

Magic was an interesting topic. My Father had instilled some of the basics into me, but he never went so far as to teach me anything specific. He had always assumed that my time at the academy would do a much better job than he ever could. I couldn't disagree with that assessment. There was a world of difference between an expert and a student, and he had only been on one side of that equation. The first two chapters of the book were dry reading; intent on explaining concepts that could easily be inferred with enough wisdom. People were born with different sensitivities to the ambient magic that flowed through the air, and for as long as people had existed in this world, they had passed down the knowledge of how to utilise that energy to perform various tasks.

The true complexity of magic does not come from the act itself. Magic is an expression of energy passed through the human body. Imagine for a moment if you wished to summon a flame. How could it be done without physical kindling? Magic could be broadly defined as an ability that 'defied' the natural laws, but it is just as much an observer of the laws of physics as anything else in this world once it was expressed on the outside. You could create a zone of concentrated oxygen by extracting it from the air, but oxygen itself is not combustible. It would merely serve as a catalyst for a reaction. A flame summoned from a human body would snuff itself out on the spot.

It was a matter of efficiency. You could create the energy needed to ignite the air with enough effort, but it was extremely expensive in terms of power to do so. You would exhaust yourself almost entirely just to summon a few sparks. That was true for mages below grade three, but grades four and five had the stamina to do much more without the assistance of a magical tool. To wit – it was not a matter of 'imagining' the outcome you desired. It was to understand the elements and building blocks that created the world around you, to manipulate them using a variety of techniques, and to provide the energy needed to elicit the wanted effect.

Even simple spells could take months to learn and execute, all determined by the person's capability to understand the science behind each one of them. As someone brought back from modern society, many of these lessons came naturally to me. The curriculum within the Academy was the most forthright they could offer, but I still had an advantage over everybody else. The book she had given us was light nighttime reading at its most complicated. The others probably didn't find it so simple.

Samantha was special in her own way. I had never played the sequels, but I knew through osmosis that she had a power that allowed her to defy some of those rules. It was connected to

a prophecy about saving the world; a plot thread that was never explored in the first game. It was a predictable rule-breaking concession that allowed her to be the centre of the universe: weak but strong, common but unique, humble but exceptional. She was a precision-engineered protagonist designed to elicit support and sympathy from a wish-fulfilling audience. A less experienced me enjoyed the game for what it was at the time. My perspective on things had hardened as I worked my way through a back catalogue of things that were more to my liking.

Samantha's destiny was not relevant to me. I was going to avoid her and her love interests like the plague for as long as possible. It would only result in me coming off like a villain or getting dragged into trouble, or dragging them into trouble. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt an innocent person just through my presence. As strange as it sounds, I worked hard to make sure that my targets were always the worst scum of the Earth. My methods were equally bystander conscious; I never left anything to chance. I was already doing something terrible by most people's standards – protecting onlookers was a small personal concession made to stop myself from losing it.

I slammed the book shut and left it on my desk for later. I was a quick learner, so internalising all of the opening chapters was no effort at all. It was a rather dry introduction to some of the material, including a brief history of the magical arts, examples of where it is utilised, and some guidelines that every mage needed to know. Mages had to register themselves with the government, especially if they were grade three or higher. While modern weapons of war were encroaching on the destructive power of a well-crafted spell, mages could hide in plain sight. They could detonate an important building or piece of infrastructure without having to bring anything with them. You couldn't do that with a bomb or a tank. It was a recent introduction, coming into force a few decades before the 'compromise' was signed.

It caused a lot of controversy when it was first formulated in Parliament. Mages didn't like the idea of having their names and addresses tracked for the sake of government oversight. Like many things, that controversy passed in time and it was implemented with little issue. People were never going to fight against a law like that for long. It required too much personal sacrifice to make a stand. It also came with military implications as skilled mages could be drafted into the army should the need arise.

My silent study time was interrupted by the sound of a commotion going on outside in the hallway. I made sure that I was presentable and marched over to the door, ready to give whoever was responsible a piece of my mind. I pulled the door open and prepared to deliver

the verbal lashing of a lifetime, but I was stopped dead by the recognition of who was standing there in front of me. It was Theodore Van Walser. If I was considered the 'Queen' of the school by the student body, then he was the 'King.' There were a few reasons as to why that was the case; the most important being his membership in the Walser royal family. He was a third year student, but his tall height, dark hair and good looks made him seem more mature than he really was.

The boy he was arguing with was a second year called Lance Franzheim. He was also one of the potential love interests from the game. Out of all of the characters in it, he was my least favourite. He was similar to Adrian – extremely prideful in his own abilities and hobbies, but without the comedic relief of not being very good at them. He was seemingly only included for the women who wanted an irremediable trash fire that they could break down and repair. I was not so forgiving of his numerous faults as they might have been. To behave so poorly was in many ways a purposeful choice.

Theodore spoke with an icy edge, "I told you to stop walking through the first year's dorms, Lance. There is a reason people spread so many unbecoming rumours about you."

"I don't recall that ever being a rule we had to follow, Theo. My room is on this floor and walking through here is the fastest way to get to it. Nobody would even know about it if you didn't keep making a big deal out of it."

"It's not a rule, it's good manners."

Lance turned and tried to walk away from the discussion, but his eyes caught sight of me observing from the doorway. "See? Now even little miss Walston-Carter is coming out here to take a look!" He was completely unwilling to admit that the volume of his own voice was the primary reason I had noticed their confrontation. Theodore looked at me for a moment before turning his attention back to Lance.

"If you ask the teachers they will tell you the same thing that I have. You need to respect the privacy of the younger students. This discussion is over."

"Whatever. You've always got a point to prove, must feel bad knowing that you're only third in line to be the King."

"That is irrelevant."

Theodore did not covet the Walser throne like Lance believed. As the primary male antagonist, he was intended to slowly reveal his vulnerabilities throughout the course of the

story. One of them was his insecurity about handling too much responsibility. He dreaded the prospect of becoming the King, as unlikely as it was. Lance, having gotten the last word, spun on his heel and stormed his way down the hallway and out of sight. Theodore turned to me and bowed.

“Apologies. I did not mean to disturb you.”

Nobody else had seen fit to investigate. I sighed and matted down a piece of stray hair; “I was finished studying anyway. It’s of little consequence.”

There was one other thing about Theodore. In the game, he and Maria quickly get into a relationship. Maria used that leverage to manipulate him and further her personal war against Samantha. He wouldn’t agree to do that if he didn’t find Maria attractive. The problem was that I had become Maria. While I was comfortable with many things, the idea of being romantically involved with anyone, especially a man, was not one of them. Before I was reborn a relationship was the last thing on my mind, and I had made my peace with never engaging in one. His stare was starting to unnerve me.

“I take it that you’re the girl who’s been causing a big stir recently?”

“Whether I wish to or not, yes.”

“Please ensure that you are representing the academy with grace and respect at all times. We have little need for those who live for attention.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.” What a charmer. The very first thing he had said to me was a random admonishment about following the academy’s rules.

“I must be away before curfew. Goodnight.”

Without a second glance he headed off in pursuit of Lance. Surely, they would continue to argue into the late hours of the evening. He wasn’t going to take his petulant insult lying down. I heard the door across from me shut – someone must have been observing us from the other side. I believed that the room was occupied by a girl named Talia. I could only cross my fingers and hope that she didn’t start spreading even more rumours about me based on what she saw.

I headed back into my room and locked the door behind me. As I passed by the mirror, I reached up and touched my own face. Were people really so interested in me just because of my looks? I was tiny compared to some of the other girls – no number of doll-like features could change that. I was strong enough to fire a gun, but anything beyond that was still

impossible. I was consistently surprised at just how few of my previous skills I could use with my body limited like this. My modern perspective on things was warping how I thought. For the period where the game took place, Maria would attract a large number of suitors. Being spindly and youthful were considered good things even as you headed up in years.

I didn't want to stay this way forever. I had accepted that I had filled the shoes of Maria and accepted that there was no realistic way of changing myself back. As long as it did not cause me discomfort, I did not mind things the way they were. Where I drew the line was when my new body inhibited my ability to defend myself. There was no prospect of turning myself into a state similar to my past life; the biological lottery that Maria had won turned her into a girl of minor stature but a large presence.

But a gun was the great equaliser. I didn't need to be tall and muscular to do what I do best. Everyone is the same when they're facing down the barrel of a firearm. Those muscles won't protect your internal organs from the shrapnel tearing through you. I looked under my bed again and considered pulling the pistol out to comfort myself, but resisted the urge. It was there for when things turned upside down, not just for me to slip under my pillow at night.

Even so, it was a restless evening.