

0001: The Academy

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“Monsieur Sinclair, perhaps you'd like to attempt the passage?”

Madame Fournier's voice was in that tone that teachers used whenever they suspected that a student wasn't paying attention. Yet, while my mind had been elsewhere, I had been paying attention; it was just that the mysteries in my head were more appealing than the lesson.

I looked at the text on my datapad. A simple paragraph about a family visiting Paris, the kind of introductory material meant to ease students into verb conjugations and basic vocabulary. We'd covered it over the last twenty minutes, the teacher taking time to have us all enunciate the verbs, practice how to roll our tongues and shift our lips.

I'd needed to hear her say it just once. From there, I could repeat it. The grammar rules we'd touched on in the last class were already ingrained in my mind with crystal clarity.

I read the paragraph aloud. Slowly and deliberately, stumbling over a word I knew perfectly, but where most would likely struggle. A calculated performance where an error was placed where a bright, but young and ordinary student might falter. The sort I'd used in this class and others already in my first few weeks at Caledonian Academy.

Madame Fournier studied me with an expression I was learning to recognise. I was seeing it more and more from my teachers. The slight narrowing of the eyes and the tilt of the head. The realisation that something was just a little bit off about me. The sort of difference that was unusual, but, in the eyes of a teacher, in a good way.

“Your accent is remarkably good for a beginner,” she said. “Have you studied French before?”

“My grandmother speaks it sometimes.” I lied, speaking with the confidence of a child who shouldn't know any better. “I must have picked up more than I realised.”

My grandmother had tried to teach me a foreign tongue when I was a bairn, but that had been Spanish. Just as in this class, and I remembered it clearly, but back then, I'd feigned ignorance and played at failure. My grandmother had simply smiled and said I'd get there eventually.

I watched as Madame Fournier held my gaze for a moment before she looked away. I hoped she accepted my answer.

Around me, I felt the weight of my classmates' attention. Boys and girls who were two years older than me. No doubt their minds already noted me as different. Not in the way the

teachers did, but in that way that children did. A curiosity, a nuisance, or something weird. The sort of weird that was often avoided, investigated with child-like drive, or bullied.

That wasn't what I wanted. I had to hide more, pull back where I didn't need the attention, and where my focus wasn't placed.

Next time I was asked, I'd speak slower and make more mistakes. Changes I would enact to appear merely as a child who was advanced for their age, and not a genius. Though that line grew thinner each day with each passing class.

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I sat quietly as Mr Hartley handed back the tests. He moved with the efficiency of a man who'd done that thousands of times. Papers slid across desks; some were met with relief, and others with resignation. Outwardly, I was calm, displaying just a hint of pleasure. Internally, I was disappointed. Not at my performance, but in myself.

Ninety-four per cent. Based on the unnamed table on the board, I was top of the class by three marks.

I had aimed for eighty-seven per cent. That would've been respectable, other than my younger age compared to my classmates, and nothing overly remarkable. Safely in the upper third without challenging for the top. Instead, I was clear out in front.

I had chosen my errors carefully: a sign mistake in one place, a skipped step in another. The kind of small slips that any student might make when placed under a time constraint. My flaw had come in the final question.

That had been a multi-part problem involving quadratic functions, worth fifteen marks. I had intended to lose five of them, perhaps six. Instead, I had solved it completely, my hand moving through the working before my mind caught up to stop it, and only realised it after the data had been inputted.

I'd acted on muscle memory, except that wasn't muscle. It was something deeper, something in me that recognised patterns and actions faster than conscious thought could process and then intervene. The knowledge in my head didn't wait for permission. It was as if it wanted me to know it was there and hated being constrained.

"Well done, Sinclair," Mr Hartley said as he paused at my desk.

Nothing more was said as he moved to the next desk, yet I'd already seen the look he'd shared with his teaching assistant. Once more, I'd outperformed students two years my senior.

Around me, my classmates shifted in their seats. I didn't need to glance at them to feel their attention or to understand their thoughts as they reassessed me again. I was the child genius, the weird kid. The threat to their standing in a system that ranked and sorted us by our performances in class on digitised lists in a place where each of us was expected to excel. The brat who'd defeated them again without looking as if I was struggling.

For some, that would fuel resentment. For others, it would discourage them. So be it. That was their failing, not mine. Others would look at my performances and take on the challenge; they would see me as an obstacle they had to overcome. They would push themselves to do better, to surpass me.

They'd fail, of course. None of them was capable of matching me. None of them, nor my teachers, understood what shifted in my mind, or how everything came with an ease that went beyond simply recalling such studies from a previous life. In time, years from now, they might understand a fraction of it. Perhaps, I pondered, the whole world might if what drifted at the edges of my thoughts revealed itself.

I folded the test paper and slipped it into my bag, already calculating how to adjust not to stand out too much beyond this moment. The next assessment would need to be different. More errors in all aspects of the paper. Less perfection where it mattered.

I was getting better at failing; I simply wasn't good enough at it yet. Though the thought was growing that perhaps I should stop trying to hide in failure.

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It was halfway through my second year at the Academy, yet I was now studying the third-year curriculum. My results over the first year had been enough to encourage all my teachers to push for my rapid advancement. A challenge I had, after some consideration, accepted.

I had grown impatient, at least to some degree, with hiding my abilities; holding myself back until I was almost bored to death. My life, beyond the early attempts to not stand out, had drifted. When the chance had come to push myself, to display just a hint of what I could do, I'd taken it, and now found myself around those three years my elders.

My teacher, Dr Morrison, had stopped asking if I understood the material months ago. Now she simply handed me the advanced problem sets and let me work while she guided the rest of the class through concepts I had mastered in the first month of the semester.

I knew how that made the others feel, but I no longer cared all that much. Either they accepted the challenge I represented, or they didn't. My intentions were far beyond them and above theirs. They could either try to soar with me or fall to the ground and live through whatever became of their existence.

As I'd done since my first week at the Academy, I was seated at the back of the classroom. I did so partly for the benefit of being able to work without being disturbed, and also because, as much as it shouldn't, it amused me to watch my classmates struggle with Newtonian mechanics while I pondered at the edges of something far more interesting than our classwork.

Most were fifteen, a handful sixteen. They had three years on me in age, and I had left them behind so thoroughly that Dr Morrison no longer bothered pretending otherwise. Outside of the Physical Education department, no teacher tried to make me seem normal.

The names other students called me had grown louder and stronger. Child genius had become Prodigy. Weird Kid had become Freak. Both were accurate, though neither captured the full truth.

I was better than them in every conceivable way. Not just in maths or physics, not just academically, but in ways they couldn't see and I couldn't show.

When Cameron Ross had shoved me in the corridor last month, testing the small boy who kept embarrassing his peers, I had let myself stumble. I had let him think he had power over me, that at least here, in a primitive display of size and strength, he was above me. The fact was, he wasn't, and he failed to realise that even as he and his friends had laughed.

I'd seen his hands coming long before they had. I'd heard the whispers with his friends, the trap, if one could call it that, they had laid. I could've avoided it, but that would only make the next step more dangerous for everyone.

When it came, I had watched, fighting my instincts. I tracked his movements and considered redirecting his momentum to put him down, or shatter his wrist, or a dozen other ways to prove his inferiority.

I knew how to do all that. I'd read the books the Academy had on self-defence, and I'd trained them in private, in the dark of night, in my room until they became second nature. I didn't need them now, but I knew one day I would. A day would come when I would be forced to fight to protect myself, to defend what I knew, and what I created. When that came, even though I didn't know when, I would be ready.

The restraint I'd shown there, and elsewhere, was perhaps my greatest achievement at Caledonian, though no one would ever know it.

"Marcus." Dr Morrison's voice cut through my thoughts. "Would you walk the class through the third problem? I think they'd benefit from seeing your approach."

At the start of the year, I would've hesitated. Not to avoid standing out, but because I wasn't sure how advanced to make my answer. Now I simply rose and walked to the board marker in hand, aware of the eyes tracking me. Some were resentful, some were curious, and a few were genuinely interested. Like Dr Morrison, all of them expected me to explain the problem as well as she could.

Even as I wrote out the solution and explained it, my mind wandered further down the pathways this class led to. Wondering how far my mind would reach as it grasped for understanding that I didn't yet realise. The knowledge that lived behind my thoughts stirred as I worked, whispering of connections between force and field and something deeper that this world's physics hadn't yet discovered.

"Excellent," Dr Morrison said when I finished, barely paying attention to anything yet never appearing to be inattentive. "Clear and precise, as always."

I returned to my seat, accepting the praise with a nod that was just shy of dismissive. The arrogance I had warned myself about when entering Caledonian was growing stronger, and the warnings weaker. The mild contempt I held for most of those around me had settled to the point it felt second nature.

I was twelve years old, surrounded by teenagers I could outthink and outfight, and cultivated by teachers who saw genius where the truth was far stranger.

It was difficult not to feel superior. Each day, I wondered how much longer I would have to restrain myself so heavily. How long would it be until the day came when I could remove my shackles and begin to truly push myself?

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The Great Hall of Caledonian Academy had stood for two centuries. Its vaulted ceiling bore the names of distinguished alumni in gilded lettering. Judges, politicians, scientists, captains of industry, and other figures of note. The weight of expectation and history pressed down from those rafters, with silent authority on the students who now sat in the Great Hall.

Well, they pressed down on everyone else.

I sat in the front row, as tradition demanded of the Dux Scholae. The First Scholar. That was the highest honour the Academy could bestow upon a graduating student. The formal ceremonial robes used each year had been heavily altered to fit my frame. Around me, my classmates who were graduating alongside me sat. Their robes were just as ceremonial, but lacking the status of being the best.

I was fourteen, and had taken five years to reach a point it had taken all of them six. To many of the others, this might be one of the pinnacles of their life. To others, it would mark the beginning of some grand adventure. To me, it was a point where I could move on and stop holding myself back as much as I had been.

I could have finished the Academy in four years easily, perhaps three, if I had truly unleashed myself. The coursework had never challenged me, not genuinely. Mathematics was so simple that I barely had to focus on it. The sciences flowed like water under my command. Languages, history, literature and the other subjects hadn't troubled me, even if they never held my interest.

Yet speed of completion had never been my goal. Not after I'd realised how I could use my time here. I had stayed the extra year deliberately, spreading my focus across disciplines I might never use. The friendships I'd developed, if one could call them that, were unlikely to be of worth in the coming decades.

Still, I'd noted names, courses chosen, and cultivated links with those that might amount to something useful in the future. They would either be further cultivated, or more likely, disposed of from the mental spreadsheet I'd crafted them onto.

My main reason to take the time was to expand and broaden my knowledge, though not in the courses available at the Academy. The puzzle in my head, the one that remained elusive even as each piece of the puzzle was revealed, went beyond what I'd realised. It didn't just

cover maths and physics, but across every science, hard and soft, offering fragments of a far wider and more complex picture than potentially should exist.

I'd long since determined the variances in the history of this world compared to the Earth I'd known from an earlier point in its timeline. I saw the lies and deceptions that had been placed in knowledge such that even adults seemed unaware of them, or simply chose not to challenge them, and I'd caught glimpses of what might lie underneath.

Things were presented too cleanly. Yes, there were conflicts, disagreements, and even wars throughout the last few hundred years. Yet, each time the solutions explained by the reports, by the textbooks and history felt... lacking. As if something was being hidden. It felt as if someone, likely many people in fact, all across the world, were keeping details from the masses.

One of the most glaring examples happened fifty years ago. In the waning days of the last century, the USA, Canada, and Mexico had merged, forming the United North American States. Then, striking first in New York, insurgents had fought against this new continent-sized nation.

The Statue of Liberty had been destroyed in what history books and recordings labelled as domestic terrorism. There was truth in that, but something was missing. That Second American Civil War had lasted three years, and when it had ended, the UNAS was victorious, but no longer the global power it had once been. From as secured position as the dominant superpower, it had become one of several major players. The same was true of the Chinese People's Federation, though its shift had happened earlier than with the UNAS.

The UK was still linked to both the UNAS and the European Federation. In my old life, the UK had broken those bonds with Europe, yet here they remained, though not to the same depths they once had in that other timeline. On the surface, all was well, but when one dove a little deeper and read between the lines, then things became less clear. The world was nowhere as rosy and peaceful as every source painted it as.

Such knowledge and understanding would be useful in the future. With the time I had, learning about the cracks in the truth of society now was more important than surging ahead and not realising the truth until it was too late. Still, it was now time to push forward again and to pick the path that offered the best balance of risk, challenge, and reward.

The offers had come flooding in during my final year, even before my final evaluations and tests were completed. Edinburgh, Cambridge, Imperial, ETH Zürich, and others had reached out to me instead of me applying to them. My grades were such that not only the locations but the choice of subject was vast, and it appeared to everyone else that I could pursue whatever path I wanted.

Yet, for all that my path seemed to open up before me, it wasn't, and perhaps it never truly had been.

The knowledge in my head, that vast reservoir of understanding that unlocked piece by piece with every equation mastered, every principle absorbed, pulled me in a clear direction.

Physics, Mathematics, and Engineering. The sciences that would carry humanity beyond this single world, out into the void where our future waited.

I didn't know why I was so certain of that path into the void, but the feeling that was where I needed to head was undeniable. Almost as if there was a compass in my mind pointing upwards towards true north.

Whatever purpose had placed me here, whatever reason lay behind my resurrection into this strange and altered world, it pointed toward the stars.

"Marcus Cormac Sinclair."

I pushed thoughts of the future aside as Headmaster Buchanan's voice echoed through the hall. I rose, smoothing my robes with the precision that implied normalcy when I was anything but. The façade was perfect now, and only when I wished did I let hints of just how far beyond everyone else I was of everyone here appear.

"In recognition of exceptional achievement across all disciplines, for scholarship that honours the finest traditions of this institution, and for conduct befitting the ideals we hold dear, the Academy names you Dux Scholae of the Class of 2145."

Applause filled the hall as the Headmaster spoke, and I walked towards him. I accepted my medal as Dux Scholae with a handshake and then turned to face the students, parents and faculty. My own family sat in the fourth row. My parents were proud and smiling, Keira was rolling her eyes theatrically, and Callum was waving enthusiastically.

They saw their son and brother, their wee professor, had grown into something remarkable. They didn't see anything more than I wanted them to, or the knowledge that whispered of technologies this world had yet to imagine was possible.

I looked at the other faces. Classmates who had gone through resentment, then respect, before simply accepting that I wasn't someone who moved in the same air as them. Teachers who thought they'd nurtured a genius who already understood everything beyond what they had to offer.

Five years of careful cultivation of calculated excellence, and of laying foundations for whatever came next.

The Academy had been the first step. University would be the second. And beyond that, the path stretched toward something I could feel but not yet name: a purpose written in the stars, waiting for me to grow strong enough to claim it.

I was fourteen years old, Dux Scholae of Caledonian Academy, and I hadn't even begun.

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