

I want to be the kind of person who explores. I want to be someone who pokes their head into open doors, and takes time to go down unused hallways. Who finds new routes to old destinations, and who has fun being places I haven't experienced before. When you meet someone like that, it's pretty clear that they're having a lot more fun than you, in general. The kind of person who finds their footing best on new ground is the kind of person who might get restless, but that's fine, because curing that restlessness is itself enjoyable to them.

Meanwhile, over in my broken brain, I get restless, and then panic about the simple prospect of going to a different Burger King than normal. And so for a lot of my life, I've stayed restless, and done nothing about it, because... because going to new places is terrifying.

You don't know where to stand, or who is or isn't okay to talk to. You don't know what order things go in. You don't know what's *expected* of you. There's so many unspoken rules in so many different places, and in my general lived experience, people get really shitty when you actually do ask questions and try to get them to speak those rules aloud.

Most of my major life changes have been because I was more or less forced to take whatever option was available. I'd stay in terrible living situations until they imploded and I *had* to move. I'd go to school until it ended not because I loved it but because switching majors or dropping out would be more painful than suffering through.

Hell, even here, I'd been kind of strongarmed into taking the scholarship to this place. No one had really explained or even *asked* really. Not in a way where a court of my peers would say I could give informed consent, fuck no. And yeah, I won't lie to myself, I want to go to wizard school. Magisterium, whatever. But having it jumped on me like that was painful.

Walking these halls now is painful. I'm trying not to fall over as I laboriously drag my luggage after everyone, and I'm trying not to have a breakdown as I fail to realize what pattern people are walking in and I keep almost running into other new students.

I don't even know what side of the hall to walk on. It should be the right side. People should walk like traffic. Or, like, it could be the left side and be English traffic. I legitimately don't care what side it is, I just want everyone to fucking pick one, agree to it, and then *tell me what I should do*.

The only thing holding me together is the fact that we're walking through what appears to be some kind of incredibly cozy ancient fantasy fortress, and our tour guide is talking about history. I have been trying to listen, but everyone between me and her won't shut the fuck up with their whispers and gross human noises, and I can't hear properly. I could get closer, but that would require plowing through a group of teenagers, and I am not emotionally equipped for that right now. It's been an overwhelming day, and I can ask about a lot of this later.

The walls around us as we walk are made of a kind of smooth stone. It shines in the light, but not even close to the same way the courtyard did. This just seems like rock with some speckled

quartz in it. The floor is I think marble, polished to the point that I'm pretty sure I could get a world record sliding across it in stockings, and that's kind of impressive if the whole place is like this. I wonder how they keep it clean.

The walls aren't bare. Magdera has been pointing out different bits of history as we've been passing them, and a lot of them are kind of neat, even if I don't know or care about the context. Broad tapestries and woven rugs, a lot of them wide enough that I could lay across them and have room to spare. Paintings, sculptures, even an orrery at one point. She has a small thing to say about a lot of them.

The lights overhead are globes of faceted crystal. I'm gonna ask about those, because they're all glowing in different colors, purples and greens and blues, but while I can see the colors of the crystals splashed across the stone up near where they're floating, by the time it gets down to us it just casts everything in a clean, warm, barely tinted light.

And more than the spots for art objects, which would just make the place look like a stuffy museum if that's all that was here, the walls contain *hundreds* of small holes, alcoves, and basins, all of which are overrun with greenery. Well, plants. A lot of them aren't green. There's something that looks like a radioactive blue fern growing out of a fountain, a whole thirty steps of wall covered in needle thin grey vines, a series of hand sized holes hollowed out and filled with potting soil to hold leaf capped red vegetables that poke the tops of their roots out. The halls are gardens, and it makes everything feel more colorful and alive.

I would appreciate it more if we hadn't been walking for almost a mile. The hallways twist and turn, never staying on straight lines for too long, and at this point, I would have no way of escaping if I got lost. It reminds me of driving into the suburbs without a map. Lose track of that main road, and you can go in circles for a long time without seeing a useful path out.

Our group stops in an intersection that feels more like a living room, what with all the couches and tables around, as Magdera stops just ahead of us and raises a robed arm to point at a roaring fireplace in the hall. She starts talking, and I really don't want to actually miss everything she's saying, so I creep closer and hope I don't offend anyone by getting too close.

"...a family flame." She's saying, as I whisper an apology to the kid who gives me a sideways look when I roll my suitcase up next to him. "Supposedly this is one of several throughout the campus that predates the Grand Magistium itself, though none are used for spellcraft anymore. An artifact of an old way of doing things, now obsolete, and yet somehow resplendent, isn't it?" She pauses, and the teenagers made nods and hums and appreciate gestures.

I don't. I can't. I've hit my limit, that point at which I am too tired to listen to my anxiety.

"Sorry, what's a family flame? I dunno. Sorry if you said this before, but I can't really hear shit back here." The words tumble out of my mouth, to the beating of my heart in instant regret for speaking out.

But if the Middle Witch cares that I'm using profanity in her musume, then she doesn't show it. "Excellent question." She says instead, nodding her bald tattooed head at me in a single sweeping motion that makes me feel like she actually means that. "A family flame is a form of *old* witchcraft. From before the Magistium was founded, long before the Codification." Unbelievable. I can hear the proper nouns. "The practice is simple, in theory. Light a fire, infuse it with your mana. Keep it lit, keep it going. The fire is not for you. It is for the next witch. Or perhaps the one after. Or perhaps one five hundred orbits long after you are buried. A family flame is a gamble that the future will need your power more than you need it in the moment." Magdera's voice sounds religious as her eyes stare at the roaring flame licking at the stone arch of the fireplace. "It is to offer, without being asked. To reach out, when uncalled."

I stare into the fire with her, standing at the back of a group of teenagers who don't seem to give a shit about the weight of what she's just told us. I have to lean on my suitcase and stand on my tiptoes to see over some of the heads, but I can see it. The fire is... just a normal fire.

And yet. There's something there. Something more than heat and chemical reaction.

"Why'd they stop making them?" I ask. I'm not speaking in front of a group now, I'm having a conversation with this one woman. This is easy.

Magdera doesn't sigh, doesn't make any noise of discontent at all. And yet, I *know*. Her demeanor snaps from reverent witch to distant tour guide once more. "As I said, they became obsolete. Too little power, too slowly. No benefit for those making them. The ones here are only kept around because they are self sustaining at this point, and they produce more benefit heating the student towers than being siphoned into personal spellworks."

The information crashes over me like a bucket of cold water. I guess wizards suck too, huh? Everywhere you look, the people with power want more power, and the people without...

I look at the flame again, feel it stir against my heart, and I am pretty sure I'm looking at a trophy looted from a long ago ended war.

This place doesn't feel so warm anymore.

"This space is a public area." Magdera continues in her tour guide voice without pausing to respect the vibe I'm feeling. "Though being as it is within a student living tower, it will predominantly be occupied by other students of your class. Your group has been issued the fifth floor of this tower, which has its own private open space, as well. Accommodations for hygiene and rest also exist on your own floor." She says, as if she has somehow become alienated to the idea of 'using the bathroom'. "Are there any questions, before I show you to your rooms, and leave you to settle?"

A girl in front of me raises her hand timidly. She looks like she's from Cali, and has the tan to prove it. "I thought there'd be dorms or something? Like, boys and girls sides?"

Magdera snorts in a manner so derisive, I'm surprised the poor girl stays standing. "The Grand Magistium Academy has neither the time nor inclination to manage the trivialities of its new students in such a manner. Should you wish to self organize by gender, that is your own prerogative as a living group."

Another boy raises his hand but doesn't wait before he starts speaking. "What about food? Where do we eat? We don't even know what's in this tower! I didn't even know we were *in a tower!*"

"Food will be provided on your floor at meal times, or can be sought out at any of the many establishments on the campus." Magdera states. "Many will require payment, however, so you may wish to become accustomed to tower food for the time being. You will not be starved; hunger impedes normalized mana flow." She sighs. "Your orientation will continue over the next few days, including information on directions around the local area of campus. However for now, do not leave this tower. It is your initiation area, and until you are fully accepted as true students, it would be unwise to wander."

I have questions about that. Actually, a lot of people have questions, and a lot of them don't hesitate to start mouthing off to the lady who I swear can throw fireballs. I haven't seen her do it, I just know she can, and it's both terrifying and hot. I keep my mouth shut, because I do not want my questions answered more than I want to find a bed and put my stuff away.

Magdera stands like an island against the waves, ignoring everyone asking stupid questions about where they're allowed to go or when classes start or a bunch of other things. Meanwhile, I look around the common area, and notice that the space is actually wider now that I'm inside it than it appeared when we were walking toward it and it just seemed to be a normal intersection. Which is *cool*, but going to make maps a living hell, I bet.

In the five corners of the room, what I had initially thought were fat columns made for the vibrant green ivy to grow on, reveal themselves to be spiral staircases as I tilt my head and look at them from different angles. Each of them has a pattern of those light crystal balls floating by them, though the one I'm looking at, only two are lit.

I realize as Magdera refuses to say anything else that we're being tested. Part of me wants to sag in exhaustion, because I'm really tired of everything in my life coming with a price tag of being patronized. But part of me has already figured this out.

Fifth floor, right? Great. The staircase with five lit globes. I pop the handle of my suitcase out with a mechanical ratcheting click, and start rolling it over there. I pretend I can feel Magdera smirking at me.

This place is an amazing, intricate, glorious puzzle box, and I'm going to find the wizard that decided there should be spiral stairs and *no ramps* and knee them in the balls.