

After our final lesson of the day, I asked Samantha to accompany me to see Miss Jennings and ask a few questions about the magical phenomena I experienced at the theatre. Having her around would be disarming for Jennings, who would see it as an expression of our collective curiosity over something to be worried about. Samantha was happy to go along with whatever I asked – seeing it as a way to get closer to being a real friend.

Miss Jennings worked on multiple subjects, aside from magic she was also something of a history buff, and frequently held lectures for the senior students on a wide variety of topics. There weren't enough magic classes to fill her week's schedule, and she was a full-time employee at the academy for fear of her being poached by another institution in search of mages.

Miss Jennings was nose deep in a book when we knocked on the door to her lecture room turned office. In a flurried panic, she reached out to the desk and tried to tidy the place up. She rarely expected to have guests at this time of day when everyone wanted to take a break from listening to the teachers for several hours.

“Maria, Samantha! What a pleasant surprise!” she stuttered between stuffing papers into the drawers and disposing of pieces of rubbish that littered the place. We allowed her to settle things before barraging her with questions about magical theory. When she was happy that the room was presentable, she returned to us with an ashamed grin that lurched from edge to edge.

“We were hoping to ask you some questions about material outside of your lessons, Ma'am.”

She giggled, “You two are going to drive me crazy. You're already so far ahead of everyone else in your studies, sometimes I feel like I'm wasting my breath by lecturing you.”

“There's nothing wrong with going over the basics again,” Samantha offered in response.

“Oh, please continue, by all means. I'm very happy that both of you have discovered such a passion for the art. A lot of grade-five mages never explore their potential due

to a lack of interest. Having two of them in my cohort is something worthy of boasting about. Now, what is it that has caught your imagination?”

Samantha spoke on our behalf, “I already told you about what happened at the theatre, and I’ve done more research on light magic since – but Maria is curious about the other side of things.”

“Samantha was telling me about the regeneration magic she was studying, and that caught my attention. But when I looked in the studies there was little to no mention of what nihilism was or how it was used.”

Jennings had a conflicted look about her, “Well, that’s because many people consider it too dangerous to have out in the open. There’s no official ban in place, but most mages refuse to teach it, learn it, and the publishing houses will turn away anyone trying to publish texts that contain information about it.”

“Is it that dangerous?”

She laughed, “No more dangerous than the other spells I’ve been showing you, in fact, nihilism and the magic that is derived from it is more dangerous to the user than anyone else. A lightning bolt is deadly enough, but unlike nihilist spells you can cast it multiple times without running the risk of dying from exhaustion.”

“I see. That’s why there isn’t any information about it in the studies.”

“Not necessarily,” she added, “Don’t tell the other teachers that I said this – but there are more dogmatic reasons why that information is suppressed. Many consider nihilist magic to be the realm of the Black Lady and by extension the Dark Goddess. From a rational perspective, there is no other reason for such a thing to be hidden.”

“We aren’t going to get into trouble for asking, are we?” Samantha worried.

“No such thing will happen on my watch, I can promise you that. I’ve always been of the opinion that educating young mages about them is important. In a controlled environment we can ensure the information they ingest is accurate and that the best practices to stay safe are known to them.”

Jennings walked to the board and grabbed a piece of chalk, scribbling down several notes in quick succession to show us some of the important points. Nihilism and Regeneration were respectively categorized with dark and light magic. Samantha had a powerful affinity for light magic, something she would soon discover for herself. Was I the same, but for dark magic?

“Nihilism and Regeneration are often misconstrued as the only aspects of dark and light magic, though in truth they’re specific disciplines that utilise the same principles. Regeneration uses magical energy to strengthen the bonds between things, while Nihilism unloads a large quantity of magical energy into a small area, causing those bonds to break down at a rapid pace. It can quite literally make things disappear into thin air – or rather, break them down into their base elements so quickly that they seem to disappear.”

Like what happened to the bullet that nearly hit me. In that instant, I somehow managed to locate the projectile as it moved through the air, dismantle the molecular bonds that held it together using my magic, and avoid being struck and killed. No wonder it tired me out so much, dispensing with that much energy in one go was probably enough to knock anything less than a grade five mage out on the spot.

“Nihilism magic is powerful but it has severe limitations. To effectively use it, one must train their stamina over and over again, lest they run dry too quickly to find it of any use. In that respect it is less dangerous than the other schools of magic. The outcome is ultimately the same, if you misuse any form of magic, it will do harm and potentially kill.”

I got lucky back at the theatre then. The bullet wasn’t the only dangerous thing about that situation. If I used too much power, I would have died or passed out. I was still curious as to what purpose this kind of magic served. A majority of the disciplines were connected with particular industries and jobs, like forging. Dismantling something on a molecular level wasn’t very useful in my opinion, not unless there was also a way to harvest the elements afterwards.

“There has long been a scholarly debate over if Nihilism and Regeneration are cyclical partners or competing opposites.”

She drew two diagrams onto the board to demonstrate her point. The first was a pair of arrows going around in a cycle, while the second pair pointed towards each other in a tug-of-war.

“In my opinion, the first explanation makes the most sense. Nihilism is connected with ideas like decay, finality, and the limits of time. Regeneration is growth, life, stasis in eternity, and the branches of what some call the universal tree. There cannot be growth without decay – there cannot be an ending without a beginning.”

This all sounded a little wishy-washy to me. These broad strokes were tainted with a dogmatic argument that must have kept them away from scholarly circles for hundreds of years. If they believed that nihilist magic was evil, it explained why it was kept out of the books save for a passing mention. What exactly were the practical implications of these associated concepts?

I crossed my arms and studied her notes carefully, “Because men are likely to fear death, they reject what nihilism stands for.”

Jennings frowned, “Morbid but accurate. There have been many mages who believed that following the path of regeneration would unlock the secrets to immortality. As far as I know, none of them came close to succeeding. The mortal body can only last for so long. Eventually, you cannot outpace the ravages of time by using healing magic. Samantha – you should keep your goals realistic.”

“I will, Ma’am,” Samantha replied, “Saving Claude at the theatre is more than I could have asked for.”

“I’d be happy to lend both of you some of my private collection, but they may not contain the full plethora of information that you’re looking for.”

“Won’t you get into trouble for teaching us about dark magic?”

Jennings smiled, “Whether something is good or bad depends entirely on the outcome. Unless you hurt other people in the process, there is no such thing as an evil tool. I’m sure that a pair of prodigies like you two can find a use for Nihilist magic in a way that nobody else has.”

Jennings walked over to one of her bookshelves and rifled through the tomes that laid within, eventually returning with a trio of heavy manuals that covered the history of the two-sided conflict between light and dark magic.

“I do need to warn you, please don’t practice this without supervision. Nihilist magic is the most energy intensive form of all – and you can easily harm yourself if you don’t carefully control how much you use.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” I assured her – excluding the fact that I’d used it by accident during the shootout. Samantha glanced down at my left hand to see if I was doing the tell she accused me of having. I wasn’t exactly lying anyway. I had no concept of how to use the spell.

“Thank you, Miss Jennings!” Samantha chirped as we walked away with our ill-gotten gains. My mind immediately moved to going to one of our dorm rooms to start researching in detail, but Samantha was already wiped out from a day of lectures.

“Let me guess – you accidentally used the most dangerous spell around during that theatre incident?”

I rolled my eyes, “Yes. That is why I’m curious as to how it works.”

Samantha ensured we were alone before asking a follow-up question, “Are you going to use it to... kill people?”

I burst out into laughter, “Kill people? With that? I can’t imagine a less practical way of ending another person’s life. For one thing, it almost knocked me out cold, second, it doesn’t do anything that a gun can’t, and third – I’m not planning on killing anyone else.”

Samantha seemed to doubt my claim, “Really?”

“Really. I didn’t do any of that because I wanted to.”

There was no way for her to understand my perspective or my wish to live this second life without causing as much trouble as my last one. To her, it must have seemed like I didn’t care for the lives of other people, given the casual way I killed others. Needs

must. I would happily live the rest of my days without ever seeing a gun again. I could always find a new hobby to replace them.

“I really don’t get you,” she grumbled.

And she never would – the true story was too much for anyone to believe.

Samantha accepted my initial explanation of learning those skills while training for shooting competitions, but that was only because she didn’t understand what a shooting competition really was. Most of the time was spent standing around in a foggy field and waiting for your turn. It was not an adequate replacement for combat training.

“Would you like to take these first? I know you’re going to be spending all evening reading again.”

Samantha handed me the stack of books, “Very well. I’ll hurry and finish them as soon as possible.”

“It’s fine – there’s no great hurry. You’re the one who wanted to know more.”

Samantha observed the ease with which I carried the books with a curious hum, “I almost forgot how athletic you were!”

“Is it strange?” I said, knowing full well that noble girls were a bunch of layabouts who’d sooner faint from shock than put effort into something.

“I can’t say no,” she admitted, “But it makes me feel a little better about how big I am.”

I gave her a glare, “You can only complain if you tower above all of the senior boys. Or better yet, transfer some of that height to me if you don’t want it.”

“Never mind, I’ll keep it.”

The problem had only gotten worse since Samantha started following me. It was even more obvious how short I was with a giant like her lumbering above. We arrived in the dorm hallway to a bizarre sight. Adrian was being accosted by several other students, who were surrounding him on all sides.

The girl at the head of the mob's voice cracked as she yelled at him, "Don't you have any shame? Showing your face in this academy again after what your Father did! It's a disgrace."

Hassling Adrian seemed to be the new thing that everyone was trying to get in on. Nobody was brave enough to take a swing at him or make things physical. Adrian was one of the bigger boys, and his prickly disposition scared people away. Adrian's face was one of boredom. He really didn't care what they thought.

"My presence is not evidence of a lack of shame. I have been apologising to the victims on my family's behalf. If you have a problem with that – then you may refrain from speaking to me."

His biting tone wasn't going to win over any hearts and minds, but this group wasn't hoping to be convinced. They were hoping to earn some social capital by harassing Adrian. The girl at the head noticed us approaching and covered her mouth, "Look, even Lady Maria is standing there and observing your meagre defence. Have you anything to say to her?"

I did not like it when people tried to put words into my mouth. I approached her and scowled, "Adrian has already apologised to me. I told him to save it for Felipe and Beatrice. For one boasting of your sense of shame, you are more than happy to needlessly drag me into your squabbles."

She visibly winced as I cut through her clout-chasing.

"B-But surely it did not suffice!"

"That is my judgement to make. There will be no forgiveness from me if you continue to block the dorm corridor with this circus of yours."

All of their aggression slipped away like a pierced balloon. There was no greater black mark for one's social standing in this academy than getting on my bad side. I didn't engage in any of the gamesmanship, but that was part of the reason why my approval was seen as something prestigious. Anyone who could be my friend was destined to be a Queen Bee of the academy, unless their name was Samantha because nobody respected Samantha or anything she did.

The crowd dispersed, leaving Adrian leaning against the wall with a weary face. He didn't want to appear troubled by what they were doing, but it took a certain toll to endure constant harassment like that.

"I didn't ask for your help."

"I wasn't helping – they irritated me."

Samantha jumped in, "She means 'thank you,' I've been learning her special way of wording things for a few weeks now."

"And there is more learning to be done. I cannot stand boorish behaviour," I said, putting up my façade for Adrian's sake, "I would have said something regardless of who their target was. Any who use my name and reputation as a weapon must be shown the error of their ways."

"I don't believe that even your reputation can survive being seen with me," Adrian scoffed. He straightened out his blazer and made a hasty exit to his dorm room.

Samantha must have thought I had a split personality at this point. I was never antagonistic to Adrian without provocation, but it was easy for other people and him to perceive that as some sort of intense hatred. I honestly didn't care about him at all.

"Uh, that was interesting. There's some real troublesome folks at this academy."

None more so than me.

"Goodnight, Samantha."

Samantha blinked the confusion away, "Oh, goodnight!"

I pulled the door shut and exhaled – glad to have some space to myself again. I laid the books down on the desk and untied the braid in my hair. Keeping up the act was exhausting sometimes. Part of me wanted to revert back to my old accent and turns of phrase, but I knew that it would cause me no end of issues if my entire personality changed overnight. I was good at playing pretend, but I'd never done it for years on end like this.

There were a lot of developments happening and that was never a good thing. The distinct stench of trouble was starting to gather around my head. Something stupid was about to happen, something that would demand my abilities as an assassin. If it did, I'd see it as confirmation of my running theory that this wasn't meant to be a punishment. I was paying penance by utilising those skills to save some innocent people. Everything lined up too perfectly to be mere coincidence.

Was there going to be another assassination plot?

Maybe not. That wasn't an appropriate escalation of things in my view. This was a world filled with magic and legends and prophecies of doom. Saving Felipe was just a warmup. The problems I faced were going to get more severe and destructive. Every good story needed to escalate in the second act. Putting myself into the shoes of my benefactor for a moment – why would they go to so much effort to bring me here for something that simple?

Saving the life of one person in exchange for the lives of many others did not feel like an appropriate exchange. I'd killed hundreds and hundreds of people back in my old life. Saving just one in exchange, and turning the balance even more negative in the process, it didn't add up. Not to project an uncaring attitude unto them, but thousands of people died in unjust ways every day. What made Felipe so important that they needed me to rescue him?

Unless he held a more important role in the course of events than I expected. The merger of their families was a big deal, with serious implications for the future direction of the nation as a whole. A lot of people's livelihoods rode on things going well. Dissatisfaction could lead to unrest, which could lead to revolution. The smallest changes could lead to major consequences.

But I'd never once assumed that things were going to play out the same way as the game. While the characters remained the same for the most part, there was never an indication that Adrian's Father had an interest in merging with the Booker's business empire. It was too specific to be included in a game about romancing a bunch of noble stereotypes. This was a fully-fledged world with all of the chaos that came with

it, not a collection of code and artwork pieced together into a tightly constructed jigsaw puzzle.

I switched over to my evening clothes and sat on the edge of my bed. The books were calling out to me with a siren's song. My curiosity about this new field of magic would not be quenched by a simple discussion with Miss Jennings. I was interested in uncovering all of the little secrets that hid within. I was also extremely tired and knew that the information inside would not be properly absorbed into my brain on a first reading.

This was all Samantha's fault. The girl was exhausting to be around, with boundless energy and stamina for all sorts of inane activities. I was a miserable old crone who relished the anti-social lifestyle. Extroverts like her were my greatest weakness. I started to wonder why I'd accepted her offer to be 'provisional friends' in the first place. It wasn't as if anyone would believe her if she revealed that I was the one who killed the assassins.

At the time I thought that letting her peek behind the curtain would dampen her enthusiasm for me. Aside from the rumours, and the action I was involved in, I was a fairly boring person to be around. I liked to read, quietly, and keep to myself.

Whenever one of the students tried to involve me in the latest piece of trendsetting I could only tilt my head and expression confusion at them.

The hottest story to hit the mouths of rumour-lovers before Adrian's return was a claim that Talia was actually the one who organised the assassination plot against her brother, or that she was involved in some way. It was the sort of thing that didn't stand up to scrutiny on a basic level. They had an older brother; the reason Felipe was marrying Beatrice matrilineally was because he wasn't going to be the one leading the family when their father passed away. But when did facts ever stop a sensational tall tale from spreading like wildfire?

At least they weren't discriminating. Almost every single person, political entity and organisation were being blamed to varying degrees. The man responsible was behind bars for twelve years, having admitted to the plot and the investigation having hard evidence of his involvement, but being accused of a grave crime like that was both

exciting and convenient for their pet cause of choice. The biggest shock was that Claude hesitated to get involved with the show – choosing to reserve his words and wave away anyone trying to make him join their side.

There were a lot of ways to learn a lesson and getting shot was a good teacher. I wouldn't recommend getting shot, of course, but it did mellow him out and make him realise that the reality of this stuff was more dangerous than he first thought. It would be some time yet before he stopped limping on that leg. He was lucky that the impairment wasn't permanent.

As for Adrian, it was obvious to me that this shakeup had affected him emotionally. He never held a high view of his Father, so his comments about him getting what was coming were honest, but that didn't exclude him from feeling the pressure of what was a serious change in his daily life. He couldn't run the family business from behind bars. Adrian was given the reigns to what was still a huge conglomerate of noble and industrial interests. He didn't hit the ground running – he just hit the ground full stop.

With all of that happening it was impressive that he found the time and will to come back to the academy at all. Most people would have elected to preserve their privacy and stay at home. Adrian could have easily whittled away the days away from prying eyes, living off the money his family made and occupying himself with whatever he pleased. Clearly, that wasn't his plan.

This was his display of defiance.

Adrian hated being told what to do, he hated it when people doubted or diminished his abilities. He wasn't going to let his old man's mistakes dictate what he did with his life. He was going to come back, bend the knee and make his apologies, and then continue on the path that he chose for himself. That was who Adrian was. The biggest question mark was if he'd shed some of that exterior resentment in the process.

We were rapidly approaching the first critical juncture in Samantha's journey. The time when choices would be made that would define the rest of her time at the academy, and by extension, mine. She had the pick of the litter – the eyes of some of the most important people at the academy, even if she didn't realise it yet. Based on

my observations, she was currently closest with Max and Claude, neglecting bonds with Adrian, Theodore Van Walser and Lance Franzheim, who I'd yet to see wandering the halls.

He was always a slippery one in the game, the type of character who demanded frustrating trial and error or a strategy guide to woo. I was curious. Tomorrow I was going to ask her a few questions about her relationship with the boys to get an idea of where we stood.

Slipping under the covers and turning off the light, I stared at a beam of ambient glow that was sneaking under the foot of my door and projecting against the wall. The sound of laughter and the stomping of feet kept me awake for some time.

