

Family Values

Alison Luhrs

From set *Commander (2015 Edition)*

Teysa Karlov is a formidable force in the courts of the city-plane of Ravnica, but she wants more. With her extraordinary command of Ravnica's law-magic and the help of a Boros soldier, she is finally ready to make a bid for power. But she still has to contend with her treacherous, domineering ancestor Karlov, who hasn't let being dead slow him down . . .



Teysa Karlov had spent another full day being yelled at by the dead.

This time, the Orzhov Ghost Council had failed to see why condemning a debtor to five hundred years of servitude was problematic in the eyes of the law. Teysa had argued till her throat stung.

The Grand Envoy of the Orzhov collapsed into her favorite chair, cane leaning at hand. One of the Grugg brothers had tidied her desk (bless him) and had left a pile of papers to go through. Teysa Karlov carefully sorted and scanned her old mail before she tossed it into the crackling fireplace of her study.

An update on tunneling progress from Tajic.

A demand of compliance from the Obzedat.

A weeks-old confirmation of appointment with the Living Guildpact. Teysa grinned. What a fun meeting that was.

“Would you agree that the content of the Safety Provisions and Regulations, specifically Article 14, exists and is a valid law?”

“Yes? Miss Karlov, I’m extremely busy and need to go,” Jace asserted, shoving a grappling hook and traveler’s coat into a bag, frantic sweat on his brow.

“Would you also agree that stealing is illegal?”

“Yes, please leave.”

After asking him to confirm no less than twenty minor laws and legal requirements, it was worth getting kicked to the curb by the Living Guildpact himself. That meeting was weeks ago, yet still Teysa reveled in his adorable irritation.

She tossed the stack of letters into the fire and stoked it with the tip of her cane. She ran through a mental checklist as she began reading in the comfort of her study. The fire flickered at her feet, warming the skin of her long-numb legs.



Teysa, Envoy of Ghosts | Art by Karla Ortiz

She had written *The Official Accord and Guidance of the Guilds of Ravnica* long before the Maze. Long before the Guildpact had a body and could sleep, eat, void, and die like the rest of the world. That law

book sat in her lap now. Teysa didn't need to physically read it to know its contents, but tomorrow was the day she would act. Teysa needed the comfort of her proudest creation.

Finally she had the tools to restructure her guild. The allies to help her. The loophole to generate a path to freedom from the abusive dead.

Really, the best part of the whole Maze affair was losing. As she warmed her blood by the fire, Teysa remembered the thrill of secret realization when she watched Niv-Mizzet test the Living Guildpact after his victory over the Guild champions.

Now that the Guildpact had a body, the law had a voice. And what that voice spoke was law. She could manipulate this technicality to challenge the monopoly of the Obzedat.

It was a lovely loophole.

Teysa was, first and foremost, an advokist. She *adored* loopholes.

"I see you're a narcissist even in your spare time, Granddaughter."

Teysa jumped in her chair. The fat, opulent folds of her deceased grandfather, Karlov, ghosted through the closed window of her study. She scowled.

"I do not care if you cannot physically knock, I will not be interrupted during my leisure time," she snapped. With a nimbleness he certainly did not have in life, Karlov lowered himself gently onto a chair across from Teysa, eyeballing the self-authored book sitting in his granddaughter's lap.

"Why read through a text you wrote yourself, sweet child?" Had he the mass of his living self Karlov would sink down past the chair's tolerance, but death has many advantages. "Unless you would rather read your own words than listen to the advice of your own family."

Teysa mentally filed through the endless list of disagreements she had had with the Obzedat recently. Instead of deciphering which subject her grandfather may have been referring to, Teysa decided she honestly did not care.

Instead, she evenly sat up in her chair. "What sort of advice would you have for me, Grandfather Karlov?"

"Stop busying yourself with acts of vanity," the ghost cooed, placing a massive hand on her copy of *The Official Accord and Guidance of the Guilds of Ravnica*. He lifted his other hand up to his granddaughter's cheek, grazing a large strange claw across her cheekbone. "And start thinking of your blood. Your physical life will go by much quicker if you stop reminiscing on past mistakes."

Teysa ate her disgust. Though she could not feel the physical touch on her cheek, she still felt a wave of repulsion roil in her gut.

Teysa arranged her face. "I read this to remind myself of past mistakes. The Council requested exception from my laws; I foolishly ignored their advice. My position as Grand Envoy remains secondary to the Obzedat," she reassured through silver tongue. "However, my duties as advokist require me to read many texts, none of which are done in vanity."

The spirit soured. "You still claim the title of advokist over Grand Envoy?"

"I claim the titles both gifted to me and earned. I worked hard to be an advokist of the Law."

"There are more important laws than the ones in your books."

Teysa's tolerance tilted. "It isn't right—"

"It is our way! I felt it in life, I feel it more strongly in death."

“You feel nothing in death,” she hissed.

Karlov stilled.

“What you feel is an unending loop of what you felt when you were alive. You were a coin-gobbling sack of a man in life and have become only more foul in death,” Teysa seethed with a venom usually reserved for court theatrics—she couldn’t help it as the truths escaped her lips.

Karlov raised his eyebrows. His lips turned up slightly as he sat back passively. “I fail to see a problem with any of that, child.”



Karlov of the Ghost Council | Art by Volkan Baga

Karlov stood and held out a translucent hand. Teysa wanted to spit on it.

Instead, the Grand Envoy of the Orzhov leaned forward, bound by centuries of the living’s obedience, and subserviently kissed the outline of the Councilman’s gossamer ring. In that moment, she fantasized about biting his fat finger to the bone. Throttling him with her strong arms and slapping his fleshy face until he sobbed for mercy. She knew without a physical body she could not hurt him.

Teysa lifted her lips with internal resolve.

“Silly girl,” Karlov laughed. “Find my thrull tomorrow,” he offered passively as he exited. “Ask for a spare coin or two. Buy yourself something nice.”

Teysa used that coin to buy a knife.

At present, it was cloaked and strapped to her side as she was guided, in shackles, by her ally, Tajic of the Boros guild. He led her, shrouded and disguised, through a busy street past the Orzhova basilica. Crowds of desperate patrons passed, all moving nervously and quickly through the causeway. A cluster of spirits wafted sadly past Teysa and Tajic as they shuffled around a frenzied trio of devotees. There were no markets in Orzhova, no vendors peddling goods. There was nothing for the public to buy, only gifts from the church to be given. Orzhova was an anxious place if one did not belong to the guild, and the tension in the streets did well to hide Teysa from prying eyes.

“Keep up, crone!” Tajic ordered as Teysa allowed herself to trip over her own lame leg. Her disguise was essential to the plan. Although the records she needed were in the basilica itself, she would be too recognizable to access it herself. She needed her friend Tajic for the purpose of sneaking her in, and hoped this show of good faith could lead to a guild alliance in the future.

There was a Boros outpost prison near the edge of the main church building. Tajic led her in through the front door and past several guards who nodded at the knight of the Boros. Tajic returned their nod and briskly led Teysa down a long hall of cells. The vacant eyes of several criminals awaiting transport to the main prison stared at Teysa through her veil. She rolled her eyes.

Tajic led her down a crooked spiral staircase into a damp underground cell block. There were no prisoners down here, and no light to show them the way. Tajic let go, and Teysa lifted her veil. He lit a torch and ushered her into a basement cell, shutting the door behind him.

“My apologies for calling you a crone earlier,” the knight said, moving with coarse but gentle palms to remove Teysa’s shackles.

“Oh, it’s fair. I’m old. Technically.”

Tajic smiled awkwardly, unlocking the shackles on Teysa’s wrists. She stretched her freed arms and examined the barren cell around her.

She shallowly sighed. “Anything I can use as a cane?”

Tajic unsheathed his sword and handed it to her. The knight grinned, “Not only can it assist in walking; it’s also a great tool for opening jars and occasionally killing people.” Teysa grabbed the hilt, using the blade as a makeshift walking stick. She moved to the wall and tapped a brick at the end of the cell.

“I like to think I hid it well down here. None of the other guards ever found the entrance,” Tajic said proudly, motioning to a part of the wall that must have hidden the door. Plenty of sleepless nights had gone into magically carving out the three hundred hands’ length that connected the Boros cell to the Obzedat’s record room.



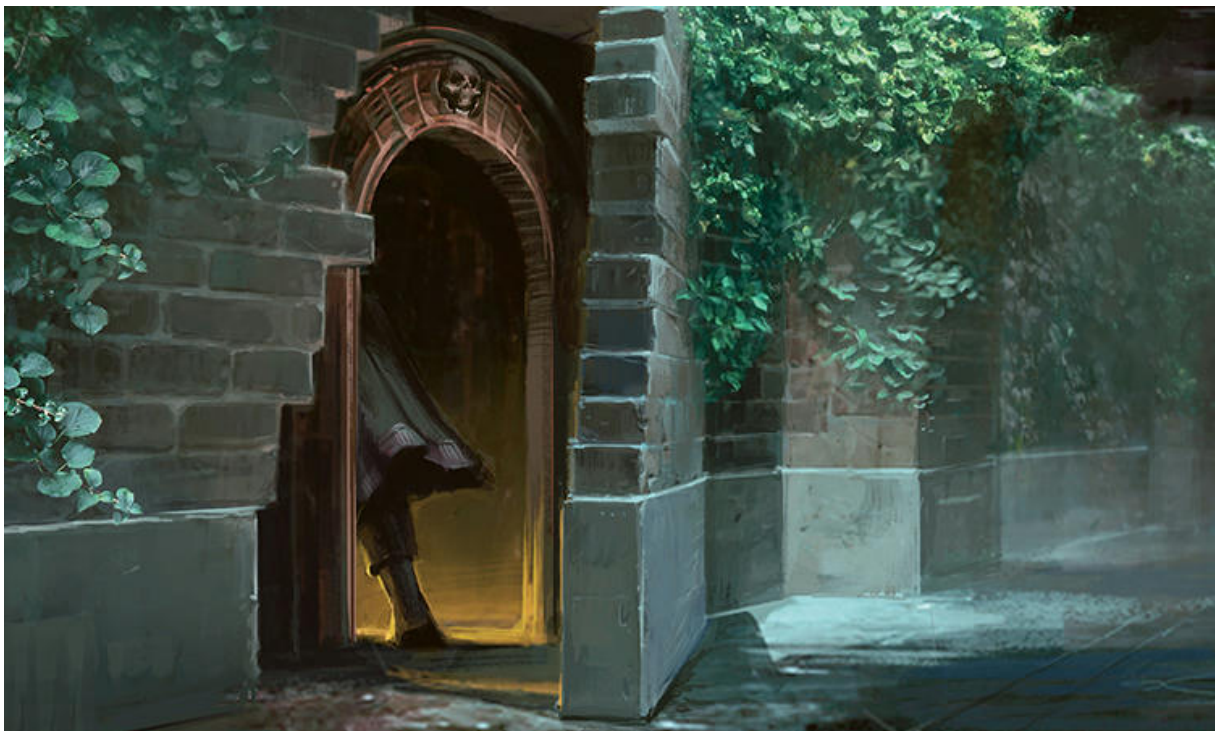
Tajic, Blade of the Legion | Art by James Ryman

Tajic picked at a stone jutting out from the wall of the dimly lit cell. “I can open it myself, but you do you want to see if your method works first?”

“Any law verbally affirmed by the Living Guildpact is unbreakable to the person he speaks the affirmation to,” she said while taking off the veil and disguise she had worn on the street. “All I need to do is directly reference a law affirmed by him and it must be made manifest. I had him affirm roughly twenty minor laws. He was ever so annoyed,” Teysa smiled. “It was precious.”

Tajic returned her grin and tapped the wall, leading Teysa through an opening he had constructed. The height was short—understandable, given that he had carved it quickly and in secret—and the light of their torch could barely illuminate the wall at the other end of the passage.

Teysa ducked and held one hand to the wall as she moved down the dark path. Her new cane clicked across the rocks, sending echoes into the darkness ahead. Tajic stayed to close the wall behind them, quickly rejoining Teysa’s side in the cramped passage.



Rogue’s Passage | Art by Christine Choi

“You didn’t have to do any of this, Tajic,” Teysa said. “The Ghost Council hasn’t done anything to you specifically.”

“You are a strong leader and ally. Your talents are wasted while you are under the thumb of the Obzedat.”

“Why thank you, Tajic.”

“Also, I really hate ghosts,” he divulged. “No offense.”

“None taken.” Teysa ran her hand along the side of the passageway. “These dead men are worthy of your hatred.”

They reached the end of the passage. Teysa stilled herself and recited from memory: “Policies and procedures section 12, item 4.” Her heart leaped as a thrill of borrowed law magic surged through her voice. “Official guild representatives may be granted passage from one guild-controlled place of residence or business to another through use of official warrant.”

Tajic handed her a piece of paper he had drafted earlier. It seemed small in his hand. Teysa held the warrant to the stone and felt the wall vibrate slightly.

She stood back as the wall rotated in on itself, bricks folding inward and behind to reveal a pitch-black space. Dust and grit fell to the floor, revealing a dark room lined with files and records before them. Teysa squirmed.

“Ugh,” she winced. “Law magic feels weird.”

“What is it like?” The knight asked. Teysa scrunched up her face.

“Starchy. Lukewarm. Like a family dinner you couldn’t get out of,” she shook off a shiver.

Tajic made an impartial noise. “An accurate description of every interaction with the Azorius I’ve ever had.”

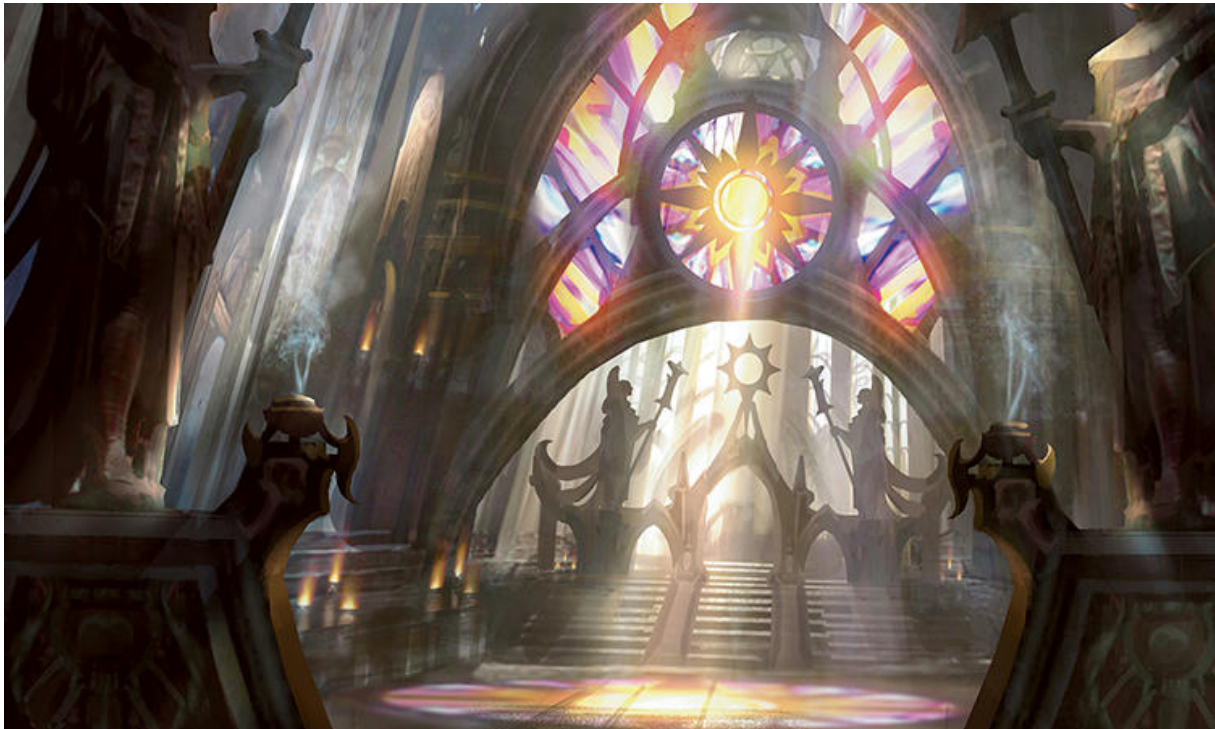
Teysa snorted a quick laugh, handing Tajic his sword back. “Be ready. There may be spells to set off an alarm,” the Envoy warned. She palmed the walls of bookcases as she entered; the portal sealed closed on its own behind her and the knight.

The records library was pitch-black save for the warm glow of their torch on countless stacks of books. Teysa stood still and recited, “Safety Provisions and Regulations, Article 14: All recorded security measures are to be approved by the Azorius Senate Office of Library and Information Affairs before inspection and operation, all those in violation will be marked for future investigation.”

Small threads appeared in the air, reflecting a web of silvery shimmers in the light of the torch.

“There. Don’t touch any of those and follow me,” she instructed. Tajic handed back the sword as she moved down the line of books, carefully ducking and weaving through the tangled loom of twinkling magic.

With the mass of threads behind them, the light of their torch fell upon a grimy crystal door inlaid with thousands of jewels. Whatever artisan had constructed the door put more intent on the volume of gems than the aesthetic. What was intended to be a grand display of wealth came off as a desperate attempt to impress an empty room.



Godless Shrine | Art by Cliff Childs

“This is the gaudiest thing I have ever seen in my life,” the soldier stated flatly.

“We’re entering the Obzedat’s sanctum. Trust me, it’s worse on the inside,” Teysa said, lifting her new knife to her arm with a smile. “This next bit is one *I* wrote.”

She unflinchingly and shallowly nicked the top of her forearm while reciting, “Article 12 of the *Orzhovniha* , a governing person of Orzhov recognition may be granted entrance to the Obzedat’s Chamber with proof of identity.”

Teysa knelt and discreetly smeared her blood on a far bottom corner of the door.

“Why down there?” Tajic asked.

Teysa shrugged. “It’s an expensive door.”

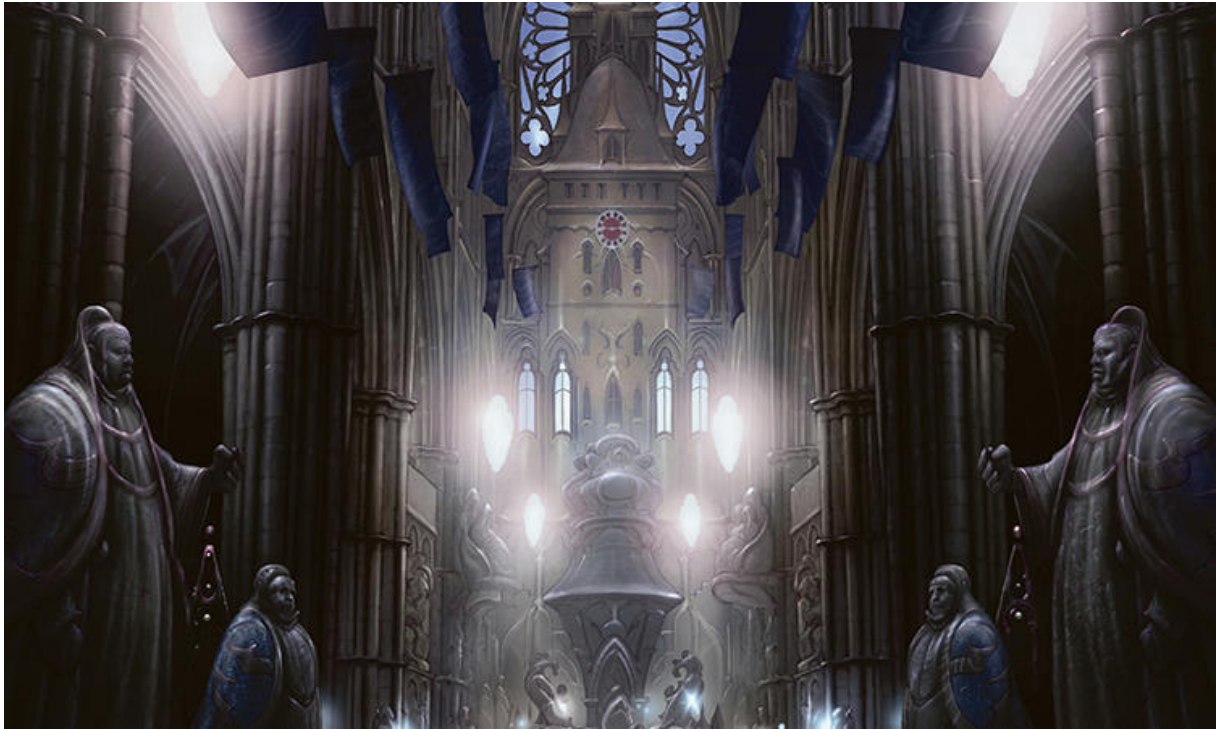
The blood was quickly absorbed as a lock deep within the structure released. Teysa started to open the gem-encrusted door.

“As if those dead magpies would really throw out anything they owned,” Teysa said while grunting and prying the door loose. Tajic moved as if to help, but Teysa continued, lost in thought, “And to think Uncle told me the bodies were *burnt*. Ha!”

The door swung open, and the knight let out a gasp.

Dozens of glittering, leathery, gold-and-velvet-draped bodies propped on thrones lined the walls of the room. The mummified former vessels of every Obzedat patriarch and matriarch sat silent and preserved, each covered from head to toe in what must have been nearly every piece of jewelry they owned in life. Huge sagging clothes covered tight-skinned skeletons, with diamonds and jet placed in the hollows of their eyes and Orzhovan deformities more obvious in some than others. The black velvet of their robes shone dimly against the tight ancient skin of the corpses they covered, dozens of rings stacked on bony, fleshless fingers. The thrones the bodies were propped on shone dark ebony and obsidian atop a polished floor inlaid with glittering diamonds.

Tajic stopped and stared upwards at the dozens of other bodies resting on inlaid shelves lining the walls of the Obzedat's chamber. The age of the bodies and their belongings increased dramatically as they approached the ceiling, which was covered in an elaborate mosaic of diamonds. The light of Tajic's torch was infinitely refracted around them as Teysa walked confidently towards the center of the empty hall. Her eyes skimmed the floor. The little space left between the gems had been filled with glistening gold and platinum. There were no chairs save for the grisly thrones, and the air stung with vinegar and preserving liquids.



Orzhov Basilica | Art by John Avon

A more recent body on the far side of the room reeked of chemicals, body fluids, and dark magic. Teysa stopped near it briefly. "Hello, Uncle," she muttered.

Tajic moaned. "Angels above. It's a family reunion."

"I warned you it was worse on the inside," Teysa quipped, setting down the sword in the center of the room and lifting a handle inlaid in the floor. She pulled a bejeweled chest out from beneath her feet.

Tajic's face was sturgeon in displeasure. "Please tell me they don't move around."

"Don't be barbaric."

"You called your family 'magpies' because they *magically preserve their bodies*."

"Well, I do appreciate the principle, but the execution *is* a bit flashy." Teysa used her hand to sweep dust away from the clasp on the front of the jeweled chest she had pulled from the floor.

"The records are in there?" Tajic asked. Teysa nodded, opening it and laying a crumbling record book on the opulent floor. She delicately turned the pages until she smiled in delighted recognition. Teysa stood back.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered. Teysa lifted her chin and recited from memory, her attention focused on the dimly lit chest in front of her.

"By order of the united guilds of Ravnica, it is decided that the betterment and progression of any one guild over another may be seen and understood as an act of war. Should proof of such subversion be

discovered by another representative of any other guild, it may be confiscated and turned over to the Living Guildpact for investigation. Tajic of the Boros Guild, what do you see before you?"

"You mean other than the skeletons with their skin still on them?"

Teysa stared at him with irritation. "I mean the contents of the book on the floor."

"My apologies. The skeletons are distracting." Tajic knelt and quickly scanned the page on the floor, being careful not to move his torch too close. The page seemed to be a logbook of Orzhov income. He gently flipped through several pages of crossed-out numbers, listings of interactions, recognizable names, and vault locations.

"It is a very old logbook that has clearly been edited multiple times. My gut says this is probably the proof you're looking for. "

Teysa smiled in earnest.

"In consonance with the *New Accord of the Guild of Ravnica* , you are granted the right of exposure and are obligated by duty to present your evidence of financial corruption to the Living Guildpact," Teysa said through happy tears. She felt a twinge of magic weave through the law in her words and her heart leapt with joy.

Tajic tried to lift the record book from the floor

He tried again.

Teysa's smile vanished.

Crumbling dusty pages now stood indestructible and resolute, as if part of the diamond floor. Tajic laid down his torch and clung to the spine of the volume with all his might, using all of his strength and unearthly will to shift the book from where it stood. Teysa's heart stood still. She felt him summon iron-hard Boros magic as he struggled to lift the records. No matter how hard he tried, he could not pick it up.

Teysa shook her head.

"I don't understand. It should work. I wrote the law, it was confirmed by the Guildpact, it should work."

Tajic looked at the Envoy in desperate uncertainty. Teysa felt anxiety tighten in her chest. She closed her eyes and held a hand to her head, running through her knowledge of law with every ounce of concentration. She opened her eyes as sudden revelation spread horror across her face. She moved back her robe to reveal her knife at her hip.

"Try to steal this," she said. Tajic stared in confusion as Teysa pointed to her knife. Her brow furrowed in determination. "Petty theft is a violation of personal property with a charge dependent on judicial ruling!" Teysa yelled, weaving as much power as she could into her statement of law.

Tajic stood and crossed to her, his boots clicking on the diamond floor. He easily grabbed the hilt of the knife and Teysa gasped. He lifted it away from her belt. The Grand Envoy of the Orzhov froze in horror.

"The law can be broken in this room," she choked. Her gray eyes widened to the whites as she looked in terror around the empty, ostentatious chamber.

"What do you mean the law can be broken in this room?!" Tajic objected. Teysa choked in response, "The Guildpact does not apply in this room! Something about this place directly manipulates Ravnican law."

"How did the Obzedat manage that?! They are dead! They cannot perform magic!"

"It's old! It's older than me, it's probably older than any member of the council, it's old and I don't know!"

"Well, then you are a silly girl."

Teysa gasped. Tajic reflexively held out the stolen knife in defense. The voice came from nowhere. The quickened breath of the Boros and Orzhov echoed eerily in the chamber. The silence was broken suddenly as Teysa growled to the emptiness, "Grandfather."

The ghost's form shined strangely in the light of the torch. He silently floated toward his granddaughter, a reproachful and parental scowl on his face.

"The law is worthless to our kind, granddaughter. I have told you this for centuries."

"Everything about the Obzedat, everything about how our guild has functioned is wrong in the eyes of the law."

She trembled in frustration. Every muscle in her body ached to fight, stab, flay, kill, but knew it would be for nothing. Karlov faked a condescending sigh. The ghost had obviously not had to breathe in quite some time—it was a sad mockery of a sigh.

"I'm afraid I will have to punish you for your temper tantrum, Teysa. I am very disappointed in you."

"I am not a child!"

"You have disobeyed my will."

"Nothing can be obeyed in this room!" Teysa asserted, flinging a gesture to the entire chamber.

"We can be obeyed in this room," Karlov overruled with iron conviction. "I initiate an immediate summoning of the Obzedat."

Tajic yelled with surprise as dozens of ghosts swiftly rose from beneath the floor. Corpulent, deformed bodies of long-dead Orzhov rose from beneath Tajic's feet and icily grazed his skin. He jolted in shock where he stood and the torch fell to the floor. Teysa stood still through the summoning, well-accustomed to the manners of the dead. The temperature in the chamber dropped dramatically as Teysa's tears of prior joy chilled on her cheek.

Karlov lifted himself to float slightly above the other ghosts of the Obzedat.

"The Grand Envoy of the Orzhov seeks to upend the council. What say we to her insolence?"

The ghosts cried out in anger, an alien, unearthly sound that shook Teysa and Tajic to their cores.



Obzedat, Ghost Council | Art by Svetlin Velinov

“Summon a thrull to escort the Boros to our dungeon,” Karlov ordered. A thrull shambled quickly through the previously open door and grabbed Tajic by the wrists. The soldier looked back at Teysa, uncertain whether to fight. Teysa subtly shook her head in response. The Boros left with his captor and the massive door closed behind him.

Teysa was dimly lit in the glow of the torch on the floor. Dozens of ghosts stared down at her from every corner of the chamber. Karlov approached her, his frown deepening on the folds of his face.

“By order of the Obzedat, your title of advokist is hereby *revoked*.”

Teysa’s heart clenched. “You can’t!”

“I can in here. The council forbids you from the practice of law for the rest of your existence,” Karlov avowed.

Teysa’s head was spinning. “I barely practice anymore! Only the Azorius Senate can remove my title as advokist—”

“We do as we please. Just as we always have.”

Her life. Her work. It was over. Teysa’s hip slid to the floor as she held herself up by her arms. “You’ve been planning this . . .”

“On revoking your title as advokist? Why of course, you vain little idiot. And unless you want it back, you will step in line and remember your blood.”

Karlov flexed his fat, translucent hands.

“We will discuss the details of your remaining title as Grand Envoy immediately. I will meet you in the Orzhova tower, yes?” Karlov smiled and motioned towards the record room door on the far side of the room.

Her chest heaved as her hands balled into fists on the diamond floor. “You can’t take away something I achieved on my own.”

Karlov smiled. "I can when you don't put the Obzedat first. We gave you a title. You owe us your unquestioning service." He held out his hand and presented his ghostly ring.

Teysa looked directly through it at the jeweled floor.

Karlov tsked.

"Insolent little girl."

"I am one hundred and twelve years old," the Grand Envoy seethed.

Karlov slowly knelt until his face was near her ear.

He faked an intake of old and shuddering breath and seethed through his teeth.

"You are small."

And she was.

"The tower, as you know, is roughly seven floors above this one. Don't keep me waiting," the ghost chided while floating up and into the ceiling.

Teysa was alone. The dying embers of the torch illuminated Tajic's sword. She sighed. The title of Grand Envoy was never a gift. It was a way to keep her bound.

She, Teysa Karlov of the Orzhov Guild, was in debt.

She grabbed the sword.

She stood firmly, supporting herself with the blade as her cane.

And she began to walk toward the stairs.