

EPISODE 3: "HALFIES"

Hace Matthews. Venday. Virgo 2344 AA. 2:47 PM. Arroyo.

[This is another episode I wrote in one go, so not too many comments to share this time around. Like Episode 1 and 2, it really does feel like half a story, but I think Episode 4 stands by itself well enough, so this is the only odd man out so to speak. That said, the first meeting between Hace and Cyphira is crucial to the story.]

"One-fifteen!"

Hace's eyes lit up. *One-fifteen. That's me! Have I been dismissed? Did I make it in? Did I earn a scholarship?* The questions came so fast they clogged his brain, nearly keeping him from answering. Or maybe he was still recovering from the tests.

[I tried to be more conscious of upfront characterization in this third episode. Like Sev, I have a very good idea of who Hace is, though I am used to writing him as a young adult and not a precocious tweenager.]

Just before the amagia could repeat herself, his hand shot up, his wyrd flared to life, and he shouted:

"Here!"

His voice cracked, and even he could feel the desperation in his emanation. A few of the others who were lined up giggled and snickered, but he barely registered it. *Please. If any higher power can hear this: I'll do anything if you can get me a scholarship.*

The stern-looking amagia nodded at Hace and gestured toward one of the growing clusters of kids in the cavernous assembly hall. Hace bobbed his head and jogged toward the specified group, which was the smallest in the room. Less than twenty. A few of the other hopefuls were murmuring amongst themselves, though most of them looked as nervous as him. Some were visibly praying, eyes shut, hands pressed together. **A cute blonde girl was tracing a pattern in the palm of her hand, muttering some sort of mantra to try and calm herself down.**

[Yes, this is a reference to the Japanese habit of drawing kanji in the palm of your hand to calm down. So it is basically a very oblique reference to an anime trope. Since languages in the world of Anno Amagium incorporates gestures, I felt okay hijacking it.]

Hace felt lightheaded again. He was thirsty, probably hungry, and very tired. Assessments were a weeklong gauntlet, measuring everything from his academic and physical prowess to his affinity for various forms of magic. And the last two days were the most brutal of all. They gauged his wyrd's raw power, having him perform sorcery of increasing difficulty. The rule was,

you could take a break whenever you wanted. As many breaks as you wanted. But the more magic you could perform in a stretch, the better you looked. And if you screwed up, and entered exus, you were done for the day.

He had come close, several times. Arcane symbols clouded his vision, blood trickled from his nose, the hair on his arms seemed to crackle with electricity, and strange, half audible voices begged him to draw deeper. And it was so tempting to embrace that treacherously euphoric, magical berserker state. To surrender his judgment to the whims of magic itself.

Hace was sure the proctor would warn him, or tell him to hold back. But he stood at the opposite end of the room, monitoring Hace and the other two hopefuls as they lifted weights and tried to tie elaborate knots with sorcery. So Hace turned it into a game of chicken. *How close can I come to the edge?*

“Hey,” an airy voice whispered, and another wyrd prodded his own.

It was another girl with long, emerald green hair, mostly tied back in a ponytail. She was also quite pretty. But honestly, most girls looked pretty to Hace these days. Despite his nerves, he stole a second glance at her. She was smiling, golden eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“Are you a halfie too?” she asked.

[Cyphira is a character I was less well-acquainted with than my main trio (Sev, Hace, and Lin), but my betas told me she kind of steals the show in this episode, which, frankly speaking, is fine. Again, it's so satisfying when characters start acting of their own accord.]

There's a lot of talk online of plotting vs. pantsing (a phrase I kinda hate), or gardening vs. architecture. I am definitely an architect, but I also try to give my characters a load of leeway. If I get the strong feeling that they would do something inconvenient for my plot, I rework my plot rather than the characters themselves.

As much as I love world building, characters really have to come first. Without characters, your story feels dry and dead, no matter how ingenious and meticulous your universe is.]

If she was nervous, there was no hint of it in her wyrd. Her emanations were cool and consistent. *She's confidant. But she's also rude.*

“That's how you say hello? Ask people if they're 'halfies?’” Hace asked.

The girl smirked and shrugged.

“I said 'hey' first,” she whispered. “And It's better than calling somebody a scatch, right?”

Hace's jaw dropped at the slur.

"You can't just... say that!" he hissed back.

"I mean. It's not a lie," the girl insisted. "And if somebody else can call me one, I figure I can call myself whatever I want."

Hace had no reply. But if she started spouting hate speech at 'hello,' she was probably trouble. Normally, trouble intrigued him. *But I can't afford that today. If I screw this up, I have to wait another year to try again, and I can't waste that much time. Every year counts. Everything depends on today.* He turned back to face the front of the room.

"Summer Court, right?" the girl asked.

He bristled. *How can she tell just from looking at me? Or did she get it from my wyrd?*

Many half-fae had obvious physical abnormalities that telegraphed their heritage. Anything from unnatural hair and eye color to patches of scales, feathers, plant matter, or fur. Some poor bastards had horns. Hace was fortunate, however, in that he could pass for a full human. *Usually, anyway.* The only hint at his heritage were his eyes, which were an unnaturally bright and light shade of blue, and the tops of his ears were slightly pointed, though most people didn't notice unless they were looking for it.

She continued: "I'm from Winter. My mom's Aos Sidhe. A Gale Elf."

Fae royalty then. Like me. He scowled.

"Good for you," he said tersely, hoping she'd get the message.

"Don't be like that. We should stick together, especially in here."

"We don't even know if we got in," Hace said, unable to help himself.

The girl snickered.

"I'll bet you anything we're in the scholarship group."

"How could you possibly know that?"

"I'm an akraasiac. I can pass into the Faed at will. You know how rare that is, right?"

Hace looked at the girl full in the face again, shaken. About one in every ten million people had akrasia. It was more common among half-fae, but still vanishingly rare. And up until now, Hace had assumed that he was the only one in the city of Arroyo.

“Me too,” Hace said, shaken. She was the first other akraasiac he had ever met.

The girl’s eyes widened.

“You aren’t lying.”

Half-fae couldn’t speak intentional falsehoods without experiencing excruciating pain. Simply attempting it was like trying to break your own arm by manually bending it against its joint. Hace only managed it once in his life and it gave him a **crippling migraine for three days.**

[Worth noting, as Half-Fae get older, their prohibition on lying becomes slightly less excruciating. But it’s still not something that comes easy to half-fae.]

“My name is Cyphira. Cyphira Quinn.”

“Hace Matthews.”

“Well, Hace. There is no way in hell the Amagium would sleep on two akraasiacs. We’re in. And I doubt we’ll have to pay a cent in tuition.”

Hace wanted to believe her. Desperately. His mother’s mind was falling apart. The medithurge estimated that she would ‘lose herself’ in seven to fifteen years without ‘drastic interventional treatment.’ There were already entire days when she was somewhere else. Or somebody else.

“Do you know when we find out?”

“No clue, but I bet they have to finish thinning the herd first.”

Hace looked back at the larger pool of candidates. He had heard there were over twelve hundred kids who had applied. Twelve at the youngest, all the way up to seventeen. Only a handful of older kids had been called so far, which was another sign that Cyphira was right. Repeat candidates were rarely accepted. Those who managed to make the cut typically had to pay unimaginable tuition fees.

“You’re twelve too?” Hace guessed.

Cyphira nodded and smiled, pleased that he was finally willing to chat.

“Like I said, they wouldn’t sleep on akraasiacs. Why do you think they make us register with them?”

“Because we’re a danger to ourselves and others?” Hace asked.

“You’re not wrong.” Cyphira admitted, laughing. “But we’re also useful.”

A small Asian girl with her hair pulled into an extremely tight bun—also very pretty—turned to face Cyphira, and pulled a finger to her lips, scowling. Cyphira gestured an overwrought apology. For some reason, the display helped Hace relax. *That chick's strung even tighter than me.* While bugging a stranger and spewing slurs was impolite, telling a pair of strangers to shut up was even ruder in Hace's opinion. *We aren't even being that loud!*

[The highlighted section above seemed like a suitable first impression for Lin to leave on readers, even though we don't really meet up with her 'til Episode 5.]

The more ligatures you can form between episodes, the more cohesive the world feels, generally speaking. You don't want everybody knowing everybody, as that can make the world small, but when my characters are naturally in the same place at the same time, I make a note of mentioning what they are doing.]

"So, are you from Arroyo?" Hace asked Cyphira, raising his voice a bit just to screw with the other girl.

Cyphira smiled and shook her head.

"I'm not from anywhere really. My latest foster family just moved to Sunland though, and this is the only Athenaeum in Los Angeles County."

The amagia in front of the individual groups had all stopped calling names. The woman in charge, some sort of dean, stepped to the podium on the assembly hall stage and addressed the room:

"The Amagium would like to extend it's commendations and gratitude to all of our candidates. If your number has not been called, you are dismissed for today. Please note, that does not necessarily mean you have been denied entry to the Athenaeum. You will receive a letter stating your official enrollment status in the next few days. Should you be denied entry, we encourage you to return for next year's assessment..."

Hace's eyes widened. *I'm in. I'm in! Holy shit, I did it! But did I get a scholarship?*

He read the expressions of the rejected candidates which ranged from disbelief, to outrage, to sadness. Some, especially the older ones in the crowd, started sobbing. A few kids made their way to the front of the room, apparently trying to argue their case. Hace's heart ached for them. The Athenaeum rarely accepted anybody past age fifteen. It was simply too late to start training your wyrd to use non-exempt magic.

Once the uncalled crowd had trickled out of the room, the same Amagia addressed the five remaining groups. It looked like there were just over two hundred kids between them, and Hace was still in the smallest group, which had topped out at about twenty people.

“On behalf of the Amagium, it is my sincere pleasure to offer you enrollment into Arroyo’s Athenaeum. Congratulations and welcome to you all.”

Cyphira nudged him with her elbow, grinning.

“Told ya.”

After a second’s pause, a cheer erupted. Triumphant yells, fists in the air, and smiles of relief all around. Even the uptight girl joined in. But Hace’s expression remained tense. *It’s all for nothing if I didn’t get a scholarship.* The amagia allowed herself a smile, and waited a few seconds before urging the crowd to quiet down.

“Now, I know you are excited, but I’m afraid there’s more waiting ahead of you. Groups B, C, D, and E will follow their instructors to lecture halls where you will be introduced to your mentors. Group A will wait here.”

The younger woman proctoring their group—an eighth-year aspirant, judging by the octagon on the shoulders of her light blue robes—waited until the other groups had vacated the assembly hall. Then she addressed the kids with a warm smile.

“The illustrious Group A. You are the cream of the crop. Due to your exceptional assessment scores, we shall be offering all of you full scholarships. And those of you in need of greater financial assistance will receive stipends as well.

Yes! I did it! I actually did it! Cyphira nudged him with her elbow and asked:

“What discipline are you going for?”

“I’m going to be a Keeper,” Hace said, without hesitation.

Again, Cyphira gave Hace a grin of approval, nodded, and offered him her fist. He grinned back and bumped it.

“The bad guys won’t know what hit ‘em,” she said brightly.

[A beta reader called this line out as being discordant with the rest of Cyphira’s voice. While I’m kind of fond of it, I think the fist bump adequately conveys the same sentiment. And if you can afford to cut something without losing the same themes and emotional impact behind a scene, it’s generally best to trim it.]

The proctor continued:

“Provided your parents are amenable, you will start your matriculation in two weeks.”

Hace heart stumbled. *What if mom does something weird? Will they retract my acceptance? Sera will be with her, but...* She couldn't remember where they were going that morning. Every other morning that week, she was excited. Not because she expected him to rescue her, but because she knew Hace loved magic. And that he was determined to protect people. *Please, mom. Hold it together. Just a little bit longer.*

Mentors started to trickle into the room. Most of them were middle-aged amagia in a rainbow of robes tailored to different magical disciplines. A sour-faced man in the navy robes of a leximancer was first. He stepped forward and barked:

"Hayes! Pensey Hayes."

The nervous-looking blonde girl from earlier flinched, and raised her hand timidly.

"Come on, then," he said, and started walking away without waiting to see if she had the nerve to follow him.

Next, a white robed medithurge collected four kids; a scrawny Black boy, two girls who looked like sisters, and a chubby brown-haired boy.

Then the Keeper arrived. A wolfish, impossibly cool-looking man dressed in the amagium's black, high collared peacekeeping uniform. He had salt and pepper hair, and a sharply trimmed beard that matched his uniform perfectly. *Oh my god, is it him? He looks like he's seen a lot of action.* Hace exchanged a glance with Cyphira, who wiggled her eyebrows.

The Keeper called five other kids and left.

Hace felt gutted. A mentor didn't have to share the same discipline as their protégé, but it was the most common state of affairs. *Does that mean they want us in some other discipline? I'm a natural fighter though! I can do elemental sorcery and glamours without anima! Perfect for going undercover. So why did he leave us? What's left? Archivism?*

The only three kids left were Hace, Cyphira, and the high-strung Asian girl who stared in open-mouthed disbelief. As the Keeper led his proteges away, she strode up to the proctor in a huff.

"There must be some mistake. I should be in the Keeping group."

The proctor looked both amused and taken aback, but before she could correct the girl, a gentle voice ventured:

"Alinore Valmont?"

The Asian girl whirled around to find a somewhat portly man in the hunter green robes of an Arcanist.

“Yes?” the girl said stiffly.

“My name is Lewin Carroll. I requested you as my protégé.”

Arcanism entailed deep magical theory and research. It was about as far away from the Keeping Force as you could get. Cyphira and Hace could practically hear the splash as the girl’s heart fell into her stomach. He felt for her, even if she had been annoying.

“Oh,” she said, stunned. “Yes, sir.”

The fatherly man gave her an apologetic smile, and led her out of the room.

After an awkward pause, the proctor looked at Hace and Cyphira and asked if they needed anything. Bathroom break? Food? Water? But the excitement of making it into the Athenaeum had banished Hace’s appetite. So they made small talk, until Cyphira finally asked.

“Do you know who our mentor is supposed to be?”

The proctor checked her list.

“Looks like it’s Master Fera Fitzgerald. Says she’s a Former Keeper.”

Smiles blossomed on Hace and Cyphira’s faces.

But after twenty minutes, there was still no sign of Master Fitzgerald. The proctor checked her phone against the clock that hung over the stage and frowned.

“I’m going to go see if I can find her. You two... sit tight, I guess. If she shows up, just go ahead and go with her. I’ll be back soon.”

They nodded dutifully, still high on relief. *This is perfect. I’m in. I have a scholarship. I’m studying under a Keeper. God, I hope I’m not dreaming. Please don’t be dreaming. I need this. My mom needs this.* Cyphira had fallen silent, opting to stroll around the assembly hall and study the opulent craftsman architecture.

Glee gave way to nerves again when five more minutes passed. And after another ten minutes, Cyphira shook her head.

“This is bullshit.”

“Yeah,” Hace agreed.

"I'm gonna go see if I can find her."

[This is a line that does a lot to characterize Cyphira, in my opinion, and it was a line I wrote more or less automatically; which is to say, the character fed me the line, rather than the other way around.]

"What? But, the proctor..."

"Apparently forgot we exist. Look, Master Fitzgerald has to have an office, right? All we got to do is find it and wait for her there."

"But what if she comes while we're looking for her?"

"Look, you can stay here. Might be better. At least one of us will find her that way."

Hace considered the situation. He was bored. Like, powerfully, excruciatingly bored. He was also nervous and excited, which made the boredom about a billion times worse. He would rather go looking for Fitzgerald and have Cyphira wait, but that was hardly fair seeing how it was her idea. Then a thought struck him:

"If we go together, we're less likely to get in trouble."

Cyphira looked him up and down as if the suggestion made her reappraise him.

[And here is where we get a better feel for Hace. At 12, he isn't as confident as Cy, but he isn't a coward and he hates appearing as such. So Cyphira is kind of a force multiplier for Hace. She brings out the best and worst of him simultaneously.]

"I dunno about that," she said. Something about her tone made his cheeks glow.

Maybe I can afford a bit of trouble today. After all: I'm in. And she's right. The Amagium wouldn't sleep on two akraasiacs.

He grinned, and replied:

"One way to find out."