

Episode 2: Monsters We Became

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

08. 01. 2024

Kaya ran through the manor as swiftly as her legs could carry her. Teysa still caught up quickly, moving with a speed that Kaya knew would cost her later: for Teysa to be running alongside the much younger, fitter Planeswalker, she had to be drawing deep on her magical reserves. That sort of thing always came with a price.

The pair came to a stop at a tall, ornate door, still closed despite the ring of servers and household servants standing outside it. They looked uniformly relieved when they saw Teysa and Kaya charging down the hall.

“Well?” Teysa demanded. “Why are you all just standing around?”

“The door’s locked, ma’am,” said one of the servers. “Larysa’s gone looking for the key.”

“How do you not know where the key is?”

Seeing that Teysa’s temper was hanging on by a thread, Kaya set a hand on her arm. “Easy,” she said. “I don’t need keys, not even in Karlov Manor.” She caught a flicker of something in Teysa’s eyes and paused. “Unless this door is warded against ghosts?”

“Much of the manor is, as a precaution,” said Teysa. “You might be able to come up through the floor, but even that would be a questionable approach.”

“Great. So someone’s in trouble, and we’re just going to stand around.”

Kaya’s displeasure was radiant, and for once, Teysa had no answer to it. No one spoke.

The seconds stretched into minutes, becoming intolerable. Teysa cast an uneasy glance at the door. The scream that had drawn them had been loud and piercing: the sound of someone in genuine danger. And for all that, the locked room was silent now, without even a hint that someone was moving around inside.

They were still standing there, waiting for Larysa to return, when Ezrim came galloping down the hall, the massive archon easily filling all available space. His mount’s long primary feathers swept household items and bric-a-brac off tables as he passed. “We heard the screams on the balcony,” he said. “It took me a moment to find a door that could accommodate me. What has happened here?”

“My apologies, Ezrim, for the disruption,” said Teysa. “We’re waiting for one of my servers to return with the key.”

“If someone is hurt, or a crime was committed here, waiting is not in our best interests,” said Ezrim. He raised a foreleg, looking meaningfully from the door to Teysa as he waited for her acquiescence.

Teysa didn't hesitate. She could always bill him later.

"Break it," she said.

Two heavy blows and the door snapped off its hinges, breaking clean in two as it fell inward. Kaya rushed forward, faster than Teysa now that the other woman wasn't using magic to speed her steps. The servants hung back, waiting for the all-clear, while Ezrim, who would dearly love to have accompanied her if not for his size, paced in the hall outside.

All of them heard Kaya's quickly cut-off gasp, followed by frozen silence.

Teysa couldn't allow the moment to linger. "Kaya?" she called. "Kaya, are you all right?"

Kaya appeared in the doorway, face grayish with pallor. "I'm fine," she said. "Teysa, send someone to find Vannifar."

Under other circumstances, Teysa might have reminded Kaya that she was no longer in charge; allowing a former guild leader to give her orders could undermine her authority in a dangerous way. The look on Kaya's face stopped her cold.

"All of you, go," she said, looking around at the servants. "Find me Vannifar of the Simic Combine and inform her that her presence is required. If she asks why, say only that I need to speak with her immediately."

Kaya appeared satisfied with this. She turned, vanishing back into the room.

Teysa sighed before nodding politely to Ezrim. "My apologies, Ezrim, but I don't think the room is large enough for you to join us."

"I understand," Ezrim said and looked to the remaining servants. "Find me one of my detectives. The Agency should be represented here. I will wait here and watch for signs of trouble." With that, he sank to the floor, assuming a guard position.

There could be no better security than an archon. Teysa turned, taking a deep breath, and followed Kaya's path into the room.

It was one of the many small sitting rooms scattered around Karlov Manor, intended for entertaining guests or conducting business negotiations. With the celebration making such gatherings impractical and unlikely, this one had been pressed into use as a cloakroom of sorts, filled with the coats and cloaks of the attendees. Kaya had stopped just inside, eyes locked on the pile of coats at the center of the floor. No—not the coats.

What was arrayed atop the coats.

Teysa stepped up next to her and froze, hand tightening on the handle of her cane until it looked like her fingers were going to break.

Zegana of the Simic Combine was artfully arranged at the center of the pile. While there were signs of a struggle around the edges, there were none around her body; she was posed as prettily as a doll, her left hand raised to the level of her face, which was turned slightly to the side. If not for the fact that she so clearly wasn't breathing, it would have looked like she was posing for a portrait of herself in repose, fins and hair arranged to their best possible advantage.



Art by: Isis

“She’s dead,” said Teysa needlessly, and Kaya nodded in silent agreement. There were no visible wounds or signs of foul play, but they were of the Orzhov; they knew death when it was presented to them.

The coats around Zegana’s body were a seeming mismatch, expensive fabrics and cheap linens overlapping with a carelessness that looked almost strange, given the precision of Zegana’s posing. Kaya took a step back, not averting her eyes. Zegana had died alone, with only time for a single scream. She deserved to be witnessed now.

From her new angle, Kaya saw the edges of a flower petal protruding from between Zegana’s fingers. Frowning, Kaya stepped closer again, bending to see.

“What is it?” asked Teysa, voice sharp with worry.

“A flower ...” said Kaya, bending farther down. “A black iris. Did you use black irises in any of the floral arrangements downstairs?” If Zegana had grabbed hold of a bouquet as she was falling, maybe that could tell them where she’d been killed.

But no: the scream had come from this room. This small, unremarkable, locked room. There hadn’t been *time* for Zegana to be killed elsewhere in the manor and then moved, especially not with the way she’d been arranged. Kaya realized how foolish her question was even before she saw Teysa shaking her head.

“I tried to avoid arrangements that would strike people outside the guild as funereal or remind them of the Gulgari in any way,” said Teysa. “It meant I lost one of our signature colors, but it was worth it for the reactions to the décor. No lilies, no black irises, no mourner’s stars.”

“Well, Zegana found one somewhere.” Kaya straightened and was preparing to say more when a commotion from the hall caught her attention. “That will be Vannifar,” she said, and turned, leaving Teysa alone with the corpse as she walked away.

Kaya stepped into the hall, where she found not Vannifar but a cluster of Agency detectives and Ezrim. The archon was standing, wings half-mantled, as he glared at Aurelia. Aurelia saw Kaya and turned away from him, waving one hand in a dismissive gesture.

“There you are,” she said. “Vannifar is coming, and Ezrim’s people are locking down the building. They say Teysa has forbidden anyone to leave the manor grounds. Something has happened.”

“Yes,” said Kaya. There was no point in lying.

“It was inappropriate not to summon the ranking legionnaire immediately.”

Teysa, stepping up beside Kaya, lifted an eyebrow. Kaya glanced at her. The expected explosion, however, did not materialize.

“I’ve been encouraging the house staff to show initiative,” said Teysa. “I’ll have to find out who looked at the situation and correctly intuited a lockdown as my next order. They deserve a bonus for their excellent predictive skills, and a scolding for their arrogance.”

“So there *is* a reason to lock down the building?” asked Aurelia. “My people are helping with the lockdown, but they,” she waved a dismissive hand at Ezrim and the detectives, “have no business being involved. They need to let the professionals handle whatever’s happening. What *is* happening, Teysa?”

“I would prefer to wait for Vannifar before saying anything; you know as well as I do that the walls have ears.” Teysa folded both hands over the top of her cane, and Kaya realized the other woman had positioned herself such that between the two of them, they completely blocked off access to the room behind them. Clever, and easily done.

Footsteps approached down the hall, accompanied by the soft swishing sound of protoplasm brushing against the floor. Everyone assembled turned, watching the approach of Vannifar of the Simic. Three lower-ranked members of the Combine accompanied their leader, who was frowning, looking distinctly unamused.

“Teysa, what is the meaning of this?” she asked. “Why did you summon me like a common criminal? Why are the Azorius and the Boros telling my people that we’re not allowed to leave?”

“I was hoping to do this in a less open location,” said Teysa. “Would you be willing to step into the library?”

“No. You summon me without explanation, and then you try to delay offering up the same? I’m sorry, but whatever you have to say, you say it here and now.”

Teysa frowned, hands tightening again atop her cane. “Then Vannifar, it is with the deepest of regrets that I inform you that Zegana of the Simic Combine has been killed.”

The effect on the gathering crowd, all of whom had known that *something* terrible had happened, was nothing short of electric. Vannifar swayed, expression one of pure shock. Ezrim turned to start snapping orders at his agents as Aurelia snapped her wings fully open, preventing them from getting past her.

“There’s a dangerous killer on the loose!” Aurelia shouted. “This is not a time for amateur detective work. The Legion will take over from here. The guilds will handle this, as we always have.”

The Agency detectives immediately began to argue. Kaya exchanged a look with Teysa, who looked almost as disgusted as she did by the brewing dispute.

“If you’ll excuse me,” said Kaya, voice low and mild when what she wanted to do was scream. Teyssa nodded, staying where she was as Kaya turned and stalked away, vanishing down the hall, leaving the squabbling parties to their fight.

The ballroom was largely deserted when Kaya arrived, save for a few servers still milling near the walls. It had never been intended as a center point of the gathering, more a retreat for those who wearied of the celebration and needed a moment away from the crowd. If she hadn’t been escaping certain conversations by retreating to the private balcony, she would have been here when Zegana’s body was discovered.

The grand balcony where the guests of honor had been acknowledged ran all the way along one wall of the ballroom, tall glass doors standing open. The sky outside no longer lit up with colored fire, and the sounds drifting from below were very different from the unfettered celebration that had been going on when first she went inside. Walking to the edge, she looked down to see the partygoers standing in long, looping lines, each one ending at a member of the Senate and a glowing verity circle. They had cast their spells with admirable speed, making Kaya wonder if they hadn’t been preparing for something to go wrong tonight. Boros legionnaires stood near the casting mages, protecting them from interference.



Art by: Borja Pindado

It would be just like the Azorius and the Boros to come to a party intended to honor the Agency prepared to step in and prevent, as Aurelia put it, “amateur detective work.” She didn’t believe the Senate would have started a problem if one hadn’t presented itself, but now that they had the chance, they

were eager to prove that they were still the law on Ravnica. Nothing ever really changed. The whole plane could have fallen, and the guilds were still desperate to hold onto their authority.

And it didn't take a genius to look at the guest list for tonight's celebration and see that trouble was all but guaranteed. With eight of the ten guilds represented—she hadn't seen anyone from House Dimir, and the Golgari Swarm was similarly absent—the chances of rough edges scraping against one another were incredibly high. She frowned, scanning the crowd again. Eight of the ten ... but she hadn't seen many Rakdos tonight, had she? Only Judith, glaringly visible in her black and red leathers.

Judith, who had vanished before the killing.

Troubled, Kaya turned away from the crowd, heading back toward the people she'd left behind in the hall. Whether the Azorius had orchestrated their role in this or not, their verity circles would prove the guilt or innocence of the attendees in short order. Some of the Boros legionnaires supporting the lawmages had been holding sheets of paper she assumed were the official guest lists. They wouldn't miss anyone.

When she reached the hall, only Ezrim remained, his front talons folded in front of him and his narrowed eyes fixed on the coatroom door. He huffed frustrated amusement at Kaya's return.

"Everyone in there?" she asked.

"Teysa led Vannifar to a private room to take a glass of kasarda and compose herself," he said. "One of my people accompanied them, to be sure they're never left alone. The other servants have gone to assist with securing the property and rounding up the guests for questioning. My people are investigating the scene."

"I'll let you know what's going on," Kaya said and slipped into the room.

Barrier wards had been deployed inside the scene, forming lines of protective magic impenetrable to anyone but an authorized investigator. The Agency detectives who were already inside were clustered in one corner, all of them looking frustrated and annoyed. Kellan was virtually vibrating with the desire to help the various Azorius members as they tore the room apart, searching every crack and crevice for clues of what had happened here. Kaya winced. Teysa was going to kill them for what they'd done to her wallpaper.

Only Zegana's corpse, still in orchestrated repose on her bed of coats, remained untouched, the black iris caged in her palm, her hair spread out around her head like a fanned-out fin.

"While your willingness to help is appreciated, we don't need Orzhov assistance," said Aurelia, snapping Kaya out of her brief study of the corpse. "We'll find the killer."

"I saw the verity circles lighting up in the courtyard below," said Kaya. "With that sort of speed and efficacy, it might seem like the Azorius were planning for trouble."

"A party at Karlov Manor, with all the guilds invited to celebrate the Agency and a Planeswalker?" Aurelia's lip curled. "The invitations might as well have said 'trouble guaranteed.' Guilds Azorius and Boros both came ready for something to need our attentions."

A woman with the Azorius crest on her sleeve pushed past Kaya to Aurelia, bowing her head as she waited for acknowledgment from her superior.

"What is it?" asked Aurelia.

"Warleader, with the exception of the people in this room, guildmasters Teysa and Vannifar, and Chief Ezrim, everyone has been questioned," said the Azorius, anxiously. "Even Grand Arbiter Lavinia has

allowed herself to be interrogated. She sent me to ask you to agree to the same. We must all be above reproach.”

“Can you cast a verity circle?” asked Aurelia.

Swallowing hard, the young Azorius nodded.

“Good. Then question us, and leave us to our investigation.”

The woman stepped back, almost stumbling, and lifted her hands, murmuring the incantation to call her circle into existence. It snapped up around both Kaya and Aurelia, something for which Kaya was obscurely grateful. With a guildmaster inside the circle, hopefully the questions would be restricted to ones that were relevant to the situation. It would have been all too easy for a lawmage who had suffered personal losses in the invasion to ask a few more ... personal questions before allowing the circle to dispel. The verity circle couldn’t compel speech, but someone who was caught off guard might say more than they intended.

The young guildmage seemed determined to demonstrate the evenhanded fairness that was the hallmark of the Senate. Her questions were quick, precise, and calm. Had either of them done harm to Zegana, either directly or indirectly? No. Had either of them killed her? No. Did either of them know who had? No. Did either of them have suspicion of who might have done so?

Kaya managed to swallow Judith’s name, telling herself that her curiosity didn’t rise to the level of suspicion.

The Azorius dropped the circle. “With your permission, Legionnaire, I’ll speak to the investigators?”

“Yes, yes,” said Aurelia, waving her off to begin casting her verity circles on the other occupants of the room.

Kaya, meanwhile, was staring at Aurelia. “All that noise about letting the professionals handle things, and you don’t have *any* suspicions?”

Aurelia turned away. “Azorius is handling the investigation, not Boros. I’m just here to keep order, at Lavinia’s request, since she can’t be in two places at once, and would much rather be searching for answers than supervising someone else.”

“Your guilds *did* plan this,” said Kaya, suspicions confirmed by Aurelia’s easy acceptance of her role here.

“Were you away from Ravnica so long that you forgot how things work?” asked Aurelia, looking back to her with one eyebrow raised. “There have been changes, yes, but the core of the city remains as it has always been, as it will always be. The Azorius keep the law; the Boros enforce it. A group of amateurs playing at protection will never displace us.”

Kaya glared. “The guilds aren’t everything.”

“Did you feel that way when you led the Orzhov? If you did, it’s no wonder they replaced you at the first opportunity. The guilds *are* Ravnica.”

“Well, then, Ravnica, do you have any idea what happened here? Or are you as clueless as the rest of us?”

Before Aurelia could answer, someone behind the pair cleared their throat. Both women turned. A human man stood in the doorway, skin a few shades lighter than Kaya’s, hair dark on top but graying at the temples, dressed in a long azure coat. A few of the Azorius who had already been released from the verity circles shot him sour looks. He paid them no mind, attention fixed on Kaya and Aurelia.

"I believe I may have some idea of what happened here," he said, as calmly as if he were requesting a cup of tea.

"You would be ...?" asked Kaya.

"Ah. Yes. I see how that might sound." He stepped into the room, studying Zegana's remains. "Fear not. I have already allowed myself to be interviewed via verity circle. I'm not your killer. I may, however, be your savior."



Art by: Lie Setiawan

"He didn't have an invitation," said the Azorius mage who had been casting the verity circles, her tone tight and unhappy. "I would have noticed his name on the list."

"And what name is that?" asked Kaya. She was getting frustrated. This was no time for games.

"I'm sorry. Did I not say? I'm Alquist Proft. Some people call me 'the great detective Proft,' and I have some skill in this arena." He moved closer to Zegana's body and crouched low to the floor, his eyes flicking rapidly from one aspect of the scene to the next. For all their apparent discomfort, none of the Azorius members in the room objected, while the Agency detectives who had been waiting for the opportunity to assist visibly relaxed, clearly trusting the man. Kaya looked at him with new interest.

"Has anyone touched the body or its surroundings?" he asked.

"No," said Aurelia.

"In that case ... including the flower in her hand, which we can interpret as being representative of the Simic in this specific instance, she has been arranged such that the sign of each guild is visible on the coats beneath her, and a pattern has been formed."

“What do you mean?” asked Kaya.

“Come here,” he said, beckoning her closer without rising from his position. Kaya obliged, too intrigued to object to his high-handed summons.

Once she had stopped beside him, Proft straightened, indicating the body and its surroundings with a sweep of one hand. “Look closely. What do you see?”

“Zegana, and coats,” said Kaya dutifully, searching for the pattern Proft had mentioned. Then she blinked, shifting to the side to get a different angle. No matter how she stood, the Dimir logo failed to appear. “I don’t see Dimir,” she said. “But there aren’t any Dimir in attendance, so that makes sense.”

“This design incorporates all ten guild seals,” said Proft, indicating a panel pattern which occurred, in various degrees of folded-over, on several of the coats. “The Golgari are likewise absent from the invite list, but their seal is visible several times—see the way these buckles form the mandibles? I would wager that, if you move her hand, a folded pattern greatly resembling the Dimir seal will have been covered by the position of her arm.”

Kaya shook her head. “That’s a lot of trouble to go through. I can’t believe I didn’t see that,” she said.

“You’ve also failed to spot the one member of House Dimir in attendance.”

Kaya startled, ready to object, only to find Proft already looking at her with an earnest lack of judgment. He wasn’t criticizing; he was describing the situation as he saw it.

“Who?” she asked.

Proft smiled.

Convincing Aurelia to stay behind hadn’t been difficult, especially not once Ezrim rose and reminded her that she had been the one who wanted to take ownership of the scene. At least now she was allowing the other Agency detectives to do their jobs, Proft’s revelation having shamed her into accepting their usefulness, however grudgingly. Teysa and Vannifar had yet to put in a return appearance, and while all the guests knew that *something* was happening by this point, there was no reason for them to suspect murder.

Although Proft had somehow suspected and followed his suspicions back to their source. Kaya eyed him speculatively as they descended the stairs to the main floor. He didn’t seem to notice. She wasn’t fooled. Only a few minutes with him had been enough to illustrate that he noticed everything, however small or inconsequential it might seem.

“The verity circles were cast and checked according to the guest list,” said Proft, abruptly. “If someone failed to appear on the list and evaded the circles with care, they could easily escape questioning. If it were someone who had good reason not to want to be questioned under conditions of absolute truth—say, a Dimir spy and known assassin—it would be simple to exploit the gaps in our investigation until the gates are unlocked. Honestly, the only thing I don’t understand is why the individual in question lingered long enough to be caught by the lockdown. She’s far too skilled for that.”

“Where is she?” asked Kaya. “I didn’t see anyone wearing Dimir colors.”

“Did you really think a Dimir agent would make their presence so apparent? I might not have seen her, had she not been taking such exquisite care to avoid interaction with members of the Selesnya Conclave. Given that she was wearing the colors of their guild, they should have been her closest companions, not a reason to step aside.”

“Oh,” said Kaya, scanning the crowd with new eyes. She had fallen so quickly back into the Ravnican way of thinking, where no one would wear the colors of a guild they weren’t affiliated with unless they were looking for trouble. Members of the Conclave were scattered through the crowd, milling as purposelessly as the other guests who had been questioned but not released.

At the base of the stairs, Proft looked around, nodded to himself, and struck out across the party, heading for the fringes, where the lowest-ranking guild members had naturally assembled. Kaya followed closely, watching the crowd as she tried to see whatever it was that he saw, whatever intangible trail he was so intent on following.

As they reached the edge of the crowd, Proft motioned for Kaya to step back, then continued onward on his own, moving until a dark-skinned woman in Selesnya green and white was standing almost exactly between them. Her gown was perfectly tailored, fitted precisely to her form, and a beautiful exemplar of the season’s fashions; there was no reason for her to have caught anyone’s eye apart from admiration or envy.

No reason, save for the lack of any guild logo visible on her person. It was a jarring omission, given the precision of the rest of her attire. *Makes sense*, Kaya thought. There were no laws against wearing another guild’s colors. Wearing their shield, on the other hand, could come with consequences.

“Miss Etrata,” said Proft, taking a step toward the woman. “I’m afraid we need to speak with you. Please come with me now.”



Art by: Ryan Valle

The woman whipped around, lips drawing back in a hiss which revealed her impressive vampiric incisors. Her entire demeanor changed in that instant, going from bored socialite to cornered predator. Casting a glance at Kaya, she clearly marked the Planeswalker as the greater threat. Charging straight

for Proft, she knocked the investigator to the ground and began to cut a straight line through the crowd, heading for the hedge maze.

“If she gets in there, we’ll never find her!” shouted Kaya, already turning to give chase.

“Try not to lose sight of her—I’ll do what I can to help from here,” said Proft, pushing himself into a sitting position without rising from the ground.

Kaya was fast. Etrata, however, was faster, and that, in addition to her head start, put her more than halfway to the hedge maze when Kaya began gaining ground, largely by dint of turning herself intangible to avoid dodging around partygoers. Charging straight through them was more efficient.

Still, Etrata was going to beat her to the maze, no question—at least until the world abruptly inverted itself around her, gray cobblestone and gathered revelers being replaced by columns of towering blue light. They were no longer racing toward the hedge maze: instead, Etrata was running down an alleyway that Kaya knew all too well, deep in the heart of Orzhov territory.

The magic, wherever it was coming from, didn’t feel malicious or like an elaborate attempt to trick her. In fact, based on the way Etrata was slowing and looking frantically around, scanning the surrounding buildings for a way out, this was helping Kaya more than anything else. She put on another burst of speed, pushing herself to her physical limits. In the sudden silence, her footsteps echoed like rocks dropped into still water. Etrata glanced backward over her shoulder before making an abrupt left turn into what Kaya knew was a dead-end alley.



Art by: Diego Gisbert

She was within ten feet of the vampire when the white landscape collapsed around them and Etrata plowed directly into Kellan. The young Agency investigator looked surprised, even with clasped arms

around the runaway Dimir. She struggled and snarled, but he shook his head, not letting go. He was still holding her when Kaya ran up to the pair of them.

“What was *that*?” she asked.

“That was me,” said a winded voice, from behind her. She turned. Proft, clearly exhausted but back up on his feet, was staggering through the semi-dispersed crowd to join them. A further look told her he wasn’t injured, just exhausted.

“What kind of magic is that?”

“I make what’s in here become out there, and I can recreate anything I’ve ever seen,” he said, tapping his temple as he looked past her to where Etrata struggled to escape from Kellan. “Everything all right, young man?”

“Absolutely, sir,” said Kellan. “Thank you for helping us apprehend this miscreant.”

Members of the Azorius guild were already beginning to converge on their position, with Lavinia at the lead of the largest cluster. Kellan tightened his grip, jaw jutting out briefly in stubborn determination. Proft stepped forward, setting a hand gently on his arm.

“This is not the time to stand our ground,” he said. “They found nothing; we found a possible culprit. They didn’t assist in the chase; you captured her. The Agency doesn’t need the glory if we can have the satisfaction of knowing that without us, none of this would have been possible.”

Kellan nodded, grudgingly. Lavinia drew close enough to speak.

“Remand the suspect to Azorius custody at once,” she said, voice ringing over the courtyard.

Kellan released Etrata, standing next to Kaya and Proft as she was swiftly apprehended again by the waiting Azorius. The three of them remained where they were, watching as Etrata was hauled away.