

The first magic class was in session, and I was bored out of my mind.

The full cohort consisted of myself, Adrian, Maxwell, Claudius, Samantha, Talia and a girl named Beatrice. For the absolute avoidance of doubt, Miss Malorie Jennings decided to quickly run through everything I had already studied beforehand. There was a novelty in experiencing lessons in a world where the history, technology and culture was radically different – but in the science, maths and language periods I was learning something new regardless. Miss Jennings was essentially reading from the book again, the same book she had asked us to read in preparation for this very lesson. I was not the only one experiencing fatigue from this repetitious walkthrough. The studious members of the class couldn't hide the boredom on their faces. The non-studious members who hadn't read the book weren't paying attention regardless.

On the teacher's left was a fifth-year student named Felipe Escobarus. He was Talia's older brother and the resemblance was uncanny. They both had the same messy black hair, tanned skin and yellow eyes. He was a character I was totally unfamiliar with, a passing silhouette in the background of a much more interesting tale. Now that I was being personally immersed in the world of Love Revolution all of those individuals would get their time in the sun. He was here to help teach the class and get extra credit towards his graduation, which would occur at the end of his sixth year.

It was a long and painful road, but eventually Miss Jennings slammed the book shut and stepped back to admire the plethora of notes she had written onto the blackboard. A few of us had decided to copy some of them, but only where she had chosen to elaborate on concepts not already explained in the text. She clapped her hands together and tried to clean off the chalk, "Now – before we go any further I was hoping to give you all a practical demonstration. The weather is perfect, and showing you what magic can do will hopefully alight a new passion for the art."

With plans made, she ushered the class down the corridor and out of one of the building's many exits. A specially cordoned yard near the woods at the back of the campus was used for magic training. It was little more than a square with some old archery targets thrown down at the far end. It bore many scars of war from years of use and abuse, with charred grass, broken trees and shattered stones. Each one told its own little story, but there was no time for Miss Jennings to talk us through all of them. Despite this period occurring after hours she was still being held to a tight schedule. We would need to visit the dining hall for one last meal before the day was through.

“I know it looks like this place has been turned into a battlefield before, but you shouldn’t expect a surplus of destructive power at your fingertips without significant time and effort,” Felipe explained. “Still – this is dangerous enough for us to conduct any and all magical testing outside of the academy building. There’s a zero-tolerance policy in place for anyone who breaks this rule. You will run the risk of being expelled, and I needn’t say what will occur if you use those magical abilities on another student.”

Miss Jennings nodded in concurrence, “That’s right. You all have an immense personal responsibility to use these powers with care. They are not a curiosity to trifle with when you find your mind wandering. Even a low-level spell can cause damage to another person.” Adrian had to use what little restraint he had to stop himself from talking back to her, he knew that a misstep would see him expelled from the course post-haste. They weren’t going to take troublemakers along for the ride if they were going to use their newly learned abilities to wreak havoc.

Felipe walked to one of the targets and grabbed a small metal rod that had been embedded into the dirt by its feet. He stabbed the pole through the hay surface and returned to the group, who watched with anticipation of what he was going to do. “This first spell is extremely difficult and requires a conductive point to function properly. Step back and allow me to demonstrate.”

Miss Jennings ensured that everyone was at a safe distance before giving him the go-ahead. He held his left hand out at the target and focused his energy on manipulating the surrounding area. Adrian rolled his eyes and scoffed as nothing happened at first, but he nearly jumped out of his skin when a lightning bolt appeared from his palm and struck the metal pole. The hay immediately caught light as a conductive channel was not connected to the ground. Miss Jennings retrieved a previously unnoticed pale of water and doused it before it could burn the forest down. It was a terrifying and sudden display of power. The class applauded the feat as he took a bow and stepped aside.

“That was an example of a two-point spell,” Jennings stated, “By manipulating the energy in the air, Felipe created a start and end that allowed him to summon forth a bolt of thunder.”

I had to replay her statement in my head to comprehend it. Did she mean to imply that he was capable of shifting the electrons and protons into a specific formation? That was how thunder was formed naturally in the air. Using a conductive point, he could direct that energy and strike at the target.

Adrian was not as impressed as the rest of the group. He crossed his arms and scoffed, “Is that it? I was expecting something more explosive.”

Claudius was quick to shoot back, “He just fired lightning from his hands, that seems rather impressive to me. My heart isn’t going to slow down. It’s pounding like a drum!”

Max agreed, “Too right. My ears are still ringing...”

I’d grown too used to the sounds of gunfire to find the crack of thunder alarming. Adrian’s posturing wasn’t playing well with the rest of the class. Nobody was convinced that the display we had just seen was underwhelming. It was much more powerful than I was expecting. My Father had spent the past few years downplaying just how effective magic could be. In specific contexts such as this, it was very dangerous. In a fight it was unlikely that you could stab someone with a lightning rod though, at that point you may as well finish the job by hand. But nobody ever said that it was useful in combat. The advent of firearms had rendered most forms of combat magic redundant. This kind of electrical manipulation would often be used in industrial processes.

Miss Jennings snapped her fingers, “Now, now. There’ll be plenty of time to discuss matters later. We have to make the most out of this lesson period, as we’ll have few opportunities to work together in person. What you just saw was an advanced spell that we’d expect from a final year student; it requires immense focus and a commitment to knowledge about the natural elements that surround you.”

Felipe nodded, “I remember seeing such a demonstration during my first year. I told myself that I’d never be able to emulate the feat, but here I am some years later – offering that same example to you all. There is still so much more for me to learn, and helping you along the path will enlighten me just as much as it will you.”

“The first practical lesson will be about manipulation. Manipulation is the basis of nearly all practical magics used today. Think of it as a muscle that one must train to strengthen, time and time again. You will use your magical stamina and manipulate something harmless, that being the air that surrounds us.” She pointed her hands towards us, and a sudden gust of wind rustled the frills on my shirt and threatened to upturn some skirts. I clenched the edge of my own and tried to prevent any untimely flashing of the boys. I had enough marriage proposals to worry about already.

“Why air?” Adrian asked with a tone that indicated he thought he was too good for such a thing.

“Air is the best place for a beginner to learn the basics. It’s light, it requires less magical energy to move, and it poses no harm to you or the other students. By using wind currents – we can make the most out of the time we have and the extent to which you can continue to use magic before exhausting yourselves. These basic skills will be the foundation by which you explore other spells in the future.”

Felipe had stern words in contrast, “One cannot expect to become a talented mage without time and effort. If your patience is running thin even now, then might I suggest seeking a better way to occupy your time?”

That open challenge ruffled Adrian’s feathers. He was overly competitive to a fault and wasn’t going to take it lying down. He’d willingly submit himself to something he didn’t enjoy so long as it proved a point to someone he hated. Felipe had marked himself as public enemy number one, and Adrian was going to endure however many boring theory lessons it took to prove him wrong. It was a pattern of behaviour that I had noticed after I first achieved victory over him at a local shooting competition; something that he still hadn’t let go of even after all this time.

“I’m not impatient,” he yelled, “I was just hoping for an explanation, that’s all!”

Miss Jennings ignored his frustration and spoke to the rest of the class by repeating a key passage from the book. “Manipulation is a method, not a spell in itself. What defines a spell is the way that these methods are utilised and combined with the natural elements around us. You must learn to reach out with your hands, and touch these elements not with your nerves, but with your spirit. Can you please line up for me?”

There was a small commotion as everyone jockeyed for the best position. I moved aside and stood at the far end. Jennings directed us through the process of tapping into our innate magical abilities. It boiled down to closing our eyes and wishing really hard, my cynical nature made it hard to take the process seriously. If it were that easy, why did we need a tutor to show us the ropes? Regardless, I successfully ‘felt’ the air around me using what could best be described as an extra sense. It was like touching the edge of a soft, silken blanket – one that moved and swayed through my skin and bones. The shock of it was enough to knock me back out of my trance and into the real world.

“It looks like Lady Maria has already succeeded! Very well done. As you can imagine, holding that state for long enough to use your magic takes some practice. The first few times you’ll come back having your head stuffed full of information.”

Samantha was the next member of the group to squeal as her imaginary fingers strummed along the edge of a passing current. She stepped back and almost fell over, but Claudius stepped in and held her up before she could injure herself. “Woah! Watch out, Sam.”

“S-Sorry!”

“Was it really that scary?” he asked.

“It was weird. It was like I grew an extra pair of hands!” Samantha murmured, unable to offer an accurate description of the otherworldly sensation. The only way to understand it was to experience it. Claudius’ curiosity draws him in and makes him try again. Thirty seconds later he had a similar reaction, crying out with a crack in his voice and almost falling onto his ass. Everyone had a good laugh at his expense, at least until it was their turn to succeed and do the same thing. Felipe offered further guidance to Adrian and his sister, who were both struggling. When everyone had their turn of humiliating themselves with a variety of reactions, Jennings checked her watch and realised that we were five minutes over our allotted time.

“Oh dear, it seems that’s all we have time for today! I’d like all of you to end every day by getting in touch with your magical senses. Simply do what we did here again until you feel comfortable slipping in and out of your trance.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Fantastic! I’ll see you all again at the same time next week, don’t overdo it.”

Everyone started to gravitate towards the entrance to the building as the teachers remained behind to clean up the mess they left, but Adrian was shadowing me with intent. Before I could slip away and enjoy the rest of my evening in solitude, he swept around in front of me and jabbed his finger into my face, “Don’t think that you’ve won just because you did what the teacher wanted before me, Maria. This isn’t a sprint – I’m going to come out the victor at the end. Just you wait.”

“I can barely contain my excitement,” I droned. The others stopped and watched to see what the fight was about. I twisted the knife just to steam him a little. “If you’re as good at magic as you are at shooting, then I won’t have anything to worry about.”

Max grabbed his shoulder, “There’s no need to get aggressive with Maria, Adrian.”

“There is! I hate seeing that smug look on her face, always thinking that she’s so much better than me.”

I stepped closer, “I haven’t seen any evidence to the contrary yet – you red-faced blowhard. The next time you point that scrawny finger in my face, I’ll snap it clean off.” A chill ran through the assembled spectators, and not because of anyone summoning the wind on top of us. It wasn’t doing anything to improve Samantha’s ill impression of me from the days before, but I wasn’t here to make friends. I was trying to do the exact opposite. Adrian wasn’t sure how he felt about me threatening to break his fingers. Was it just a joke? Or was I being serious?

“You... I... who the hell do you think you are?”

“Have a nice evening, Adrian.”

I pushed past him and walked away.

“Yikes,” Maxwell exhaled, “I thought something bad was going to happen there.”

Claudius smirked, “See, I told you that she was a cold-blooded killer. She had those eyes, you know?”

Adrian turned on the duo and spat back, “Oh shut up, both of you! As if a dainty little girl like her could do something like that!”

Samantha held her tongue, but recalled a moment where she had seen Maria without her shirt a few days prior. She was cleaning herself up in the washroom. At first, she thought nothing of it, but as she moved and tensed her muscles she discovered that Maria was hiding a lot beneath that uniform and doll-like façade. Maria may have been short and pretty, but she had the body of a young athlete. There was no doubt in her mind that she could follow through on her threat if Adrian tested her any further. The more Samantha learned about Maria the less she understood. She was studious, polite, frigid, popular but isolated, and engaged in hobbies like shooting. All she did know was that she didn’t like her very much.

“Don’t come crying to me with your hand in cast in a few days,” Claudius snickered, “We warned you.”

“That’s right. It only takes a small amount of leverage to break a finger. I did it when I was a kid,” Max added.

“She’s not going to break any of my bones!” The more Adrian said it, the less convincing it sounded. Dramatic irony demanded that such an occurrence would come true if he kept foreshadowing it. Claudius made a cutting motion by his neck to tell Adrian to keep it quiet.

He wasn't going to heed such sage advice. He huffed and stormed away, leaving the friendlier members of the class with each other for company.

"Ugh, what is his problem?" Talia said.

Claudius was already psychoanalysing him; "He seems like a fragile guy. I don't know how long he's going to last in this academy, to be honest. Maria is rattling him on purpose."

Max nodded, "There's no love lost between those two..."

"You seem to be the only person she's willing to tolerate, Talia."

"She never speaks with me – we just sit next to each other in class so she doesn't have to deal with her fanclub. I painted a huge target on my back by doing that. Those girls are crazy mean when you get between them and Maria. I get why she doesn't want anything to do with them."

"If you're looking for friends, we'll welcome you to the group," Samantha smiled. She liked how selfless Talia was being, even if it was in service of someone she had a rough relationship with. Samantha and Talia weren't alone. Maria didn't care for anyone in her year, and the older students were too busy or aloof to worry about one of their juniors.

Talia was happy to accept, "Sure, when I'm not playing defence for her – I'll come hang out."

Claudius laughed, "Thank you. If Samantha spends too much time around us she might lose all of her girl power. We need another girl to balance things out."

"Girl power?" Samantha echoed.

Max groaned, "It's nothing, Let's go get something to eat before all of the good food is gone."

