

SPARKS FLY

BIRDIE LYNN

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To anyone who could fill a bingo card with their most beloved romance tropes.

*And for those who've searched for queer spaces in a magical world
and been left wanting.*

“Hit me with your best shot, Pham.”

Mika Rivera aimed a devastating smile at Arthur as they circled the middle of the classroom, wands aloft. Their professor heaved a long-suffering sigh, drowned in the catcalls and whistles from the crowd of green blazers and cream sweaters around them. Arthur stifled a smirk and rolled his eyes. Enough was enough.

“Oh, no. You’re not going to break out into song, are you?” Arthur swiped his wand up in an arc, commanding the oxygen atoms in the air around him into a razor-sharp whip and snapping it in Mika’s direction.

Without blinking an eye, Mika shot his wand arm out to the side, cupping his palm. A small ball of flame materialized there, dropping the temperature in the room several degrees, consuming Arthur’s whip before it could strike true, sending the flame into a blaze.

“Not unless you go all-out *Dirty Dancing* on me.” Mika grinned, embers alight in his hazel eyes. “Come on, let’s do the lift. I promise I *definitely* won’t drop you.”

He cocked his arm back, swinging it in a couple circles for show before pitching the fireball back at Arthur. His showmanship cost him the element of surprise; Arthur had already gathered the moisture from the air to send a small tidal wave hurtling forward along the ground from behind him. It sluiced through the space between them.

“Sorry, am I in the right room? I’m here for the magic duel, not the

dance battle.” Arthur’s eyes watered, bone-dry, but he couldn’t complain as the wave doused Mika—and half the class—in its wake. He smirked at how closely his rival resembled a wet puppy, carefully mussed brown curls dripping down over his eyes as he pouted.

“Nobody puts me in the corner.”

Only further confirming the resemblance, Mika gave a great shake, dispelling the moisture back into the air as their classmates burst into a fresh round of cheers.

Professor Hirst, soaked to the bone, blinked his eyes with great patience. “So who can summarize for us what Mr. Pham and Mr. Rivera have demonstrated here, regarding how the four elements can be harnessed in our world at any given time—”

But someone’s voice in the crowd rose above the others: “Auto-graph my ass, Mika!” and Professor Hirst’s plea for order was lost to the din for the third time in as many minutes. Arthur had half a mind to feel guilty, but he could Sense the vibrations in the air around their professor. He was already going to give them outstanding marks—as always.

No longer under Arthur’s influence, the remaining water in the classroom excused itself, evaporating into the air. He rolled up his sleeves. “Is that really the best you can do, Rivera?”

Mika gave a derisive “ha” and leaned over. For a split second, Arthur thought he had dived into an elaborate curtsy, but then he saw Mika’s wand touch the floor. He braced himself as Mika rose, pulling up his wand slowly, meeting resistance as the floor started to rumble.

Professor Hirst grabbed his desk to steady it. “I swear, if you open up a hole in the ground again—”

But he was silenced as the entire desk seemed to deconstruct itself in double time, collapsing into wooden planks and then into logs which coalesced to form an entire tree, spontaneously sprouting up from the floor. Much of the same was happening to all the desks pushed back against the wall and soon the room more closely resembled a forest clearing than a classroom, save for the fluorescent lighting.

Their classmates roared and stomped their approval. Several students in the back clambered up into the trees to get a better view of the duel, but Arthur merely shifted his weight onto his left leg and crossed his arms, eyebrows raised.

Mika was grinning, devouring the praise. Arthur waited.

Finally, Mika's smile faltered. Arthur pursed his lips thoughtfully and looked up at the canopy of leaves above them, which were starting to shake. The students perched there hastily abandoned their posts as Arthur glanced at his watch, then back up at Mika.

"Ten seconds. Impressive. However, I do think Newton's about to have his say here."

Sure enough, the trees began to shake violently, and in the span of a single second they cycled through their construction all over again, de-materializing into logs, shaping themselves into planks, and constructing themselves back into desks with the nuts and bolts they'd abandoned on the floor.

Mika breathed hard, and Arthur sucked his teeth sympathetically. "I hear magical stamina is indicative of your stamina in bed. I wonder if that's true?"

Professor Hirst didn't even attempt to protest as the students launched into a chorus of jeers, louder than ever.

Undeterred, Mika shot Arthur a grin through the sweat. "Like you could last any longer."

Wordlessly, Arthur tapped his wand to an antique cherrywood chair beside one of the desks, closing his eyes as he pulled up his wand, bringing a blossoming cherry tree along with it.

Keeping his eyes closed, he willed some of his own energy into the tree, aiding it in its genesis. He extended his awareness to the breeze outside and invited it into the classroom. Cherry blossom petals drifted in the air.

Someone started counting. Arthur felt the chair's fatigue, felt its creaking, stubborn tendency to want to be a chair. He siphoned off a little more of his energy into it, encouraging it as the chorus of voices crescendoed to a climax. Just a little longer...

"Fifty-five, fifty-six—"

He was going to need a long nap after this spell, but after opening one eye to see the look on Mika's face...it was worth it.

"Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, *sixty!*"

Arthur lowered his wand as his classmates yelled, staunchly fighting the desire to lie face down on the floor. He winked at Mika.

"Newton's First Law: 'An object at rest will remain at rest unless *continuously* acted upon by an external force.' Read a book once in a

while; you might learn a few things. Although...” Arthur pocketed his wand and gave Mika a sympathetic look, relishing in how his jaw clenched. “Can’t really help you with the stamina thing.”

And even after three years of divination classes at Stonebury’s Conservatory for Young Mages, Arthur couldn’t possibly have predicted the impeccable timing of the class bell, chiming to signal the end of class in that precise moment.



“Fun show today. I think you might have topped the one on Monday.”

Arthur turned to find his coworker, Tan Fernando, calling up to him from the library floor. He twisted away from the bookshelf ladder to perch back against it, squinting against the sunlight streaming through the nearest floor-to-ceiling window.

“I’ll admit, I can’t turn down an opportunity to put Rivera in his place.”

“Never a dull moment with you two around.” Tan smirked.

Arthur lowered his wand, lowering the books he’d been re-shelving along with it. He’d used up enough energy for the day.

“He loves to put on a show, I’ll give you that.”

“Oh, please. You’re as into it as he is.”

Arthur narrowed his eyes at the condescending glint in Tan’s gaze. “Excuse me?”

“Just saying.” They shrugged. “I’d love to actually learn something in Evocation for once.”

Arthur rolled his eyes. “Take it up with Professor Hirst. He just can’t let the practical demonstrations go.”

Tan chuckled, and Arthur bristled. “Professor Lottie wanted me to tell you to head out after you’re done with that stack. Everyone’s hoarding their books for midterms, so there isn’t much left to do for today.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” Arthur saluted his classmate dryly as they walked away, turning back to the shelf to levitate his stack of books back up to eye level.

“Sweet, I’d been looking for that one.”

Mika had materialized, seemingly out of nowhere, to climb a

neighboring ladder and roll at high-speed to where Arthur stood. He snatched one of the floating books out of the air.

“Oh, would you look at the time.” Arthur glanced at his watch without looking at it. “We’re closing in...five minutes ago.”

“This is a twenty-four-hour library, ass.”

“Not sure if you were aware—” Arthur busied himself with returning a book to its proper place on the shelf— “but the library is for people who are, you know, literate.”

“I read,” Mika protested, cracking open the book he’d stolen as if to prove his point. It probably would have been a more emphatic argument if he hadn’t opened *Feminismagic: Everything We Learn Today is Thanks to Women* upside down.

“And I work.” Arthur returned the last book in his collection to the shelf. “Not all of our parents are employed by the biggest tech company in the magical world. Some of us have to innovate and work for our tuition, you privileged piece of shit.”

“You mean the frou-frou phone charms you’ve been handing out?” Mika adopted the Lithuanian flavor that so often wormed its way into Arthur’s speech. He started throwing the book up and down. “No offense hon’, but I think your side hustle would have more luck at Featherwood’s.”

“First of all, it’s called Auratech. Second of all, heteronormative much? And third of all, congratulations on proving my point that you don’t understand the value of hard work.” Arthur raised his eyebrows. “Pray tell, what did you do this summer? Catch a tan in *Miami*?” He tried his best approximation of Mika’s grating American accent in retaliation.

Mika tossed his book up extra high. “Nah, this brown beauty’s all natural.”

He offered a rakish grin that made his hazel eyes sparkle, honey skin gleaming in the sunlight, bare forearm flexing under a rolled-up shirtsleeve as he hung lazily from the ladder.

A spark of ire flashed hot in Arthur’s gut. He flicked his wand, and the book fell on Mika’s head; Mika tumbled down the ladder and onto the floor.

He rubbed his elbow where he’d banged it on the way down. “Fuck—”

“—off, I quite agree. Bye.” Arthur effortlessly slid down his ladder

and stepped over Mika to make his way over to the time-punch pad, leaving his mortal enemy grumbling swear words under his breath.

Arthur wasn't usually a competitive person.

Well, that wasn't true.

Arthur had learned to be competitive. After all, he'd had good reason for it: scholarships were hard to come by at Stonebury, and he'd secured every single one he could get his hands on. God forbid his GPA fall below a 4.0—his tireless hard work leading up to his last year at university would be all for naught. Mika's insufferable insistence on effortless achievement kept Arthur on his toes, fueling his fire to come out on top of someone who had so little regard for his wealth and social status.

Needless to say, Arthur relished leaving Mika behind in the dust. He tapped his wand to the crystal pad next to the time-punch machine, clocking himself out of his shift before doubling back to step right over Mika—still working his way up from the floor—on his way out of the library.



"Well, everyone," Professor Silverton announced as she passed out tests down the rows of students, "if these exams are anything to go by, you all have a lot of work ahead of you for midterms...except for a select few, who got *perfect* scores. Congratulations, and treat yourselves while everyone else studies their asses off."

Arthur's Sense pricked the hairs on the back of his neck, and he looked up to find Mika making a face at him from a few seats down the live-edge wood table spanning their row. He was holding up his test; Arthur seethed at the sight of the large 100 circled in red at the top.

He flashed his own 100 back at Mika alongside a careless, raised eyebrow before dismissing him in favor of gazing out the long windows behind Professor Silverton's desk, framed by seamless wall-paper featuring an abstract splotch of forest green watercolor. From this south-facing window, he could see where the island on which Stonebury stood gave way to the lake surrounding it. In his mind's eye, he walked down the cobblestone-paved pathway stretching over the water, bridging the school to the mainland across gentle waves and

leading into *Watergraafsmeer*—into the hip and upcoming block where he'd spotted the 'For Rent' sign in the shopfront on weekend trips into the city. While Professor Silverton rattled off areas of focus in Transmutation and engineering enchantments to work on for the midterm, Arthur lost himself in daydreams of buying the shop with meager savings to house Auratech, upholstering it in sleek metallics and sparkling lights designed to help his inventions throw light, drawing oohs and aahs from eager customers—

“Mr. Pham?”

Arthur was wrenched from his reverie.

“Sorry, Professor?”

“I was hoping you could demonstrate the wandwork required for number seven on the exam? About how kinetic patterns harness the energy of atoms for us to create magic?”

Arthur blushed, burying his nose in his exam, scanning the paper quickly. “Right, of course, I—”

“Please, Professor,” came an all-too-familiar voice, and Arthur knew he'd been half a second too late. “If I may?”

Instead of walking all the way around the long table, Mika sat on it and pivoted around to jump off, straightening at the front of the class. Arthur flushed deeper. *Showoff.*

“Like this?”

Mika pulled out his wand and arced it in a perfect Fibonacci spiral. The atoms in the air around his wand locked into place, glowing in a complex, intertwining pattern before dissipating harmlessly, unable to maintain the energy without organic material to cling to.

Mika shot a surreptitious wink at Arthur.

As Mrs. Silverton applauded, Arthur fumed. Engineering was his! *How dare he!*

Once Mika leapt over the table to return to the squashy armchair that was his seat, Mrs. Silverton began her lecture, and Arthur straightened. He wouldn't be caught off guard again. Having gone all out in the class before was no excuse.

“It is widely known that bismuth is the best conduit for Crystal-technology, but can anyone tell me why? Yes, Mr. Pham, go ahead.”

Arthur's hand had shot up before she finished the question, and he knew even before he heard his name it had been a fraction of a second ahead of Mika's. “The circuitry of man-made crystals allows us to

more finely manipulate the massive amounts of energy required to run Crystaltech, like catching the energy with a funnel and channeling it into very specific areas where it needs to go.”

“Well said, Mr. Pham. I expected no less from our resident crystal engineering tycoon.”

Arthur’s heart swelled.

“But Professor—” Mika’s hand was still up, and heat spiked in Arthur’s gut. He treated himself to a fantasy about launching down the table to strangle Mika. “What other crystals have been experimented with for Crystaltech use? Wouldn’t crystals with a higher capacity for storing energy—say, the versatile Clear Quartz—be better suited to handle such energy levels?”

Arthur couldn’t contain the contemptuous snort. “Right, if you want your laptop to blow up every time you turn on your Wi-Fi, sure.”

“I’m not saying we would use crystals straight from the damn forest, only that maybe there’s an opportunity for even more sustainable—”

“If it ain’t broke—”

“The only thing that’s broke in here is the broken record, and it’s you—”

“Why don’t you stay in your own lane—”

“Boys!” Professor Silverton lifted her hands, and the electricity of their debate fizzled out into silence. “I appreciate the passion, but why don’t we save discussion time for Seminar? And give Mr. Rivera more credit, Mr. Pham. We can never be so arrogant as to think the first right answer we find is the only one. We’re always learning and expanding our knowledge. If there’s one thing you should take away from your time at Stonebury, it’s that.”

She leveled Arthur with a stare before continuing her lecture.

Heat creeping up his collar notified him of Mika making another face his way from two artist stools and a shell-backed accent chair away, but he sank down further into his chintz armchair and kept his gaze resolutely forward.

God, he could not wait until Year Four was over. He’d outgrown the classroom setting.

And he’d give anything to outgrow his rivalry with Mika Rivera.

The bell couldn’t come soon enough. Arthur packed his bag and stood to leave before it even ended its trill, shooting past Mika to

speed out the classroom door. He retrieved his phone from his pocket as he ran through a mental checklist of things to do once he got back to his room: *Transmutation homework, hang new poster, call Ma, walk to town with Clarke and Jonathan to pick up Samhain ingredients—*

And speak of the devil: his friends were already in the group chat.

CLARKE

When are we meeting

Where are we meeting

JONATHAN

Why are we meeting

What are we meeting

CLARKE

PLEASE

JONATHAN

Lmao

See you back at the room

CLARKE

AAAAA

“Happy Halloween, Pham!”

Arthur raised his gaze to glare at Mika, who had that insufferable grin donned once more as he threw Arthur a salute, practically skipping past him.

“Fuck off,” Arthur called, returning his attention to his phone.

Clarke had sent several more panicked texts while he’d looked away. Arthur smiled and managed to shoot off a quick *‘I need a nap, my room in an hour’* before his phone lit up with an incoming call. Arthur frowned. It was a Stonebury area code.

“Hello?”

There was a cough and some rustling papers on the other line. The hairs on the back of Arthur’s neck stood up.

His intuition didn’t disappoint.

“Mr. Pham, I’m afraid I have some bad news.”

Arthur froze in his tracks, rooted to the spot in the middle of the courtyard.

Ms. Wells from the financial aid office cleared her throat on the other end of the line. “Mr. Pham?”

“Y-yes, sorry. What’s happened?”

“I’m calling because of an issue with your tuition check from this semester.”

His palms started to sweat.

“What kind of issue?”

“Well...” She hesitated. “We were unable to process it.”

“What does that mean, ‘unable to process it?’”

“It bounced,” Ms. Wells admitted.

Arthur’s heart skipped a beat. Two.

“Mr. Pham?”

“I’m here,” Arthur croaked.

“Right, well.” Ms. Wells cleared her throat. “We were a bit late in processing all the checks this semester, so you have some time to resolve the issue. We’ll need your payment by the end of next week.”

“Next week,” Arthur repeated, numb.

“Right,” Ms. Wells confirmed. “Shall I contact the sender of the check? A Ms...ah, your mother, Ms. Anh Pham?”

“No,” Arthur interrupted. “No, I’ll handle it myself. Thank you.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

“Alright then, Mr. Pham. You have a good day.”

“You too,” Arthur muttered before hanging up.

He stood, staring. Students done with class for the day—clad in greens and creams and ties and shimmering crystal lapel pins—now flooded the circular pavement of the courtyard laid into the expanse of succulents planted in the ground, spiraling out from where a bronze statue of the original Headmaster Elias Stonebury stood, wand aloft. Arthur was seized with the impression of glittering insects flitting to and fro in a garden, dancing in interwoven patterns as he tried to count his breathing. In-one, out-two, in-three, out-four...

Once he got to ten, he forced his legs to keep moving, raising his phone once more to call his mother.

He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but he still felt a flash of frustration when the phone rang five times, then went to voicemail. He shot off a text:

Call me back, financial aid said something's up with your check?

Think. Arthur paused on the east side of the courtyard to settle on a bench under a willow and tried to count his breaths again. *Think, think, think. How can I fix this?*

He called his mom three or four more times, to no avail. *How can I fix this?*

He shot off a text to his sister.

Where's Ma?

ANNABELLE

Annabelle: Work, picked up an extra shift. Why?

Just school stuff, no worries.

Arthur leaned his elbows on his knees and stared at his phone. *Think.*

It buzzed again.

MA

At work. I meant to tell you, the car needed work.....

But I thought the tuition checks got processed last month?

They're running behind this semester.

When should I tell them the check will go through?

MA

Well.....I saved up that money over summer to pay.

Will save up more, have it ready in a few months, could you pick up another work study shift.....

Arthur closed his eyes tight. How hadn't she realized the money had never been deposited? How had she forgotten his work study limit? How was this happening, why was this happening, what was he going to *do*?

I'm already doing the max amount; they need it by end of next week.

Maybe I could ask for an extension but not that long probably

It was five minutes before the reply came.

MA

I could pick up more shifts.....

Guilt roiled in Arthur's gut.

It's fine. I'll figure it out.

MA

I know you will son.....I love you

Arthur rested his elbows on his knees again, toying with the crystal charm on his phone, right leg bouncing. *Think*. His vision started to go fuzzy around the edges, and he could feel the warning

signs of an anxiety attack settling in, so he reminded himself to count his breaths, but he only got to five before his brain found more pressing things to think about—if his mom’s check had bounced, and his mom couldn’t make the payment in time *and* was already picking up extra shifts, he had to come up with the money himself, and *how was he going to come up with the money himself?* The cash he’d made selling the Auratech stock he created over the summer was only enough for spending money—not nearly close enough to how much was owed for tuition this semester—and there was no way he’d find the time to create enough charms to have the money ready by next week or even by the end of the semester. More financial aid was likely out of the question, too, because the incredibly stingy scholarship board had made exceptions for his outstanding performance the past three years to award him with a fifty-percent tuition credit, and he was already allotted the maximum amount of hours of work study students were allowed, but maybe he could find a part-time position in town on the weekends or after school. But then how would he have the time to study, to maintain his scholarship—

“Coming to the party tonight, Pham?”

Arthur’s runaway thoughts came to a grinding halt, stomach lurching at the sound of the very last voice he wanted to hear.

He shut his eyes resolutely, refusing to spare Mika a parting glance. “In your dreams, Rivera.”

“Don’t have a costume?” Mika didn’t seem to be getting the memo that Arthur wanted him as far away as humanly possible, because he strode to Arthur’s bench and flopped down next to him gracelessly.

“Don’t have a life?” Arthur shot back, staring at the blank screen of his phone.

Mika didn’t seem to have a comeback for this, and Arthur glanced up to find Mika’s eyes also on Arthur’s phone. He caught the tail end of an odd look on Mika’s face, accompanied by the uncomfortable pressure of Mika’s Sense attempting to extend into his personal space.

Arthur hurriedly siphoned off energy from his already-buzzing entirety to block him out.

It was over as soon as it began, and Mika course corrected into one of the seventeen shit-eating grins he had in his expression Rolodex.

“Don’t have a date?” Mika smirked, picking up where they’d left

off. “You know, staring at your phone won’t make them text back any faster.”

“Leave me alone before I reenact a different scene from *Dirty Dancing* with you,” Arthur snapped, fist clenching.

“Bye,” Mika said brightly, wiggling his fingers before finally, blessedly, making his exit.

“Jesus.” Arthur shook his head as a new wave of exhaustion washed over him from the emergency shutout. His phone vibrated once more in his hands, and his eyes flew to the screen.

He deflated. Just an email.

Stonebury Conservatory for Young Mages: Class Rankings Updated

Students,

The Year Four class rankings have been updated on the Stonebury student portal. Please note that the first in class, automatically awarded the title of Electi Magi, will be featured prominently during the graduation ceremony and will be eligible for the exceptional Elias Stonebury Grant, an exclusive, prestigious post-graduate fellowship. Those in the top ten slots will...

Arthur sighed, scrolling down to the end of the email and opening the link automatically. He already knew what he’d find.

He entered his student credentials to log in, and sure enough:

1. Michael Rivera 4.025
2. Arthur Pham 4.025

Mika’s full name—*‘Mee-kai-yel’*—burned too bright on his phone screen, taunted him in his mind, and left a bitter taste in the back of his throat. He tossed his phone onto his bag beside him, resting his head in his hands.

He’d been neck and neck with Mika for years—practically since the day they entered their first year of Stonebury at age thirteen. Inexplicably, despite getting identical scores on tests, assignments, and practical exams, Mika remained first in their class. Arthur knew it had to be purely bureaucratic—that the class ranking system probably didn’t allow for two students to share the number one spot. But it was

almost worse than the rote, automatic, absolutely neutral filing system had put Mika first. Hell, it wasn't even alphabetical—what kind of system was this? If only he could manage to secure the number one spot of Electi Magi, it would rocket-launch his post-graduation plans to success, especially if his mom would no longer be able to support him financially—

Arthur's eyes flew open.

He checked his phone. *Excellent.* A whole half-hour until office hours closed.

He propelled himself off the bench, hitching his bag over one shoulder and walking back through in the direction of the academic building, bypassing it for the administration hall.

He was going to fix this.