

Episode 4: Justice Before Mercy

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

Teysa's body had yet to cool. When Kaya found the strength to move—when her frozen legs began responding to her commands, although her feet refused to quite solidify, bits of broken statue on the floor passed through them as she approached the desk—she crossed the office to her fallen friend, brushing her fingertips across Teysa's cheek. She was no stranger to death, hadn't been even before her time in Ravnica, and she knew what had to happen now. She also knew these might be the only moments she had to study the scene undisturbed before the rest of the household came rushing in.

Kaya circled the desk to Teysa's side, not letting herself touch the body again. Her claims of innocence would be easier to believe if she didn't have blood on her hands.

Teysa's expression was pained, which was to be expected but oddly peaceful, as if she had seen this coming on some level and been prepared to face it.

"Is this what you wanted to talk about?" Kaya asked. "Gods and monsters, Teysa, you could have called me sooner. You could have—we could have—whatever happened, it didn't have to. Whatever you did, we could have ..." She stopped. Debating with the dead was only productive when the dead could answer back.

Most people who were going to return as ghosts didn't do so immediately upon their deaths. Loss of the physical body caused disorientation, and adapting to an insubstantial, spectral existence caused even more. Still, the more powerful the magic and will of the deceased, the more quickly they were likely to adapt. Grappling with the idea of a Ravnica that didn't contain Teysa troubled Kaya.

She wasn't a spirit medium, not really—her magic followed other channels—but she had been an Orzhov oligarch, and their dead recognized her authority, at least to the degree of being willing to speak with her. She straightened, reluctantly pulling herself away from the shell of her friend.

"Teysa Karlov, I would speak with you," she said, forcing her voice not to tremble.

Teysa's ghost did not do her the courtesy of appearing.

Instead, a thinly sketched female figure drifted through one of the walls dressed in the simple attire of an Orzhov servant, clearly having been permitted passage by the house wards. She moved toward Kaya, hands folded demurely in front of herself.

"Master Teysa is not entertaining guests at this time," she said, voice as much sigh as sound.

Kaya bit the inside of her cheek for a moment before saying, "I was invited. Is she going to be that rude?"

The ghost woman glanced up, briefly alarmed. "Master Teysa is not entertaining guests at this time," she repeated.

"But you know where she is?"

The woman didn't reply. Kaya scowled.

"You *do* know where she is?" If Teysa had been killed by a sufficiently powerful rival, her spirit could be imprisoned somewhere, ready to be exploited by her enemies.

The ghost woman looked down again. "Master Teysa is not entertaining guests at this time."

This was getting old, fast. Kaya sighed. "Where is everyone, anyway? No one came to greet me or shake me down for bribes when I came in, and that's not right."

"Master Teysa gave the living servants the day off, in anticipation of your arrival."

"So you can say other things. That's good. Did you see what happened?"

"No," said the ghost. "You are the first living person I've seen since the staff was dismissed."

That didn't mean as much as it could have, but it was something. Kaya looked at Teysa's body again, refusing to allow herself the luxury of denial. "Who leads the Orzhov now?" she asked.

"Master Teysa remains our guildmaster," said the ghost. "Our charter makes no distinction between her current state and any other."

"I didn't kill her."

"We are aware." As the ghost spoke, more figures appeared around the edges of the room, half-sketched and unclear. "We will tell the lawmages and investigators who are bound to come that this was not a power struggle between past and present leaders; your innocence proves itself."

Kaya scoffed, stuffing the crumpled Phyrexian note into her pocket. Stealing evidence was wrong, but allowing anyone else to see it before she knew what had really been going on was somehow even worse. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, maybe Teysa had been innocent—of this at least, if she'd never been innocent of anything else in her life.

"Not everyone's going to think that," she said. "Teysa stole the guild out from under me while I was off-plane. Some people are going to assume I came to get my own back."

"Orzhov's dead know you didn't, and as she is still our master, we are all that matters here."

"Tell that to the law." Kaya knew a verity circle would clear her in an instant—but she didn't want to be questioned in the first place. She didn't want to be standing here, next to the body of her friend, with a note in Phyrexian script in her pocket. She wanted ...

She wanted to run. That was the problem, and that was why she *couldn't* run. Even if she didn't owe her presence to Ravnica, she owed it to Teysa.

She owed it to herself.

"When they come here, we will," the ghost who had come to her call averred.

Kaya sighed. "Then I'd best go tell them they need to be on their way. I know I don't give the orders, but please, don't let anyone in here unless it's the Agency or a representative from the Senate? Teysa deserves to be left with a little dignity."

The ghost hesitated before she replied, "We can do that."

"Thank you," Kaya said and walked past the ghosts, leaving the room—leaving Teysa—behind. As before, her feet phased with every step, passing cleanly through the ceramic shards littering the rug. When she reached the door, she paused, but didn't look back.

In the end, Kaya just kept walking.

The Agency headquarters were in chaos when Kaya arrived, having taken a hired carriage to get her there more quickly. She frowned at the scene, investigators swarming like hornets whose nest had just been kicked. They formed clumps, trading news and angry words, then split apart and came together again in new formations. It didn't look like much work was getting done. Whatever had them so upset seemed to take priority over everything else.

Kaya tipped her driver before heading for the waiting mounts intended to take guests up to the building, careful to avoid the densest clusters of agitated agents. None of the investigators she knew were in the crowd, and this wasn't the place to announce Teysa's murder. A few people glanced at her with varying degrees of curiosity and suspicion. She kept moving, riding her borrowed steed to the entrance and heading inside.

The security desk was currently unoccupied, and the halls buzzed with the same furious energy as the street. Kaya frowned again. Maybe something had happened while she was at Karlov Manor—something more than the death of a guild leader. If the Agency knew about Teysa, she never would have been able to make it up the stairs without someone at least asking her what she needed.

As there was no one to question her presence, she continued onward to Ezrim's office. The door was ajar, and raised voices came from inside, all talking over one another, until nothing distinct could be understood.

"Quiet!" snapped Ezrim, booming voice cutting across the commotion. "Yes, we have good reason to be angry, and yes, we were demeaned by people who have proven themselves as unprofessional as they accused us of being, but this serves nothing! Etrata is still missing. The Azorius seized our investigation right out from under us, locking us out of the investigative process as much as possible, only to lose our only suspect. Yelling at each other changes neither of these things."

"So what *does* change them?" asked a voice Kaya didn't recognize.

"Doing. Our. Jobs." Ezrim spoke each word as if it were unbreakable law.

Commotion broke out again, louder than before, and Kaya began to turn away. She couldn't burst in and demand the position she'd previously declined; she needed to follow the rules. Flouting them in front of an archon was a good way to get ejected from the building, and she needed to be here. Still silent, she made her way back the way she had come.

The clusters of furiously arguing investigators had rearranged themselves into entirely new formations. Kaya scanned them as she walked, pausing when she caught a glimpse of a familiar head of dark hair. Kellan, the agent who had helped catch Etrata during the party. He was holding his own in an argument against three other investigators, clearly unhappy, but not yet moved to anger.

He was perfect.

"Apologies," said Kaya, inserting herself into their group and taking Kellan's arm. "I need him."

Kellan looked confused but didn't resist her pulling him away. The other investigators promptly closed the gap made by his absence, continuing their argument without missing a beat.

"Thank you for the save," he said, once they were far enough down the hall that the others wouldn't hear. "People are mad, and they're starting to say things they don't mean."

"What happened?"

"Detective Proft went to speak with the prisoner in Azorius custody. When he got there, she was gone. They can't tell us where she went. A few of them have even gone so far as to imply that Proft may have had something to do with her disappearance." Kellan sounded personally offended by this challenge to his colleague's honor. Then he paused, frowning. "Did you need something?"



Art by: Andreas Zafiratos

“Yes,” said Kaya. “I need you to get me in to see Ezrim.”

“He’s a bit busy right now.”

“Please. It’s important.”

Kellan blinked. “All right,” he said. “He’ll probably welcome the interruption.”

When they reached the partially open door, Kellan knocked, a quick rap of his knuckles that silenced the ongoing argument. “Can I help you?” called Ezrim.

“Planeswalker Kaya is here, and says she needs to speak with you,” said Kellan.

“Clear the room,” barked Ezrim.

Several disgruntled Agency investigators trickled out of the office, some directing glares at Kaya and Kellan. More quietly, Ezrim called, “You may come in now.”

Beckoning Kellan to follow, Kaya stepped into the office. Ezrim was settled behind his desk rather than astride his mount—which answered a few questions about archons, even as it raised several more—which was lounging on the pillows, watching the scene with sharp eyes. The office was otherwise in reasonable condition, with only a few out-of-place papers to indicate anything had happened.

“Close the door,” said Ezrim.

Kellan did as asked, while Kaya stepped forward to face Ezrim.

“I changed my mind,” she said. “I would like to take point on this investigation.”

Silence stretched between them. Finally, Ezrim said, “You realize the situation has changed.”

"I do. The investigator made me aware."

"Then you understand this will be substantially more difficult than it would have been when I first asked you."

"Yes."

"There is a chance the Azorius—"

"Teysa Karlov has been murdered."

Ezrim stopped, shocked into silence.

Kaya took a step forward. "I found her body. I'm willing to submit to questioning within a verity circle to confirm I was not responsible. I'd gone to meet her. She had something she wanted to talk about." The note felt like it was burning a hole in her pocket. But handing it over to someone else, even Ezrim, would feel like admitting Teysa had conspired against the city, and she couldn't do that.

At least this way someone attached to the investigation would know about it, even if she wasn't admitting it to anyone until she absolutely must.

On the other side of the office, Kellan made a small, confused sound. Kaya and Ezrim turned toward him. Kellan's cheeks reddened as he looked away from their combined gazes.

"You had something to add, investigator?" rumbled Ezrim.

"No. Yes. I mean, it's just that—Teysa Karlov was the head of the Orzhov."

"Yes," said Kaya. "Believe me, I knew that better than anyone else you could ask."

"So, if she's dead, she's a ghost now," said Kellan, with almost painful earnestness. "Shouldn't you be able to—you know—summon her and ask her who killed her?"

"There are a few problems with that," said Kaya. "First off, I'm not a necromancer. I can interact with ghosts, and I can sort of become a ghost without dying, which is a useful trick. I can talk to ghosts, but I can't summon them just because. I can ask politely, when I'm dealing with Orzhov ghosts, and I already tried calling Teysa." In the study, Teysa's skin still warm, her blood still red ...

Kaya shook off the memory. "I know she warded her own soul; it's standard practice for high-ranking Orzhov. It keeps their rivals from calling them back and binding them after they die. I'm not a medium. I can't break through her wards. Teysa will appear when she wants to. Until then, she's out of the picture."

Kellan frowned. "Why wouldn't she want us to know who killed her?"

"Quite a few reasons. Maybe she doesn't know. Maybe it was one of her own. The Orzhov aren't always great at involving the other guilds in intra-guild affairs. If she was careless enough for someone to get the drop on her, this is how their leadership has changed before." Kaya fixed her attention back on Ezrim. "An answer, please."

"I asked you to lead the investigation, not give me orders."

"That's why I said 'please.'"

Ezrim sighed. "You know I'll have to tell the Azorius about the death of Guildmaster Karlov."

"I know."

"This can't stay a private Orzhov matter. Not with two high-ranking guild officials dead in less than a week."

"I know that, too."

"If their investigation finds something you don't like, or determines Guildmaster Karlov took her own life as part of some Orzhov power play—"

"She didn't," said Kaya, with absolute conviction. "If the Azorius find something I don't like, I'll accept it, and we'll go from there. I've had a lot of experience accepting things I don't like. But Teysa did not orchestrate her own murder."

"Very well," said Ezrim. "You returned before I could locate someone else to head the investigation. The position's yours. Your first task is to speak with the only other member of guild leadership known to have been at the party who has yet to check in with us—Judith of the Rakdos."

"Given the unique nature of her position, she may have interpreted your call as not applying to her," said Kaya, delicately.

Ezrim snorted. "She's happy to serve as speaker for her guild in all other circumstances. She knew we wanted to talk to her. You begin with her. Inspector Kellan, you'll accompany her. Make sure everything proceeds according to protocol. We *will* solve this, and the Azorius will regret defaming us."

Kaya exchanged a look with Kellan. An investigation beginning in Rakdos territory was an investigation of interest, if nothing else.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"I guess we're partners now," said Kellan as he walked Kaya back toward the door, sounding entirely too happy about the idea. She frowned at him. He shrugged. "This is big. It's big, and it's interesting, and I joined the Agency because I like interesting things."

"I thought it was because you wanted to learn more about your father."

"He's an interesting thing," Kellan smiled lopsidedly. "When you and Detective Proft caught that assassin, it was the most interesting thing I'd seen in weeks. Murder isn't interesting. It's tragic and sad. But a foot chase through a crowded party, that's fascinating. I'm just glad I could help."

Kaya gave him a sidelong look, fighting the urge to answer his smile with one of her own. There was something about him that lifted her spirits, something untroubled and untainted by the terrible events of the last year. It was easy to take him at face value. That was something she didn't encounter nearly often enough. It was ... soothing.

The commotion in the halls was still going, and Kellan skirted a new path around the edges of the building to avoid the worst of it, taking them past a large room with shimmering sheets of static force instead of walls. The space inside the static was filled with shelves, each loaded with its own assortment of containment capsules.

Kellan saw her looking. "That's where we put evidence relating to ongoing investigations," he said. "If the case is solved, the evidence gets processed, neutralized when necessary, and removed from our care. Until that happens, we keep it here, where it can't hurt anyone."

Kaya blinked. "What keeps people from just walking in and taking it?"

"Anyone breeching the walls will trigger an alarm, and the walls will turn solid to trap them inside," said Kellan. "No one who tried it would be able to get out of the vault. Even someone with your abilities would find themselves stuck with an entire building full of angry agents between them and the exit."

"You mean the phasing, yes?"

“Of course.”

“Because I doubt that thing will stop a Planeswalker from leaving Ravnica entirely.”

Kellan shrugged. “If we start thinking in terms of needing to stop Planeswalkers, there’s no security left on the plane,” he said. “Ravnica learned that when the invasion came.”

Kaya winced at his tone. “I’m sure it’s not a real concern. I was just curious. I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing,” he said, shaking off his momentary unhappiness as if it had never happened. He indicated one of the containment capsules. “That’s the main reason I’d worry right now. That’s where we’re containing the Gruul god we detained until we’ve finished wrapping up the case, and can prove to the Boros that it’s not going to rampage again. If that broke open inside the building, well ...” He whistled, long and low. “It wouldn’t be pretty.”

“No, I wouldn’t think so,” said Kaya.

Then she paused, a frown crossing her face. Kellan looked at her curiously.

“What is it?”

“A ghost just entered the building.”

Kellan’s eyes widened. “Is it Guildmaster Karlov?”

“No, I don’t think so. Teysa might come here, but I think she’d come to me directly. Whoever it is, they’re this way.” She sped up, walking faster for the door, and Kellan followed, matching her step for step.

In the entrance chamber stood a very familiar, very dead man, darker skinned than Kaya or Kellan, with gray short-cropped hair and decorative drapes in Boros colors attached to his semi-transparent armor. All of him was semi-transparent, really, making it easy to guess why the last of the gossiping agents had cleared out of the room to let him have it.

Kaya inclined her head respectfully toward him. “Master Kos,” she said. “To what do we owe this honor?”

“I didn’t realize you’d joined the Agency,” said the ghostly figure. “Planning to start a cross-planar franchise?”



Art by: Jason A. Engle

“I’m helping with the investigation into Zegana’s murder,” said Kaya. “I’m neutral enough in the eyes of the guilds that it seemed like a good use of available resources.”

The ghost snorted, looking unimpressed.

“This is Investigator Kellan of the Agency,” said Kaya, indicating the man beside her. “Kellan, this is Agrus Kos. He was one of the Boros’s best investigators when he was alive, and death didn’t change that. Master Kos, we were just on our way to follow up with a potential person of interest. Can we help you with something?”

“The Boros Legion has asked me to work alongside the Agency doing whatever they feel is necessary to catch the party or parties responsible.” He grimaced. “Because one thing every dead man likes is being sent to get in the way of someone else’s investigation. Didn’t like it when I was in charge, don’t like it now that Aurelia’s running the show. Can’t even do the polite thing and offer to get the coffee.”

“You’ll want to speak to Ezrim,” said Kaya, sympathetically. “I get it. This isn’t easy for any of us. But we’re going to find the answers, and while that won’t bring back the dead, it will hopefully settle the guilds.”

“Nothing brings back the dead,” said Agrus. “Doesn’t mean we don’t want answers.”

“If you’ll excuse us, we’re going to go find them,” said Kaya. “I’m sure we’ll see you when we get back.”

“Looks like I’m haunting your house for now,” said Agrus.

Kaya and Kellan continued on and out the door.

“Do you know where we’re going?” asked Kellan as they descended the stairs.

Kaya glanced around to make sure no one not wearing the Agency shield was in earshot, then said, very quietly, "If we're going to speak with Judith, we need to head for Hellbender. Apparently, that's where all the 'cool' people are spending their evenings right now. Judith has never been anywhere but the center of the celebration if she had any choice in the matter."

"How are we going to get there?"

"Carriage." Kaya stepped up to the street and raised her hand, flagging the first unoccupied hackney with dromads to come trotting down the way.

Kellan looked nervous as he followed her into the vehicle. She smiled at him, trying not to feel like she was betraying Teysa by going to a nightclub when her friend was yet unburied.

"Come on, kid," she said. "Let's crack this case."

The carriage let them out in front of a grandiose structure in Plaza West, too big for its neighbors and crowding them out through presence alone. A lanky teen in red and black lounged on the rail beside the scalloped marble steps. A toothpick bounced between his lips as he chewed on the end. He pulled it free at their approach, twirling it between his fingers before flicking it toward the street. Sneering, he focused on Kaya.

"Pretty Orzhov lady, you have no business here," he said.

"Aw, you think I'm pretty?" she half-simpered.

Kellan, who hadn't known her long but had known her long enough to realize how out of character this was, shot her an alarmed look. His alarm only grew when she took two long steps closer to the Rakdos boy, producing a knife from inside her tunic. Its edges spat purple light as she grabbed the back of the boy's shirt and yanked him toward her. Kaya's look of delight faded into one of cold efficiency.

"That's not going to work," she said.

"Calling you pretty doesn't work?" asked Kellan.

"That's not what I meant." She nodded toward her hip. Kellan looked lower.

The Rakdos boy had a knife of his own, one that was currently buried in Kaya's faintly purple-tinted stomach.

"Can't stab what's not solid," she said. "I, however, can stab you as much as I want. Judith would probably offer me honorary guild membership if I made sure the splatter was artistic enough. She in?"

The boy's eyes widened. "She is," he said. Kaya let him go, stepping back. Her knife disappeared back into her clothing, her middle turning solid again.

The boy tucked his own knife away, looking at her with a wary unhappiness that seemed to mask a degree of surprised amazement. "You didn't have to threaten me," he said. "I'd have let you in if you just paid the cover charge."

"Yeah, but like you said, I'm a pretty Orzhov lady. I don't pay anyone outside the guild if I don't have to," said Kaya. It was too early for a crowd to have gathered inside Hellbender. A glance was enough to tell them that the place, while run-down enough to come across as seedy, was dazzling at night, its high ceiling strewn with hanging glass spheres that would refract and split light once the candles were set aflame. Most of them were clear; others were red, or a purple so dark it would be almost like they were throwing black light across the gathered crowd. The dance floor, now splintered in the daylight coming through the narrow windows, was wide and level enough that it was doubtless very popular

with the kind of people who just wanted to cram themselves in until they could barely move, drink, and dance before the sunrise stopped them.

Kaya had never been one of those people, even when she was younger and less jaded by the Multiverse. Sometimes she envied them a little. What must it be like, to be able to forget the world outside of your immediate needs? To have no responsibilities or obligations?

The Rakdos traded in violence and in joy, and maybe they had the right idea.

A vast bar took up one entire wall. There was no one there, but bottles gleamed dimly through the shadows, inviting their approach. Kellan, who was sticking close to Kaya, swallowed hard.

"I don't think there's anyone here," he said.

"Oh, she's here," said Kaya, crossing her arms. "This is Judith. She's just waiting to make an entrance."

There was a small, curved stage at the far end of the room, and warm, deeply amused laughter echoed from the shadows behind the half-drawn curtain. Kaya walked toward it, Kellan beside her, and stopped about six feet away, waiting patiently for the laughter to stop.

It finally tapered off, and Judith herself stepped around the curtain to center stage. As always, she was dressed in red skin-tight leather and flowing velvet draperies, making her as striking as a moving piece of scenery. Teysa had enjoyed investing in her home and in little luxuries like the moving topiaries. Judith had never felt the need to invest in anything other than herself.

"We're not open yet," she said, crossing her own arms in obvious mockery of Kaya, a smirk on her perfectly shaped, perfectly red lips. "How did you get in here?"

"Hello, Judith," said Kaya. "We didn't get much of a chance to talk at the party. I was surprised to see that Teysa sent you an invitation. I would have expected her to show more discretion in her guest list."

"Well, you know Teysa." Judith waved her hand carelessly. "Always aware of the angles. A little spectacle is ... what's that word your people like to use so proudly? Profitable. Yes. A little spectacle is a *lot* of money, as long as it's on your side. Upset the people who call the scene changes and," she made a small *tsk* sound, "you can find yourself literally as well as creatively bankrupt."

"Not everything's about money."

Judith let her hands fall theatrically to her sides and stared at Kaya. "Now I *know* a former Orzhov guildmaster didn't say that! Just like I know you didn't come here because we'd failed to catch up properly at Teysa's little attempt at a party. Why are you here?"

"Ezrim sent us," blurted Kellan.

Kaya shot him a sharp look. He ducked his head. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I didn't know what else to say."

Kaya swallowed a sigh. According to Kellan, Oko was fey, making Kellan half-faerie. Lies would be difficult for him, if they were possible at all—or maybe it was just his relentless do-gooder thing. That made working for the Agency a fascinating career choice for him. He must have known how to talk his way around an answer, when not put on the spot by someone as artfully intimidating as Judith, who had honed the power of her presence to a razored edge.

"Ah," said Judith. "This is about my little disagreement with Teysa, then?"

"Yes," said Kaya, before Kellan could say anything. Disagreement? This was the first she was hearing of it.

"I hardly think an argument over interest rates gives me cause to murder a Simic guildmaster," said Judith. "Besides, don't you have your killer?"

Neither of them answered. Judith studied Kellan's face before bursting into laughter.

"The high and mighty Azorius *lost* her," she said, utterly delighted. "Oh, this is too good. But no, I didn't kill anyone. I submitted to their little verity game before I left the party. For once in my life, I can honestly say that I didn't do anything wrong."

"No one said you did," said Kaya.

"But you're here, which means someone *thinks* I did. You're missing pieces. There's more to this story than you know."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Judith's lips stretched in a long, thin smile. She waited to reply, clearly savoring the suspense. "You may have your killer in Etrata—that doesn't mean you're done. Go to Vitu-Ghazi. You need to read the Guildpact in its original form, and the tree shelters it. That will clarify things, I think."

"Why—" began Kaya.

Judith raised a hand. "No. That's quite enough. You can go now. I've seen you."



Art by: Jodie Muir

Recognizing a dismissal, Kaya turned away, Kellan following as she made for the door. She paused before exiting, looking back over her shoulder. Judith was still at center stage, watching them go. For some reason, she looked smug, like everything was following her script once again.

Kaya and Kellan slipped out into the fading light of day.