
Episode 3: Shadows of Regret

Seanan McGuire

From set *Murders at Karlov Manor*

09. 01. 2024

The party was pretty much over after that.

Etrata's removal from the grounds of Karlov Manor took no time at all in the grand scheme of things. Long enough for everyone to see what was happening; long enough for several members of the Selesnya Conclave to approach Teysa, nearly frantic with the need to make it clear that Etrata wasn't with them, they hadn't smuggled her into the party, this was not their doing, they had been betrayed as much as anyone else! Not, perhaps, as much as Zegana, who would never be betrayed by anyone ever again, but as much as Teysa, as much as the Agency, as much as anyone else who was innocent of all wrongdoing.

Teysa's wards should have kept anyone from leaving: Karlov Manor wasn't the seat of Orzhov power, but it was the seat of *her* power, and here, her word was absolute law. But when the Azorius mages who had grabbed Etrata marched her to the gate and pulled her out, nothing stopped them; no other members of House Dimir appeared to demand the release of one of their own.

As during the run for the coatroom, Kaya would have sworn Teysa was nowhere nearby. The tap of the other woman's walking stick against the stones of the courtyard was the only warning she had that she was wrong, and if she hadn't been so attuned to the sound, she would have missed it under the rising hubbub of voices. *Everyone* wanted to know what had happened. *Everyone* wanted to know why a Dimir assassin had led Teysa's pet Planeswalker on a merry chase through what was supposed to be a celebration, dressed as a member of the Selesnya Conclave, no less! And into that ridiculous magic of Proft's! Only a few members of the Agency had seen it in action before, and while they were quietly smug about how elegantly he'd applied it to the task at hand, the remaining Azorius looked more annoyed than anything else.

Kaya supposed that wasn't much of a surprise. Proft had been their asset before he chose to go off and ply his talents with the Agency, and if there was one thing she knew about the guilds, it was that they didn't like losing resources. Especially these days, with everyone running close to the bone as it was.

Kaya resisted the urge to glance at Teysa as she stepped up on Kaya's right, leaning heavily on her stick. The evening had taken a lot out of her.

"You let them leave," said Kaya.

"Following our colleagues at the Agency into the investigative arts?" asked Teysa. "It seemed impolitic to imprison the members of another guild when they were apprehending a killer. They're my wards. I can open them for anyone I like. I would have opened them for you, if you'd tried to follow."

"You can't hold me here without my consent."

"No. I suppose I never could, could I? Out of all of us, you remain the one who can just ... walk away, any time you want to." Teysa's expression sobered.

Kaya managed not to flinch. Somehow, without coming anywhere close to mentioning them by name, Teysa had managed to invoke the shades of Jace and Vraska, the other two people who'd walked away from Ravnica. The two who hadn't come back.

The two who never would.

What was she doing? She didn't belong here anymore. She might have said as much, but Teysa looked directly at her, heartbreaking shadows in her eyes, and said, "I'm grateful that you stayed."

"I said I would," said Kaya, looking away. "How is Vannifar?"

"Shaken, but recovering," said Teysa. "She's moving past grief and into outrage. I wouldn't want to be the person who did this. They're likely to find the entire weight of the Simic crashing down upon them, and there's no one in a position to leaven Vannifar's wrath. She and Zegana fought over the future of the Simic Combine, but they were sisters, in their way. There were deep bonds of loyalty and affection there. Vannifar won't allow this to go unanswered."

"No, I can't imagine that she would. What did you want to talk to me about before?"

Teysa hesitated, glancing at the partygoers milling around them, even as they clumped back into groups and began drifting toward the exits. Some were heading for the manor, others for the gates, depending on whether they'd left anything inside, and Kaya found herself wondering, somewhat uselessly, what the Agency intended to do about the coats that had been left under Zegana's body.

Proft, who had been standing nearby and observing this entire interaction with dismayingly keen eyes, apparently had the same thought. He straightened and hurried back toward the manor, leaving Teysa and Kaya alone in the thinning crowd.

"The news will be everywhere by morning," said Teysa bitterly. "Come celebrate what a great job the guilds did of protecting us all, by watching them fail to protect one of their own."

"I'm sure people will understand that this wasn't your fault," said Kaya.

Teysa shot her a sharp look. "You know better."

She did. Still, she had hope. Hope that the wounds of war were healing; hope that the old wounds of Ravnica might be healing at the same time. Torn scar tissue could sometimes heal into something cleaner than the initial injury, if conditions were right. Maybe the conditions were right.

"Before, on the balcony, there was something you wanted to say to me," said Kaya. "Or tell me. Can you tell me now?"

Teysa sighed. "Stay long enough for the news to break, and to see that the ripples don't wash us all away, and I'll call for you," she said. "I do *want* to tell you, it's just ... this isn't the time."

Kaya looked at her carefully. She seemed sincere. Teysa was a born politician, but even politicians can have their moments of vulnerability.

"Three days," she said, finally. "Then, if you haven't called me, I come looking."

"Deal," said Teysa.

Three days slipped steadily by. Kaya returned to her rented room, refusing Teysa's offer of a guest chamber at the manor, and Teysa, perhaps understanding that pressing the matter would be a good way to make Kaya leave the plane, hadn't pushed the issue. During the day, she wandered the streets,

enjoying the familiar tastes of Ravnican street food and strong coffee laced with cream and lavender honey, and listened to the people who didn't know her well enough to bite their tongues.

Rumors swirled in the streets, bitter, writhing things with teeth that snap and bite. There had been a theft at the Orzhov party, they said; some guild member had lost a precious heirloom and was going to be furious until it could be reclaimed. There had been a betrayal. An affair had been uncovered. All manner of crimes had apparently happened on the grounds of Karlov Manor, and because both the Agency and the Azorius had been present, both groups were being spoken of with uncommon disdain.



Art by: Tony Foti

Anyone known to have been in attendance moved at the center of a hurricane of flattery and sweet-tongued requests for more information. Most people, lacking true gossip to share, invented more and more outlandish stories, knowing that there was no one who could contradict them. Kaya listened to them all, frowned to herself, and said nothing. The less attention she attracted now, the better.

Because they didn't just talk about the party, although that was the most recent glorious scandal, and somewhat less raw than the wounds of war. They talked about the Phyrexian invasion and how the Planeswalkers had failed them all. After spending years safe in the knowledge that the average person didn't know what a Planeswalker was and thus couldn't have opinions on them, Kaya was now faced with a reality where everyone knew, and almost everyone disapproved.

It was uncomfortable enough that she was almost relieved when, on the morning of the third day, a messenger from the Agency came looking for her. She was positioned in a tiny coffee shop, listening to the morning news. The word "murder" was finally starting to circulate. That, combined with the

unusual scarcity of Simic Combine members, was attracting attention, and pulling the gossips away from their ongoing discussion of the war.

“Ma’am?” said the messenger, stopping a few feet away, virtually vibrating as he waited to be acknowledged.

Kaya took one last, lingering sip of her coffee before turning to face him, blinking when she saw his face. “Agent ... Kellan? Why did they send you?”

“Were you expecting the Agency to send someone?” asked Kellan, blinking earnestly.

“I thought they might, so I’ve been staying where I’d be easy to find,” said Kaya. She rose, regretfully leaving her half-finished coffee behind. “I assume Detective Proft would like to speak with me about what happened?”

She knew, all too well, how many ears would be perking up and turning in her direction, their owners attracted by mention of the Agency, hoping to catch some juicy scrap of information.

“No, actually,” said Kellan. “He isn’t much on sharing his thoughts with other people when he doesn’t have to. No, it’s the chief who’d like to speak to you.”

Kaya caught herself before blurting out, “Ezrim?” Let the gossips wonder a little longer. Instead, she nodded and beckoned for Kellan to follow her out of the shop.

Once they were on the street, and a little less obvious of a target for busybodies, she asked, “Why did you come yourself? They just honored you for your service; you should rank above playing message boy.”

“Oh,” said Kellan. “I asked them to send me.”

“What? Why?”

“I wanted to speak with you.”

Kaya blinked, not sure how she was supposed to respond to that. Kellan started walking toward the Agency headquarters, and she automatically followed, still trying to process her thoughts.

“Why?” she asked, finally.

“I’ve read your file. You’re not from here.” He waved a hand, indicating the city around them. “Ravnica, I mean. You came from someplace much farther away.”

“You’re allowed to say ‘Planeswalker,’ you know. It’s not a bad word,” said Kaya.

Kellan looked briefly abashed. “Sorry. Yes. You’re a Planeswalker.”

“So is my father. I hoped you might ... I wondered if you might know where he is.”

Kaya stopped walking. Kellan continued for several more steps before he noticed and turned to face her.

“What?” he asked.

“Your father is—who’s your father?” *Please don’t let him say a name I know*, she added silently. *Please, if there’s any mercy left in the Blind Eternities, he won’t name one of the dead.*

“His name’s Oko,” he said. “He’s one of the fae.”

A stranger, then. “Sorry. Don’t know him.”

She could see the disappointment in his eyes even as the relief flowed through her.

“You’re the second Planeswalker I’ve talked to who’s said that. I thought—well, the Agency has all sorts of information. I thought they might know something, if he’s ever passed through here.”

“And no luck?”

Kellan only shook his head. “The filing system is ... complicated.”

“Just keep on looking, okay, kid? And if I ever run into him, I’ll tell him you’re trying to find him,” said Kaya.

Kellan gave her a fragile, sidelong smile. “Thank you,” he said. “That would mean a lot.”

The floating, angular shape of the Agency headquarters loomed in front of them. Streams of water cascaded from the base, falling into channels that had been designed to catch them before they could flood the streets. Agency mounts stood at the ready, ferrying agents up and down. Kellan led Kaya through the queue, up to the door, and past the security check, escorting her down the hall to Ezrim’s office before he said, “I’ll see you when you’re done with the boss,” and left her alone.

Kaya hesitated, looking at the closed door. Waiting wouldn’t make this happen any faster, and so, gingerly, she raised her hand and knocked.

“Enter,” boomed Ezrim from inside.

Kaya took a deep breath and stepped through the door, not bothering to open it first.

Ezrim’s office had been designed with his ever-present companion in mind. In addition to a massive desk and several traditional chairs for visitors, the back third or so of the space had been turned into something close to a stable, with straw on the floor under a heap of pillows that formed a sort of lounging chair. Not that Ezrim was currently lounging; the great archon was sitting on the back of his steed, twisted to face the desk, sorting a pile of papers. Kaya realized with a small start that she didn’t know whether Ravnican archons were a single conjoined being or a pair of individuals who simply chose to never be apart for any reason. She had never seen Ezrim dismounted nor any other archon of Ravnica knocked from their partners in combat. If they were one creature, this office was a symbol of practical necessity, not one of consideration.

“You called for me, sir?” she asked, folding her hands behind her back and standing at attention.

“I did,” said Ezrim, before falling silent. Kaya recognized the ensuing silence as a prompt for her to say something, and so she stood a little straighter and said nothing at all. She was happy to come when called for, but that didn’t mean she worked for Ezrim. She didn’t technically owe him anything. If he wanted her to talk, he could ask her a question.

After enough time had passed for the silence to become uncomfortable, Ezrim cleared his throat and said, “You’re not a member of the Agency.”

“No, sir.”

“But you’re a well-known problem-solver. The Orzhov have always spoken highly of your problem-solving abilities.”

Somehow, she doubted the “always” in that sentence. Kaya smiled thinly and said, “Thank you, sir.”

“Because of your position as a former guild leader, the guilds will view you as largely neutral in this situation. You had no known grudges against either the Simic Combine or House Dimir.”

“No, sir. I get on reasonably well with both guilds.”

“Teysa called us both to that party to try to lend us what legitimacy she had to offer. I, as head of the Agency, and you as a former guild master ... and a Planeswalker. You’re aware that your kind are not presently well regarded in Ravnica. I believe even Guildmaster Zarek has encountered issues of late.”

“I’m aware, sir,” said Kaya.

“I would like you to assume leadership of this investigation. You would have access to any resources you need, including my staff, and I believe you would need some sort of lever to remove Detective Proft from the case. He doesn’t let go of a puzzle once his interest has been aroused. While the assassin Etrata has been detained, we still don’t know who ordered the killing, or why, and she continues to insist that she has no memory of the deed.”

Kaya said nothing. For once, Ezrim didn’t allow the pause to stretch out.

“Your neutrality is assumed. Your involvement could only help to redeem public opinion of the Planeswalkers who couldn’t save us when we needed them most.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“No. It’s a complete sentence, and you know what it means. No, I won’t help you with this. I’ve done more than enough already. Thank you for your concern about my reputation.” She turned on her heel and stalked out of the office, once more without opening the door. Ezrim didn’t call her back.

Kellan was gone, probably elsewhere in the building doing his actual job, but it felt like every other eye at the Agency was fixed on her as she lifted her chin and walked back down the hall to the door, leaving their silences and unwanted requests behind.

The sooner she was out of Ravnica, the better.

The Agency had been established to investigate crimes without the bias of guild affiliation tainting their discoveries. Criminals, whether proven or strongly suspected, were remanded to Azorius custody to be held in appropriate conditions.

As Proft stood waiting for the Azorius lawmage guarding the door to finish checking his papers and let him through, he couldn’t help regretting the years he’d spent doing precisely the same thing.

“Everything seems to be in order,” said the lawmage finally. Three layers of security had looked over Proft’s paperwork, none of them finding any issues. At least this one was too new to the guild to have overlapped his tenure. People who remembered him dressed in their own colors tended to be even more insufferable when confronted with what they saw as him begging them for access. “You can go in.”

The door unlocked at the lawmage’s words, and Proft nodded, reclaiming his papers. “Excellent performance of duty,” he said, trying to restrain his tone as he stepped into the final hall between him and his destination.

Etrata’s cell was the only one occupied in this block, leaving her entirely isolated, save for her guards, none of whom were likely to indulge her in conversation. She looked up at Proft’s approach, abandoning what looked like the rapt contemplation of a spider that was making its way across the wall.

“Consumed by fellow-feeling?” he asked.

“We’re nothing alike, the spider and I,” she said. “It can leave whenever it desires. No one punishes it for following its nature. No one imprisons it. It does as it likes, and always shall.”

“Until someone smashes it flat.”

“I suppose. Come to gloat, have you? The victor reveling in his conquest?”

“I want to,” he admitted. “It has brought me pleasure in the past, the gloating. Gloating is the glass of bumbat the soul consumes when it succeeds. But this time ... there are too many things I still can’t explain. Too many little inconsistencies, too many unanswered questions. I know your reputation.”

Etrata stared at him, apparently bewildered by his sudden change of directions. “Many people do. Your point?”

“My point would be, the people who know about you speak *very* highly of your skills. You’re supposedly one of the best that House Dimir has to offer, the cream of their crop, as it were. Please, for the sake of my unsettled thoughts, will you tell me why you chose to kill such a prominent target in such a public way? Not to mention the theatrics surrounding the body. You had plenty of time to commit the murder and make your escape, but you remained on the grounds even before the wards were raised to prevent your exit. That isn’t the work of a professional. Why commit such a grievous crime in such a manner and not make your escape while you could?”



Art by: Anastasia Ovchinnikova

Etrata looked at him, unblinking. “That’s not what you really want to know, is it?” Her tone was mild; her words acid-tipped and unforgiving. “Ask the real question, *Detective* .” Somehow, she turned his title into an insult.

Proft was unfazed. “How were you able to trick the verity circles during your interview? If they’ve been defeated, the guilds need to know.”

“Aw, worried about losing one of your tools against the criminal underworld?” Etrata mimed wiping away a tear. “However would Ravnica survive without your little parlor tricks?”

“Please.”

Etrata paused, briefly taken aback by the sincerity in his tone.

He went on. “You’ve been caught. I’m not asking you to give away the secrets of your house; I’ll have nothing to do with your trial or sentencing. But the city is already splintered enough. There’s no trust lost between the individual guilds, or between the guilds and the citizens. We need to know that the verity circles—that *something* in this city—can be trusted.”

Etrata looked away.

Kaya walked back to her rented room with her head down and her shoulders tight, hating the feeling of eyes on her skin, hating the feeling of isolation from a city that should have been hers, that had been hers for so long. Gods and monsters; she was ready to go. This place wasn’t her home anymore. Maybe it had never been her home in the first place.

A courier in Orzhov colors stood outside the rental house, young enough to have only the faintest blush of stubble painting his cheeks, glancing anxiously around as he waited. When he saw Kaya, he brightened and hurried toward her, quick and awkward, almost stumbling over his own feet.

“Master Planeswalker,” he said, once he was close enough to address her without shouting.

Even as she inwardly winced at the address, Kaya supposed it made sense. She wasn’t a guildmaster anymore, and the normal honorifics for a former Orzhov guild leader didn’t apply to her, since she wasn’t dead, either. Addressing her without respect could have been taken as a grave insult, and in the absence of any other role on Ravnica, he had defaulted to the one he knew. It was the safest choice. She didn’t have to like it.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Guildmaster Karlov requests your presence at the manor.”

“Guess I’m just popular today.”

The courier blinked at her, clearly confused. “Pardon?”

“Nothing. Never mind. Just let me get something from my room. Did she give you any additional messages for me?”

“This,” he said, producing a sealed note from inside his pocket and offering it to her with a small, satisfied nod. He had done his job, and as soon as she took the letter, he could go.

Kaya took the note, not breaking the seal as she tucked it into her shirt. “Will you be escorting me?”

“She said you would know the way.”

“She was right about that.” Another method of avoiding insulting her. She was so tired of Ravnican manners. When she was done here, maybe she could go to Kaldheim for a while, where no one was worried about insulting anyone else, unless it was with a fist to the face. Or Innistrad. Far less etiquette and propriety involved. “Well, thank you for finding me so quickly.”

She produced a coin from her pocket and passed it to the courier, who surreptitiously checked the value before he made it disappear.

“Thank you kindly,” he said and emulated the coin as he vanished into a nearby alley. Kaya shook her head in reluctant fondness before making her way inside. She needed to change her shirt before she went to the manor. Manners again, but propriety must be observed. While in the privacy of her room, she broke the seal on Teysa’s note and opened it.

It’s time for the discussion we couldn’t have during the gala. I’m so sorry it’s taken this long. It’s not safe for me to write anything down. Please come at once. Come alone.

Thank you for staying. I know you did it for my sake, more than Ravnica’s, and I appreciate it more than you can know.

Your friend, after everything,

Teysa

Teysa’s signature was a nasty scrawl. Kaya frowned as she concealed the note beneath her pillow, quickly changed her clothes, and left. Time to head for the manor.

Time to finish this.

No one stopped her as she hurried through the streets to Karlov Manor, and she found the gates already unlocked for her, the wards having been adjusted to allow her passage. The walk up the driveway seemed like the most intolerable part of her journey, needlessly long, designed only to impress and intimidate. As if the manor weren’t impressive enough entirely on its own merits. The topiary alone would send most thieves running, and the building seemed to loom, watching every step she took.

Kaya continued onward into the house, which had been left unlocked for her arrival. She looked around, half expecting Teysa to be waiting for her, but saw no sign of the other woman, or of her staff. The manor was eerily quiet, with no one in attendance or rushing to announce her.

Feeling a strange tightness in her stomach, Kaya started up the stairs. Teysa wouldn’t want to have this meeting in one of the public areas of the house, or on the balcony; anything too important to be written down would be left for her private quarters, the rooms she reserved for herself alone. She had a parlor there, small and elegant, outfitted for meetings of precisely this type. Kaya knew her well enough to be certain she would find her there.

The strange silence and stillness persisted as she made her way along the hall. Teysa must have sent the staff away before this meeting. Whatever she had to discuss, she wanted absolutely no risk that they’d be overheard.

The door to Teysa’s private parlor stood slightly ajar. Kaya moved toward it, hesitating for an instant when she caught the scent of blood in the air. That hesitation was more than balanced by the speed with which she threw herself at the door and into the room beyond, where she stopped, clapping a hand over her mouth to contain the scream she could feel building in her chest, and simply stared.

Teysa was there, sprawled on the floor next to the desk where she received visitors. She had been waiting for Kaya: that much was clear. Her eyes were still open, staring blankly at the ceiling, and the shattered shaft of her walking stick protruded from her chest, slick with blood. More of that same blood stained her hands, where she had tried to pull the makeshift spear out before she bled to death.

Teysa was gone. Knees threatening to buckle and drop her to the floor, Kaya staggered into the room, heading for the body of her friend. Death wasn’t the end, not for the Orzhov, but Teysa, for all her

entanglements with the dead, had always been one of the most vitally *alive* people Kaya knew. And all that was over now. Another friend gone. Another body to bury.



Art by: Jodie Muir

Something crunched under Kaya's foot, stopping her. She looked down. One of the elegant maiden statues Teysa kept on display in the parlor had been knocked over in whatever altercation happened here and lay in pieces. That felt like a desecration of Teysa's space to accompany the desecration of her body, and looking at it seemed easier than looking at her friend's body. Kaya knelt, beginning to collect the ceramic shards.

A piece of paper was buried among the mess. Kaya frowned, setting what she'd gathered aside as she picked it up carefully then froze again, her chest tightening as the world narrowed to a single point. She could hear her heart hammering in her ears, the rushing of her blood like the sound of a distant sea, and if it hadn't been for Teysa's wards, she would have dropped straight through the floor, losing control of her phasing in the face of her panic.

The writing was clearly Teysa's. Kaya knew the little smear at the bottom of each line. The script, however ...

The script was Phyrexian.

Kaya breathed harder and harder, hand closing convulsively around the note and wrinkling it. She couldn't leave. Teysa was dead, Teysa might have been working with Phyrexia, and she couldn't leave. She had to go back to Ezrim. She had to tell him she was in this after all.

She always had been.

"I didn't," said Etrata.

Proft frowned. "But when you were questioned within the verity circle, you said you didn't kill her."

"Because I didn't." Etrata tilted her head back until it hit the wall. "I snuck into the party because House Dimir needed *someone* to be our eyes, and it seemed like an amusing evening. I had no targets. I had no assignments. I had a plate of those meat-filled pastries with the cheese on top. They were lovely."

Proft made a frustrated sound.

"Didn't you get to try them? I'm sorry." Etrata seemed to decide to stop toying with him then. She sighed and said, "If I killed her, I don't remember it. I didn't come there to kill anyone, and I don't assassinate for free."

"You didn't ..." Proft paused, mind whirling.

Ravnican law was very clear: if mind control or magic had been used to force Etrata's actions, she was no more culpable than a knife. She might be the weapon, but she wasn't the killer. The case remained open. The puzzle remained unsolved.

"Will you help me clear your name?"

Etrata looked at him. "The guilds need their pound of flesh. There is no clearing my name."

"Swear you'll help me," said Proft insistently.

"You can't fix this."

"I am Alquist Proft, and I will risk my name to clear yours. Now swear."

Etrata blinked, then frowned. "As much as I can, you have my word."

"Then come, we have work to do." He made a few simple motions, twisting his fingers through the air, and the lock on her cell sprang open with a click. "Pff. Only a quadroanarchic theory-lock? They're getting sloppy." He straightened his cufflinks. "You're a trained assassin. You can get out of here without being seen."

Slowly, her frown became a smile. "And where am I going?"

"My home," he said and gave her the address. "I'll see you there."

Etrata nodded before stepping out of the cell and melting into the shadows.

Proft turned to go, fixing a look of irritation on his face. "I was promised a prisoner," he said loudly, striding toward the door. "Not an empty cell."

The chaos that followed would allow them both to make their exits.