

Episode 2: Cupellation (Raw Draft)

Sevardin Harker. Marday, Leo 3rd, 2344 AA. 9:46PM. Arroyo.

[Unlike Episode 1, I wrote this episode more or less straight through, and I think it is stronger for it. When you can manage that as a writer? It feels great, but it's not always possible. Honestly, I think skipping those first few sections in the first episode helped me build up a lot of momentum to tackle the second half. That is why I am so determined to preserve "flow."]

The girl advanced, giggling and crying.

Her hand smoldered with dark fire, flickering in unnaturally jagged geometric shapes.

Then she raised her head from Sev to the tunnel behind him, and her body buckled to the side as a deafening bang echoed through the tunnel. Sev looked back to see Ashford with his service weapon drawn and smoking. Panicking, Sev looked back at the girl. Miraculously, she wasn't dead. *Egregore must have blocked the bullet with her wyrd.*

Ashford yanked Sev to his feet with sorcery-assisted muscle and dragged him back around the corner. Juel popped out long enough to cover their retreat.

"You could have killed her," Sev said, disbelieving.

"Are you hurt?" Ashford asked.

"No," Sev said, but his body was still squirming from the impact that laid him out.

"Then get your head in the game," Ashford half-snarled. "Use your wyrd. Feel how powerful that thing is."

[Finally, some more characterization of both Sev and Ashford. This is the main reason why I think Episodes 1 and 2 should be combined. Between the two of them, you get a feel for the characters and the world, but the first really only tells half a story.]

Sev could feel a gross swell of fetid, rotting energy radiating from the passage they had just escaped. *It's waiting. Or preparing.*

Ashford continued: "If its host dies, *it* dies, and it's not going down without a fight. I could have shot her in the head and not given it an opportunity to defend itself. Hell, I probably should have, because now its guard is up."

"No," Sev said. "We can save her."

"That's the idea," Ashford said, though he sounded skeptical.

“Is it a demon?” Juel asked.

Sev shook his head.

“Areligious. Causes extreme pain. Ponophage, I think.”

The classification finally came to him, unbidden. Egregores came in a limitless variety of flavors, ranging from minor nuisances to godlike entities. In populations where the collective unconscious was particularly devout, they often assumed the mannerisms and identities of angels or demons. Other areas spawned monsters shaped by fear of serial killers, fae, urban legends, and anything else that caused a panic.

But ponophages were simpler. They were entities born from concentrations of mental energy associated with pain. Generally speaking, they could not physically manifest until they had hijacked a mind, at which point they could be expelled and bound to the material plane. Unfortunately, all possessive egregores would use their hosts as hostages and wield them as weapons. *And the best part? Any pain the host suffers enhances the ponophage's power.*

[Normally? This is the kind of area where I would skip ahead to maintain my flow, but I actually had not worked out what precise kind of egregore I was going to go with yet, so I took the time to think the monster through then and there.]

“We need to shock that thing out of her body, bind it, and destroy it,” Ashford said.

“I can bind it,” Juel said.

“I can destroy it,” Sev said.

“Prep your contracts. Be ready for my signal,” Ashford said, nodding, then turned to Sevardin. “As soon as that thing finishes taking shape, blow it to hell.”

On a three count, Ashford jumped out from behind cover, firing his gun at the ponophage two more times, then unleashed his shock and awe contract. There was a blinding light, and the air temperature in the chamber plummeted, fast and quick enough to make Sev draw breath that was like a knife in his lungs. The girl's body, and the floor around her was shrouded in frost.

[Yet another reason to preserve flow at all costs; I write a lot of action. Action scenes really benefit from getting into the right headspace and maintaining continuity throughout.]

Smart. The ice will shock the girl but also numb her so it won't have any pain to draw on.

And as soon as Ashford landed the hit, Juel followed up with his binding contract. A storm of cyan, spectral chains erupted from Juel's wyrd and shot toward the girl. The contours of her wyrd briefly became visible; a transparent blue sphere radiating from her body, polluted by a rusty shadow. The chains threaded themselves through the egregore, like a plant taking root in

bruise-colored soil. Juel seized the two largest lengths of chain and wrapped them around his vambraces as he took a heavy step back.

The girl was drawn off her feet, levitating. Sounds ranging from shrieks to peals of laughter escaped her throat. She twisted in mid-air as Juel continued to pull with the chains. The cyan links of the chain subdivided again and again, spreading through the shadow until Juel finally had the leverage to pluck it from the girl's wyrd. She collapsed to the ground with a groan.

A skilled binder could not only force an incorporeal being to manifest, but also directly influence and constrain the form it took. And Sev knew well from his time at the athenaeum, Juel was a peerless binder. A mouth emerged in the nexus of chains—or rather, a lump of flesh blinked into existence, sprouted several errant teeth, followed by two tongues, and a mass of sinew that continued to spin itself from thin air. The lump of meat expanded and shifted shape constantly, with claws, scales, tendrils and other strange types of tissue briefly appearing.

Sev focused on his contract. *When you need something dead, it's very hard to argue with fire and force.* He reached to the final animus in his right cuff, a knot of thermal and kinetic energy. Fire anima were easy to court into service being volatile and generally eager to go out in a blaze, glorious or otherwise. The problem was, that eagerness made them difficult to control, and even harder to 'hold.' If Sev blasted the ponophage too early though, he would disrupt the binding, and some of the egregore might not cross over into the physical plane.

So Sev held back the fire in his wyrd, sweat immediately beading on his brow. If he lost focus for an instant, the contract could detonate prematurely. After three more torturous seconds, Juel released his hold on the egregore, trapping it in the shape of an enormous, skinless creature resembling an ape. It was a perfect target. Large, exposed, and no nasty natural weapons—apart from its considerable muscle mass, but Juel could only do so much.

Sevardin released his contract just as the thing finished forming. A blazing sphere of flame, large as a basketball and hot as the shores of hell ejected from his hands as if launched from a cannon. It streaked toward the creature who was already darting toward Juel--

He'll be caught in the blast.

At the last picosecond, Sev used his wyrd to tug back the reins on the animus, depriving the spell of its full destructive potential. The orb still slammed into the ponophage with impressive force, enveloping the hallway in dust and smoke. Sev pulsed his wyrd into the cloud of debris, trying to feel out everyone's relative positioning. As if in answer, Ashford flew back-first from the cloud and smashed into the wall next to Sev. His shoulder audibly popped, and he fell to the ground, gasping.

The egregore released a shriek that became a roar, and as the smoke cleared, Sev could see it shucking off a literal layer of charred muscle from its body. *How much power does this thing have?* Ponophages were usually found in hospitals and doctor's offices. And unless things got really out of hand, Medithurges were usually able to deal with them without consulting the Keeping Force. They were not natural fighters. More like parasites.

This thing didn't just happen. It was built. Fueled by torture. Somebody taught it to fight. It turned to face Sev. The front of its head looked like a lamprey's maw—a gaping, oblong hole surrounded by blunted teeth.

Think fast, Sev.

He had only cast contracts simultaneously a handful of times. His attitude was that it was generally better to do one thing as well as you could, rather than splitting your focus. But certain situations demanded situations that were simply too complex for a single contract. *And I am down to my last two shots.*

He split his mind into two tracks, reaching out to the last two anima in his licenses. The egregore started charging toward Sevardin, loping forward on its enormous knuckles. Both contracts toyed with similar types of energy, which made it difficult to avoid combining them. One demanded a mental arcane equation, and the other... the other simply wanted him to whistle.

When the ponophage was less than 10 yards away, Sevardin released his first contract. The acrid stench of ozone and metal laced the air as the animus flared to life. Sev's eyes flashed with images of gears, electricity, industrial magnets, and natural lodestones. His left hand fired a blue pulse of energy at the ponophage: a magnetic mine.

Strands of rebar exploded from the concrete floor and adjacent wall, impaling the monster through the head, shoulders, chest and pelvis as it charged forward. For a second, Sevardin thought the thing would continue straight through, ripping itself free. But the metal managed to stop him for a least a second, which was plenty of time.

Sev whistled at the ponophage like it was a lovely lady.

Intense, euphoric energy coursed into his body as the animus accepted the contract and empowered his wyrd. For a second, he felt like Thor, or Zeus, or God-All-Fucking-Mighty. A thick arc of ultra violet lightning leapt from his outstretched palm and smashed into the monster's bulk. Electricity flooded its flesh. The animus' energy was probably sufficiently powerful on its own, but Sevardin 'leaned' on the spell with his wyrd, magnifying its destructive properties.

The iron bars impaling the Ponophage began to glow red, yellow, then a molten white. It howled and contorted with the current, its body too overwhelmed to draw power from its pain. After three full seconds, the thing burst into thick chunks of bruise-colored sludge.

The ectoplasm splattered Sev in the face, treating him to a flavor like burnt pus. He sputtered and wiped the ichor away from his face, then turned to see Juel crouched in front of the girl, the hostage laying prone behind her, and Ashford holding his shoulder.

"You okay?" Sev asked.

Ashford held up a finger, stretched his neck from side to side, grabbed his arm, and torqued his shoulder joint back into place with a burst of sorcery. A sickening pop echoed through the tunnel, and Ashford grunted to keep from crying out. Eventually he sighed and looked at Sev, smiling faintly.

“Good work.”

“Yeah, nice lightning man!” Juel said, giving him a thumbs up.

“I meant to kill it with one shot but—” Sev started, but Ashford cut him off.

“You held back. You made the right call. If you went all out, you might have taken Flores, the girl, and the hostage with you. That double was quick thinking.”

Sev was surprised. *He read my wyrd that carefully? In the middle of a fight? I’ve got a lot yet to learn.*



[In the course of writing this passage, I plotted out the loose story beats for the rest of this “arc.” I knew I wanted to leave some room for a couple character development episodes before diving straight into the case, but I didn’t want this episode to be a one off.]

They ended up backtracking through the drug lab. It was too dangerous to continue forward with everyone’s anima spent, and the rogue malefactor still at large. Fortunately, Ashford and Juel each had two contracts left, which was enough power to break open the door that had fused shut. While they worked on the door, Sev started visually examining some of the reagents in the lab.

“Aqua Logos... urdic nullifiers.... spirit orchid extract... these are all reagents to make inhibitor ink.”

As soon as he said it, he saw what appeared to be the confidential, alchemical formula for said ink. The Third Amagium was built on inhibitor ink. The magic license system only worked because of the ritualistic binding tattoos compulsorily applied at birth. *So, what the hell was this guy trying to do?*

When his partners didn’t respond, still occupied with the door, Sevardin studied the alchemist’s workspace in more detail. There were pages covered in extremely minute and dense mathematics, and some alchemical formulas that seemed to speak of counter-spells and nullifying ritual enchantments.

Was he trying to find an antidote for the ink?

It was a startling idea. But it might explain how he was able to use magic without a license—assuming that silent sorcery was magic, and not some kind of trick. Most criminals generally attempted to crack the licenses themselves, as experimenting with a ritual enchantment could

have excruciating, or even fatal consequences. *Not the kind of thing you would test on yourself. Maybe that's what the prisoners were for... But what about the egregore?*

"I think this guy was trying to undo his tattoos," Sevardin said.

"Maybe he succeeded. He was unlicensed when he hit us with that sorcery," Juel said.

"That wasn't sorcery," Ashford grunted.

"What the hell was it?" Sev asked.

"Way above our paygrade. We've got two civilians to extract and there may be other hostiles around. Leave this shit for the detectives."

Sevardin nodded, and stooped to pick up the girl, who was still unconscious. She was reedy, with dark brown skin, long braided hair and features that would be quite pretty if she weren't so badly malnourished. *Christ she's light. Can't be more than ninety pounds. Hard to believe that egregore gave her so much power.* Juel shouldered the man from the cage, and Ashford took point as they backtracked their way back to the entrance of the flood control system.



Attisha was waiting when they stepped out, face stricken with anguish. Sevardin approached her, still holding the girl and wearing his best reassuring smile.

"She's going to be alright."

The woman eyed him suspiciously, looked at the girl again, and then gave him a nod. She saw Juel carrying the man next.

"That's Bock. He alive too?"

"He'll be fine," Juel said.

"Uh-huh," She said, skeptically peering at his body. "What about Dee and Canker?"

"We're still investigating the area," Ashford said, before Juel or Sevardin could speak.

"You kill whatever was in there?"

"Yes, ma'am," Ashford answered quickly again. "But we have some questions. Can you hang around for a few minutes and ask these people to do the same? Detectives are on their way and they will want to speak with you."

Attisha snorted.

“I mean I’ll ask, but most of them already left.”

Ashford gestured for Sev and Juel to lay the people on the grassy bank of the ravine, and then motioned for them to come close.

“When you start taking statements, not a word about that guy with the fucked-up voice, understood? Like I said, Xenomancy is above our paygrade,” Ashford grinned. Sev and Juel both chuckled. Xenomancy was storybook shit. Cautionary tales for kids tucking in at night. Religious deities had more metaphysical credence. Ashford continued: “Seriously though. We don’t want to spook people; let M&M handle it.”

“What about the lab?” Sevardin asked.

Ashford pursed his lips.

“Don’t volunteer it, but inquire about drug use. Hell, see if somebody has an interest in hedge alchemy. If they ask why you’re asking, tell them we found... ‘paraphernalia’ down there.”

Hedge alchemy, my ass. His notes had symbols I didn’t recognize, and my alchemy finals are still fresh in my head. But Sev figured Ashford would use that as more credence for his argument however, and bit his tongue.

“I’m gonna call Monstrum and Malefaction, because this... definitely fits the bill. You two take statements from everybody who bothers to stick around, but do not let these two,” he gestured at Sidani and Bock, still unconscious, “Out of your sight.”

Sev and Juel both nodded.

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A Detective Two venture from the Monstrum and Malefaction division showed up in only ten minutes. It helped that Ashford failed to make his fifteen-minute check-in with dispatch, and they had already assigned officers to back up. Forensics and an ambulance followed, and dispatch cautioned Ashford that the press was not far behind.

Before the circus hit full swing, Sev managed to ask Attisha few questions.

“How long have you known Sidani?”

“How is that relevant?” Attisha asked, crossing her arms.

Sev grinned and tried not to laugh. He was charmed.

“It isn’t, strictly speaking. You just seem to care a lot about her and...” Sev smiled reassuringly. “I’m just trying to get an idea about your relationship. And your community.”

Attisha looked him up and down.

“Fine.” She conceded. Sev smiled, but before he could ask a question, she held up a finger. “You tell me what the hell actually happened down there, and I will answer anything.”

Sevardin sighed. Ashford wouldn't like this.

“Sidani was possessed by an egregore.”

“Those weird thought-things? I can make those go away with my own weak-ass wyrd.”

“This... was a big one. Look, I'm not supposed to tell you this. I would really appreciate it if you could keep this quiet. But that's what happened. That's why we're beat to shit. That's why she's out cold. Honest.”

“What about Bock? Was he possessed too?”

“Possibly,” Sev said on reflex. The brief seminar on ‘public communication and management’ was the best elective he had ever taken. How to lie without lying, taught by a very tricky half-fae. “Look, as my boss says, this is above our paygrade. We aren't qualified—”

“If you aren't qualified, then why are you talking to me?”

Sevardin opened his mouth to explain but followed Attisha's gaze to see another vehicle pulling up. *Oh God. Not the coroner....* By the time he turned back, Attisha was already half-jogging away.

“I'm out!” she said, raising both hands. “No dead people for me!”

[With this line, I knew Attisha would be making a comeback at some future point. Background characters are a little like anima; you use them for given purpose (like casting a spell), but some of them are more potent than others, and really take on a life of their own. Unlike anima though, they fortunately don't expire afterwards!] 😊

I answered your damn questions lady; you really gonna do me like that? Sevardin thought of a small list of excuses he could use to detain her, but they all struck him as exceptionally petty. He knew her name. He knew she would be back for Sidani, eventually. And he shook his head.

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“That all she said?” Second Detective Ross asked.

“Unfortunately,” Sevardin said.

“Next time just bind her, yeah?” Second Detective Kline suggested, exasperated. “You know you can cite her for trespassing and squatting until the asfalis cops show up, right?”

Sevardin did his best to take the comment in stride, but Ross interrupted him.

“Alright, good work bluebie. Head back to to your CO and we’ll get you out of here.”

[You’ll notice lots of little errors in these raw drafts. My copy-editing process is as follows:

1. One visual before sending it off to betas.

2. Another pass incorporating betas’ feedback in Word.

3. MS word’s automated spelling and grammar check.

3. A final visual pass when I am plugging the finished story into my site.

Despite that quadruple filtering, errors inevitably sneak through on occasion. Goes to show just how rigorous the editing process can be, and how challenging it is to catch every flaw.]

Sevardin opened his mouth to reply, but Ross had already turned to Kline and started a separate conversation. Sevardin blinked, then spoke up.

“Actually detectives, I noticed some... irregularities during our investigation.”

“Oh?” Ross asked, seemingly amused.

Sevardin continued unphased.

“My CO told you everything that happened right? Casting without a license aside, isn’t it strange that a ponophage could grow that powerful without anybody noticing? People live here. It’d be like having a cacodemon in your attic.”

“Where are you going with this?” Kline asked, less amused.

“I think our mystery man may have been growing the egregore. Using his hostages’ pain to cultivate that thing, and controlling it somehow.”

“'Somehow' is pretty vague, bluebie. Ponophages are pests. Why even bother?” Kline pressed.

“Maybe that was how he abducted people. Maybe he wanted it to act as a guard dog, or some kind of scarecrow against lesser egregores.”

The two detectives looked like they were suppressing laughs.

“Look, we appreciate the theories, bluebie. Be sure to put it in your write-ups,” Ross said, and turned back to Kline to continue his conversation.

Sevardin bristled. He spoke before he could hold his tongue in check.

“It’s Harker, sir.”

[This is probably the most important line in this episode, as it tells the reader the most about Sev’s character out of any other interaction. Again, ideally, I’d fit something like this in at the very outset of the story, but I take a while to get going.]

The detective turned to face Sev, slow and incredulous.

“I’m sorry?” He asked.

“My name is Sevardin Harker. Sir.”

The detective nodded languidly, and paused a moment before replying.

“Yeah. I’ll make a note of it.”

Sevardin gave a curt bow in response and walked back to the cruiser.

Ashford Adams was standing near the cruiser, smoking a cigarette and jotting something down in field notes. Juel was inside the car, speaking to the precinct about something. Sev’s wyrd must have been naked with anger, because Ashford snickered without looking up:

“Try not to take it personally, Harker.”

“Sir?”

“Look. You’re... what. Twenty-four? Twenty-three? You’ll be in their boots soon enough. In the meantime, be patient and observe propriety as best you can.”

“I didn’t realize putting up with derision was part of propriety,” Sev said.

Ashford sighed and flipped his notebook shut.

“They don’t teach you how to navigate department politics in the Athenaeum, so here’s some advice: pick your battles. Don’t be a pushover, but learn to take a joke. Keep your head down when you can, and put in what work is asked of you.

“Correcting your superiors, pretending at Detective 3 on your first week of General Patrol, trying to play the prodigy... Those are all good ways to make enemies.”

“Here I thought we were all on the same side.”

Sev could tell Ashford was getting annoyed. He plucked the stub of his cigarette out of his mouth and ground it under his boot.

“We are. That’s my point. People are gonna haze you. It’s nothing personal. If you can grow a sense of humor about it, you’ll be much better off.”

Ashford clapped him on the back, gently, and started walking back to detectives.

“Get in the cruiser and I’ll get us clocked out.”

Sev paused a moment, then climbed behind the wheel of the cruiser’s middle seat. *Propriety is a pretty word that covers a great many sins.* It tended to work out well for men like Ashford. Straight, white, handsome, and, above all, comfortable. *You might be satisfied with Officer 3 after five years on the force, but I’m aiming higher. And I don’t intend to abandon my ambitions for the sake of your convenience.*

Sev sighed heavily, watching Ashford walk back to the detectives who had dismissed him earlier. *Somewhere, McCormick’s probably smiling, and he doesn’t know why.*

Every aspiring amagia was assigned a mentor when they enrolled in the Athenaeum. And most developed close relationships, comparable to parental bonds. But Sev had a different experience with Ridger McCormick. The man was warm enough before Sev declared peacekeeping as his discipline. Master McCormick tried to dissuade him. When Sev held his ground, McCormick trained him harder than anybody else. Made examples of every mistake he made, and turned his successes into targets on his back. And when it became clear that Sev wouldn't back down, McCormick eventually regarded him with a mix of grudging respect and resignation. There was always a suspicious distance there. And it wasn’t until Sev graduated that McCormick leveled with him. Every word of that little farewell speech was chiseled in his head:

“You have what it takes to be an excellent amagia, Harker. If you went into Arcanism, Medithurgy, Leximancy...people would be reading books about your career before it even ended. But I still don’t think you have what it takes to be a Keeper. Honestly, it took me a long time to figure out why myself.

"You came to this country when you were eleven and enrolled in the Athenaeum a year later. We are a walled garden, son. I know you think you know prejudice. I’m sure you’ve had more than a taste of it. But believe me when I tell you, you have no idea how to be Black in Ericia. Much less, how to be a Black cop."

McCormick held out his arms to the side, as if to say “there it is” and let them fall flat. Sev opened his mouth, coughed a laugh, and tilted his head to one side in consideration. *Of course, he’d save that remark for last. Of course, that was how he chose to say goodbye.* It was too much to take in at once. It raised all kinds of questions, the sort he would want to ask a mentor he trusted, but that clearly wasn't McCormick. When Sev found his rebuttal, it came earnest and unchecked:

“I appreciate all you’ve done for me, Master McCormick. That’s not me being snide or sarcastic. I take pride knowing you did your damndest to break me. There were even a couple

moments where you came close. But I made a habit of proving you wrong. And I look forward to doing it again."

McCormick eyed him with an inscrutable smile and gave him a stiff nod. Sev smiled back, nodded back, and turned around with a silent vow to make that their last meeting.

As the scene played out in his head, Sev opened the door to the cruiser and slid into its odd, central driver's seat. He was trying to mask his expression and keep his wyrd emotionally neutral, but apparently not hard enough. Juel muted himself on the radio and looked at Sev.

"You good?"

Sev snickered.

"That obvious?"

"Not really. But after eleven years, I feel like I got a pretty good read on you," Juel laughed. "That's your 'Fuck-This-Shit-But-Try-To-Look-Polite-About-It' face."

Sevardin chuckled.

"Sounds like one of my faces."

"Oh, it's a classic."

After that, Juel let it drop, and went back to talking to dispatch. Sev was relieved. He didn't want to go into it further, or else Juel might end up shooting his mouth off at their superiors. Juel was good at shrugging people off—up until they affronted someone he cared about. Then the gloves came off. *And the last thing we need is two people stirring the pot.*

Sev watched Ashford talking the two detectives. The three of them spoke for a couple minute, finished with a brief chuckle, and exchanged a handshake.

Sev simply smiled and shook his head.

Fuck 'propriety.'