

Episode 9: Beauty in Destruction

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

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Silence filled the room until it felt like they were collectively choking on it. Ezrim looked to Kaya. “Did you know this?” he asked, shattering the silence into something more manageable.

“What? No! We sat quietly for a while, and then that flower came out of the wall, and Proft put it in the jar and announced that he’d solved the whole case,” said Kaya. “He didn’t say anything to me about accusing Trostani.”

“Trostani could *never*,” protested Tolsimir. “Even if she were somehow corrupted by the influence of Phyrexia, she can’t leave Vitu-Ghazi while the tree is healing! If anyone is above suspicion in all of this, it’s her.”

“A fact I believe she was counting on,” said Proft, still watching the tripart dryad as her pieces twined around one another in silent confusion. As before, her heads were out of unity, each reflecting its own response to the situation. Ses looked even angrier than she had before, the dryad of order incensed by the accusations being hurled at her roots. Cim looked shocked and horrified, the dryad of harmony unable to accept the disharmony all around her. Only Oba’s face hadn’t changed.

The dryad of life still looked serene and detached, removed from the situation by a barrier of her own making. Whatever was happening here, she took no part of it as her own, only watched the people arguing about guilt and obligations.

Proft continued: “It’s become easy, in the aftermath of war, to blame everything on the Phyrexians. Every pothole is from damage they did to our streets, not our own failures to maintain them. Every rumor roots back to Phyrexia. Every lie, every inequality, every mistake we lay at Phyrexia’s feet. But we were capable of cruelty long before them. We were capable of crime. And we were capable of betrayal.”

The other guild leaders protested, some with sincere dismay at the idea that one of their own could have been behind this, others with seemingly performative dismay. Even as Judith began to snarl and rave about false accusations and unqualified investigators trying to push blame away from their Dimir lackeys, she was scanning the room, checking the exits to see how best to make her escape. Krenko backed deeper and deeper into a corner, looking for something he could use as a weapon against the violence his honed understanding of danger was telling him would erupt at any moment.

Only Izeni remained calm and silent, watching this unfold like she was observing the blooming of some rare and deadly flower.

Etrata rose and slithered through the crowd, slick as any snake, to station herself by Proft's side. He shot her a look, a smug smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "I knew you wouldn't be able to resist stepping in for the big reveal," he said, almost teasing.

Etrata rolled her eyes. "Please. Like I'm going to let you get yourself slaughtered *now*, after I've worked so hard to keep you alive. Go ahead, go back to explaining the nice lady's horrible murderous plan and how she was able to accomplish it with all of Ravnica trying to hunt her down. Please, tell us."

"I'd prefer it if *she* told us," Proft said. "I know she was responsible. What I'm still missing is a large portion of the *why*. Why now? Why betray the trust Ravnica has put in her, allowing Vitu-Ghazi to become the repository of our history, putting the original Guildpact into her keeping? Why, during this period of rebuilding, when decapitating the guilds could very easily cause them to collapse completely? I have not always been the biggest advocate of the guild system, even as I've both benefited from and suffered under it, but I recognize that it is essential to a healthy, stable city, and we need both those things to be true if we're to recover after the invasion."

"We didn't—" began Cim.

"How dare you—" Ses said at the same time.

Oba was silent, and remained silent as her sisters turned, with terrible slowness, to look at her. Their expressions of horror and fury melted into confusion, followed by shock. Through it all, Oba looked at them unwavering, her own expression never changing.

"How—?" asked Cim.

"Why—?" asked Ses.



Art by: Evyn Fong

“Because they *deserved* it,” snapped Oba, facade of calm finally shattering.

Kaya was on her feet before she recognized the intent to move, her daggers already drawn and ready. Etrata shot her a quelling look, and she sank slowly back to her seat, never taking her eyes off Trostani.

“They failed Ravnica in its time of greatest need,” continued Oba. “In *our* time of greatest need. They play at finance and invention, at pleasure and pain. *We* are the will of Mat’Selesnya! *We* are Ravnica, the plane itself, not merely the city our world has become! We are the green and growing heart of this plane, and without us, there would be no Ravnica, no city, no guilds! Mat’Selesnya nearly fell in defense of *their* workings, and as we teetered, they did their best to cut us off at the roots!”

Cim and Ses recoiled, as much as their conjoined nature allowed. Proft, meanwhile, took a step closer to the dryad.

“If you would explain to the rest of us precisely how we failed Mat’Selesnya in specific and Ravnica in general, perhaps we could all come closer to understanding,” he said. “It might be possible to find a path through this that requires no further punishment for anyone.”

“I think not,” growled Aurelia.

Lavinia shot her a look, and she quieted.

Proft, meanwhile, continued looking at Oba with the patient attentiveness of a schoolboy waiting for his most-essential lessons. The dryad leaned closer to him.

“As the invasion occurred, I watched through the root system. Vitu-Ghazi *is* Ravnica, and we are Vitu-Ghazi; there is no inch of this plane’s soil that is not ours to keep. I *felt* the taint of their foul oil seep into

our earth, *felt* their unnatural footsteps as they strode along our streets, *tasted* the blood of our citizens soaking into our roots. It ... hurt me.” Oba glanced at Cim and Ses, and for a moment, her expression softened. “I feared what it would do to us if it was allowed to spread unhindered, and so I chose to pull the pain into myself for the sake of my sisters. I fought the corruption of Realmbreaker alone.”

“We never asked you to,” said Ses.

“You never asked why it was hurting all of Ravnica, and not hurting us,” said Oba. “You were as selfish as the rest of them, when you saw the chance to be. I felt it all. Every sick, terrible instant, every vicious drop. We came so close to falling to Realmbreaker, to becoming part of their terrible design, and if Mat’Selesnya, which *is* Ravnica, had fallen, nothing anyone else did would have been enough to save them. I fought in the darkness, with no one to assist me, and I saw what they did.”

“What who did?” asked Proft, trying to guide the conversation.

Oba shot him a glare so filled with hatred that it should have been as deadly as any Golgari toxin. “He,” she jabbed a finger at Krenko, “was hoarding resources. His little lackeys would raid stores and warehouses while their protectors were elsewhere, trying to save Ravnican lives, and they would take everything they could get their hands on, stripping the shelves down to dust. Then he sold those things, those necessary, vital things—clean water, food, medical supplies—back to the Ravnican people at a markup even the Orzhov would have been embarrassed to impose. He gouged people who were already bleeding.”

Aurelia and Lavinia turned to Krenko, expressions questioning and cold. Krenko shrank back against the wall, refusing to meet their eyes, but didn’t deny the accusations.

Oba wasn’t finished. “Without his actions, thousands of citizens may have survived the invasion. Because of him, they had no chance. And you!” She swung her attention toward Vannifar. “You cry false tears for your compatriot, but I heard how you spoke to each other behind closed doors. I know how little love was lost between you. Zegana was *fascinated* by the Phyrexian oil. She had begun infecting ordinary creatures with it, the beasts of Ravnica who had no voices of their own, no way to object to what was being done. She would have moved on to intelligent subjects had the invasion lasted any longer. She was well along the road to dooming us all.”

Vannifar didn’t contradict the furiously raving Oba, only looked at her hands with an expression of profound sorrow. Oba turned her attention to the rest of the room, scanning their faces one by one before settling on Kaya.

Kaya sat up straighter, waiting to hear what poison Oba would spit in her direction. Coward? If there was anything she knew she wasn’t, it was a coward. Deserter? She’d come back to Ravnica even knowing she would be condemned for leaving them. Failure?

That was the one word Kaya didn’t think she could endure. If Oba flung that at her, she would probably walk into the Blind Eternities whether she wanted to or not, fleeing yet another crisis that needed her attention. There were some things she still couldn’t bear to lift.

Oba said none of those things. Instead, leaning as far forward as her conjoined state allowed, she said, “You grieve Teysa. You’re here, in this room, as a part of this *ridiculous* investigation, because you mourn her so deeply. No one should mourn her. She was a monster. What she did, what she was preparing to do, is far greater than any crime I could possibly have committed. Teysa Karlov was in league with the Phyrexians, communicating with them in secret. She intended to rule Ravnica in their name once the invasion was complete. She betrayed every person in this room, and if I passed judg-

ment on her crimes, who are *you* to pass judgment on *me* ? All I did was what any one of you would have done, given the means. You all clearly had the motive.”

“Sister, no,” said Cim, reaching for Oba. Her hand was shaking. “No. You drank in the anger and grief, the suffering of the whole city, and it has poisoned your judgment. We stand for Selesnya, but Selesnya is not the judge and executioner for all of Ravnica. What you do, what you have been doing ... it’s wrong.”

Vannifar took a sharp breath and stood, eyes on Oba. “You’re right,” she said. “Zegana was experimenting with the Phyrexian oil, but what you missed in your eagerness to take our bickering for hatred was the fact that she did so with my full consent. She was seeking a cure for phyresis, the spreading taint of Phyrexia; she sought a way to bring our lost citizens back to us. She had no intention of wielding the oil as a weapon. I would have known. I watched her so closely.”

“Roots are, by their nature, buried,” said Ses. “We can hear through them, but distantly. What you overheard may not have been—was not—the whole of the story that unfolded before you.”

“You have no right to say such things of Teysa Karlov, who was a hero in every way possible.”

For a moment, Kaya thought she had spoken without intending to. Then the voice fully registered in her ears, and she turned to see Etrata scowling at the dryad, eyes narrowed.

“Yes, Teysa was in communication with the invaders,” said Etrata. “She learned their language from the dead who had not been fully converted to the Phyrexian cause before they gave their lives for Ravnica, and she opened communication in their own words. They saw her as a useful curiosity, and replied. Once she was able to reliably communicate with them, she began funneling information to the resistance. She used the spirits who serve the Orzhov to spy on every movement those monsters made, risking the possibility of phyresis, putting her own life secondary to the needs of her city. I was one of her contacts. She was working with House Dimir the whole time—she, and her dead. She was a *hero*. She never betrayed Ravnica. But you, who saw without understanding ... you were more than happy to betray *her*.”

For a moment, there was silence. Krenko began inching toward the door. Ezrim fixed him with a glare, the archon’s mighty wings flexing as if he were considering the merits of a pounce. “What of you, criminal?” he asked, voice sharp. “Don’t try to lie. The head of the Senate is here, and she will know.”

“Yeah, and so what?” asked Krenko. “Goblins died getting those supplies from behind enemy lines. The Phyrexians sure weren’t going to share! You expect me to risk my life without a profit?”

“Everything I say he did, he did,” said Oba. “I *watched* him. Even if I believe your stories about secret heroism and double agency, he committed the crimes I know I saw.”

“What did Kylox do?” asked Ral abruptly.

Kaya turned to look at him. She’d almost forgotten the death of the Izzet inventor; she’d only heard about it from Proft, rather than witnessing it herself. Oba sneered at Ral.

“He got in the way,” she said. “I sent that assassin after the goblin, and your inventor was standing in his path. And even if he hadn’t been out of place, your house needs cleaning as much as any of the others! You’d think this city would have learned the danger of putting Planeswalkers at the head of any guild. Always here to go. But you didn’t watch your people closely enough. Your man Kylox was fascinated by Phyrexian technology. The oil powered and transformed them, but the things they built ... he thought to steal their designs as his own, to rise within the guild on the strength of corrupt engineering.”

"You killed him for *industrial espionage*?" demanded Ral, electricity crackling around his hands. "I have no doubt you could kill half my guild for the same crime!"

"*Then maybe I should!*" snapped Oba. "Maybe cleansing Ravnica from the stains of the invasion means killing every soul who was tempted, even for a moment, by the people who came to destroy us!"

"Sister, *no*," said Ses. "You should have told us you were suffering."

"You should have let us share in what you felt," said Cim. "We would have shouldered our fair share of the burden."

"You're wounded, and you need to be healed," said Ses.

"Please," said Cim.

"Please, let us help you now, even if you couldn't before."

For a moment, it seemed like Oba might listen. Then they reached for her, and she recoiled.

"Fools, all of you," she said. Her voice filled the room, shoving everything else aside. "You refused to look. You refused to listen. You refused to *see*. And worst of all, you still congratulate yourselves on a battle well fought and a war well won—even here, where you stand smugly in front of me and assume you've unraveled my plan. I've been killing for *weeks*."

Silence fell. Even Proft looked shocked.

Now triumphant, Oba stood taller and declared, "I witnessed countless examples of cruelty, cowardice, weakness, all in need of nature's righteous judgment. The streets of Ravnica ran with the blood of the guilty long before I started hunting larger prey. You only noticed when I targeted people you cared about. The ones you considered important enough to grieve. And *I'm not done yet*."

"Yes, you are," said Aurelia, standing. "By the authority given to me as guild leader of the Boros Legion, I formally place you, Oba of Selesnya, under arrest."

"Oh, do you?" Oba looked theatrically around herself, first at the room, then at her sisters. "How were you intending to do that? *We* are Trostani. We are three and we are one, and my sisters committed no crime save for being sheltered from the horrors of war. Your own laws won't allow you to place them under arrest, any more than you can arrest the weapons used to deliver my justice. *That* has been pointed out in excruciating detail. One who does not act of their own free will carries no culpability in the crimes their hands commit."

"I'll find a way," spat Aurelia.

"You'll sit *down*," said Oba. The room shook, not hard, but hard enough to drop Aurelia back to her seat and Detective Proft to the floor. He landed on his behind, hands splayed to keep him upright as he narrowed his eyes at Oba.

"That was quite impolite," he said.

"Believe me, we're done with civility," said Oba. She turned to Cim and Ses, who were still speaking in quiet, soothing tones, trying to calm her. Oba clapped her hands. Her sisters went limp, sagging on their single trunk like wilted flowers, their eyes half-closed and unseeing.

"That's better," said Oba. "And I'd like to thank you, Detective Proft. I'm sorry you have to be here for this. You're as close to innocent as I've seen."

"Be here for what?" asked Judith, sounding alarmed rather than bored for the first time.

In answer, the room began to rock, Vitu-Ghazi responding to the commands of the single mind controlling the great tree. The manor room buckled, twisting in on itself as Ezrim roared and Etrata produced long, wicked-looking knives from inside her shirt, focusing on Oba.

“I am Vitu-Ghazi!” bellowed Oba, the branch that was her body pulling away from the bough where her sisters dangled, silent and stunned. Farther and farther from them she pulled herself, until she was, while still attached to the tree itself, an entirely independent entity, Trostani no longer. For the first time since they had been chosen by Mat’Selesnya, she was Oba, one and alone. “I am Mat’Selesnya! I am *Ravnica*!”



Art by: Lius Lasahido

Thorny vines burst through the walls, grabbing for the assembled Ravnican leadership. Kaya phased through the loop that tried to entangle her, spinning her daggers in her hand as she rushed to cut first Kellan and then Ral free.

“Thank you,” said Ral, eyes flashing electric fire as he pulled lightning from the accumulator on his back and whipped it at Oba. She absorbed the blast, barely seeming to notice what should have been a devastating assault. Instead, she moved one hand in a slashing motion, and a massive branch snapped across the room, slamming into Ral’s chest and knocking him into the nearest bookshelf. It teetered dangerously, spilling volumes in all directions.

All this had happened in a matter of seconds. Lavinia tried to spring to her feet, only to find herself held down by thick, knobbed roots that had grown up from the floor and wrapped around her ankles, so gently she hadn’t even noticed, but leaving her with no leverage to pull herself free. Aurelia tried to go to her aid but discovered she was in the same situation, more vines wrapped around her wings,

pinning them. The chain holding Massacre Girl went limp—all at once, the assassin was nowhere to be found.

Izoni remained perfectly still as the vines wrapped around her, watching them without blinking. Only once they were in place did she move her hands, easing a tiny vial from her pocket. She sprinkled its contents on the vines and watched dispassionately as they withered and dropped away.

Kaya continued slicing as she raced across the room, stepping through any vines or roots that tried to grab her. She released Ezrim next. He roared, pouncing on the nearest branch, as she moved to free the now struggling Etrata. Oba continued lashing out with a seemingly endless parade of roots, vines, and branches, as if she had brought the fury of all Ravnica's long-razed forests to the fight.

The ceiling grew distant as the room stretched like a street vendor's hand-pulled taffy, becoming taller with every passing second. Kaya had never been inside Vitu-Ghazi while it was in the process of becoming something new, had been unaware the vast living guildhall *could* become something new before she'd seen the manor on the moor, and with the way the walls were shaking, she was increasingly unsure any of them would be able to survive if they stayed here much longer.

There were no windows. Their absence had seemed like a good thing when Proft told her to request this room, ensuring there would be no witnesses, no chance of assassins taking advantage of an unclosed latch or broken seal, but now it seemed they had allowed themselves to be herded into a killing box.

And there wasn't time to dwell on that as Ral hurled another bolt of lightning at Oba, which she deflected with a swing of one mighty branch, sending it ricocheting into the wall just above Krenko's head. Krenko yelped and swore, swinging a punch at the nearest cluster of vines, and was promptly tied down by more loops of root growing from the floor. His struggles were to no avail, as he had already been tied fast.

Yarus, saying nothing, gestured for Kaya to come to him. She jumped and kicked off a swinging branch, launching herself in his direction. He grinned.

Kaya was momentarily taken aback by the sheer joy of that expression, then remembered who she was looking at. For someone high enough in the fragmented Gruul leadership to be called to this sort of meeting, a dull assembly about crime and politics turning into an out-and-out brawl must have been *fantastic*. She glanced back. Kellan had managed to fight his way through the swinging branches to join Etrata in protecting Proft. She approved. Of everyone in the room, the detective was the least equipped to protect himself—save possibly Krenko, who was pinned in his increasingly dense prison of roots and vines. Unless Oba planned to constrict him to death, he was probably fine for the moment.

She retuned her attention to Yarus. "Big beast rider took my weapons before he'd bring me here, but I can improvise," he said. "Let me out of these tangles and I'll show you."

"You'll be attacking—?"

"Got called to the Agency because someone let Anzrag out. Right thing to do. Gods shouldn't be confined. Wrong place to do it. She," his eyes narrowed as he focused on Oba, "used my god as a weapon. She doesn't get to do that."

Kaya didn't hesitate before cutting his legs free. Yarus grinned again, even wider. He moved away from her, grabbing a chunk of fallen rafter and holding it like a spear as he rushed across the room toward Oba, whose attention was fixed on deflecting Ral's lightning while her roots struggled to tie Aurelia and Ezrim ever more firmly down. Izoni was free, stepping lightly through the chaos, poisoning the roots that grabbed for her, occasionally pausing to do the same to any particularly troublesome vines.

Kellan and Etrata hacked away at the roots that targeted them or Proft, but they were fighting a defensive battle, making no forward progress.

Yarus might have reached his target had he not given in to the Gruul urge to roar a challenge. His voice boomed through the distorting room, horribly loud. Tolsimir heard the sound and leapt for Yarus, knocking him away from Oba and driving the rafter straight through his own chest.

Yarus glared at him, still holding fast to the portion of the rafter that wasn't buried in Tolsimir. "Why did you do that?" he demanded. "I had a clear shot!"

Tolsimir made a thick choking noise before falling backward, pulling the rafter from Yarus's hands. Yarus began scavenging for a new weapon, only for everything he grabbed to be immediately wrenched away by furiously twisting roots. He was still trying to rearm himself when the roots wrapped around all six of his limbs, yanking him off his hooves and jerking him toward Oba, who took her eyes off Ral to lean closer, her face tight with fury.

"He was *mine* !" she snarled. A root rose from the floor, trailing ends twisting together until they formed a sharp-pointed spear. It pulled back like a rearing snake as she aimed it at Yarus's chest. "How *dare* you!"

"I dare for the Clans!" shouted Yarus. "I dare for Ravnica! You are not the world, you're a *gardener*, and I have never accepted your authority over me." He spat at Oba.

She pulled the root spear farther back, preparing to slam it home. Before she could complete her strike, Etrata leapt into its path, knocking Yarus aside. The spear smashed through the left side of her chest, shattering muscle and bone.

Kaya stiffened, feeling the last traces of hesitation leave her body. There hadn't been much: after what Oba had admitted, she'd known the dryad had to die. But that strike had been so similar to the one that killed Teysa that suddenly what had been a story—a what-if spun by a woman who had clearly suffered enormous, if invisible, damage during the war—became a confession of murder. Proft had cracked the case: Oba had been telling the truth all along. Trostani was an essential enough part of Ravnica that Kaya hadn't fully believed her until she struck Etrata.

The Dimir lay motionless on the floor, a trickle of blood painting one corner of her mouth. Proft dropped to his knees, searching her body for signs of life. It looked as if the smug, stoic detective was on the verge of tears. Yarus grabbed for another weapon, but a cascade of vines tied him down, immobilizing him next to the woman who had taken a possibly killing blow for his sake.

And all that was a distraction from what still needed to be done. With a roar that would have made Tyvar proud, Kaya flung herself, solidifying and knocking Kellan out of the way of a swinging branch. He hit the floor and rolled to his feet, already in a fighting stance.

Kaya spun her daggers in her hands and lunged, solid enough that when Oba wrapped a root around her waist, she didn't tumble through it.

"Little deserter," Oba sneered. "Little runaway." She wrapped more and more roots around Kaya, layering them on so quickly that Kaya couldn't turn insubstantial long enough to escape, pinning them both in a seemingly endless race for dominance. When Oba began to pull back as if to hurl her away, Kaya realized what she was doing and stopped trying to phase, allowing herself to position for the throw.

Half the room's occupants were chained to the floor with loops of root and vine, branches pinning them down. The other half fought or knelt around the motionless Etrata. Izoni still moved freely, but her little vials were starting to run empty, and even as Kaya watched, Oba got a root around her, dragging her to the floor.

Kellan shouted something and leapt for Kaya. Jamming one of her daggers into a loop in the root, she grabbed his hand, pulling him along as Oba hoisted her into the air.

Above them, the ceiling opened like an iris, branches pulling apart to reveal an oblong section of sky. "Hold on!" Kaya shouted.

"Oh, I am *holding on*," Kellan yelled back.

As Kaya had hoped, the higher Oba hoisted them, the more the room below shifted to look like a section of natural tree, Vitu-Ghazi reaching for its original form even as Oba's rage distorted it. Holes appeared in the walls, not windows, but breaks in the wood, places where the growing bark had peeled away. Judith broke free of a loop of root and fled for one of those openings, wildly forcing her way outside.

"Coward," Kaya muttered, pulling her dagger out of the wood just as Oba hauled back and threw them. The force of the throw separated her from Kellan, leaving him spinning away into the sky. Kaya stretched a hand after him, before she was pulled up short by a vine wrapping around her ankle, and realized two things at the same time:

The throw hadn't been the point of the attack. And Oba wasn't doing this on her own. Even connected to Vitu-Ghazi, she wouldn't have this sort of power. She was drawing directly on the Ravnican World-soul, Mat'Selesnya, ripping strength from the very plane and using it against the people she had designated her enemies. Kaya attempted to phase free, preferring the fall to what was sure to come.

The strength of the Worldsoul was a shackle around her skin, and she was yanked back into the crumbling manor.

Kellan fell without anything to catch or hold onto, arms in front of his face to shield him from the inevitable impact. He could still see Vitu-Ghazi beneath him, now caught midway between the manor house it had appeared to be and a twisted, unhealthy-looking oak. The damage the Phyrexians had done went deep; the damage Oba was doing might go deeper.

Of course, if he hit the ground, the damage she did to him would be the last thing he ever had to worry about.

Kellan tried to twist in the air, hoping he might slow his descent, and succeeded only in going into a sort of spin that left him dizzy in addition to weightless. He screwed his eyes shut, not wanting to see himself hit the ground, and felt his spin stop as his fall slowed to something almost pleasant. Cracking one eye open, he glanced over his shoulder and saw that pure, gold-rimmed fae magic of the same kind his hilts produced now enveloped him.



Art by: Durion

He opened both eyes, blinking at the unexpected sight. “Hey! I’m okay!” he said, waving his arms to control his position in the air without much success.

Below him in the courtyard, Judith ran around ground-breaking roots, almost falling several times before she rounded the front of the manor and the road was in sight.

So was a familiar figure in red and black, a painted doll’s smile on her face. Massacre Girl smiled a vicious, natural smile below her harlequin’s grin, producing a viciously barbed knife from somewhere on her person.

“This is for leaving me to the wolves,” she said. “Naughty, naughty. Rakdos doesn’t like it when the children fight.”

She lunged. Judith stumbled back.

Not even Kellan, still occupied in falling, heard what happened next over the screams from inside.