

Episode 10: Roots of Decay

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From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

The vine around Kaya's ankle pulled tight enough to feel like it was grinding against the bone. Not that pain was the problem; she was an assassin and had been called on to serve as a warrior more times than she liked to ponder. Pain was an old friend at this point. Pain meant she wasn't dead yet, and as the vine whipped her toward what was sure to be a devastating impact with the ground, she knew without question that she wasn't ready to be. Death came for everyone, even Planeswalkers—and wow, did she know that was true—but she'd never seen any sign that the dead could walk between planes. When she died, she'd be staying wherever she fell.

It was a devastating thought, forming fast as she was pulled through the air. Did the ghosts of Planeswalkers haunt the planes where they died, never able to go home, wherever that was? Or did they cross the Blind Eternities one last time, one final gentle passage to the place their hearts could be at peace?

And maybe big questions of cosmology could wait until she wasn't about to get pancaked on Ravnican soil. Because one thing she could say for sure: she did *not* want to die on Ravnica. She refused to be just one more Orzhov ghost, one more eternal cog in a machine that couldn't afford to stop turning, ever, no matter how many people were ground up inside it.

Again, she tried to phase free of the vine, and again, she felt the Ravnican Worldsoul pushing back against her, refusing to let her go. But her own magic wasn't the only thing she had. If Oba wanted to wield Mat'Selesnya like a weapon, there was no reason for Kaya not to respond in kind. She reached deep into herself, past her fear at what was about to happen, past her grief at what had already been, past even her own connection to the lands of the dead, necromantic without being a part of a necromancer's standard bag of tricks. Down she reached, trying hard to remain calm when she knew that any second now, the whipping vine would finish its journey through the air and slam her into the ground hard enough to break every bone in her comparatively fragile body.

Down, until she reached the place where her spark burned, that small fragment of the Multiverse that tied her to the Blind Eternities and made her what she was, always precious, ever since the moment she'd felt it catch fire at the core of everything she was, changing the way she understood reality forever. Even more precious now that it was so very, very rare. Planeswalkers had always been a rarity, but she couldn't imagine another time when their numbers had fallen so quickly and so brutally.

The Blind Eternities would carry the scars of Phyrexia forever, and so would she.

Wrapping mental fingers tight around her spark, Kaya called the Blind Eternities, asking them not for an exit but for an escape; asking for the aid she needed to push back against the living soul of an entire plane.

She barely felt her body turn intangible enough to slip through the vine. Oba howled fury and disbelief as Kaya, still semi-solid, landed lightly on the floor of Vitu-Ghazi, glowing lambent purple with her own magic—but also prismatic, bright as the skies over Kaldheim, as she held the connection to the Blind Eternities that would normally have whisked her away to some other place or plane, some other set of problems.

Drawing her daggers once more, Kaya gave them an experimental spin, feeling the way they pulled at her wrists, as intangible as the rest of her but solid enough to have presence and heft in her hands. It was an illusion, she knew, one more thing she shared with the dead; they felt as if the things they held were real, too, and were sometimes confused when the living disagreed.

But that was the big difference between Kaya Far-Traveler and the actual dead. When she struck the living, they felt it.

Vitu-Ghazi had descended even further into chaos during her trip to the sky and back. Krenko was no longer visible, just a lump of roots and branches on the cusp of being absorbed into the wall. The guild leaders had been entangled and subdued, even Ral, whose body juddered and shook with the waves of lightning that ran across it, apparently outside of his control. Proft was still kneeling next to Etrata, now bound to the floor by loop upon loop of root, unable to take his eyes off the fallen assassin. Someone had to finish this.

Kaya had to finish this.

She gave her daggers another spin and started across the uneven floor toward Oba, phasing easily through the obstacles in her path, including the motionless body of Tolsimir.

Oba jerked around to face Kaya, snarling. "Why won't you *die*?" Oba demanded.

"Lots of people have asked me that," said Kaya, phasing one dagger back to solidity just long enough to sever a swinging branch. "Some of them were a lot more frightening than you. Rage-twisted dryad lady? You aren't even in the same *league* as some of the things I've seen."

She shuddered theatrically, continuing her inexorable march forward. Oba swung more branches at her. She chopped those down as well.

Something wrapped around her waist, jerking her to a stop. Kaya looked down and was almost impressed to see a phantom branch holding her where she was.

"Clever," she said, unable to keep the approval out of her tone. The Ravnican Worldsoul had to encompass *all* things on Ravnica, *all* aspects of the plane, and that included the dead. A severed branch wouldn't normally manifest its own ghost, but the potential existed. She'd seen ghost trees in other places, and not all of them had been as functional or as worshipped as Kaldheim's World Tree or Phyrexia's Invasion Tree. They haunted the forests where they'd fallen, making their slow vegetable desires known.

This tree, once part of Vitu-Ghazi and controlled by the furiously enraged Oba, was anything but slow, and if it could be said to have desires, it desired only to stop her advance. It was also phantasmal, with no more substance than any ghost.

Kaito would tell you the best place to walk in a storm is between the raindrops; you just have to move faster than they fall, she thought and turned solid again, free from the entangling ghost in an instant. Several more tangible branches lashed out to grab for her. She chopped the first two aside with her daggers before phasing through the third, moving into the space where the raindrops—or the potential murder weapons—were not. They grasped, she evaded. It was like a dance, a swift, potentially deadly dance, around the bodies of her friends and the fallen and the ones who were both.

A series of roots ripped through what was left of the floor and wrapped around her ankles. When she tried to step through them, she once again hit the resistance of the Ravnican Worldsoul, refusing to allow her to phase, refusing to let her go. *So much for stepping between the raindrops*, she thought.



Art by: Jeremy Wilson

Well, Kaito wasn't the only person she'd had the opportunity to learn from. Koth was nothing if he wasn't a lesson in working with your environment, understanding and caring for the world that made you regardless of how difficult it became. She was a daughter of Tolvada, not Ravnica, but she had been here often enough and long enough that there was little chance the plane didn't know who she was. Ravnica understood her, possibly better than her homeland, and even if she didn't want to haunt this plane when she died, she had to admit it was likely.

If she was touching the Ravnican Worldsoul, even when it was under Oba's control like this, the plane was aware. The plane knew what was happening. Maybe she could use that.

Tyvar's love of the natural world and the easy way he had been able to turn it to his own advantage flashed across her mind as another branch grabbed for her and she phased through it, her spark pulsing a little brighter inside her chest as if to mark the moment. And Nahiri, who had spoken to the stones around her—and the stones had seemed to answer back, hadn't they? Implying that they could somehow understand ...

"Hey," she said, voice loud enough that Oba scowled in evident confusion. "I don't *know* you can understand me, but I'm taking a gamble here, because we are what you made us, and you are what we made you. Gods and monsters, heroes and villains, and a city to hold and keep us all. You don't choose which ones of us you care about. You don't take sides. Well, *she* wants you to take sides. And I say a Ravnica that chooses one side over another is no Ravnica at all. She wants to turn you into something you're not." She paused to shoot a venomous glance at Oba. "Just like the Phyrexians did."

Oba recoiled, looking for a moment like she might understand the scope of what she'd done. Kaya was almost sorry to see that. It was easier to fight the monsters when you knew they were beyond all

helping. But this face of Trostani was responsible for Teysa's death, and so she didn't think a single look of shock was going to slow her down once she finally got free.

Looking back down at the roots that held her, Kaya added a desperate, "Ravnica. *Please*."

This time when she tried to phase, the roots passed right through her. Kaya raced the rest of the way across the room to Oba, jumping over roots, phasing through branches, and turning solid when the ghosts of branches lashed through her. Oba had a tighter grasp on the Worldsoul now; Kaya wasn't going to talk her way around the dryad's rage a second time. Kaya's rhythm had to be precise, as exact as Teysa tallying up the books. Every step had to balance the account opened by the step before it.

The thought of Teysa turned out to be just what Kaya needed to find her focus. She owed a debt to the Orzhov. Teysa had forgiven part of it by taking over the leadership of the guild, and what had that gotten her? Murdered by a grief-poisoned Trostani who had been unable to tell friend from foe in the aftermath of the invasion. Dead and laying in state and probably to return—powerful Orzhov usually did—but never to be the same. Never to be *alive*. Her death was a line on a ledger that Kaya would never balance, never erase, and knowing that helped her move between, around, and through the obstacles Oba threw into her path.

And then Kaya was stepping through a fallen bough as thick around as her own thigh, almost face to face with Oba for the first time since the chaos had begun. She blinked, and for a moment, she thought she *saw* Teysa, off to one side, gesturing for her to get on with it. Her attention snapped back to Oba as she snarled, beginning to spit some curse or insult at Kaya, and all Kaya could feel was grief, and weariness.

Her foot hit something as she adjusted her stance, and she glanced down to see an Agency barrier ward capsule on the floor. Ducking under another wildly swinging branch, she grabbed it, hoping its twin was nearby. Barrier wards weren't meant to be used in detention; they were for sealing off crime scenes that had been claimed by the authority of the Agency.

Vitu-Ghazi was a crime scene. And Trostani had acknowledged the authority of the Agency when she allowed them to hold their meeting here. Kaya straightened, anchor in her hand.

"No," she said and hit the button to deploy the barrier. Cascades of magical light shot out, struggling to wrap around Oba's form. Again, Kaya thought she saw Teysa out of the corner of her eye, grabbing for the ribbons and guiding them back toward Oba, but she couldn't look, couldn't hope one way or the other, couldn't allow herself to *see* —

Oba shrieked, thrashing against the wards. She was going to break loose. It was inevitable. Barrier wards were meant to be initialized from two ends at the same time, allowing them to seal off a scene without leaving anything exposed. She couldn't do it alone, and she didn't have anyone else: they were all tied down, all confined. She was going to lose. Again.

Etrata opened her eyes.

The Dimir assassin, who had been lying motionless since she was impaled and had not been entwined by any of the roots that seized her allies, rolled onto her knees, blood pouring from the wound in her chest, and grabbed the second barrier ward anchor from where it lay forgotten on the floor. She hit the button as she climbed to her feet, and more ribbons lashed out, twining around Oba, pinning her in place as she howled her rage into the air. Together, Etrata and Kaya pulled the ribbons tighter and tighter—until they slipped out of Kaya's hands.

Frantic not to lose the ground they'd gained, Kaya grabbed the first thing she could find, her hands closing around one of Oba's ghost branches. She forced a jolt of necromantic energy into it and felt it

bow to her command, becoming *hers* rather than Oba's. Snapping the newly flexible branch around, she whipped it into the mass of cords, using it to catch and confine the struggling dryad.

The bindings were still stretched taut, like two people had hold of them. Once again, Kaya refused to allow herself to look. If it *was* Teysa, she would be distracted, and she couldn't afford that right now. Ravnica couldn't afford that. If it wasn't, the disappointment would be even worse.

They pulled until Oba's struggles stopped, until she was wound up in the barrier ward and the ghost Kaya had stolen from Vitu-Ghazi, as captive as a fly in the center of a spider's web.



Art by: Matt Stewart

The room stopped moving.

"Is it over?" asked Yarus.

"Not quite," said Etrata. "But look ..."

The other two heads of Trostani were beginning to stir. They straightened, then reached for their struggling sister. Each of them pressed a hand to her temple, and she went limp.

Something inside Kaya collapsed at the same time. She could have killed Oba during the fight. Now, with the dryad captive and unconscious, it would be too much like an execution. She couldn't do it. No matter how much she wanted to, she couldn't.

The last of the strength seemed to go out of Etrata as Oba stopped fighting. She collapsed then, face down on the floor, and didn't move again. Kaya straightened, finally allowing herself to look at the other end of the barrier ward. There was no one there, of course. That would have been too much to hope for. Her shoulders sagged as she looked around at the room of tangled wooden structures and

trapped guild leaders. “Good meeting, all,” she said wearily. “We should never, ever do this again as long as any of us live. That work for you?”

In his cage of roots, Ral began to laugh, and after a moment, Kaya did the same. They laughed not because they were amused, but because they were alive, and sometimes relief can look a lot like joy when it’s seen in the right light.

Everything depends on how you’re looking at it.

Lavinia waited until the two Planeswalkers had laughed themselves into silence before she cleared her throat and said, “If you’re quite done, the rest of us would appreciate being cut free.”

“Yeah, I guess cleanup comes next,” Kaya said and moved to cut Proft free of the floor, offering her hand to help him to his feet. He nodded and took two steps before dropping to his knees and gathering the fallen Etrata into his arms.

“Were you playing dead that entire time?” he asked.

Etrata opened an eye. “You’re the great detective. You tell me,” she said. Her voice, while strained and weak, was perfectly clear.

Proft blinked several times before tilting his face up toward the now distant ceiling. “What am I going to do with you?”

“Didn’t you know?” asked Etrata. “House Dimir is all but gone, our guildmaster dead. Our scattered assassins are like stray dogs. If you take one of us home, you have to keep us.”

Proft looked at her sharply.

“Besides, you need an assistant, or you’re going to get yourself murdered in no time at all. I’m pretty sure half this room would pay me to do it.” Etrata looked briefly speculative. “Maybe I could get them to bid against each other.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“True enough.” Her expression softened. “An assistant needs a detective to protect. We’re an ecosystem now, you and me.”

“I can’t pay you.”

“I’ll work on the side.”

“And we’re going to have to talk about your stubborn insistence that Lazav is gone. We both know better.”

“A girl needs her secrets.”

Kaya laughed again. It wasn’t that funny, but it was a relief to be alive to laugh, to be standing in a ruined room filled with people who weren’t afraid of each other, to know Teysa’s death would be avenged. Teysa, and many others, some of whom might never be identified, but Oba had been right about one thing: you grieved harder for the people you knew than you grieved for strangers. That was the way the heart worked. That was the way the heart *had* to work, or there would be nothing but grief ever again, anywhere in the Multiverse. It was better this way. Selfish and small, certainly, when compared to the vastness of something like the Blind Eternities, or even Vitu-Ghazi, but sometimes small was safer, because small was something that could be understood. Small was something that could be kept.

Kaya wanted to keep things for a while.

Around the room she went, cutting everyone free, helping Aurelia pull the grasping branches from her wings without breaking any additional feathers, trying to avoid accidentally cutting Krenko, who was swearing and thrashing in his cocoon of roots, seemingly not entirely clear on the fact that the battle was over.

Vitu-Ghazi no longer moved; Kaya wasn't even sure the great tree was alive. They hadn't escaped this battle unscathed, even if most of them were, surprisingly, going to walk away.

Ral fingered a tear in the hem of his jacket. "Tomik is going to kill me," he said. "He made me promise not to get into life-threatening fights with people I assumed were allies unless he was in the room, since apparently the presence of my spouse will keep me from behaving in what he called an 'unreasonably reckless' manner."

"If he asks, I promise to tell him you didn't start this fight, and you spent most of it literally rooted to the floor, not taking any unnecessary risks," said Kaya.

"Really?"

"I mean, it's true. And sure, you would have been reckless if you'd been able to. Want me to tell him that?"

"I would prefer if you didn't."

Kaya smiled. "Then I'll stick with my first story."

Once everyone was loose, Proft helped guide a limping Etrata out of the room, taking her vague needling with good grace, while the others left under their own power—all save Krenko, who found himself dragged along by a furious Aurelia determined to see *someone* arrested after this day's chaos. Kaya privately suspected Aurelia would find the law didn't consider evidence gathered from the ranting of a dryad sufficient to convict, but that was a problem for later.

There were so many problems for later.

As the others left, Kaya approached Trostani. Ses and Cim were weeping. Oba dangled limply in her web of barrier ward, giving no sign she was still alive.

Stopping a respectful distance away, Kaya bowed her head to wait. One-third murderer or not, Trostani led Selesnya until someone said otherwise.

Finally, voice dull, Ses asked, "What do you need from us?"

"I apologize for intruding," said Kaya, looking up. "But I need to know. Oba ..." She trailed off, unsure how to even frame the question.

Cim sighed. "The Guildpact has no provision for our situation. Oba remains one-third of us; we have no way to sever her. Nor would we if we could. She is still our sister." She paused, seeming to realize how tactless that had sounded. "I regret what you have lost."

"Me, too," said Kaya. She stopped then, biting her tongue. Anything else would have been facile.

"When a branch is rotten, it must be removed for the health of the tree as a whole," said Cim. "Left where it is, the rot will spread, and the tree will die. We will mourn our sister, who died in the invasion. What remains is not what was."

Ses made a strained, hiccupping sound, putting her hands over her face.

"We would prefer to be alone with our grief," said Cim. "We must go deep into our thoughts, and try to restore our connection to Mat'Selesnya, to see if she even wishes us to remain as we are, to speak for her, after what our sister has done. Perhaps we, too, are coming to an end. Emmara Tandris will

speak for the Conclave while we are in communion, and perhaps even after our return, depending on the will of Mat'Selesnya. We have called for her. It may be you do not see us again."

Ses lowered her hands. "Everything ends. Trees root, they grow, they spread their leaves to the sun, they live for a time, and when that time is done, they die. If Mat'Selesnya says our time is done, we will go."

"Ravnica will judge us for what our sister did," said Cim. "Now go."

Feeling more exhausted than she would have thought possible, Kaya looked around. She was alone with Trostani and the fallen Tolsimir. She supposed Selesnya had other servants, or perhaps the remaining members of Tolsimir's "most faithful," who would come and clean up the damage. If not them, then Emmara would arrange for it upon her arrival. Still, she hesitated.

"The Guildpact ..."

"Will be available to any who need it," said Ses with surprising clarity. "Vitu-Ghazi is not fallen. Selesnya stands, for all that has happened. We will do our duty as required. If there is cause to consult the original Guildpact, it will be here for those who seek it."

That was the best she could hope for under the circumstances. Kaya nodded and made her retreat, easing the broken doors as close to closed behind her as she could.

No one had waited for her. She couldn't exactly blame them.

Making her way out of the manor, she realized with a start that she hadn't seen any sign of Kellan since Oba threw him off the roof. She quickened her pace, hoping she wasn't going to step outside and find her partner smeared across the stones of the courtyard.

Ezrim would have come to tell me if one of his agents was dead, she thought, somewhat frantic. That didn't still the small voice in her head that was trying to remind her how often her friends got hurt, how frequently she walked away and they didn't.

Whoever had left most recently had taken the time to close the doors. Kaya could respect that. What she couldn't do was slow down now that she remembered what she needed to be worried about. She stepped through the door, almost walking straight into Kellan.

He blinked at her. She blinked back. He recovered his composure first.

"Ezrim told me to stay outside while you talked to Trostani, but not to go anywhere before you knew I was okay," said Kellan. "I'm okay. Are you okay?"

"I wish he'd told you to come in, but I'm glad he asked you to wait," said Kaya. "No, I don't think I'm okay. I don't think I'm okay at all."

Then, for the first time since she'd found Teysa dead in her office, Kaya allowed herself to do the unthinkable. In front of a very startled Kellan, she allowed herself to cry.

Three days later, Kaya sat in a pew at Karlov Cathedral, staring at her hands as the Orzhov pallbearers selected for the honor of bringing Teysa to the altar carried her remains to the front.

There was a hollow boom as they set the coffin down. The organist played the traditional march that accompanied the entry of honored Orzhov dead. And a wry, irritated voice beside Kaya said, "What is this piece of music called, anyway?"

"I think it's called 'Waltz for the Deathless,'" said Kaya, not quite daring to raise her head.

"Funny." Teysa sniffed. "I always thought it was called 'You Can Take It with You.'"

Kaya finally let herself look.

Teysa was next to her, only the faint transparency of her form betraying the fact that her body was on the altar while her ghost was with Kaya. The wound that killed her was gone. Unlike some ghosts, Teysa was clearly disinterested in defining her afterlife by the manner of her death. Her cane leaned against her leg. It had been an extension of her body for as long as Kaya had known her; it only made sense that she would keep it with her now.

“I appreciate you keeping my guild from falling apart as I gathered myself,” said Teysa. “Also for helping to identify and eliminate my killer. That was kind of you.”

“I owed you a debt for letting you die,” said Kaya.

“Consider it repaid in full, if it ever existed,” said Teysa. “Honestly, it’s better this way. No more hunger, no more distracting bodily needs, just me and the ledgers and the assets of the guild, the way it’s meant to be. Why would a little thing like death stop me from running the Syndicate? I’m going to be here for a long, long time.”



Art by: Julia Metzger

“Was that you in the fight at Vitu-Ghazi?”

“Of course it was. I’ll always look out for you when you’re in Ravnica.”

“Why did you ...?”

“You had business to do. I would only have been a distraction. Really, Kaya, you have to learn to do things in the proper order.”

Kaya made a sound that could have been either a soft laugh or a sob. In the darkness of the cathedral, it passed easily for both. Teysa frowned, eyeing her.

“Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t kill Oba for you.”

In the time since the fight, Trostani had stepped aside, as promised, and retreated into a deep, meditative state. Lavinia was studying the Guildpact daily, trying to find a way to arrest Oba when the dryad finally woke. So far, she had been able to find nothing of substance.

“Don’t be,” said Teysa, voice turning hard. “Lavinia won’t find a justification for arresting her. There are too many loopholes she can worm her way through. I, on the other hand, don’t intend to use anything so straightforward as the law. Selesnya will doubtless make the argument that she can be purified and reformed. *I* intend to make the argument, through an army of accountants and financial bylaws so archaic *Azor* wouldn’t be able to comprehend them, that the price of assassinating an Orzhov guild leader is everything you thought you owned. They want her alive? Well, her death would have been far less expensive.”

“Oh,” said Kaya.

“You’ll have to leave, of course. I wish it didn’t need to be this way, but if I’m intending to absolutely *ruin* Selesnya for not answering Oba’s treason by handing someone an axe, it’s best if I don’t have my predecessor, the known assassin, hanging about the place being all alive and confusing the question of who’s in charge.” Teysa looked expectantly at Kaya. “You understand, don’t you?”

“I sort of wish I didn’t, but I do,” said Kaya. “I was planning to go anyway. I don’t want to become the kind of person who kills someone who can’t defend themselves. But after what she did, if I stayed here ... I might.”

“Good. Then it’s settled,” said Teysa, and she sounded so perfectly like herself that Kaya laughed, unable to swallow the sound.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Kaya said and leaned over, half-phasing herself out of the world of the living as she reached out, not quite shaking, and embraced her friend.

After a moment, Teysa smiled and hugged her back.

Four days after that, with Teysa’s body lying in state and her spirit assembling the newest iteration of the Orzhov ghost council, Kaya stepped back into the atmosphere of quietly efficient chaos that reigned at the Agency. Chatting agents leaned against the reception desk with mugs of coffee; more agents moved along the hall, barely taking notice of each other.

They took even less notice of Kaya as she wove her way between them, heading for Kellan’s desk. He was mercifully present, inputting the notes on his latest case, when she walked up and knocked against the corner of his desk.

Kellan looked up, breaking into a wide smile. “Kaya!”

“I’m heading out in the morning,” she said, only a little amazed at the pang that rose in her chest. She was going to miss him, talented, unseasoned, eager partner that he was. It was nice to think there would still be people—living people—on Ravnica that she’d miss when she was gone. “Promised a friend I’d help him hunt for something he called a ‘dire bear’ once I finished with things here. He’s a nice guy. Very enthusiastic. I think you’d like him.” Fortunately, they would probably never meet. The thought of Kellan and Tyvar deciding to out-hero each other on the battlefield was exhausting.

"Thanks for letting me know," said Kellan.

"Just wanted to check in before I hit the road. Any sign of Judith yet?"

"None." Kellan shook his head. "No one's found a body, *or* seen her, and no one's claimed the kill. The rest of the Rakdos seem to be laying low for the moment, and even though they're no longer on the verge of war with Boros, that's probably for the best. Aurelia's feathers are well and truly ruffled."

"I wouldn't want to break the law right now," agreed Kaya. "Proft still spending all his time with our former escapee?"

"He officially hired Etrata as his aide," said Kellan. "So she's going to be around for a while."

Kaya blinked. "He was *serious*?"

"Yup. Things are going to be interesting here even without you," said Kellan. Then he grinned. "I'm so glad."

Kaya grinned back. "Weirdly enough, me, too."