

*Sevardin Harker. Marday, Leo 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2344 AA. Arroyo.*

Sevardin knew the woman wasn't lying about the monster. From the moment she laid into Ashford, her wyrd was shot with genuine hysteria. She was good at hiding it, cloaking her vulnerability behind bitterness and righteous anger. But there was a strain in her emanations, a tension that reminded Sev of twisting metal and fraying rope. She might not have seen an actual monster, but she certainly thought she did.

**I'm gonna be honest: As openings go, this isn't anything special.**

**In fact, these very first episodes have a bunch of problems that I would go back and fix if I could. I'm not talking about minor spelling and grammar things, but things that would require a major shift in the plot and the site. To begin with, episode 1&2 should have probably been one long episode.**

**At the time though, I was still learning what my limits were. How much I could write episode to episode. And as I got more accustomed to it, the episodes got longer and (I think) better.**

**The truth is: everybody starts somewhere. And I decided to start by introducing the world to Sev. Even then, in Episode 1, it is hard to get a feel for who he is as a character, since he spends most of the time in crisis mode, following protocol. Looking back, I would have given myself more opportunities to characterize him.**

**One of the major challenges of AMAGIA is that it is actually an adaptation/prologue to novel I wrote. I had built the worlds, developed these characters, and introduced them to beta readers before.**

**So doing it all over again, in a new format threw me off my game for a couple weeks. But seeing what the series has become (as of January 1st, with a backlog of posts written through March 1st) I am proud of where the story goes and hope you will stick around for the ride!**

"Your name, miss?" Ashford asked.

"Attisha," the woman said, as if responding to a challenge.

It was difficult to be sure of her age—the street wasn't kind to anybody. But she looked relatively young. Late twenties. Black. Malnourished but wiry. Ashford paused and gently urged her to continue with gesture and wyrd:

"Attisha...?"

The woman squinted at each member of the venture in sequence, like they were morons. If she was intimidated by amagia—and most asfalís people were—she didn't show it.

“Attisha’s good enough for you, *officer*. This isn’t about me. It’s about the teenage girl who just got dragged into that darkness. Get in there!”

She thrust a finger at the cave-like entrance to the flood control system.

“We need to know what we’re dealing with first,” Ashford said. “What happened?”

“We had a camp at the base of the old dam. Straight through that access tunnel and all the way down. There were a couple fires going. Jeet was playing the guitar. Then it stopped working.”

“The guitar stopped working?” Ashford asked, skeptical.

“He’d pluck a string and a second later you’d hear the noise, all fucked up. Like the whole thing went slow and out of tune at once. Then everything went dark. Phones. Lights. Fires. I felt something brush my wyrd... it made me feel like something slid beneath my skin...like, I actually *felt* it,” she said, shivering.

Juel shot Sev a meaningful look and a focused emanation that roughly translated to “Oh shit.” Most living creatures were capable of weak emanations: expressing emotions and hinting at images or concepts. Conveying simple physical sensations was also easy enough for a human, but sound disruption? Usually, you needed dedicated magic to disrupt the Resting Laws so drastically. Whatever this was, it was powerful.

**[Gap to be filled later: Take a moment here to characterize Sevardin]**

**As I said, I have characterized these people before. They already live rent free in my head. When I was first writing, I was eager to keep the plot moving forward, so I circled back and filled in this section after the fact.**

**When I start a draft, my primary mission is to get to the end. Finishing things, even ugly, imperfect, weird things, is the most important practice you can adopt as a writer. A complete thing can be read. It ‘works.’ A half-finished thing usually doesn’t. The definition of “finishing things” has also changed considerably throughout my career. Getting all the words on the page so the thing makes sense is step one. Then I flesh it out while shaving off the bits that seem unimportant in hindsight, and I edit it to the best of my ability.**

**Then I turn it over to people I trust: beta readers. A beta doesn’t need to be a writer, or an editor. They don’t need to be not-your-friends, or not-your-family. But for your sake, they need to give you their honest opinion, and not just effusive praise. (These people are extremely rare by the way. It may take you a long time to find some, but they are worth every second of the search, and are essential for good writing, in my opinion). By all means, also share your writing with people who love you (and by extension, your writing) unconditionally, but be aware of the bias. They can’t help you as much as somebody who isn’t afraid to kick you in the teeth.**

“Anyway, Sidani screamed. She was sitting next to me and... her hand slapped my leg, reaching out, but something dragged her away before I could...” The woman shook her head. “Listen. You’ve got to go now. This isn’t the first time. Nobody comes back.”

“How many people have gone missing?” Ashford asked.

“Least three others. Dee, Bock, and Canker. They all loners too, so maybe it got some others I don’t know about.”

“You think it’s targeting people who won’t be missed?” Juel asked.

Ashford didn’t wait for Attisha’s answer, gesturing for Sev and Juel to fall into step behind him. The woman spoke anyway, shouting and pulsing explosive emanations after the venture as they strode into the tunnel.

“Nobody’s gonna miss any of us! Only reason you doin’ anything at all is because we finally came outta our hole and you worried we’ll bother the rich folks!”

Sev couldn’t fault her urgency, or her hostility. Arroyo’s rough civic policy toward the homeless was “keep them out of sight, so they can stay out of mind,” but even that presumed upon a degree of benign negligence that was absent. The irony of it was, Arroyo was a big charity city. Erician Red Cross. Starving kids in Africa. Breast cancer research. Slowing late-stage vampirism. The sort of topical issues that garnered donations with galas and auctions. But Arroyo’s transient population rarely warranted notice beyond complaints and bigotry.

“You, uh... you think this is the real deal?” Juel asked, chuckling nervously and adjusting his right magic license.

“They wouldn’t call us unless they were desperate,” Ashford said.

People didn’t use Keepers as bogeymen as frequently as they used asfalis cops. Amagia made almost everyone uncomfortable, and there were steep fines for calling in fake reports of supernatural crime or monsters. Even for the well to-do, calling the Keeping Force was a last resort. More so for transients, who often had relationships with the local fae population, and were also generally fed up with law enforcement pushing them around.

“Give yourselves vision,” Ashford said to Juel and Sev.

Sevardin looked to his right magic license; a steel vambrace inlaid with silver and studded with three glass globes. He focused his wyrd around the first orb, and the animus inside stirred to life. It was fresh and spritely, eager for release. Sev offered to perform a sequence of gestures for it, in exchange for giving him the ability to see in low light. The spirit was easily appeased, and lent its power to his wyrd. His eyes tingled, and Sev found that he could see further. Areas obscured by shadows were rendered in crisp monochromatic lines.

*Let’s do this.*

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Devil's Gate, so named for a sinister visage that could be seen in a local rock formation, was on the Arroyo side of the border to the Hahamong'na First People's Reservation. It was at the most northern edge of the city's eponymous gully, the largest of several tracts of greenspace that disrupted the civic grid.

The Devil's Gate Water Treatment and Flood Control Facility was located next to the base of one of the city's enormous, petrified rose briars, so moonlight had to sneak through its vicious thorns and the petals of its crystalized flowers, casting a lurid red glow over the gully. The facility was built into the slope of the hill that the briar emerged from, and it had been shut down for no less than half a century, obsolesced by a new, adjacent dam that was barely necessary itself, given the drought. The homeless used the plant's warren of tunnels as a refuge despite its inherent dangers.

The lower levels flooded on the rare occasion it rained, and neglect drew the usual assortment of common pests. But disuse also bred darker things. Forgotten places incubated dire animals, egregores, and naturally-occurring chimeras. *But Attisha and the others would be accustomed to all that. So what the hell is down here?*

Even with their vision enhancing contracts, the lighting was dim—it took the spell about a quarter second to catch up with his eyes, gaze gradually parting the darkness like a fog when he stared at a spot long enough. They moved through the access tunnel swiftly but cautiously, reaching into the depths of the monochromatic world with their wynds. *Nothing.*

*No urdic pressure of any kind. Even the vermin have fled.*

The tunnel eventually opened up into a cavernous, concrete room with a cliff-like ledge. Ashford went to the rusted metal railing above and surveyed the bottom of the dam. They saw the homeless camp, abandoned, and save for the storm drains, the only entrance to the room was an enormous flood channel that had long since collapsed, effectively sealing the area.

*No movement. No pressure, except how damn quiet it is.*

“Nothing,” Juel said.

Ashford nodded at the far-right end of the dam's ridge, which exited into double doors next to a broad window overlooking the dam. *Probably the floodgate controls.*

The team approached the doors, with Juel and Sev taking up positions on either side as Ashford pushed the right door up. He grunted with effort, but the door finally cleared the frame and—they heard a garbled shriek of rusted metal. *It's like Attisha said. The sound is out of sync.* It was unquestionably magic, but Sev didn't sense a whiff of energy.

The doors led to a broad hallway, with a door to the left marked “Flood Control.” Inside, there were several banks of electronics that had long-since been stripped for parts. There were signs of

a camp; several sleeping bags and a foul-looking futon, along with some other belongings that looked like detritus. *But those dirty clothes, camping stoves, and sacks of cans are essentials for the desperate. All they've got. They wouldn't abandon them without a good reason.*

[Explain what this place is/was and how it works/worked.]

**This wasn't a section I needed to think up; I had worked out the details of Arroyo's power grid, and Anno Amagium's whole infrastructure a long time ago. So I figured I would circle back later and add in the essential context. Exposition can take a reader out of a story, but it can also take a writer out of a story because it is tricky to write. Ideally? Exposition should be seamless as possible. Sometimes though, readers need to know something at a given time. In those cases, it is best to write the scene out first, then go back and do the exposition so you can ensure clarity and brevity.**

Most rooms had been claimed by transients, and hastily abandoned. Another set of double doors at the end of the curved hallway was labeled "Water Treatment." It also had a warning sign pasted over both doors that read "Condemned. Structural Collapse," and the handles were chained shut.

"Should we check out the furnace, or...?" Juel asked.

Ashford moved straight to the chained doors though. He placed his hand on the poster, and sent a powerful pulse of sorcery through them. The chains vanished. And the poster shimmered, revealing a tear.

"It's a glamour," Ashford said.

"How did you know?" Sevardin asked.

Ashford gave him a withering look.

"The dust, Harker."

Sev lowered his head to the dust, and when he focused, the darkness cleared enough for him to see a swathe of disturbed dust leading to the doors. Sev was glad the vision contract didn't convey color because he felt himself flush bright red. The voice of his mentor, Ridger McCormick mocked him: *A Keeper's most important tool isn't magic. It's common fucking sense.*

"Barriers. Reflexes. If there's anything here, we'll meet it in there."

Sev and Juel complied. He appealed to the second kinetic animus on his right cuff to fortify his wyrd with anti-magic wards and physical buffers; a shell that could make the difference between life and death. Once armored, he used the kinetic animus on his left cuff to speed up his reflexes. A sensation like lightning laced through his veins, and everything seemed to slow to quarter time. *Only three anima left. And these spells will only last about 10 minutes.*

When the group had finished buffing themselves, they drew their service revolvers, and Ashford kicked open the door. The group started to clear the room; an industrial hallway that had more hollowed out machines... and a series of metal tables littered with alchemical equipment.

“Drug lab?” Sev asked.

“Looks like,” Ashford said.

“We’ve got bodies!” Juel called.

Sev and Ashford moved toward a back room labeled maintenance that Juel had called from. They found a defunct electrical generator against the opposite wall, enclosed by a narrow, chain link wall with a gate secured by a padlocked length of chain. Three people lay inside the ad hoc kennel, which reeked of feces and urine. They were mostly naked, stripped down to shirts and undergarments. None of them were wearing magic licenses. Juel prodded the bodies with a series of urdic emanations, and called out to them verbally. They didn’t even twitch.

“He’s alive,” Juel said, pointing at the man slumped in the far corner.

Sev followed his gaze and reached out with his wyrd. The man’s wyrd responded with the faintest, erratic hum. It was even weaker than if he had been asleep. And the other two bodies were voids. Completely still. Completely cold. Dead.

“No sign of our girl,” Ashford observed.

Juel tried to pick the padlock with sorcery. Most locks were supposed to be outfitted with skeleton key runes that would spring open in response to Keepers’ licenses, but somebody had tampered with this one.

“Stand back,” Ashford said.

He extended his hand, closed his eyes for a moment, and then jabbed the lock with his pointer and index finger. The bridge of the lock snapped and it fell to the ground with a clank. Juel unwound the chains and pulled open the door with a rusty shriek—the sound was normal this time, though it still seemed impossibly, dangerously loud.

Sev kept his weapon drawn and positioned himself in the corner of the room so he had a visual of both the cage and the entry way. *I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.* Juel knelt to the man inside, touching his neck. He was clearly dehydrated, his ragged shirt and soiled undergarments hanging loose on his emaciated frame.

“Hey, we’re gonna get you out of here.”

The man started awake, and tried to voice a protest, but he was too weak to resist Juel, who scooped him up.

There was another rusty shriek from outside. Ashford gestured for Sev to accompany him back into the lab. The double doors they had used to enter were now closed. *No. Fused.* It was as if somebody had turned the metal to sheets of liquid, stirred them both together, and then transformed them back into a single solid. Again, it was clearly magic, but there had been no ripples. No hint of energy whatsoever. A chill ran down Sev's spine.

*Trap. Fuck me.*

"This way," Ashford said, voice grim. "I'm taking point. Harker, bring up the rear. Flores, keep the hostage between us."

Sevardin emanated compliance and fell behind Flores as Ashford led them to another pair of doors that read "Access North."

Inside was another long hallway like the last, with a number of miscellaneous rooms that had been used to store chemicals, or God knows what. Ashford continued forward, Juel trailing behind and Sev covering their backs. Sev heard a faint, electrical hum, and he was blinded as the lights flickered to life for a split second, flooding his contract vision with far too much light. The venture collectively swore, then Ashford shouted:

"Halt! Hands where I can see them!"

Sev turned around to find a man standing in their path, next to a young teenage girl. He was dressed in tattered robes with short sleeves that revealed his naked, license-less forearms. He opened his mouth, and a distorted voice escaped his mouth, though its sounds didn't match the erratic movements of his lips, tongue, and throat. Even more unsettling, he was speaking in blunt. No gestures or urdic emanations. It was like hearing a marionette speak:

"You intrude. You disrupt. You are late."

It said the last through clenched teeth. A manic, living rictus. But the fierce smile was discordant with the rest of his expression. His eyes were glassy. Unfocused.

"Release the girl," Ashford commanded.

The man tilted his head to the side.

"I do not hold her."

The man's left hand jerked forward and the venture was thrown onto their backs by... nothingness. There was no physical impact, but also no urdic power. No hint of an anima or other ambient energy. One second the venture was standing, and the next, space itself seemed to spit them out, sending them on their backs. The magic had been completely silent. Ashford got the worst of it, flung to the far end of the hall.

Sev rolled to his feet and trained his weapon down the hallway. But the man had vanished and only the girl remained. She looked behind herself in a daze, as if she was also confused about where he had gone. Then a giggle escaped her throat and she looked at the venture with completely white eyes, nearly bulging from her skull.

This time, Sev could feel the attack coming. There was a swell of negative mental energy—tormented thoughts, idle dread, and bad dreams—followed by a lash of congealed shadow, streaking straight toward Juel, who was still carrying the hostage. Sev dashed forward, drew his wyrd into a sorcerous dome and intercepted the strand of energy before it could hit his partner. A paroxysm shot through his forearms when the thing's energy made contact with his wyrd. *The pain's probably all in my head, but damned if it doesn't hurt.*

He grimaced, trying to assess the entity. *Mental energy... Victim in a trance... Pain*

“She’s possessed—egregore!” Sev shouted.

“Flores, fall back, Harker, cover us!” Ashford commanded.

Sevardin fired a spread of kinetic bolts at the girl; invisible projectiles with the force of a solid punch. None of them would hit hard enough to do permanent damage to the girl—*I hope*—but it might be enough to keep the thing inside her busy, or possibly even stun it. But the egregore didn't even try to move out of the way. The girl's body jerked with the haymaker impacts in sequence, and then she started giggling. Her wyrd congealed into a host of dark tendrils, swirling and swelling with energy.

Meanwhile, Ashford helped Juel and the hostage to their feet and retreated back around the corner. Sev held his ground, blocking the next volley of the girl's attacks.

*This thing's a lot more powerful than I gave it credit for*—In the time it took Sev to clear his head, the girl had closed the distance between them, and before he could do anything to defend himself, she reached out and placed her hand against his armored jacket.

*Fuck.*

**[Explain the perils of touch attacks, and mitigating factors like Amagia uniforms]**

**Again, I worked out these rules a long time ago, and didn't want to disrupt the narrative. (I immediately proceeded to write episode 2. See again, my top comment about maintaining flow.**

**I think my advice about filling in gaps is this: if you already have something written out in your head, feel free to come back to it and shuffle it in later.**

**But if it is something that you don't know about your own characters, plot, or world yet, pause and figure it out before going further. Less re-writing involved that way and a more cohesive narrative as well.**

Sevardin wasn't sure if there was an actual bang, or it was just his head trying to process the pain. For a fleeting second, he assumed he had died. It felt like the possessed girl had broken every bone in his ribcage from within, and the surge of sorcerous energy ejected him into the air. He landed heavily on his back, winding him twice over. The girl walked forward as he struggled to draw breath, gathering more power in the palm of her hand.

*Well, Sev. You should be real with yourself right now: this looks bad.*