

# Grim Business

An Anno Amagium Story by Hank Whitson

“Be honest. Have you ever seen someone... this bad?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Aviada said, emanating calm regret with her wyrd.

Ms. Cartridge sniffed haughtily. Her wyrd was taugth and caustic, almost like she was disappointed, or insulted that her son’s corpse wasn’t the most gruesome to ever arrive in the parlor. *If it makes you feel better, he’s the worst I’ve had this month.*

“Well, I suppose in your line of work it’s inevitable,” Cartridge conceded.

Aviada knew the woman wasn’t finished, so she smiled sadly and waited. Everybody who worked in one of death’s industries quickly came to understand that bodies were a relatively small part of the business. Managing others’ grief was the real core of it.

Ms. Cartridge shivered against a phantom chill, and added:

“Those damned butchers. Wild dogs would have been kinder.”

*I’ve seen what wild dogs do, my dear. I’ve seen dire coyotes, feral shifters, and chimeras, and you don’t have the slightest notion of what you’re talking about.* Aviada held her sad, demure smile, even as her marrow began simmer. *I’ve also seen what people like your son do. Bodies reduced to husks by sorcerous fire. Flesh flash-frozen with illegal contract magic and then left to thaw, until the lysed cells melt into gray, stinking porridge.* But Aviada simply nodded and lowered her head sadly.

“They never found any proof, you know. Just shot first and asked questions later. And we can’t even bring it to a real court. If your licenses are silver, you answer to no one.”

“Amagia are monstrous,” Aviada said seriously.

*If they weren’t, the real monsters would eat them alive.*

After a long moment of silence, Ms. Cartridge collected herself.

“Can you do it? Can you make him presentable?”

“Yes,” Aviada said. Speaking that one word was an art she’d practiced hundreds of times. Her voice was gentle, but her gestures were crisp, and she kept her emanations firm enough for to be reassuring. “I’ll care for him like family.”

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Morret helped her remove the body bag. It was a delicate process. Aertess Cartridge had been killed by a concussive burst of air, enriched with currents of wyrd energy that simulated flechettes. The raw force had broken the majority of his ribs—especially on the left side—and the ephemeral blades had torn apart the surrounding soft tissues. The spinal cord was also partially severed. And with the internal organs removed during autopsy, there was precious little left to prevent the corpse from falling apart at the abdomen.

“You sure you don’t want help? That chest looks like six hours of work by itself.”

“I’m fine, Mor,” she said with a gentle emanation. “Thanks, though.”

Her boss smiled and nudged his glasses snug against his nose with the second joint of his index finger; an odd little salute that was all his own. Then he left, and Aviada was alone.

Washing and shaving the body would come first. She retrieved the disinfectant solution, several sponges of varying coarseness, shaving cream, and razors for course and fine hair. Once her other tools were laid out, she retrieved all the anima she would need from the safe.

She pulled them from the stasis chest in reverse order, starting with the glass orbs that contained elemental spirits specially coalesced for glamours and other cosmetic contracts.

*Roth always called it make-up magic.*

The memories came back on her all at once. Aviada had to stop and take a deep breath.

When she was calm again, she grabbed the last animus she needed. It was actually designed for massages and sports medicine, but remarkably effective at combating rigor mortis. Like most exempt anima, the spirit was generally agreeable and easy to use, requiring a series of simple finger gestures. In return, it would empower her wyrd to impart warmth and relax knotted or stiff muscle fibers. Living subjects would also enjoy a mild, euphoric high.

She ejected the depleted anima orbs she had last used from her licenses and place them in the return bin, which was now precariously full. *We should probably head to the animaclave tomorrow. Restock.* Then she slotted the massage animus in her right cuff.

*Everything was ready. Time to get started.*

But Aviada was frozen. She stood there for god only knew how long, staring at the body's pale face and faded gray eyes.

Then she spat on the corpse, striking the bridge of the nose at an angle.

She was still and silent as she watched the thick, foamy glob trickle into his open eye. *It's not enough.* Rage curled her fingers into fists. Tremors worked their way up her arms. *It's not half of what this piece of shit deserves. Not a quarter. It's nothing.* A growl escaped her throat, blossomed into a roar, and her gloved right hand moved unbidden, knuckles bouncing off his right cheek with a sloppy backhand.

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It sounded like an echo. A reminder of the first time Roth hit her.

*All battered wives tell themselves they had it coming. "I deserved it," or "I made a mistake," or "it was an accident." But I'm different. I'm sick. I wanted to piss him off as bad as I could.* She wanted to break him of the boy scout routine he wore at work, with friends, family, and the rest of the goddamn world.

She tried to connect in other ways first, of course. But nothing got through to him. Aviada's greatest talent was finding the sharpest knives for a person's softest spots, and the better she knew them, the easier it was.

His backhand took her by surprise, that first time. Struck her quick as lightning. A flash of white and she was on the floor. After that, they both calmed down. It was like they had pulled a splinter out of their relationship. *He was mortified. He opened up. I lost my anger. We made love. It wasn't just sex. We connected. We had a real conversation after. Things were good again.*

Three months later, though, his walls were back up. So she started pushing again. And again. And again. And when her taunts failed to catch flame, when he didn't take the bait, she hit him for the first time. That was when the cycle started in earnest.

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Aviada pounded the corpse's right shoulder with one fist, and its thigh with the other. *You need to stop.* But part of her knew she could cover the damage with glamours. Normally, such contracts would only last for a few hours, or a day at most, but that was because the spells needed to compensate for movement. Expressions and respiration required the enchantment to adapt to its subject on the fly, rapidly exhausting its energy. On a corpse, they would last a week. Aertess Cartridge was going to be buried in two days. *My crimes will be buried long before they're revealed.* She punched him in the temple, and a hollow knocking noise echoed throughout the lab.

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It had been twenty-five months since Kaydin and Cenia showed up on her doorstep alone. She knew their news based on the hour, before she opened the door, revealing their ashen expressions. It was the knock that stalks the spouse of every soldier, cop, and Keeper.

Roth had been a detective in Monstrum and Malefaction, in the LAKF's central precinct. His venture was working a case straight out of a pulp novel, or some tawdry symvision procedural. He, Kaydin, and Cenia were tracking a serial murderer in Compton. They weren't sure if he was carving and burning people for some sort of ritual, or mere sport, but there had been three confirmed victims in the space of a month.

Aviada had asked Kaydin to describe what happened so many times that she could picture it herself.

Irvem Sellers was a wiry man of indistinct eastern European ethnicity. When the venture knocked on his front apartment door, he was disturbingly calm. Unsurprised. Wyrd muted. He admitted the Keepers, acquiescing to their search without asking to see the warrant.

Roth started to question him in his living room while the others moved to the kitchen. Cenia screamed when she opened the fridge, and Aviada would never forgive her for that. The sound drew Roth's attention for a split second. Long enough for Irvem Sellers to unleash his contract. A localized pyromantic blast. He must have cast the spell before letting the Keepers in, and held it hidden in his body.

*How could you not notice, love? How could you not smell the magic in him?*

It didn't matter. Rothem Dale died in an instant. Esophageal burns. Point-blank brisance. The extreme surge of heat that cooked his brain. Any single factor would have been enough.

She laughed when she saw his charred body. She didn't know why. It was her literal worst nightmare. But she had seen so many dead bodies, dreaded and imagined that exact moment so many times... there was an indistinct, yet wickedly palpable irony about its arrival. She managed to cover herself with a sort of moan, buried her face in her hands and pretended to weep, even though it would be days before she could feel sad. Months before she could grieve properly.

But in that instant, she knew nothing would ever be "right" again. She'd never find out how their fucked up little duet would end. Any hope of righting the ship was gone. They had talked about kids and mutually decided to push the issue to some ill-defined tomorrow, and that was off the table too.

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Aviada struck the corpse once more before she could rein herself in. She shrouded her left fist with all the wyrd energy her license cuffs would permit, and the metal grew hot around her wrist. Then she punched him square in the jaw.

Something broke. There was the unmistakable crack of a breaking bone.

But the blow also woke something up.

The urdic energies fortifying her fist triggered something in his mouth. Something magical. Her wyrd rebounded sharply, shooting pins up Aviada's arm. She cried out, staggered backwards, and barely managed to catch herself on her instrument table.

*What the fuck was that?*

Her heart lurched back into rhythm, each beat thudding and ponderous.

*There is something magic in his mouth.*

Aviada gulped. There were only two explanations. The coroner had either left some kind of forensic tool in his mouth, or he had missed something important. And deep down, she already knew which answer waited for her. Most urdoforensic tools were either disposable and non-magical, or too expensive to accidentally leave in a body.

If it was a remnant of the autopsy—a swab saturated with residual energy or something—she could just throw it away, cover her tracks as intended and none would be the wiser. *But if they missed a piece of evidence, I have to alert the Keeping Force. They will re-examine the body. No matter how negligent they are, they will notice the dozen new bruises I caused. And then I will lose my fucking job.*

She paced the floor for a few minutes, trying to think of an excuse. *I could say whatever's in his mouth reacted to the contract, and I panicked and punched him.* She shook her head. *No. That doesn't explain the other bruises, even if he fell off the table.* Every contusion told its own intricate origin story and matching them to the shape of her boney fists—and the finger adorned with her wedding band—would be trivial.

*Fuck. Fuck!*

Aviada screamed, barely managed to stop herself from flipping the instrument table. *Get a grip, you idiot. You've done enough damage already.*

She grabbed her arms, gloved fingers digging into her flesh, hoping she could wake herself up. *Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I just caught a nerve and mistook it for magic.*

Cautiously, she approached the body and probed the corpse's head for magic. And there it was. A well-hidden enchantment that would be almost impossible hard to detect unless you were looking for it. But it was incredibly dense with magic that didn't feel remotely forensic in nature.

"Shit, shit, shit!"

She flung her fists into the air and slammed them down on nothing, pacing once more. *You don't have to report it. You can just do your fucking job, and nobody will ever know.* But she remembered what Cartridge said: *"They never found any proof."*

Contrary to what most asfalis people believed, Keepers faced serious scrutiny every time a life was claimed in the line of duty. The Prosopon, the force's internal investigation unit would suspend the offending officer, peel apart every aspect of their life, and then lay down censures. Demotions were common. In more severe cases, Keepers were expelled from the Amagium and forbidden from practicing anything but the most basic exempt magic. Years of training—their entire sacrificed youth and career to date—were wiped away and rendered meaningless.

*If investigations into this asshole's death are ongoing, whatever's in his mouth could be the key to exonerating an officer practicing self-defense. It might even prove that the stiff is in fact, a malefactor.* Aviada considered the corpse for a long moment. With one final sigh, she used her wyrd to activate the massage animus in her license, and got to work.

Prying the mouth open was even more onerous than usual. She wasn't sure if it was her nerves, or if the body was actually worse than most stiffs, but the jaw may as well have been wired shut already. She had broken his jaw, and felt the mouth ready to give way. She silently braced for the rotted breath trapped inside.

But when the mouth opened, the air that escaped was strangely earthy.

Aviada got a small flashlight and peered inside. *Nothing lodged in the throat. Teeth look normal... no. Wait.* He had an average amount of dental work done, a few assorted fillings, but one of his back molars was either crowned, or replaced with a silver implant. She prodded it with her index finger and felt an even sharper shock of power than when she'd punched it.

Again, she paused, weighing her options. At this point, she was legally required to turn the body over to the Keeping Force and accept her fate. *But whatever's in there may help me come up with a better excuse.*

"In for a penny."

She got a set of pliers, often used for wirework in extensively damaged bodies, reached into the mouth, and yanked the silver tooth out.

It was perfect. Impossibly unblemished and gleaming with a mirror sheen. Completely smooth... save for the face of the tooth. There was a tiny impression. An emblem.

Aviada squinted. It was an emblem. A wreath of briars. The symbol of the Autumn Court of Fae. Rothem had told her such tokens signified an allegiance or service-debt to

the fae. They could also bestow powers that allowed the bearer to use certain kinds of non-exempt magic.

She tossed the pliers into the wash basin and clenched her fist around the tooth.  
“Fuck everything.”

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It was about quarter after eight when she worked up the courage to call Kaydin. *Poor guy is probably trying to enjoy his dinner and here I am, dropping an atomic bomb of shit into his lap.* A crackled ring escaped the phone. Then another. Desperation wrestled with incipient relief. *This was a bad idea anyway. Probably best if I don't get him involv—*

“Avi?”

*Shit.* Hearing his voice was harder than she had expected.

“Hi Kay,” Aviada said. “I’m so sorry to bother you.”

“No! No trouble. Always good to hear from you. Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. Well. Actually, no. Everything’s completely fucked.”

“Are you safe?”

*Ever the Keeper.*

“I’m fine. I think. Do you know anybody in Arroyo’s department? Somebody you trust? I was working on an alleged malefactor and... the coroner missed something. Something big.”

“Okay. Start from the beginning.”

Aviada haltingly recounted her story, including her flashbacks. She hoped it would help justify her behavior, or at least help him understand, but she also expected him to interrupt, call her crazy, or stupid, or some other form of well-deserved abuse. Aside from a couple heavy sighs, he waited in patient silence.

“So yeah. That’s where I am,” she finished.

“Listen carefully,” Kaydin said in a soothing voice. “I need you to put the tooth in a secure container. Something you can lock, if possible. Then lock the lab, and go wait for me in another part of the parlor.”

“Alright. Is it dangerous?” Aviada asked.

“It might not be by itself, but it definitely isn’t safe. Those trinkets are powerful enough that the fae who bestowed it may come back to claim it. And believe me: you do not want to run into the sort of fae who deal in teeth.”

Aviada’s eyes bugged. *Oh shit. I didn’t even think...*

Roth had told her about tooth fairies before. They were a particular stripe of fae royal who wore innumerable human teeth as armor, or directly implanted them into their flesh—accounts varied. Either way, they were powerful, predatory, and associated with the sort of Storybook Tales that didn’t have happy endings.

Aviada reopened the anima safe and locked the tooth inside. Then she left the lab and locked it behind her. She put her phone back to her ear, suddenly acutely aware of her vulnerability.

"My life is over," she said. "When Mor finds out, I'm definitely going to be fired, and then I'm probably gonna get sued. Assuming the Force doesn't arrest me first for tampering with magical evidence."

"I will do everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen," he said firmly, and then added:

"The Force watches out for its own."

"I'm not a Keeper, Kay. I'm not even amagia," Aviada said, snickering.

"Roth was, though. The job took him from you, and we don't forget our debts. Try to stay calm while I make some calls. I'll head over to you as soon as I can."

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Aviada paced the parlor's entrance while she waited. *I think I'd prefer to be gutted by a tooth fairy than have to explain this to Mor.* This was her second job. Her first career job, fresh out of college. Mortuaries were generally family businesses, and she knew Mor assumed a big risk taking her on, even if she had more qualifications than were strictly necessary.

To her credit, she had been a model employee. Prompt. Low maintenance. Loyal. She had managed to dress up malefactors before without breaking their damn jaws. *But this is the first I've handled since Roth died.* While, mental instability ran deep in her family, and self-destructive urges had cut deep grooves in her life, she had never snapped like this before.

*So why? Why now?*

It took Kaydin twenty minutes to get there.

He was broad shouldered, with a buzzed head and an ear to chin beard. He actually looked a bit like the standard, fictionalized depiction of Arch Magus Homer. And seeing his doubly familiar face was a tremendous comfort.

"Thank you so much for coming," Aviada said, squeezing him.

"Of course. We're gonna get you out of this."

"How?" She asked, and realized with dismay that her voice had cracked.

"I know Arroyo's Chief of Administrative Operations and told her what's going on. She's sending over two ventures, and their Deputy Chief of Forensics, Sola Harlowe. You're going to give Harlowe the rundown, same as you did with me. Don't leave anything out."

Aviada swallowed and nodded. Telling somebody she beat the shit out of a dead body was embarrassing enough the first time around, but she trusted Kaydin.

"Technically, protocol dictates that we contact the parlor owner first. But we're going to get that body out of here and back in our morgue as soon as possible. Unfortunately, the officers performing the transport are notoriously clumsy. It seems likely that the body might sustain some additional post mortem trauma in transit. And since that didn't happen on your watch, it isn't your problem."

Aviada threw her arms around Kaydin again, nearly melting with relief.

"Thank you, Kay," she said. "Oh god, thank you so much. You're saving my life." He laughed as he hugged her back and patted her shoulder.

“Consider it a favor returned. If that tooth does what we think, you just saved somebody yourself. Arroyo’s detective is still under investigation for the slaying. He claimed the boy attacked him with non-exempt telekinesis. But the problem with telekinesis is—”

“It leaves no physical trace. Impossible to prove or disprove,” Aviada finished. Kaydin nodded.

“The detective’s partners both vouched for him, and there were other confirmed malefactors present, but this kid’s licenses weren’t cracked, so there was no plausible way for him to use combat magic. It sounded like a textbook cover-up.”

“I’m happy to help. I would have done it even if it meant my job.”

“I know,” Kaydin smiled. “Roth always said you never let common sense get in the way of doing the right thing.”

Aviada smiled. *Roth was delusional. Especially when it came to me.*

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Sola Harlowe, was a small, brusque woman with grizzled gray hair who barely stood as tall as Aviada’s breasts. She had a powerful wyrd though, and the sort of presence that made Aviada feel like she was talking to her mother, or a stern teacher.

“You’re real a piece of work, honey,” Harlowe said when Aviada had finished. “But you also covered our asses tonight, and we are going to return the favor.” She looked at the trio of Keepers who stood near the lab’s entrance, then nodded at the corpse.

“Gentlemen, if you’d please.”

Aviada emanated her sincerest gratitude and barely managed to avoid blubbing as she thanked the diminutive woman. Harlowe waved away her thanks.

“Let me see this tooth,” she said.

Aviada led her over to the anima safe. But as she stooped to unlock it, a familiar voice bellowed from the lab’s doorway.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Morret Williams, funeral director and proprietor of Glendale Respite Services, stood in the doorway, red-faced and out of breath. Everybody else froze. He turned to Aviada, his baffled expression demanding an explanation.

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Turns out Mor had gone out for dinner that night, and he was passing the parlor on his way home when he saw the Keeping Force cruisers parked outside. He almost never ate out. Any other night, Aviada would be free and clear.

*Fucked by freak coincidence. Or karma, maybe.*

“We shouldn’t do this,” he said simply. “That kid may have been a malefactor, but his mother trusted us to take care of his body and we betrayed that trust. *You* betrayed that trust.” He paused a long moment, letting the weight of his words crush Aviada before continuing: “I can’t afford a lawsuit. Not with Karra going to college in the fall. So, God



have mercy, we're going along with their plan. But..." he shook his head. "You're through, Avi. This isn't something I can overlook."

Aviada nodded, sniffing. *Justice served.* He teared up too, removing his spectacles and pinching the bridge of his nose.

"Look, I feel bad. I really do. I know you've gone through more than anybody should—"

"I understand, Mor. I'll clean my stuff out tonight."

The funeral director looked like he was going to continue, but nodded sadly.

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Kaydin invited Aviada out for coffee that weekend. He said he wanted to catch up, though she suspected that he was trying to apologize, or check in on her. *And maybe I need checking in on. I beat the shit out of a stiff because I couldn't hold my goddamn temper, and it cost me my job. I probably meet the criteria for a certifiable lunatic.*

She arrived at the small downtown café a half hour early, ordered a black coffee and lit a cigarette. It was probably illegal. You couldn't smoke anywhere anymore, but coffee and smoke were a combination too appealing to pass up. If somebody asked her to put it out nicely, she'd apologize and stub it without a second thought. If somebody ordered her to stop, or did something passive aggressive, she'd still comply, but she'd probably try to figure out how to be a bitch about it first.

Kaydin showed up five minutes later, looking surprised and embarrassed.

"Sorry," He said, completely unnecessarily. "Hope I haven't kept you waiting,"

"I came here early to wait," Aviada said. "I don't have a lot going on these days."

He excused himself to grab a drink from inside, then joined her out on the patio.

"Smoke bother you?" She asked.

"I actually miss it. Gives me an excuse to reminisce."

"Started when I was fourteen. Never had the discipline to quit," Aviada said.

Kay nodded.

"I picked it up in my last year of the athenaeum. Forced myself to stop when I lost my breath chasing a suspect. Roth gave me no end of shit about it."

"Same," Aviada said, rolling her eyes. "But he indulged me and I grateful."

They caught up from there. Kaydin said that he and Cenia had cycled through three new partners since losing Roth, and none of them managed to stick. Aviada found herself at a loss for meaningful life updates, and settled for describing the shows she watched to waste her lonely nights. Mentioned that she had taken up sketching, though really, it had been two weeks since she touched a pencil.

*Is my life really that empty? Did grief stunt me completely?* She steered the conversation back toward him, asking about his family. He returned the question after some perfunctory responses. No wife. No kids. No girlfriend worth mentioning, apparently. Neither of them had anything to say on that front.

The whole thing could have been tedious so easily. But it was actually nice. Refreshing. For at least a few minutes, somebody else gave a damn about her. Aviada liked being alone. She relished silence, despised small talk. But it had been ages since she had an

actual conversation about something other than work. She expected to excuse herself quickly, but three cigarettes later, with long pauses between, she didn't want the chat to end.

*Christ, I'm lonely.*

"I still feel bad about what happened the other night," Kaydin said. "Is there anything I can do? Anything you need?"

"I could use a good fuck," Aviada said lightly, "But somehow I don't think I'm your type."

Kaydin blushed bright red, and immediately tripped over his tongue looking for a reply. She gave him a truly wicked smirk.

Aviada knew she was pretty and while she tried very hard not to make it a pillar of her personality, women who ignored their beauty entirely or feigned modesty offended her. *I have enough reasons to hate myself already. Need to relish what god gave me.*

"I wouldn't have guessed I'm yours," Kadyin managed at last.

She pointedly looked him over, now re-considering her own offer in earnest. He was about ten years her senior, a little shorter than she'd prefer, and the shaved head didn't do much for her, but like all Keepers, he was mostly corded muscle. She imagined he would be overly timid at first, or gentle to the point of treating her like glass. But the Athenaeum taught Keepers how to use every ounce of their body and wyrd, which went a long way in the sack, and given his reaction, she could tell that the thought had crossed his mind before. Perhaps when Roth was still alive, even.

*How scandalous.*

Roth would have been devastated in life, but she suspected his ghost could see the sad humor in it. *And it's your problem if you can't. I'm the one who's stuck here.* Aviada smiled and reclined slightly, in what was hopefully an alluring, come-hither sort of way.

"These days I'm pretty open minded. Not a lot of people lining up for the Keeper's widow."

She could tell he was seriously considering the offer. Sorely tempted. Hungry, even. *But now he's looking for a nice way to say "no." That's what I thought. I'm way too weird for a genuinely nice guy.* She laughed and backed off.

"No pressure. But my door's open if you change your mind," she said, and then to change topics, added: "What I really need is a new job. Or maybe a scholarship to learn a new trade."

Kaydin seized on the new topic like it was a lifeline.

"You looking to go back to school?"

"Not really," Aviada said, sighing. "I barely managed college. But funeral homes usually don't hire morticians who beat the shit out of their clients. That kinda thing tends to come up when people go looking for references."

"I thought your boss was keeping the... 'circumstances' quiet," Kaydin said.

"He is. And I should be fine if I move out of LA county. But word of the mishandled evidence is making local headlines and people are gonna talk. The grim business is a pretty small pond."

Kaydin folded his lip and bobbed his head.

"I'm fine. Really," Aviada assured him. "Thanks to you, I don't have to worry about the Cartridge family suing me for all I'm worth. Between Roth's pension and life insurance policy, I could probably retire for a decade before needing to work again."

Kaydin nodded again. He sipped on his coffee in the lull, while Aviada continued to inch her way toward cancer, one drag at a time.

"What about the Force?" he asked abruptly.

"What about it?"

"Your little discovery cost Arroyo's coroner his job too. Now they need a new one."

"A mortician isn't the same thing as a coroner, Kay," Aviada laughed.

"Rothem told me you went to university to be a medical examiner. If you supplement that with a certification, you should have all the asfalis knowledge you need, right?"

"Sure, but what about the magical knowledge? Aren't Amagia trained for like fifteen years? From age seven?"

"Sixteen to seventeen, usually. But there aren't enough us to go around for that reason. Word is Arroyo's department already has an inurbanus girl working as their sketch artist."

Aviada laughed again.

"What? How can she work for wizards if she can't even emanate?"

"Don't need a wyrd to draw well, I guess. And from what I understand, the spells our coroners use are exempt with a class two scientific license. You don't even need a doctorate, let alone an Amagium license."

"Doubt I made a very good first impression on Arroyo's Deputy Chief."

"Maybe not. But from where I was standing, she seemed kind of amused. And extremely grateful. You proved you have sharper senses than the last guy she had. Even when your worse nature gets the better of you."

*That is the sweetest way to call somebody a crazy bitch I have ever heard.*

"I wonder what Roth would say," Aviada mused.

"He'd probably try to talk you out of it. Time and again, he told me and Cen that he wanted to rescue you from work. Always said he wanted to make captain so you could retire and live a life of ease and plenty."

Aviada snorted.

"Roth did always think playing dress up with dead people was bad for my sunny disposition. But he wanted to make captain for himself."

"Probably," Kaydin admitted.

The final long pause arrived. Aviada stubbed out her cigarette and barely managed to finish her coffee before Kaydin stood and stretched.

"Well, I should get going. Got to go feed my dog. But you should throw your hat in the ring. What's the worst that could happen?"

Aviada nodded and then smiled.

"I'll think about it."

They threw away their trash, shuffled out of the cafe, and said their goodbyes with a hopelessly chaste hug. She watched him go, wondering halfheartedly if she should have

pushed him harder. But her mind was already elsewhere, intrigued by hitherto invisible possibilities. Aviada lit another cigarette.

*What's the worst that could happen?* She smirked at herself.

*What indeed?*