

What a damned mess.

No matter how hard I tried, it was almost impossible for me to keep a low profile. For whatever reason I had become something of a local celebrity. A tangled web of rumour and reputation building had created a false impression of me that had been broadcast much further than I had ever expected it to be. Several female students had appointed themselves as my fanclub – further exaggerating my supposed beauty and grace. The years preceding my arrival at the academy were spent studying those things to further my disguise, but the idea that I was somehow better at it than everyone else was ludicrous.

Everywhere I went there were people talking about me, or trying to approach me. I had no less than four different boys propose to me on the spot. What was I expected to say in such a scenario? I stared blankly at them until they lost their nerve and ran away.

Things were finally starting to become more familiar to me. The gilded halls, tall windows and lavish paintings took me back to the days when I happily played every visual novel and dating simulator I could get my hands on. I never thought much of Love Revolution when I finished it – it had now taken on more significance in retrospect by its apparent realisation as a place I could go to.

In terms of visual novel plots, it was rather tame. The primary focus was on the main character, Samantha, being the apple of every boy's eye thanks to her country charm and innocent looks. There were some minor conflicts between the characters as they strived to be the top of their class, and some rumblings about saving the world in the future; something left hanging for a potential sequel.

My role was to be the villain. Her nemesis. A petulant, spoilt child who existed solely to take her opposite position on every issue. The exact reasoning behind Maria's hatred of Samantha was irrelevant. It was an expression of class-based resentment that was more extreme than I would have ever predicted. I was not going to do that. I was not going to be hoisted by my own petard. I was going to keep myself out of her personal space for as long as humanly possible.

I had decided to entertain myself a little and sign up for the magic course. Magic was something that didn't exist in my old world, so I was curious as to what it could be used for. At the very least it would provide an interesting diversion from studying the other subjects like science and maths. It was only when I spotted Samantha sitting in the front row with some of the boys from earlier that I remembered she was also going to try out. In the game,

she was immediately identified as a high-level mage, as was Maria. That made them the perfect foil for each other.

I took a lonesome seat on the other side of the bleachers and sat myself down. I could already hear the other students whispering all kinds of salacious rumours about me. It made my skin break out into goosebumps. I never liked being the centre of attention, but I couldn't avoid it. Maria Walston-Carter had taken on a life of her own without my input. Hitting that boy with a rock didn't help; I was already ruining my past self for taking such a conspicuous course of action.

I had already met several of the characters from the game, including Samantha, Maxwell, Claudius, and Adrian. They were all intended to express a romantic interest in Samantha. Maxwell was the easiest and usually the first route that a player would take so they could learn some of the mechanics. Of course, I already knew Adrian well. He was a regular on the shooting circuit. In the game Adrian wasn't so confrontational with Maria – and that was because the original Maria did not partake in his favourite pastime like I did.

Humbling the kid with my frankly amazing aim was something I took great satisfaction in. He had been one of my most vocal detractors when I went to my first meeting. He had run his mouth for nearly an hour straight, implying that I wasn't strong enough to hold the gun, and that my finger would snap in two before I managed to make the thing fire. He couldn't have been more incorrect. I had already trained my body to an athletic standard that outstripped any other girl my age. I didn't win the contest, but hitting several targets was enough to make him shut his mouth for the first time in years.

It may have lit a competitive fire inside of him. Every time we faced each other, he'd make big boasts about how much he'd been practising since the last time we met. Every time I would humble him in much the same manner, earning accolades and trophies that made him ooze with barely constrained jealousy. Such an issue of skill was his to resolve. But a part of me regretted getting involved with him in the first place, because now I knew that he was going to be an irritating piece of dung for the five years in which we were to attend the academy.

The stuffy old men who had initially claimed shooting was too dangerous for a girl to handle had gone through a similar process of resentment. They'd grown out of it in time – at least under the impression that my inclusion into the sport was an exception rather than a sign of things to come. My Father had also resisted at first, but as soon as he saw how many prizes I was winning while doing it, his prideful nature won out and he became my biggest supporter.

My musings on the interrupted course of events were cut short by the arrival of our magic tutor. She was a pretty looking woman with ginger hair and a beauty mark above her lip. The long dress she wore was covered in frills and ribbons.

“Good evening everyone! My name is Malorie Jennings, and I’m one of the two magic tutors who works here at the royal academy. I’m very happy to see so many students interested in learning the art with us.” Of course, she was completely unaware that the reason for such a large turnout was my presence.

“Before we begin, I’d like to explain the process we’ll undergo here today. There are several different grades of mage registered officially by the Government, which are roughly correlated with their ability. They run from grade one at the low end, to grade five at the highest. Any level at two or above is enough to qualify for the magical elective course that we offer.”

She pointed to the blackboard, “Grade one mages are those born with the natural compatibility to perform magic, though they are not capable of generating enough energy to do so unassisted. They are often referred to as ‘conductors’ for this reason. At grade two, the individual becomes capable of generating enough energy to manipulate the natural laws themselves.”

She moved to the second row on the pyramid, “Practitioners at all levels require a high level of general knowledge. To manipulate the laws, one must understand the laws. Knowing which elements must be manipulated to achieve the desired effect is the basis of all magecraft. Do not trick yourself into believing that your grade defines your final capability. Some of the most brilliant mages in history were only grade two. The power of your magic is directly connected to the efforts you put forth in learning it.”

With that brief explanation done – she moved over to a wheeled cart that stood next to the podium. She pulled away a white blanket and revealed what hid beneath. It was a steel box covered in moving needles, connected to a leather arm strap and small metal plates. It reminded me of a blood pressure machine.

“This is a compatibility tester, based on principles established thousands of years ago. We can use this to grade you quickly and painlessly. All you need to do is slip your arm into this shackle. A small amount of energy will be moved through your body, which we can use to measure your power.”

She demonstrated for us, wrapping the leather cuff around her bicep and tightening it. It reminded me of a blood pressure machine. She flipped a switch and the machine hummed to life. The needle on the left stuttered into motion, eventually coming to a halt beside the number three printed onto the white screen.

“I am a grade three mage, as you can see here. There is no guarantee that you will have magical capability. Regardless – the first step to mastery is attending this session. There is nothing to be ashamed of if you are not at grade two. The march of time is opening many new doors for people without knowledge of magecraft.”

With the preamble done with, it was time for her to start working her way down the list of attendees. She simply picked out individuals from each row of the bleachers, bringing them to the front and using the measuring device on their bodies. It quickly became apparent that the ability to use magic was rare indeed. Several people were eliminated at grade one, leaving the room despondently. She then came to me. The whispers started again as I made my way to the front. I already knew what compatibility score Maria had in the game. As the villainess, she needed to be a cut above everyone else to support her smug personality.

I reluctantly offered my arm to the eccentric woman, who happily wrapped the leather around my arm. She didn't waste any time with theatrics – as there were three dozen more students to get through in short order. The machine roared once again. I turned to face it and watched the dial as it crept higher and higher. I could already hear the other kids getting excited as I broached the fourth-grade mark, and then kept going. I almost rolled my eyes as it hit grade five.

Only the best for Lady Walston-Carter...

Mrs Jennings was gobsmacked; “Well I never! Grade five! Very impressive, Miss Carter.”

There was nothing impressive about it. I bowed to the instructor and headed back to my seat. Some of the more infatuated members of the audience applauded me for my great feat of being born with magic running through my body. To the spectators my expression was unreadable – it wasn't radiating with a smug pride like they were expecting. I picked up my book and went back to reading.

To make a long story short Adrian scraped by with a grade two, which did not make him a happy man. He couldn't storm out because the teacher had more to say once the testing was over. Maxwell passed with a grade three, as did Claudius. An unfamiliar girl also earned a third. The last person to catch my attention was Samantha. I could sense a nervous

excitement coming from her as she slipped her arm into the machine's clutches and waited to see where she lay. Grade four. Some of the dour students who had said unkind words about her were outraged, spreading malicious rumours about the machine being faulty. In their eyes there was no way that a farm girl could be gifted with such a talent.

With the last stragglers cleared out and a full class of six assembled, Mrs Jennings clapped her hands together. "What an amazing class we have this year! I haven't had the privilege of teaching so many in a long, long time. There is just one last thing I'd like to do before letting you go and rest."

She handed out a set of books, entitled 'Introduction to Magical Theory, Vol 1.' I inspected the inside cover briefly, before deciding to take a closer look in my own room later. I didn't like studying with a broiling mass of masculine rage glaring at me from across the way.

"I'd like you all to read the first two chapters of this book. It's the best possible foundation for your ongoing study, and it'll mean that we can jump right into practical lessons when we return. The position of our session on the time table hasn't been confirmed just yet, but you'll be informed when the time comes."

Adrian was going to struggle. He didn't like reading.

"I'm looking forward to seeing you all again. Please do your best!"

And with that, the class was dismissed. Adrian and the stranger were the first out of the door, but I lagged behind for a second to gather my thoughts. But before I could decide what I wanted to do next, Samantha stepped out in front of me on the stairs and started to talk to me.

"Thank you for being so nice earlier. I know it sounds rude, but I wasn't expecting you to treat me so kindly. I was hoping that we could get to know each other better, Maria."

Samantha punctuated her heartfelt appeal with a dazzling smile.

That was too much credit to assign to my actions. My clear disinterest in bullying the fresh-faced farmer had temporarily frozen over the blood frenzy that had started at the behest of a boy named Johnathan Wilkes. I was unfortunately rather familiar with him, as his father was frequently seen skulking around our manor trying to score an arranged marriage. When I had asked where all the bad attitudes about Samantha had come from a few hours before, he was the one who was overwhelmingly pointed to as the culprit. He hadn't even spoken with her yet.

I needed to nip this in the bud before the girl got any ideas in her head. I didn't want to be responsible for dragging someone else down with me when everything went to hell. If this was some kind of divine punishment for my deeds, friends and family would be prime targets for retribution. None of my 'friends' could die if I didn't have any to begin with. All I needed to do was maintain an air of mystique that scared some, and push others away when they started to get too close to me. While I was considering this carefully, the response I went with was significantly less elegant than I had hoped it would be. The words tumbled from my mouth before I could stop them.

"When did I ever give you the impression that we were friends?"

"Huh?"

"I think it would be better for the both of us if you kept your distance."

Samantha's face ran through a complex spectrum of emotions. Betrayal, sadness, anger – before settling on a mournful frown. She turned on her heel and walked back to her seat without any further comment. I chastised myself for rejecting her in such an overly harsh way. That wasn't going to help my reputation any, not unless it was the type of crowd that I didn't want to mix with. There were a lot of students who wanted to put the lower classes in their place; I did not want to become their role model.

Samantha had Maxwell and Claudius already. She didn't need a wet blanket like me. They'd show her the ropes and protect her from the worst of it. I grabbed my things and headed out into the corridor with a frustrated sigh. Still – what I had wanted to go with was something much easier on her feelings. I'd messed it up. I just couldn't argue with the results when it was always my main intention.

As long as she stayed away from me, it was mission accomplished.