

The school term was divided into three thirds of four months, with two-week holidays between each. The newly instituted revolutionary calendar of the Republic was much the same as the traditional one, with slight modifications to terminology to consolidate what had become a complex web of linguistic differences. While it had infamously caused a brawl on the floor of the Republican Parliament – most regular people were not so invested in the debate.

Samantha was well versed in the passing of the seasons. Much of her young life was dictated by the ticking of the clock. Harvest season was always at the forefront of her family's mind, with everything they did revolving around making the most efficient use of their time. When their livelihoods depended on the weather, it was only natural. But now she didn't have to worry herself with such things. The morning wake up call was practically luxurious compared to her usual waking hour of five in the morning.

It was going to be a difficult adjustment. All of her knowledge and experience with tending to animals and crops, and the myriad complexities involved in doing so, were now useless in an academic context. Samantha was a vanguard of the newly developing lower-middle class. A hard-working collection of businessmen and farmers who wanted their children to fulfil long held ambitions. The Royal Academy had recognised the importance of that experience. An effective leader was one who understood their purpose inside and out.

It was with some debate that Samantha earned one of the scholarship spots in the new year. A large portion of the bill for her education would be covered by the academy itself. All of the hard work, studying in the twilight hours of the evening as her mind attempted to shut down, was finally paying off. She was going to make the most out of this opportunity while she had it.

She flopped back onto her new bed and marvelled at the quality of the space she had been given. Her farmhouse home was nothing to complain about, but she was now understanding just how much difference some polish and decoration could really make. The polished skirting boards, plush rug underfoot, and the ornate wooden furniture were enough to make her feel like a fairy tale princess. Her bed was gigantic, not at all concerned with preserving floorspace for siblings or storage. Suddenly the bag of clothes she had brought with her for the weekends seemed much smaller. The wardrobe wasn't even half full.

There was little time to concern herself with that. They had been given just a few minutes to become familiar with their rooms before the next step of the initiation process, from which they would be assigned to their classes. The first year at the academy was intended to allow

the students to explore a wide range of subjects – so there was no need to make a serious commitment to one area of study just yet. Samantha wasn't certain where she would end up. Part of her wanted to get away from the family business and break out into a new field, her brothers were much more enthused about inheriting the farm one day, or at least buying one of their own.

With her luggage unloaded and her key retrieved, Samantha straightened out her hair and returned to the hallway. Other students had started to do the same, lining up by their respective doorways and awaiting the return of the teacher. Samantha's eyes were drawn to Maria once again, who was located just across the hall from her. Samantha had to admire how pretty she was; she was every bit the noble lady she had imagined from reading stories about the city. Her black braids were distinctive, deftly weaving together something cute and sophisticated. Samantha's shoulder length locks were not so cooperative. She had tried in earnest to grow it out once before, but the texture simply wasn't conducive to such intense styling.

The frumpy old teacher returned, her long heels clacking against the marble floor with each step. She scanned the assembled children with a nod of approval; "I see that everyone is already done inspecting their quarters. Please remember to treat them, and your neighbours, with the same respect that you would like to receive in return. Sleeping hours begin at eight in the evening – students who do not observe the curfew and cause a ruckus will be punished appropriately." There was a murmur of uneasy agreement from the rowdier boys.

With that warning dispensed, the teacher turned on her heel and waved to the group to follow behind her. Samantha slid into the line, not paying any particular attention as to where she would end up. Maria slotted it in front of her. Samantha held her tongue as they were led on a long walk back the way they came, across the campus and towards the school wing. The two functions of the compound were harshly separated down the middle. The balance was pushed in favour of the classrooms as only a limited number of students were to be admitted.

The classes themselves would be tightly knit – with numbers no larger than fifteen or so students between each tutor. Oddly, the lecture theatres that had been constructed to handle a much larger figure were left mostly unused as a result. It was within one of those larger rooms that the initiated students were asked to take a seat. An elevated wooden platform allowed everyone to see the chalk board and podium that dominated the front wall. The troublemakers immediately tried to sit at the very back so as to hide their mischief, but the teacher was not going to let that slide.

“Everyone to the front, please. I don’t want to destroy my vocal cords yelling at you.”

Another groan of protest. A gaggle of five returned and slipped into the third row from the front. Samantha sat on the edge of the second, while Maria sat on her right on the opposite side. When the teacher was certain that everyone had settled down, she cleared her throat and started to write some important details onto the board with a piece of white chalk.

“I’d like to extend my own personal welcome to all of you. You are some of the best and brightest young minds that this great country has to offer. I hope that you all understand what an amazing opportunity this is, and that you’ll make every effort to get the most out of it.”

As her hands moved deftly, they slowly revealed the full scope of what she was writing down. It was a list of the different subjects that they would be dabbling in for the next year. Mathematics, language, art, biology, chemistry, physics, music, and magic. They were generalised courses meant to provide an overview of what they could expect from more advanced derivatives.

Miss Marside picked up a piece of paper from the desk, “Without further ado, I’d like to assign you to your classes for the first year. The list has already been compiled. I will read it now, please keep your assigned number in mind.”

She started running down the list in alphabetical order, dispensing numbers in a seemingly calculated manner. Samantha was placed into class two along with Maria Walston-Carter. There was a lot of disquiet from the admirers who would not have the benefit of being with her during their lessons. Samantha pondered why she had enraptured them so. She was certainly pretty and from an influential family, but devoting your entire being to stalking her around the campus did not seem like a good strategy for befriending the girl.

“One last thing before I send you away to familiarise yourself with the building – there will be a magic compatibility trial in this room three hours from now. If you wish to participate in the magic course and learn from our experts, you will need to attend and be subjected to an initial test. Please keep that in mind!” Miss Marside clapped her hands together; “Dismissed.”

The room burst into a frantic discussion as all of the chatter that had been bottled up was unleashed at once. Samantha was already being stuck with indecision. “Oh, we have to choose?” she gasped. Her self-directed question was answered by a masculine voice walking up behind her from the third row.

“Nothing like that. The magic course is elective,” one of the other students explained. He was a tall boy with moss green hair and darker skin. “Dedicated Magic Colleges require that entrants demonstrate their ability before they’re accepted – but the Royal Institute is also a school for science, technology and art. They want to see if you have the capacity to do it first before letting you into the course.”

Samantha peered upwards at him, “Oh! I see. It’s a special exception.”

He offered a practised smile, “That’s right. I’m Maxwell Abdah.”

Samantha tried to remember her manners; “Samantha Easton, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He leaned against the wooden bannister and sighed, “It’s not going to be a very big class anyway. My Father says that only one in fifty people have any magical abilities at all. Don’t feel bad if you don’t get in. Most of us won’t.”

One of the girls behind butted in, “Lady Maria will.”

Maxwell shrugged, “Okay, but who asked?”

Maria was just about the only thing that the other students were willing to speak about. In a strange way she had become the number one icebreaking topic within hours of arriving, and the battle lines were being drawn between her helpless admirers and most ardent haters. Everyone had to have a well-developed opinion or they were excluded from the raging debates about how good she was at any given task or subject.

Maxwell had zero need of joining in. He had seen dozens of similar girls, passed through his manor house like the seasons. Some of them had hoped to become his fiancé for the sake of securing a future for their respective families. Not one had ever elicited his young love. At least Maria herself seemed to find the entire thing as droll as he did. She treated everyone with a terse patience that the socially unaware took as enraptured interest. Those gritted teeth and glassed-over eyes were all too familiar to him.

“You don’t look like the usual kind of student,” Maxwell theorised, “Are you one of the scholarship picks?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Heh. You must be pretty smart then. Don’t let them drag you under if they get jealous, Samantha. They’re here because of money, just like me.”

Samantha was curious; “What does your family do?”

“We’re a big trading family. Shipping stuff across the sea, buying and selling, that kind of thing. My Grandfather decided to settle here in the republic before I was born because of how big the ports were. Perfect environment for the family business.”

“That’s very impressive! My father owns a farm,” Samantha revealed. It felt much less significant than her new acquaintance’s background. But Maxwell wasn’t so judgemental as she first thought.

“There’s nothing wrong with that. If you put my Father in that position he wouldn’t know what to do. Everybody has something that they’re good at. Farming, trading, mining, knitting – that kind of thing.”

“Do you have anything in mind that you would like to study?”

“No, not at the moment. I’ll probably end up following in my family’s footsteps and go pursue something that’ll help our business.” Maxwell was a naturally helpful young man.

Considerations of class or precedent were often ignored in favour of doing what he thought was right. In a sense, speaking with Samantha was his way of helping her ingratiate herself with the notoriously picky upper classes that dominated the school body. There was a more ulterior motive though. Maxwell found himself struck by how attractive he found her. She had a different air to all of the other girls he had met since arriving.

“I think I’ll go and try the magic course,” Samantha concluded. It had always interested her, and there was no harm in trying. All she needed was to be born with the capability to transmit the energy through her body to get started.

“I think it’s going to be pretty busy this year. Lady Maria is rumoured to be attending as well, so all of her little followers are going to try and join too.” Maxwell glanced at the girls in the third row, who were sending a dirty look his way thanks to his dismissive comment. “Don’t be afraid to come speak with me if you need anything.”

“Thank you, I will.”

Maxwell had somewhere to be. He gave Samantha a wave and headed out through the classroom door to parts unknown.

