Speed, and the ability to turn insubstantial. It was almost exhilarating, having something as straightforward as a simple alley brawl to worry about. She spun and wove, letting them reach for her, striking when they got too close. She dropped the first almost before the fight had been joined in earnest.

The one with the hammer was down, felled by a blow to the back of the neck, before she had a chance to check on Kellan. Like her, he was down to his last opponent; the other two were on the ground, their faces pressed to the alley floor. Kellan had his swords drawn and was matching blade for blade with his remaining attacker, who held a pair of vicious-looking knives. Kaya kicked her remaining opponent, first in the knee, then in the groin. He folded like a broken ladder, and she kicked him in the head for good measure before she started toward Kellan. Then she stopped dead, blinking.

Kellan had hooked his blades around the attacker's knives and disarmed him with expert skill, leaving the man looking helplessly around for something else he could use as a weapon. Before he could find it, Kellan slammed his shoulder into the man's chest, knocking him back.

Kaya moved toward the man, who was at least still conscious, and wrapped one hand around his throat, spinning her dagger in the other hand as she pinned him to the wall, trapping one arm against his body. "Hello," she said. "We're your intended victims. You want to tell us why you came after us?"

The man moved his free arm quickly enough that if he'd been holding another knife, he could have hurt her grievously. Instead, he shoved something that looked like a tiny green sprout into his mouth, triumph lighting up his eyes as he swallowed.

"What was that?" Kaya demanded.

"I don't know, but the ones on the ground just did the same thing," said Kellan.

Kaya could only stare as the flesh of the man in front of her softened and turned green, growing plush as it transmuted into moss beneath her hand. Then he dissolved, moss scattering across the alley floor, leaving his empty robe to drop to the ground. Kaya danced backward with a wordless sound of disgust, shaking his remains from her fingers. They didn't stick, and no signs of the same transmutation marred her skin.

Kellan was retching. Kaya turned to face him. All the other attackers had transformed into the same mossy scatter. Kellan bent forward, hands on his knees, and paused.

"Kaya, come over here."

"Why?"

"Because I need you to see something."

Careful not to step in the moss, Kaya moved to Kellan's side. He drew one of his bracers and stooped, shifting the cloak with the tip. "Look," he said.

A tuft of white fur tipped in gray clung to the fabric. Kaya straightened, staring at him. Kellan did the same, nodding very slightly as he did.

They were still staring at each other when an Agency thopter zipped into the alley. It flew to a stop between them before projecting a holo-message of Ezrim in his office, looking at them sternly.

"Your recent altercation has been noted," it said. "Boros officers are on their way to your location. Secure the scene and return to headquarters."

"Yes, sir," said Kellan automatically. The thopter zipped away as he pulled a pair of weighted ovals out of his pocket, gesturing for Kaya to step out of the alley as he affixed one to either side of the entrance. As soon as he let go, a ribbon of pure light extended between the two.

"Agency barrier wards," said Kellan. "They'll let our investigators through, but no one else. Come on."

Together, they moved down the street, moving through the crowds swiftly and without further challenge.

The street outside the Agency headquarters was clear, the previous swarm of gossiping agents dissipated. Kaya still ducked behind Kellan as they climbed off their mounts and made for the doors, letting the actual, official agent precede her into the building.

The ghost of Agrus Kos was waiting in the foyer. "The boss wants you," he said as they entered. "Says it's urgent. Doubly so for you, ma'am." He nodded to Kaya, a sympathetic look on his faintly translucent face.

That was enough to tell Kaya what Ezrim had for her, and she hurried down the hall, leaving Kellan and Agrus Kos to follow. Ezrim's door was closed when she arrived. She didn't bother knocking but simply walked straight through.

Ezrim was behind his desk. He looked up when she appeared, seemingly unsurprised by her entrance. "Thank you for coming so quickly," he said. "Though I have a door for a reason."



There was a knock at the door. Ezrim glanced toward it.

"Some people remember manners," he said. "Come in!"

Kellan slipped into the room, Agrus Kos close behind. "You called for us?"

"Yes." Ezrim returned his attention to Kaya. "Teysa's killer has been apprehended by the Azorius."

Kaya's legs felt suddenly weak. She grabbed the edge of a bookshelf to hold herself up. "Sir?"

"A low-level hitman, no guild affiliation," said Ezrim. "He swears he doesn't know what happened. One minute he was walking through the Eighth District, and the next, he was in Karlov Manor, covered in Teysa's blood. He ran. Someone saw him leaving the area, and the Azorius were called. They have him in custody."

Kaya and Kellan were gaping at him when the door slammed open and Aurelia appeared, dragging a thrashing woman in Rakdos colors by the hair. The woman had been tied up, hands secured behind her back, but she fought like she thought she could break free. Aurelia half-threw her to the floor, wings spread in indignation.

"She was coming for *me*," she snapped, voice cold as the grave. "She killed ten of my guards before I stopped her."

"You *cheated*," snapped the woman. "Not supposed to bring wings to a ground fight. Naughty and nasty and not playing fair."

Aurelia ignored her, absorbed in her own fury. "This is the one they call Massacre Girl, and her presence proves the Cult of Rakdos is behind all this senseless slaughter. We should have known. I'll gather the Legion, and we'll march—"

If the Boros Legion marched to war against another guild with the city in such a delicate state of recovery, everything would collapse. The Dimir were missing, and the Golgari were in self-imposed exile. Ravnica couldn't afford to lose another guild.

This might not be her home anymore. That didn't mean Kaya wanted to see the place burn.

"Wait," said Kaya desperately.

"Better listen, bird-lady," said Massacre Girl snidely.

Kaya resisted the urge to kick her.

"These agents have been to see Judith of the Rakdos and were returning to make their report," said Ezrim.

"Agents?" Aurelia looked at Kaya quizzically, rage temporarily dimmed by confusion.

"For this case," said Kaya. "I'm more neutral than many. Massacre Girl. Why did you attack the Boros warleader when you knew the possible consequences?"

"I don't know," said Massacre Girl. "I don't remember anything before she was sweeping my legs out from under me and stepping on my chest. I didn't even get paid."

Kaya turned back to Aurelia. "You see, this could be connected to the other attack. In both cases, the assailant didn't remember the act, or know to evade the aftermath. Warleader, we spoke to Judith, and she didn't have the demeanor of a guilty person. If anything, she was helpful. She directed us toward a lead, which we're presently investigating. Please, we need time before open accusations are made against another guild."

“Even in the face of your own loss, you would press for patience,” said Aurelia.

“You would do the same, if you were thinking clearly,” said Agrus Kos. “Listen to her. She speaks sense.”

Aurelia frowned at him. “*You would advise me ?*”

“You sent me to oversee. I’m overseeing.” He looked at her calmly. “They need time.”

Aurelia closed her wings, still frowning. “Twenty-four hours, no more, and the assassin stays with us,” she said. “If another prisoner is lost, heads will roll.”



Art by: Justyna Dura

“That’s all we’ll need,” said Kaya with evident relief.

Aurelia gathered her prisoner and her pride and swept away. As soon as she was gone, Kaya sagged. Kellan put out an arm to steady her.

“It’s fine,” she said, waving him away. “Just ... having a killer means this isn’t a trick. Teysa’s really gone.”

One more person she hadn’t saved, one more friend she’d never see again—not in the same way. Teysa’s ghost might come back, but that wouldn’t undo the damage. Kaya rubbed her face with one hand. Being someone she cared about was starting to feel like a dangerous proposition.

“We have twenty-four hours,” she said, lowering her hand. “Let’s get to work.”

The goblins who had captured Kylox clearly hadn't realized anyone was watching; they made no effort to cover their tracks as they passed through the boilerpits to their own ladder to the street above. Proft and Etrata stayed back far enough not to be seen and followed them out into the early evening air.

The kidnappers made no effort to hide their thrashing captive, either, but no one looked too closely or stopped to ask them what they were doing. Proft and Etrata continued to follow, not interfering, as the goblins carried Kylox to a disreputable-looking pawnshop. They exchanged a look then hurried to the store, stopping outside.

Proft produced something that looked like a small trumpet from inside his jacket, pressing one end to his ear and the other to the glass. Etrata began to ask him a question. He waved her off then pressed a finger to his lips, signaling her to stay quiet.

Inside, the familiar, faintly nasal voice of Krenko rang out clear and true: "What do you know?"

"Nothing!" Kylox replied. "I'm not—I don't understand what you think I—"

"The *killings*, what do you know about the *killings*?" Krenko sniffed. "I know enough to know I'm at risk here. You're *going* to tell me everything you know."

Proft lowered the trumpet. "That sounded like a threat to me," he said, looking to Etrata. "Those guards, do you think you could take them?"

Etrata looked mildly offended. "I'm a professional."

"Excellent," Proft said and kicked the door open.

Etrata surged into the room like a shadowy tide, Proft strolling along behind her.

"That will be quite enough of that," he said mildly as Etrata disarmed the first of the goblin guards. Krenko squawked in surprise, moving so two more of his men could cover him, only to watch them go down as well. The Dimir assassin moved with restrained grace, and in moments, all six guards were on the ground, not moving.

Etrata moved to start untying Kylox, while Proft focused on Krenko. "What," he asked, "are you doing?"

"I—important people have been dying!" said Krenko. "*I'm* important! I could be next! *He*—"he indicated Kylox—"was talking about doing work for important people, but he wouldn't work for me! He might know something! He's *going* to tell me!"

"I did tell you," said Kylox, rubbing his wrists as he stood. "I don't know anything. Alquist, thank you. I hoped you'd understand what I was asking for."

Proft didn't have time to respond before the window smashed in and a bulky man in laborer's clothes crashed into the room. He charged for Krenko, swinging a dagger—and ran into Kylox first. There was a strangled gasp as the viashino fell out of the way and slid, motionless, to the floor. Proft moved to his friend while Etrata slashed at the curled grip of the attacker, knocking the dagger loose. She jumped onto his back, then, and wrapped an arm around his throat.



Art by: Jason A. Engle

“Krenko, you useless pile, the chains!” she shouted.

Surprise broke through Krenko’s look of terror, and he hurried to get the chain that had been used to tie up Kylox, tossing it to Etrata. She squeezed the man’s neck a little tighter, then slid down and began tying him up quickly, immobilizing him.

When she turned, Proft was there, a bleak look on his face. “Kylox?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I’m so sorry.”

“As am I.” He stepped toward the attacker. “Why are you here?”

The man didn’t answer, only snarled at the cowering Krenko. Proft frowned.

“His eyes aren’t focused, Etrata,” he said. “See?”

“His pupils are too dilated,” she said. “He’s clearly intoxicated.”

“Perhaps ...” Proft glanced over his shoulder. “We need to break the fugue somehow.”

“Allow me,” Etrata said and stepped in front of the man, locking her gaze on his own.

There was no outward display of her psychic abilities, but he jerked back, pupils returning to a more normal state as he tried to recoil from her and the fear she had induced.

“What am I doing here?” he demanded, nearly sounding panicked. “This isn’t the florist. My husband’s going to kill me!”

“As I suspected.” Proft turned to Etrata. “People are being brainwashed into these attacks. They can’t be held responsible, as you can’t. Someone is doing this. And I am *going* to find out who.”