

Episode 5: Chains of Expectation

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

11. 01. 2024

The afternoon air was bright and crisp as the detective and the escaped fugitive made their way along a shadow-swamped street, flanked on either side by looming buildings that somehow managed to look more sinister than architecture could explain. Etrata moved with quick economy, her feet making no sound on the cracked cobblestones. Proft's tread was heavier.

For all that they walked side by side, there was a distance between them, like the Dimir vampire was unsure about the company she kept. She kept slanting glances at Proft, a frown tugging at the corners of her mouth as she chewed on the questions she wasn't ready to ask quite yet.

"You say this is the last place you remember being before you woke up at the party," said Proft, his tone mild, almost disinterested. Etrata hadn't known him long, but she could tell that tone for the trick it was. People would be eager to explain, to help him understand why he was wrong to dismiss them so easily. It was simply one of the more visible tools in a deep, deep toolbox.

And even knowing it for what it was, she found the urge to explain rising in her chest. "Not quite," she said. "We're almost there."

"I must admit, I'm not as familiar with the Dimir-controlled parts of the city as I ought to be," said Proft. "The Azorius are rarely welcome here, and now that I'm with the Agency, we get surprisingly few calls to investigate in Dimir territory. We don't enforce the law. We just help people answer the questions they can't answer on their own. Do those who fall under Dimir's protection not ask questions?"

"Not if they know what's good for them," said Etrata, stopping next to an apparently blank stretch of wall. She looked meaningfully at Proft. "This is where a gentleman averts his eyes."

"I am nothing if not a gentleman," said Proft, turning his back ostentatiously.

It was a gesture of good faith so vast it nearly took Etrata's breath away. Freeing her had been a surprise; insisting on accompanying her to retrace what she remembered of her steps before the party had been more in line with her expectations. Of course he wasn't just going to let her go. Not with a dead guild leader and a mystery to be solved.

She raised her hands and let them dance across the seemingly ordinary brick wall, tapping the mortar here, pressing against the stone there. It was a complex pattern, years of practice allowing her to complete it in seconds. With a weary grinding sound, a section of the wall slightly smaller than an ordinary door shifted and slid inward, creating a crack large enough for her to wedge her hand inside.

She didn't stop tapping as she slid her fingers into the gap, completing the part of the pattern that would keep the door from slamming shut on her hand. With a second groan, the door swung fully

open, revealing a narrow wooden hall with splintery floorboards, light shining through a single cobweb-encrusted skylight.

"You can look now," she said.

Proft turned, clearly unsurprised by the appearance of a secret entrance. "I appreciate your cooperation with my investigation," he said.

"Of course I'm cooperating." She took a few steps into the hall and stopped, beckoning for him to follow, even though she had barely gone far enough to leave sufficient room.

Proft raised his eyebrows and stepped through. Etrata took a step back, and the door slammed shut with a resonant crunching sound. Proft jumped, turning to look behind himself.

"Izzet work?" he asked.

"Originally, although the builders are long dead; no one knows about this entrance but me. If someone manages to follow me here and slip through the door before it closes, as soon as I step *off* the pressure plate in the floor, they'll learn why that was a bad decision," she said, tone mild.

"Fair enough." Proft moved to follow as she started walking again, heading for a less aggressive-looking door at the far end of the hall. "What do you mean, of course you're cooperating? Many wouldn't, innocent or not."

"I don't remember *going* to that party, much less getting ready for it," said Etrata. "Where did I get the clothes I was wearing when they arrested me? There may be a dead member of the Selesnya Conclave stuffed in a box somewhere, waiting to be found, and if that's so, I don't remember killing them either."

"Do you remember everyone you've killed?"

"Yes," she snapped. "I'm a *professional*. I don't kill for free, and I don't forget the dead. I won't pretend to have some high-minded reason for doing the work I do—I'm good at it, I enjoy it well enough, I like getting paid—but I'm an assassin, not a murderer. The guild doesn't look kindly on unsanctioned hits, which means I'm not just in trouble with the Azorius, I'm in the bad books of the House as well. What I still don't understand is why you're helping me."

"Ah," said Proft. "That's a simple matter. Right now, you represent the most interesting puzzle set before me since the invasion. Most of the questions put to the Agency have easy answers. They come quickly. We turn over a few rocks, and there the solution is, ready to be unveiled. You, however. A trained Dimir assassin kills a guild leader—"

"Allegedly," said Etrata.

"—allegedly kills a guild leader in a manner out of keeping with her profession and known kills, then flees the scene in a frankly clumsy way, without sufficiently covering her trail? That's enough to make no sense all on its own. Couple that with you lacking any memory of the event or the party itself? It becomes genuinely fascinating." Proft watched as she unlocked the door. "I have a bit of a reputation for continuing to dig long past the point where it would have been polite, or politic, to stop. It's gotten me into trouble before."

"It's going to get you in trouble this time, too, if the Azorius find out what you've done," said Etrata, pushing the door open to reveal a surprisingly spacious room. She began to step inside and stopped as Proft held up a hand, palm out.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Are there any more little surprises for people who come here without your consent?"

“No. No one’s ever made it this far, and I prefer not to need to be on my guard when I’m heading for bed.”

“Then, if you would allow me, I would prefer to see the scene in its current, undisturbed condition.”

Etrata raised an eyebrow. “Be my guest.”

“Thank you.” Proft smiled as he moved past her. “Cheer up, Etrata. We have a mystery to solve!”

Etrata didn’t look nearly as pleased by the idea as he did.

The room itself seemed to be a combination workshop and bedroom, with half the space dedicated to the tools of her trade—weapons, vials of toxins, racks of disguises—and half containing her bed, everyday wardrobe, and a small table where she presumably took her meals. Everything was impeccably clean. Everything except for the surface of the bedside table.

Proft stopped there, frowning. “Do you customarily apply cosmetics in bed?”

“What? No. Do people do that?”

“Hmm. Do you take any medicines in the form of a yellow-gray dust? Perhaps something to help you sleep?”

“No. In my profession, a drugged sleep is the last one you’ll ever have.”

“Then please come over here, carefully, and disturb nothing—unless you have a small jar prepared for poison that can be repurposed for collecting evidence. I’m afraid I was unable to request a proper investigator’s kit while orchestrating your escape.”

Etrata crossed from the door to the workbench, grabbing a jar before moving to join Proft by the bed. Once there, she paused, following his gaze to the bedside table. There, dusted across the wood and onto the nearby pillowcase, was a fine yellowish-gray powder.

“I’ve never seen that before,” she said.

“I suspected as much. Do you have a knife?”

Etrata managed not to roll her eyes as she handed him both the jar and a knife he was *sure* she hadn’t been carrying when he released her from custody. Ah, well. If an assassin couldn’t acquire a knife without being seen, they presumably wouldn’t be an assassin for very long. Carefully avoiding any direct contact with the powder, he scraped as much of it as he could into the open jar before sealing it firmly.

He held the knife out to Etrata, gripping one side of the hilt. “I would clean this thoroughly before using it for any purpose—even murder—and do the same for this table and all the bedding. I don’t know what this substance is, but I know it isn’t anything I’ve seen before. Given the situation as it currently exists, I would theorize it has something to do with your missing time, and the actions taken therein.”

“But how did it get here?” asked Etrata. She took the knife by the other side of the hilt, whipping it across the room to embed in the wall.

“That is an excellent question,” he said, holding the jar up to study its contents through the glass. “Shall we move on to answering it?”

After the invasion, the citizens of Ravnica had learned to take the threat of contamination seriously. Etrata left without any of her belongings, saying she could get a change of clothes in another bolt hole—one that didn’t come with the risk of mysterious powder worked into the seams.

She took the lead as they walked back down the hall, and Proft followed, careful to put his feet where hers had been. They were almost to the door when Etrata heard a thump and a strangled squeak from behind her. That was all the indication she needed of an attack in progress.

For a moment, she considered continuing on her way. Few people knew about this particular hidey-hole: any one of them could have had their own grudge against Proft, and if the detective were to mysteriously perish, there would be no one left who knew how she had escaped Azorius custody. She could walk out that door and disappear without a trace.

Disappear into a city that thought she was a murderer, that would stop at nothing to see her apprehended, all because she'd allowed the only person who believed her innocence to die. With a frustrated sigh, Etrata turned, pulling two more knives from inside her shirt, and leapt for the fight behind her.

It wasn't a "fight" so much as an assault: Proft was on the ground, a figure dressed in red and black crouching over him, a knife in either hand. He had his arms up to protect his face and throat, and he was already bleeding from several shallow cuts by the time Etrata barreled into the figure and knocked them away, sending them several feet down the dimly lit hall.



Art by: Lie Setiawan

The attacker recovered quickly, refocusing on Etrata. Etrata matched them move for move, careful to keep herself between the figure and the fallen Proft.

Finally, in a puzzled tone, the figure said, "Etrata?"

Etrata stopped, straightening. She knew that voice. "Massacre Girl?"

"No one told me *you* were going to be here."

"This is my place. Where else would I be?"

"I don't know. Azorius custody?"

"I'm out," said Etrata flatly, not mentioning Proft's role in making that happen. If her fellow assassins believed she could escape from an Azorius prison, well, she wasn't going to disabuse them.

The two began to circle in the close confines of the hall, Proft now between them, saying nothing, but staring into the shadows with wide eyes.

"I'm sure you understand why that was unexpected."

"About as unexpected as you here, in my hideaway, attacking my guests. How did you get in here, anyway?"

Massacre Girl was good but off her guard: she couldn't stop herself from glancing upward.

Etrata swallowed a groan. "The skylight? I just had the traps on that reinforced last season!"

"Heavy storms. You should have checked your tripwires for signs of decay."

"Oh, for ..."

"That's a rookie mistake." Massacre Girl stopped circling, the painted red grin slashed across her pallid face still luridly visible in the gloom. "Like I said, I didn't think you'd be here. I wouldn't have taken the job if I'd known you were out."

"What's the job?"

"They didn't pay for secrecy, so. I was supposed to kill the man who caught you. Leave his body as a warning to the Agency to stay out of guild business. But if he's yours ..."

"Yeah. He's mine," said Etrata firmly. "I'm helping him find out who really killed Zegana."

Massacre Girl looked surprised. "You mean it wasn't you?"

"Have you ever known me to be that sloppy?"

"Only when it comes to securing skylights," Massacre Girl said and cackled at her own joke. The knives in her hands vanished back into her clothing. "Sorry about the confusion. They didn't pay me the friends and family rate."

"They never do," said Etrata, putting her own knives away. "We good?"

"We're good. Door unlocked?"

"Yeah, let yourself out."

"See you when you clear your name," said Massacre Girl before turning her attention on Proft. "Sorry."

"About attempting to kill me?" he asked, all wounded pride and confusion.

"No, about failing. It looks bad for both of us." She grinned abruptly, a flash of white teeth through her painted red smile. "There's always next time." She turned then, walking down the hall and vanishing out the door to the street.

Etrata offered Proft her hand, levering him up off the floor. "You okay?"

"She didn't cut deeply," he said. "I've had worse."

"You're lucky whoever sent her hired a Rakdos," she said. "Golgari and Dimir assassins use a lot more poisons." When Proft looked alarmed, she laughed. "Don't worry about it. If she'd poisoned her knives,

it would have been with a blood thinner to make the arterial spray prettier, and you'd already be bleeding out."

"Was that a friend of yours?" he asked, beginning to gather his dignity around himself once again.

"A colleague. She does good work. So buck up. Our association is already increasing your value."

"I'm sure that will be very gratifying when I'm dead," he said and sighed. "Now come along. We shouldn't lurk where there might be assassins waiting."

"Where are we going, anyway?"

"To see an old friend of mine—not associated with the Agency, and hence witheringly unlikely to turn us in—who might be able to shed some light on what we've found." Proft untensed his shoulders, returning to his normal position of easy self-confidence. "Shall we away?"

"Just don't get attacked again. I can't call in too many favors for you," said Etrata.

When last Kaya had seen Vitu-Ghazi, the great living guildhall had been dormant, so deeply damaged by the God-Eternals that even the mighty city-tree had been unable to sustain itself. She had known at the time that Vitu-Ghazi was not dead; if the guildhall had actually been destroyed in the battle, Selesnya's mourning would have been enough to tear the plane apart. Still, she hadn't been there to see the city-tree assume its new form, and as she and Kellan set off to follow Judith's parting instruction, she had to wonder what they would find.

What they found was a road leading into one of the city's rare park systems and a carriage driver who stopped when the road did, at the edge of a vast, rocky moor that seemed to stretch all the way to the horizon. "Sorry, sir and ma'am," said the driver, twisting around to address them through the small window behind him, "but this is as far as we can go."

"You could have said as much when we told you where we were going," said Kaya, moving to get out of the carriage.

"I could have, yeah," he agreed, smiling tightly as Kellan got out and dropped their fare into his hand. Looking at Kaya, the driver tapped the Orzhov seal on his taxi license. "And you could have been here when the Phyrexians came. Seems we all could have done a little better, don't you think?"

He flicked the reins to turn his dromads and drove off, leaving Kaya and Kellan standing by the side of the road. Kaya glared after him. A dozen sharp replies gathered on her tongue, and she swallowed them all unspoken. He had been rude, but he hadn't been *wrong*, and her penance wasn't finished yet. Fixing a smile on her face, she turned to Kellan.

"Looks like we're walking from here," she said. "I don't know this park. Never been here before. Do you know the way to Vitu-Ghazi?"

"I do," he said. "Listen, Kaya—I'm sorry about Guildmaster Karlov. I know you two were friends."

"We weren't friends," Kaya said. Her relationship with Teysa seemed entirely too complicated to sum up like that.

"Well. You were close. I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Did you come here alone?" she asked. "To Ravnica, I mean."

His eyes popped open in surprise. "How did you know?"

"Come on, kid. Give me some credit," she said. "So. Did you come here alone?"

“No,” Kellan said after a moment. “A friend of my own came with me.”

“Where is she now?”

Kaya braced herself for another sad story—the Multiverse seemed so full of them these days. Instead, to her surprise, Kellan grinned. “Oh, she’s in the Rubblebelt, I think. Something about an ancient ruin? She doesn’t really sit around waiting for *my* adventures to happen.”

Kaya blinked. She knew that this walking ball of sunshine should be annoying her by now, but somehow, she didn’t mind it. “Huh. Well, Ezrim’s going to expect us to check in sooner than later, so we need to keep moving. Come on.”

She gestured grandly for him to lead the way, and after another moment of frowning at her, he started walking, striking out across the moor in a straight line. Kaya followed close behind, stepping around rocks rather than phasing through them. For the moment, she wanted to exist on Ravnica, walking on Ravnican ground, solid and alive as Teysa would never be again.

Ugh. She couldn’t think that way. She wrenched her thoughts back to the present, watching Kellan walk, staying close behind. The young agent hadn’t complained about any of the strange things he’d been asked to do today. Visiting the Rakdos, now heading for Vitu-Ghazi: none of this could be ordinary for him.

“What’s Vitu-Ghazi doing all the way out here?” she asked.

Kellan glanced back at her. “This park is part of the Conclave’s holdings. After the invasion, the guildhall was weak and needed to be semi-dormant for a little while to recover its strength,” he said. “Mat’Selesnya told Trostani that Vitu-Ghazi needed space to put down new root structures if it wanted to return to its former strength, and she moved the guildhall here. It’s going to take a long time, but this was deemed the best place for Vitu-Ghazi to reconnect with the plane and properly recover.”

“Hmm,” said Kaya. She had never put that much thought into the lengths a tree the size and power of Vitu-Ghazi would have to go to survive on a plane as urbanized as Ravnica, where every inch of dirt was deeded and exploited for the needs of the city. It made sense that the Selesnya would have tucked away a few oases of whatever had been here before the city came, using them as living batteries for situations like this one.

As if there had ever been a situation like this one before. If not for the damage done by the God-Eternals, even the Phyrexians might not have been able to harm Vitu-Ghazi enough to compel the tree to enter a period of dormancy. This was all uncharted territory.

The moor was beautiful, in its wild, improbably pastoral way. Rocks jutted out of the earth here and there, forming jagged obstacles in their path, and mixed brush in greens and yellows covered the ground, some topped with tiny flowers, others bristling with thorns. Kaya tried to concentrate on where she was putting her feet rather than dwelling on the things she couldn’t change.

A howl split the air. Kellan stopped walking. Kaya did the same, moving so that the two of them were standing back to back. “What was that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” said Kellan.

“Very encouraging,” she said. “Like the energy.”

Kellan’s reply was cut off by a second howl, this one from substantially closer. Kaya turned toward the sound, finally able to get a direction on it, and felt her entire body try to tense and relax at the same time. A massive white wolf was loping toward them, legs eating up the ground at an impossible pace as it closed, mouth open to reveal a full set of jagged, vicious-looking teeth.

“Wolf,” said Kellan in a strangled tone.

“Yup,” said Kaya.

“You sound way too calm about this.”

“I know that wolf,” said Kaya.

“Will that keep it from *eating* us?”

Kaya paused. “Hard to say,” she allowed, after a moment’s consideration. She drew her daggers from where they rested against her hips. “Don’t attack first, but feel free to defend yourself.”

Kellan still looked dubious, even as he pulled what looked like two small baskets from his own belt. His hands fit neatly inside, and the woven latticework of the “baskets” lit up with elemental light before producing two short, curving swords.

Kaya raised her eyebrows, looking impressed. “Nice,” she said. “Now remember. Defense only.”

The wolf continued running until it was five or six feet away, then skidded to a stop and began to circle them, snarling. It seemed more interested in keeping them where they were than in attacking.

“How are you so calm?” hissed Kellan.

“I told you, I know this wolf,” said Kaya. “His name is Voja. He won’t hurt us unless he decides we’re a threat.”

“So why is he here?”

“I’m guessing we’ll know in a minute.”

A piercing whistle rang out across the moor. Voja stopped circling and raised his head, ears perked up as he turned toward the sound. He didn’t move away from them, however, and quickly returned his attention to the cornered investigators.

Kaya and Kellan remained where they were, still standing back to back when an elf in green and silver armor came loping across the moors to meet them. How he’d been able to get that close without being seen was anyone’s guess: magic, most likely, although not a kind Kaya herself knew.

He stopped next to the wolf, setting a hand on Voja’s shoulder.

Kaya bowed her head respectfully. “Tolsimir,” she said.



Art by: Uriah Voth

“We weren’t expecting visitors today,” he said.

“Inspector Kellan and I are investigating the matter of Zegana’s death,” said Kaya. “It was suggested that we visit Vitu-Ghazi and refer to a passage in the original Guildpact. We intended no disrespect; I was unaware that notice was required to visit the guildhall.”

“Precautions have been put in place after what happened to Zegana,” said Tolsimir. “I have heard rumor that she may not be the only guild leader to have been harmed—you might look within your own guild, Planeswalker Kaya.”

News of Teysa’s death was spreading that fast? Kaya managed to suppress her surprise, barely, and only nodded. “Not my guild anymore,” she said. “May we continue our journey?”

“I’ll see you to the doors,” said Tolsimir. Hand still resting on Voja’s shoulder, he began to walk. Kaya and Kellan sheathed their weapons and followed him.

Quickly, Vitu-Ghazi appeared before them, having previously been concealed by the curvature of the land. Kaya stared.

The towering guildhall had reconfigured itself as it came to rest in the open moor. Formerly a tall tree cupping a grand city, it was now a tangle of roots draped around and across what looked like a remote country manor—modest in comparison to what it had been before, although still grand enough to rival Karlov Manor. Kaya knew the edifice couldn’t be more than a year old, but it managed to carry the impression of having been there before, wood weathered by the passage of time, windows drooping slightly at the corners as if they could no longer hold themselves entirely open.

A single trunk still stood, taking the form of a gnarled oak that stood higher than the house itself, shading the roof with its branches, and roots broke the soil all around the foundation, making it as uneven and rippled as the living sea.

Tolsimir smirked as he looked at her, judging her reaction. “Like Ravnica itself, Vitu-Ghazi may be transformed, but still, the city-tree stands. This way. Trostani will receive you.”

The doors swung open as the group approached, apparently responding to their presence, and they continued inside, through the vaulted entrance hall and past a guild checkpoint into a smaller, cozier receiving room. The walls were lined with bookshelves clustered with volumes of Ravnican history, and at the center of the room, another oak tree grew. No—not another. The same oak. There was only one tree, after all, and it was the tree outside and the tree inside and the manor itself.

Kaya, who had beheld the true World Tree of Kaldheim and the twisted Invasion Tree of New Phyrexia, caught her breath, awed despite herself as the three largest branches of the oak began to twist and move. Seamlessly, they became three women, seemingly human from the waist up, sinuously bending branches from the waist down. Three dryads, each one an individual, and collectively the singular entity through which the Worldsoul of Ravnica was said to speak.

Kaya inclined her head. “Trostani,” she said. “We have come to consult the original Guildpact, if you would allow it.”

“Of course,” said one of the dryads that made up the being known as Trostani. This was the one called Ses, the dryad of order and the rightmost body. “Our roots tell us you seek to serve the investigation, that you will find the person responsible for targeting our fellows.”

“We are honored to assist.” It took Kaya a moment to realize that this was Cim, the dryad of harmony; she was on the left side of the thick branch from which they all grew. That was new. “We are told your former guild’s leader has left us as well.”

“Teysa’s death will be avenged,” said Kaya stiffly.

“Like all the deaths while you were gone?” asked Oba, the dryad of life. Her sisters turned on her, the three normally united dryads twining around one another as they returned to their usual accord. Oba was, Kaya noted, the central body now. Did that correspond to her influence on the tripart being? *Life, triumphant in the aftermath*? She couldn’t have said either way.

Oba was still frowning when they returned their mutual attention to their guests.

“Tolsimir will show you to the Guildpact,” said Cim. “It has always been Selesnya’s purpose to preserve the history of Ravnica. Here, in this new configuration, we are able to do so in a somewhat more accessible way. Anything you need to know, you should be able to find it here.”

That seemed to be their dismissal: without another word, Tolsimir turned to leave the room, and Kaya and Kellan had little choice but to follow.

“Has Trostani seemed different to you lately?” Kaya asked once they were outside the room and halfway down the hall.

“She’s still adjusting to the new shape of Vitu-Ghazi,” said Tolsimir. “The wind is different so low to the ground. There’s much to get used to. Do you only need the original Guildpact?”



Art by: Ben Hill

“That was all we were told to look for,” said Kaya. “We may ask to see more, if it sends us in a new direction.”

“Very well. This way.” He led them into a smaller room, an oak podium at the center. A bubble of magical force surrounded an open book. It faded when he waved his hand, leaving the book unprotected for them to read. “I’ll be with Trostani if you need me.”

Kaya and Kellan exchanged a look before she approached the podium, stepping up behind it and skimming her fingers down the page. It was open to the table of contents.

“Judith could have been more helpful about what, specifically, we’re consulting,” she said sourly.

“The Rakdos rarely seem inclined to assist with anything resembling an official investigation, even if it would help them,” said Kellan. “Whatever we’re supposed to be looking for won’t be about Judith, but it might be about her guild?”

“That would make sense.” Kaya checked the page again, then flipped deeper into the book, heading for the section on the establishment of the Cult of Rakdos.

Aloud, she read, “‘The Cult’s purpose is to be twofold: to serve the people of Ravnica, and to placate the demon Rakdos through blood and through fire.’ Grim, but not news. ‘They shall satisfy their hungers as they see fit, and in so doing, shall keep Rakdos satisfied. We hope, by binding the guild to him, that he will find a greater purpose than destruction.’ Then there’s a bunch about specific duties ascribed to the guild, positions members are expected to willingly assume, how much chaos they’re allowed to cause before the Senate gets involved—none of this is new. Why would Judith want us to see it?”

“The book seems too large to be just the Guildpact,” said Kellan. “Is there anything else in there?”

“There’s some history at the back of each section, explaining decisions that were made during the founding so that future keepers of the Guildpact can understand them better,” Kaya flipped forward again, pausing a few pages later. “It is the hope of the founders that, by binding the demon Rakdos to a people of his own, we can prevent his continuing to instill murderous rage in the citizens of Ravnica. This disruptive pastime has resulted in random slaughter and rampages, with even the meekest of people turning on their kin without warning or due cause—”

Slowly, Kaya looked up. “Didn’t Etrata say she didn’t remember killing Zegana?” she asked.

Kellen nodded. “Would Judith really implicate her own parun?” he asked, voice unsteady.

“To save her own skin? She might.” Kaya stepped away from the book, mouth set in a grim line. “We need to report this to Ezrim as soon as possible.”