

EPISODE 4: THE NATURE OF MAGIC

Hace Matthews. Venday. Virgo 16th, 2344 AA. 3:17 PM. Arroyo.

[This was an important passage for me that appeared as a flashback in the original Amagia book, but the first time I wrote it, it didn't resonate with a lot of my betas.

Rather than scrapping it, I reworked it pretty drastically. Originally, Hace was younger. A little too young, frankly, for this situation to be plausible. And originally, the conversation only featured him and Fitz.

Cyphira was the missing ingredient that makes it all click, in my opinion, and betas seem to agree. The lesson here? If you have a scene you love, don't throw it away. Save it, futz with it, keep reworking it until you get the results you want.]

"We're looking for Master Fitzgerald," Cyphira told the Administratum clerk.

"Are you aspirants?" the man asked, slightly skeptical of their asfalis clothing.

"We've just been admitted," Hace said.

"Oh. Congratulations! Your mentor should be coming to you though..."

"Apparently, she didn't get the memo." Cyphira said.

The clerk seemed confused by the statement, and skeptical as to whether they were following protocol, but noticed his line of students was starting to back up. He quickly typed something into his incanter, scanned the screen, and a puzzled look came over his face.

"This is strange. There's no Master Fitzgerald in the faculty directory."

"Can you check somewhere else?" Cyphira asked.

The clerk clicked through another couple windows, typed again, and then shook his head. Hace licked his lips, suddenly nervous again.

"Try Fera Fitzgerald," he said.

The clerk shrugged and humored him. Then his eyes lit up.

"Ah! Master Fera Fitzgerald. Looks like she doesn't have an officially assigned office... Actually, she's not even on staff. But there is a memo here... Building 49. Conference Room. Meeting at 3PM. But she's the only person scheduled to attend."

Hace's eyes widened in horror as he saw the clock behind the clerk read that it was nearly half past three.

"Where would that be?" He asked, suddenly desperate.

The clerk pulled out a campus map and circled a large building at the far southeast edge of the campus. He handed the map out.

"I think the conference room is on the roof," he said.

"Thank you, kindly," Cyphira said brightly, reaching for the map. Hace bobbed his head in thanks, and fell into step behind her.

They followed the map at a jog until they spied the building they were looking for. It was one of several spires at the cardinal points of the campus, towering over the adjacent buildings, and offering an extraordinary view of the west-central arroyo, and the city's downtown sprawl.

They arrived at the building, which had an extremely steep, switchback staircase leading up its side, completely enclosed in geometric stained glass. It didn't lead all the way to the roof, but appeared to be about five stories tall.

[This building is a pastiche of several tall buildings on the University of California at Irvine campus, which I remember sprinting up to make various assignment deadlines. For some reason, all of my favorite professors had offices on the top floor, or near to it.]

"He said she's at the top right?" Hace asked, putting a hand on Cyphira's shoulder, as if he wanted to look at the map.

"I think so," Cyphira said, also lowering her head to look at it.

Hace broke out in a mad, sorcery-assisted dash toward the staircase, playfully shoving Cyphira back as he took off. Cyphira instantly recognized the challenge.

[Again, it felt like Hace fed me this decision rather than the other way around. Really makes the scene more cheerful, IMO.]

"Oh, you false-start *son of a bitch!*" she shouted.

"Oldest trick in the book!" Hace called back, laughing.

He made it to the top of the enclosed staircase before his muscles gave out on him. Everything was still wrecked from the physical exams earlier in the week. His legs liquified and he face planted on the tile floor. *Ow.*

Cyphira emerged from the stairwell a couple seconds later, huffing and heaving.

“Tell you what...You call that a draw...and I won’t throw you off the roof,” she said between gasps.

“Fair enough,” Hace conceded, still laying in a heap on the landing

Two older aspirants emerged from the door leading to the interior of the building, nearly stumbling across Hace’s body. He shoved himself out of their path, gesturing his apologies. Cyphira started laughing, even though she was still out of breath, and then covered her mouth, trying to keep from vomiting. The aspirants looked between them suspiciously, and descended the staircase shaking their heads.

When Hace could stand, he joined Cyphira, who had slumped over the railing as she struggled to catch her breath.

“Hell of a view,” Hace said, observing the late afternoon sun, sinking toward the skyline.

“Probably means she’s important,” Cyphira said.

When Hace’s muscles started working again, and Cyphira’s lungs were finally under control, they entered the interior of the building. There were classrooms in the central column, and teacher’s offices around the perimeter. They walked the halls until they found a stairwell leading to the roof of the building.

When they arrived, they found a glass-walled, cottage like office. It was completely empty, except for a large wooden desk, and a standard office chair. There were shelves, but they were completely empty. Hace walked up to the door, and noted the conference room was empty, but there was a woman lying on the broad stone railing at the far edge of the roof.

She wore a Keeper’s uniform—which must have been absurdly hot—and had a shock of short, spiked white hair. Hace and Cyphira exchanged a glance, then went to approach her.

“Um, excuse me...” Cyphira ventured.

The woman yawned, and asked languidly:

“What’s your deal?”

“We’re looking for Master Fera Fitzgerald,” Hace answered dutifully.

She sat up at that point, stretching like a cat who had grown bored with napping.

“You found her. And she wants to know what your deal is.”

Hace shot Cyphira a glance. She shrugged and made an expression to the rough effect of 'I have no fucking idea what's going on here.' Hace decided to play things straight:

"We're new aspirants. My name is Hace Matthews and this is Cyphira Quinn. We're both half-fae akraasiacs and—"

"Do you like waiting, Hace Matthews?"

Hace drew his head back, surprised again but now also slightly miffed.

"No. Err, no, Master Fitzgerald," he said.

"Then why did it take you over an hour to get here?"

This time, Cyphira glanced at Hace. He shrugged as she had. Cyphira put on a polite smile, and started gesturing deferentially, with apologetic emanations

"We had no idea we were supposed to come to you. Our proctor said you were running late, and went to go find you and..."

Fitz interrupted her as well.

"When you have an akratic episode, do you wait for somebody to come get you?"

Cyphira made a disgusted noise and Hace frowned, incredulous. *That's an absurd question.* Pocket dimensions were completely random bubbles in the Veil. It was hard enough to follow another person through to the Faed. Hace had no idea how you would even go about finding an akraasiac who was having an involuntary seizure. *Did I get an idiot for a mentor?* Fitz laughed.

"Ha! Those faces you're making? That's the right answer. People can be stupid, kids. When it becomes clear that they aren't going to help you, it's time to help yourself. I hoped you would find me in under an hour. All things considered, you didn't do too bad, but if it took you more than two, I would have passed you off to someone else."

This was another test? He was impatient and scared before. But now he was pissed. And he wasn't alone.

"Maybe you should go ahead and do that," Cyphira said, crossing her arms. "So far you haven't helped us either."

Yeah! You tell her! Hace nodded in agreement and put on a defiant scowl.

Fitz blinked at her and then laughed again, longer and louder than before. Hace's scowl deepened. It seemed like a fair question and he failed to see the humor in it. Cyphira was similarly unamused.

"That's a fair point. And I'm willing to reassign you if that's what you want. But now I think we'll get along famously." She glanced at Hace, then back at Cyphira winking. "Red's a little slower on the uptake, but we'll get him there too."

The fuck do you mean, 'slower on the uptake?' Based on what, exactly? And what the hell is this 'Red' shit? Fitzgerald continued:

"Look, I'm sorry for the trick, but I needed to know if you have independence and initiative. Because I can't teach that. Well, I might be able to, but it would take more time than we have."

Hace held his skeptical expression. He already learned that plenty of people tried to excuse meanness with little bits of niceness at just the right moment. Fitzgerald stopped smiling and put on a new expression. An "I promise to take this seriously," face.

"Let me make it up to you. Ask me anything you want to know about me and I'll answer. Nothing's off limits."

Hace hesitated only a second. Being polite with her got him nowhere. Being brash got results. So he asked the least sensitive question he could conjure on the spot:

"Have you ever killed anybody?"

Fitzgerald nodded.

"I know for a fact I've killed four people, and I carry their names with me to this day. But I've been in some big fights and the details aren't always clear cut in hindsight."

"When did you lose your virginity?" Cyphira asked in blunt speech, unaccented by urdic emanation, or gestures, making the already rude question about as rude as it could possibly be.

Ooh. Good one! Hace looked at Fitzgerald expectantly. She didn't so much as blink.

"Fourteen. Right here, on this very campus." Cyphira looked surprised. Fitzgerald continued, glancing at her fingernails, each tipped with black nail polish. "It sucked. First times usually do, but I didn't know I was gay yet, and that didn't help."

Hace's eyes lit with surprise. He switched gears, searching for other taboos.

"Have you ever been shot?" Hace asked.

Fitzgerald pulled up her uniform jacket to show a nasty scar on her left flank.

“Stabbed?” Cyphira asked, sounding almost hopeful.

Fitzgerald opened her collar and tugged aside her under shirt to reveal a slice of scarred skinned running across her collarbone.

“Actually, that’s technically a cut. I have been stabbed, though. Left bicep. But you’re gonna have to take my word for it. Don’t really feel like stripping at the moment.”

“Please don’t,” Cyphira said, laughing.

Fitzgerald gave her a vaguely offended look, then laughed too.

Hace barely noticed. He was still dwelling on the scars. He spotted another one on her right hand. A burn, it looked like. *Guess I’ve got a lot to look forward to.* But those ugly, pale signatures of old injuries impressed him. They were proof unto themselves. *She’s being honest.*

Even at twelve, Hace knew everybody lied, and it terrified him. While he was shackled to the truth, other kids could say anything they wanted, and he would never know until he got in trouble or they started laughing. Adult lies were even worse. They usually meant well, trying to provide comfort, or at least palatable alternatives to harsh truths. But when their lies fell apart, it always hurt worse.

But this strange-ass woman, this scarred stranger who would be his teacher for the next eleven years, was leveling with him. More importantly, she was accepting his honesty in turn.

The questions gradually became less sensational and more practical. They learned that she was forty-three. No spouse. No siblings. Formerly of San Francisco’s Keeping Force. She had suffered a permanent injury to her wyrd—one that made contract magic unreliable. And that was an unacceptable liability in life-or-death situations.

“...So I decided to teach instead,” she finished.

“Why?” Cyphira asked.

Fitzgerald—who had started reclining again, held up three fingers in sequence:

“More money. Less boredom. And the last, least important reason, is that I get to pick my proteges. I still have to teach general ed. classes, but I only have to take on mentees who interest me personally.”

“Why’d you pick us?” Hace asked.

Fitzgerald smiled like a Cheshire, eyes sparkling. She said conspiratorially:

“Us akrsiacs gotta stick together.”

Hace and Cyphira exchanged another look.

“Really?” Hace asked.

Cyphira was even more excited.

“Does that mean you can train us how to...?”

“That’s the idea.” Fitzgerald swung her legs off the railing and stood. “There aren’t many of us. But it appears Arroyo was particularly blessed. So they shipped me out here from the San Jose Athenaeum. Or, they will, anyway. I said I wanted to meet you before I committed.”

“You’re moving here to train us?” Hace asked.

“I’m charging an absurd relocation fee.” She said, twisting her back. “When you graduate, I’ll be able to afford a small island somewhere. And I’m getting the sense that it’ll be worth it.”

“Thank you,” Hace said.

“Yeah. Uh. Thanks,” Cyphira said.

“So, we’re good?” Fitzgerald asked, putting her hands on her hips.

They both nodded emphatically.

“Okay, then. Now you know the essentials about me, I want to bring things back to my first question: what is your deal? Which is to say: why are you here? Tell me your goals, and I’ll try to help you achieve them.”

“Malefactors killed my dad and step-mom when I was five,” Cyphira said.

Holy shit. Fitzgerald drew her head back, and gestured ‘condolences.’ Hace followed suit.

“You want to avenge them?” Fitzgerald asked, voice neutral.

Cyphira rolled her eyes.

“I’m not stupid. I know that won’t change anything. But if I can stop something like that from happening to somebody else...” she faltered a second, shaking her head and shrugging. “I think that’s something worth doing with your life.”

Fitzgerald nodded silently, then turned to Hace

“How about you, Red?”

Hace went quiet again. He nearly said, *‘I want to save my mom.’* Because it was true. He typically defaulted to fundamental truths, and it was what he wanted more than anything. But it also sounded childish, even to him. And that wasn’t the only thing he wanted from life. That was just his starting line. Instead, he said the deepest thing he could think of, hungry to impress Cyphira, and this exceedingly strange, thrillingly honest woman.

“I want you to teach me the true nature of magic.”

[As an ex-little boy who was hungry to impress everybody, this line feels exactly like the sort of dumb shit I would have said when I was trying to be deep or cool. Which is to say, really lame.]

Both Cyphira and Fitzgerald looked at each other, fighting smiles before bursting with laughter. Hace knit his brow at them. *What? Isn’t that what the Athenaeum is for?*

“What does that even *mean*?” Cyphira asked, literally wiping tears from her eyes.

“Forget it,” Hace said, petulant.

“No, no. That’s, uh, that’s a valid question,” Fitzgerald said. “And an admirable goal. It’s just a bit... *big*, you know? Like, ‘why are we here?’ *big*.”

Cyphira snorted again. Hace flashed her a “fuck you” smile. *And fuck me for asking, I guess.*

“Aw. He’s cute when he pouts,” Fitzgerald said.

“Seriously, just forget it,” Hace said. His face was so red it physically hurt.

“No, listen. Listen,” Fitzgerald said. “Goldy Eyes’ goal? That’s very concrete, okay? Save people. Fight bad guys. Yours is very subjective, which makes it harder in some ways, but easier in others.”

[I was repurposing prior writing and augmenting it with Cyphira’s inclusion, so I was able to write this speech in one go. As I mentioned earlier, she was the missing ingredient, so sliding her into the exchange was easy and the section came naturally.]

Cyphira got herself under control and gestured that she was sorry. Hace looked away. Fitzgerald also gestured an apology, and then asked him to face her. When he complied, her expression was solemn, but gentle. Respectful.

"I can tell you what magic means to me. Right now. The thing is... ultimately, it's an answer you'll need to find for yourself. But like I said, that's a good enough goal for me."

"What does magic mean to you?" Hace asked.

Fitzgerald took a deep breath.

"I think it comes down to three things. First, magic abhors coincidence and adores meaning. Events start chaining together in bizarre ways. The improbable routinely gives rise to the improbable. Little events that would seem unimportant to asfalis folks take on powerful significance for us. Those hidden signs are like wind currents. The more you use magic, the stronger the wind blows, carrying your life in deliberate directions. Magic is *intentional*."

Now Cyphira was rapt, and Fitzgerald started to address her as well:

"That intentionality gives rise to patterns, and those patterns usually come full circle, or are shaped by a strange sort of symmetry. That's the next thing. Magic is ironic. It shows wisemen for fools, brings kings low, and bestows might to the weak. It also has a vicious sense of humor. But those are side effects, really. I think the last thing is the most important."

Fitzgerald's new students hung on every word:

"Magic is the will of change itself. It makes somethings of nothings, defies the Resting Laws, and confounds human logic. Those transgressions are what keep the wheels turning. And for that reason, I think the true nature of magic is violence."

"Like people hurting each other?" Cyphira asked, skeptical.

"That's definitely part of it." Fitzgerald said. "But violence is bigger than people trading literal blows or waging wars."

"So...chaos?" Hace asked.

"Closer. But chaos is random, right? My first two points, magic's intentionality and irony... they aren't random. Even if we can't completely grasp the rules. Magic is more like... upheaval. Disruption. Disorder."

"So... is magic evil?" Cyphira asked, sounding disappointed.

Again, Fitz carefully weighed her response.

"It certainly can be. And that's why we have to be better than the magic we use."

Hace chewed on the statement again, then asked:

“You mean as Amagia? Like, role models?”

Fitzgerald smiled and shook her head.

“As people.”

Cyphira and Hace fell silent, both thoughtful and intrigued. Fitzgerald allowed them to digest her speech, looking out over the campus, as the sun fell toward the western horizon. She smiled, and murmured to herself:

“Yeah. I think this is gonna work out.”