

Aniela Ley: Silvercliff Hall – The Kiss of Magic

(p. 7–14)

The Curly-Haired Girl – In My Way

Nathan

Me and Oxford, Oxford and me. It should have been a love story. But even after a few weeks in the famous university city, I still wasn't a fan. It wasn't just that summertime Oxford tasted of stale air, it was that the things it represented simply weren't all that interesting to a seventeen-year-old like me: It was ancient, proud of its traditions and history, and played up to its image as an educational Olympus. As you'd expect, the students were a bunch of intellectual prodigies, shining stars in the academic firmament. All very impressive, unless your scholarship meant spending lots of time with the scholarly elite and you really didn't like it when people acted like their massive brains were the ultimate gift to humanity.

I was allowed to say things like this because ... well, because I was attending the Summer School for chronic know-it-alls, specialising in astrophysics. Theoretical astrophysics, something I mostly muttered under my breath to avoid certain preconceptions about people with special interests. Stephen Hawking may have been my hero, but I wasn't so obsessed with the concept of Hawking radiation that I'd forget to put my trousers on in the morning. And so far I'd successfully avoided walking open-mouthed around the 'City of Dreaming Spires' like a walking nerd cliché. There were enough people here already who could barely believe they were actually in this supposedly magical place.

OK, I'll admit it, Oxford didn't leave me totally cold. Every now and then I'd catch myself rubbing my eyes in amazement at the frankly ridiculous amount of history I encountered around every corner.

Things were no different on that fateful Saturday afternoon as I made my way to the Radcliffe Camera, the Bodleian Library's reading room. The Camera was a huge rotunda tower with a domed roof, like something out of a picture book. Looking at it nestled between the Library's many other architectural marvels, you couldn't help but wonder if there was such a thing as too many columns and archways, too much splendour? In this city, people took their books extremely seriously.

But the question that concerned me most was what the hell I, of all people, was doing here. Me, Nathan Hamsworth, who grew up on the eighth floor of an apartment block surrounded by rows and rows of identical apartment blocks. Wearing a T-shirt that had gone through the washing machine a few too many times already, cargo shorts, and trainers that I would have loved to take off in the hellish July heat. I felt totally out of place among the imposing buildings overflowing with turrets and ornamentation, where your imagination would run away with itself, expecting a magic student in a wafting robe to come rushing past at any moment. Or at least to see a dragon lolling on the dome of the reading room, a movie playing out in your mind.

Sample translation “Silvercliff Hall – Jinxingly Bewitched in Love” by Aniela Ley
Translation by Sarah Pybus (sarah@pybustranslations.co.uk)

I simply didn't fit in. Not just because I wore the wrong clothes, but also because I really liked living in the present. I didn't need magic to find the world exciting. It was plenty bizarre just as it was, at least if you were studying physics.

Unfortunately, the city was full of people who didn't share my opinion. It was overrun with visitors giving free rein to their fandom. Cosplay as far as the eye could see. It wasn't enough that Oxford appeared to have prettied itself up for a 19th-century teatime; I was constantly encountering wannabe lords in top hats saying things like 'Verily, my good sir'. Or gangs of girls in old-fashioned clothes who would sit on the boat landing and read out their favourite passages from *Wuthering Heights*.

Oxford was full of surprises.

And it had yet another surprise in store as I went to climb the stairs to the reading room. A subtle, extremely high-pitched noise like bouncing glass stopped me in my tracks.

Annoyed, I turned around, but there was no one else in the courtyard.

No wonder in this heat. Everyone else had been clever enough to find somewhere cool to shelter.

Which was exactly why I'd come here. The bedroom I'd been assigned in Magdalen College for the duration of the Summer School had been transformed into a sauna. I couldn't think straight in the heat, although it was looking likely that my brain had already overheated and taken leave of its senses.

Where the courtyard had been empty moments ago, a dazzling blue rift suddenly appeared in mid-air.

It's definitely an optical illusion, I reassured myself. The light's playing tricks on you. There isn't a jagged two-metre tear floating in front of you. At least not in our dimension.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment, hoping to get rid of the bizarre apparition.

But instead of disappearing like a hallucination ought to, the rift opened, and through it walked someone with a particularly severe case of cosplay-mania. A girl, around sixteen years' old, stormed into the courtyard. Her look was original 19th century, as though she'd slipped through a doorway in time to visit the library.

Sounds crazy? It was. In so many ways.

Despite the summer heat, the girl wore a velvet cloak, underneath it a floor-length, empire-line dress with a rippling hem and complicated ruffles on the shoulders and sleeves. Lady Cosplay was in such a rush that she had to hitch up her skirts, revealing a pair of laced ankle boots that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Pride and Prejudice*. And that wasn't all. On her head she wore a peculiar bonnet with honey-blond corkscrew curls peeking out beneath. But the thing that amused me most was the determined expression on her face as she walked straight towards me, as though expecting me to promptly vanish into thin air. Me, a 6' 2" guy who balanced out his nerdy side with competitive swimming.

'Sorry, but you're in the wrong place', I called before she could knock me down. 'The rest of the Jane Austen fan girls are off taking high tea in the Botanic Garden.'

Lady Cosplay narrowed her striking blue eyes. In her universe, I was clearly an illusion at most. Then she raised a hand draped in white lace (straight up! in July!) and waved it about in the air as she moved even faster.

She was about to crash into me!

No, I thought, she can't be that crazy. She's messing with you, Nathan. She's bluffing, and when you jump back in fright she's going to laugh at you. She's getting back at you for treating her like she's lost her marbles.

So I just stood there. Totally nonchalant and not even trying to defend myself.

And what did Lady Cosplay do?

Barrelled straight into me.

For a fraction of a second, I could see the surprise flash in her eyes. As though by standing in her way, I had violated every law of nature. A flesh-and-blood human, well built and easily a head taller.

And then we crashed into each other so hard that we were both left gasping for air.

My sunglasses, which I'd pushed up into my hair, flew off my head, and I sent out a quick prayer that they hadn't broken. Otherwise I'd spend the rest of the summer squinting.

Right then, something flashed so brightly between me and Lady Cosplay that I was momentarily blinded. It was as though she'd set off a rocket flare underneath her robe. I staggered backwards and grabbed for her shoulder.

'How dare you! Unhand me at once, sir', the Lady snarled. And why shouldn't she? After all, I'd had the audacity to get her all tangled up without so much as a by-your-leave. And how dare I refuse to dissolve into thin air on command?

But I had other problems.

I was still seeing stars from the inexplicable explosion of light, and desperately trying to regain my balance. The last thing I wanted was to spend my time in Oxford with broken ribs.

Somehow I managed to save myself by jumping onto the first step. Stupidly, I was still holding on to Lady Cosplay, and she threatened to topple over. When I realised my mistake, I let go of her shoulder. Being the great guy that I am, I also gave her a little shove to set her upright.

Which turned out to be another mistake.

Lady Cosplay let out a cry of dismay and clawed her fingers into my T-shirt. Before the threadbare material could give way and she went flying backwards, I bent over and wrapped an arm around her waist, making sure to keep a safe distance between us. Something told me she wouldn't allow me to get any closer without an engagement ring.

To balance out the momentum, I pulled her towards me on the first step. The peculiar bonnet slipped off her head, for which I was extremely grateful. Our slapstick routine must have looked embarrassing enough already. To top it all off, she slipped off the edge of the step. I had no choice but to wrap my other arm around her and pull her close, personal comfort zone be damned. We were so close that I could count the freckles on her button nose – seven of them, to be precise.

This time there was no flash of light as we collided.

Instead, I heard the almighty clanging of a gong.

Actually, I felt it more than I heard it. A wave of sound coursed through my body. And as though a door had opened inside me, something previously buried deep within flowed towards the girl in my

arms. A connection, something tender – as though we were melting together. My skin tingled. Was this real? Everything was happening so intensely fast, maybe I was imagining things. And yet suddenly it all felt so familiar. As though we weren’t strangers forced to discover a terrifying number of details about each other, details that would normally remain hidden under our clothes. I should have wanted to run away ... but it just felt too good.

[...]

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But there was no time to complain. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a shadow.

It was my friend Ben. We’d arranged to hang out in the reading room to keep cool. He was going to be very entertained by this bizarre situation.

But instead of bending down with a grin and asking if I needed any help with my comprising position, Ben walked straight past us without so much as a glance. His Converse even kicked my bag, rattling the broken pieces of my smartphone. And even that didn’t provoke a response.

Ben had failed to notice me and Miss 19th Century in what was clearly a very awkward predicament.

Just like that.

It was ... well, it was impossible!

‘Ben, come back right now! I need your help, dude!’

I didn’t just shout, I roared. And if there’s one thing I don’t have, it’s a delicate little voice.

But Ben just strolled up the steps undeterred, swiping on his phone as he went.

‘Your friend did not notice you, sir’, Lady Cosplay said, stating the bafflingly obvious.

‘But why not? We’re on display for all to see here.’

My thoughts were obviously shared by a gentleman wearing old-fashioned clothes and a top hat who scurried past us, shaking his head.

‘Ah, Sir Curtisfield, if I am not mistaken’, Lady Cosplay greeted the man from her horizontal position.

The esteemed Sir Curtisfield grimaced in disgust. ‘How disagreeable’, he pronounced in a nasal voice. Then he waved his finger in front of his chest in an ornamental fashion.

And just like that, the man disappeared.

‘That didn’t just happen, that guy didn’t just magic himself into thin air’, I whispered in astonishment.

‘That’s exactly what the scoundrel did, sir. How impudent! He might be Master of “Magical Ancient Currents” – a thoroughly overrated subject – but how dare he ignore me?’ Lady Cosplay had turned pale with indignation beneath her already porcelain skin. ‘Nobody overlooks Emilia Albertine Vandercould, even if she is buried beneath an Ordinary.’

‘How charming. I really can’t understand why Mr Magical Expert turned his back on you, considering how loveable and warm-hearted you seem to be.’

Help! I was actually playing along with this madness. I needed to put an end to this right now.

‘Your name’s Emilia, right?’ I asked. ‘So, Amazing Emilia from the super-important Vandercould family, could you please stop spouting this rubbish and instead start thinking about how we’re going to untangle ourselves? I don’t know about you, but I’d at least like for us to stop hanging around like Siamese twins. The strap on my bag’s probably caught on your coat. We just need to find a way to put a bit of distance between us, and then all these weird things are sure to clear up all by themselves.’ Ideally if she, too, were to disappear with a whoosh.

Emilia crinkled her nose. ‘I am afraid that will not work, sir. This is more than a simple connection between our auras. The soundwave that occurred during our second collision has caused the scrambled aura particles to merge. It will take more than a sprinkle of Ordering Magic for our auras to separate again.’

‘Our ... what?’ I interrupted.

‘Our auras, sir. Do you really not know what that is?’ Emilia inspected me thoughtfully. I’d probably gone down in her estimation from an Ordinary to an amoeba. ‘An aura is a person’s highly complex and personal energy field. Civilised cultures are familiar with the concept already, of course.’

‘And now I am too. Thank you *so much* for explaining this bullshit to me.’ Yes, I could be caustic too – there was only so much I could take. ‘Okay, so you’re trying to make me believe that this is all about magic and not an unfortunate accident. Just for a minute, let’s assume that’s true, although I’d like to state for the record that I am very confident in the laws of nature on which our world is based. So if this is some magic trick of yours that’s gone wrong, now would be the perfect time to admit it. I won’t reproach you for it. Hand on my heart.’

Emilia pressed her lips together, looking miffed. ‘I beg your pardon, sir? Do I honestly look so wretched as to bother with magic? As I just said, the interfering frequencies caused problems during the Vandercould Call. As a result, something went awry as I materialised and I collided with you. Regrettably, our auras connected in the process. Even you must have noticed the resulting orgone discharge.’

‘You mean that explosion of blazing light? That can’t have had anything to do with orgones because they don’t exist. Physics is my thing, so I know that what you’re talking about – this form of energy – is a load of rubbish. The same goes for materialisation, dimensional rifts floating in the air and ...’ I broke off, feeling overwhelmed.

Emilia looked sheepish. ‘My apologies, sir, this must be a lot to take in. I have no experience with Ordinaries, so I assume this is a reasonable reaction to my explanations. But not to worry, there is a formula to resolve our problem. In the past, when we were still one reality, collisions happened all the time between Ordinaries and my people, the Elevated.’

[...]

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A Magical Academy – If You Can Get In

Emilia

The Vandercould Call sounded relentlessly at a frequency only members of my family could hear.

It was an honour that I could hear it.

I tried to remind myself of this as the high-pitched signal assaulted my ears. It would not ease off until I finally reached our Academy’s library. For that reason alone, I raced across the part of the Bodleian Library that belonged to the Ordinaries. It was good that none of the students in the reading room could see me as they hunched over their books or whispered amongst themselves. It was also fortunate that nobody from Silvercliff Hall was present as I came running, my skirts flying around me.

[...]

I should have been attending the Academy for five years now, as was usual for the Elevated. If you had the social status, the right family tree and an outstanding talent, then once you turned eleven you attended Silvercliff Hall. I had all of those things in spades, but Papa considered most of the subjects taught at Silvercliff Hall to be a waste of time. In his eyes, the Vandercoulds were destined for higher things, especially his only child who would one day take up his legacy.

To my surprise, that moment had come already, and I had set out without hesitation, just as Papa would have wanted. The collision I had caused a second after materialising would have been less to his taste, given that I had become very closely acquainted with the first Ordinary I had ever met. So close, in fact, that the memory made me flush with heat; the most I had previously experienced was gentlemen bowing down to kiss the air above my hand.

Even now, as I hastened through the corridors in pursuit of the Vandercould Call, that young man was taking up far too much of my thoughts. By the time I reached the portal for Silvercliff Hall, I had a new set of problems.

It was closed.

As I stared at the portal, perplexed, I noticed something even worse.

Rapid breathing told me it was standing right behind me.

‘This cannot be happening’, I murmured.

Nathan deftly ignored the grinding of my teeth. ‘What exactly is the point of staring at a bare wall in a building full of books? Wait, it isn’t bare. That’s the dreariest picture I’ve ever seen in the Bodleian. It is hiding a mouldy stain?’

Nathan reached out a hand towards the wonky frame, but I slapped his fingers. The man had some nerve.

‘Upon my soul, Nathan Hamsworth, you were supposed to wait outside on the steps until my return’, I said, harnessing every ounce of my patience, which was already wearing thin.

Shrugging his shoulders, Nathan pushed his hands into the pockets of his ridiculously short trousers. ‘True, you did say that. But I don’t remember agreeing.’

Seriously? My governess may have raised me to behave like a lady and maintain strict self-control, but I was sorely tempted to give this young man a thorough piece of my mind. If I had, dear Miss Forneyby would have turned in her grave.

‘There is no need for you to consent to my request, Nathan’, I explained calmly. ‘It would be best for you to do as I tell you.’

Apparently, my words had the same effect on Nathan as a kick to the shin. How stubborn could a person be? I could practically feel the heat of irritation radiating from him. Inexplicably, I found it extremely attractive, though I would not let it show at any price.

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‘You mean I should be a good little boy and obey your commands because you’re my superior, an Elevated?’ Nathan asked.

Obey me? Of course you should!

That would have been the right response, followed by an explosion of epic proportions. But I was a lady, and I had been taught that ladies do not explode. Think of dear Miss Forneyby, I reasoned with myself. Your governess always stressed the importance of exemplary behaviour. It is bad enough that you are unable to enter a common portal.

But I could not help it, looking Nathan up and down out of the corner of my eye.

He was sizing me up as well. He was clearly willing to leap into the fray.

Keep your composure, Emilia, I urged myself.

But with complete disregard for my excellent education – and I am truly sorry, Miss Forneyby – my mouth decided to run away with itself.

‘You really should follow my instructions, Nathan. What is more, you should be grateful to me. Not because of my self-importance, but because as an Ordinary, you walk through the world without a care and have not the faintest idea of the dangers from which the Elevated tirelessly protect you and your kind. So please, let me perform my duty in peace!’

I had grown so indignant that I almost hoped Nathan would go in for one of his eloquent ripostes. Then I would have a valid reason to finally lose my temper. What happened instead was unexpected. Nathan smiled, but with no humility whatsoever. I did not have much experience with young men, but this smile seemed to suggest that I were the impertinent one.

‘You clearly have an inferiority complex’, he said quite seriously.

‘I would not even know how to spell that.’

Nathan did not fall for my fib. ‘There’s no need to be embarrassed. Clearly, something’s not quite right with you – but what does it matter? You’re in good company there. I mean, the universe is full of mistakes. How else would you explain the existence of social media or liquorice ice cream?’ The only thing left for him to do was give me a patronising pat on the back.

‘Everything is well with me’, I grumbled.

Nathan wasn’t going to concede so easily. ‘Is it something to do with the wall you’re standing in front of with your fists clenched? Is it magical? Do you not know the trick to make it do its special thing?’

That was an astonishingly good guess. ‘It is a portal, and at home the staff are responsible for opening portals’, I admitted.

Of all the moments they could have chosen, this was when the portal keepers of Silvercliff Hall decided to walk through the wall.

Whatever Nathan was about to say, he forgot it. He was far too busy gawping at the portal keepers.

Ordinaries ... no manners whatsoever.