

Eleven thirty PM is a weird time to be working in a convenience store.

There's a lot to do, but functionally, there is no motivation to actually do any of it. After all, the people who were here before me didn't finish their job, and stuck me with a lot of catchup, so why should I return the favor when I get paid minimum wage to be sexually harassed by gross dudes who want to buy cigarettes instead of taking a shower? For ten hours, every day.

I mean, I like to think I'm a good person. I'm not, like, shitting in the doughnut display or anything. I'm just being a slacker at work because minimum wage is *barely* enough to make me show up, and certainly not enough to make me give a fuck.

In the abstract, I understand that if everyone did a little more, that society would be better. Kinder, nicer, whatever. But I have met my ethereal coworkers who largely exist in the hours before I arrive at work, and I don't want to be the first person to *try* to do more, only to abruptly learn that no one else cares.

I work almost sixty hours a week, don't get paid overtime because my boss lies on his taxes, and can only barely afford the combination of rent, student loan payments, medical bills, and utility costs. And yeah, food isn't on that list. I steal a lot of food. Though not from work; and not out of some master plan or anything. I just want to eat some fucking vegetables sometimes, and living on candy bars and bags of air with a few chips at the bottom isn't going to get me there.

I'm tired. All the time. I'd start a revolution with an opening salvo of bricks through plate glass windows, but I'd just rather sleep and not think about the grim fact of how I'm qualified to be an English teacher.

Meanwhile, in the present. Eleven thirty is a nice time to be here. Ten is basically the cutoff time for people with real jobs going home, so the string of battered Hondas and shiny pickup trucks that have never seen conditions more dire than a slightly pothole filled street cut off from my parking lot. And midnight is the start of when the worst sort of people start wandering in. But now? I've got one dude in a black leather jacket who stops by every three days to get a single candy bar, and that's it for the whole hour.

I sit behind the counter, and look at cat memes on my phone. I have a book on here that I started reading, but the idea of trying to learn anything right now makes my brain recoil and my uneducated ADHD try to strangle me. Emotionally. And also possibly physically; I don't want to dictate to my brain chemistry how to act, but if it is trying to physically strangle me it's not doing a very noticeable job.

This is when the wizard walked in.

I feel like I might need to revise my assumption that eleven thirty at night is a time somehow magically devoid of weirdos, and rephrase it to a time devoid of all non-magical weirdos.

It's also important, I think, to mention that I live on Earth? Like, I work at a Plaid Pantry. My life is mundane, which is, you know, *kind of a problem*, but wizards aren't really a daily occurrence that I have interactions with. Because they aren't real.

Monsters are real. But just the boring kind of monsters; murderers and rapists and landlords and stuff. Not, like, chupacabras or yeti or anything cool. Just boring human war criminals.

And yet, a wizard has just walked into the convenience store.

Now, first thought. "How do I know that he's a wizard, and not just a dude in cosplay?" And the smart answer is that there's just something *off* about how he looks around, how he carries himself. I mean, yeah, there's a thick staff made out of some kind of subtly rust colored wood, and the... well, they're not really robes, exactly. It's like a mix between leggings and a sort of half-skirt, with a heavy emphasis on the cowl? It's a hell of a fashion statement, and it's also a dark blue that really pulls in the eye, with gold lines across it that give off a flat reflection of the burning fluorescent lights of the store. I'm not gonna lie, though; I'm a bit disappointed there's no big hat. I feel like a wizard should have a big hat. But maybe that's just a childish desire to go back to being a kid and reading badly written fantasy books for the first time.

The man's eyes shine with bored curiosity as he sweeps them around the interior, before they land on me behind the counter, staring at him, probably with my mouth hanging open. He makes a small twisting motion with his off hand, and quirks an eyebrow on his irritatingly perfect face.

Now, my mouth is probably hanging open because there's also the fact that, instead of using the door, he stepped out of a linear algebra tear in space somewhere in the middle of the chips aisle.

Some people would say that going off that piece of evidence is making an assumption, or cheating, so I listed all the other wizard-esque things first.

Also, and I cannot believe this is the second thought I have, holy fuck dude, I'm going to have to clean up all those goddamn chips. You absolute twat, if you can teleport into a Plaid Pantry, you could at least not cut the fucking chip aisle in half when you do it! There are chips *all over the floor!* I can smell the artificial barbeque powder from here, it is seeping through my mask, and I am dying in retail hell.

I can put that second thought aside though, because there is a wizard walking over to me, and there's no way in hell that I'm going to ask him to pay for the chips when it's highly likely he could fireball me.

Although now that I think that, I remember that my exhausted self-loathing and lack of ability to resonate with how dangerous my current situations are has led me to be belligerent to at least two different people who had me at gun point. And this isn't really that different.

"You're going to need to pay for that." I tell the motherfucking chip-smashing wizard as he approaches the register, point over at the trail of destruction and smashed potato particles he's stomped into the filthy white linoleum floor.

The wizard *smirks* at me, and is disgustingly handsome while doing so. I've read enough to know not to stereotype, but I legitimately expected that if I ever met a wizard they'd be more Gandalf and less... has Tom Cruise ever played a wizard? This guy has a face people write horny poetry about, is my point.

"You are..." the wizard pauses oh so briefly, and then says something that takes me from amusingly belligerent to actually angry *real* fast, "Tyler Hall, yes?"

"Sarah." I correct the wizard with a cold voice. "And why do you even know that?"

He raises his eyebrows, and lets out a silent 'ooooh', twisting his hand again in that pattern he used when he arrived. "Ah, I see. My apologies." Every word he says sounds aristocratic, and therefore not to be trusted, but at least he *did* apologize right off. "Miss Hall... miss, yes?"

"Just Sarah is fine." I'm talking to a wizard. What is going on here? "What's going on here?" Might as well get it out of the way. If I'm being arrested by the wizard police, now's the time to find out.

"Miss Hall, I have arrived to offer you the opportunity of a lifetime. Your unique bloodline affords you the status of potentiate, and the Grand Magistium Academy wishes to extend to you the offer of education at our prestigious institution." He looks down his nose at me, which is not hard because he is over six feet tall and I cap out at just above five when I'm standing up straight because a doctor ordered me to. "Should you accept, you will have a place among the elite of our world, unraveling the secrets of reality, and expanding your own power beyond what you could possibly know as a..." he looks around the building. "Mortal." He settles on, sounding almost sad.

I stare at the pompous asshole in front of me. "I have student loans already." I say, voice cracking.

Because this obviously isn't happening. I'm probably hallucinating or something. Maybe I OD'd on... uh... what's in Dr. Pepper? Does it have cinnamon? I bet you can OD on cinnamon.

A wizard is inviting me to wizard school, and I just said I have student loans. What the fuck am I doing? I drag myself back together. "But seriously, I can't afford... anything, dude. Nice to know I've got nice genetics or whatever, but there's no way I can go back to college." Jesus

fucking Christ, what is coming out of my mouth? Is this how far into the ground I've been driven? Maybe I really have already given up on life. I bet wizard school would be worth some more loans. Is there financial aid for wizard school? I barely notice the guy mouthing the word 'genetics' back to himself as he puzzles over what I'm talking about with that same bored curiosity.

He *sniffs* at me, glancing between the grimy glass and metal of the front door and the gurgling hiss of slightly damaged machinery in the automated coffee machine. "Obviously." He states, like my poverty is just a matter of fucking course. "We are prepared to offer a form of scholarship."

"A form of?" I try not to sound too suspicious, because this is a lifeline, and I don't want to drive off the motherfucking wizard throwing it to me.

He leans against his staff, shoulder pressing into the wood that he is no longer holding onto while he crosses his arms and the stick supports his weight like... I mean, magic I guess. "I am simply the messenger extending the offer, the full details would be for you to review at your own leisure. However, your education would be provided at cost in either currency or service. This, of course, is due to the generosity of the Four Great Lineages who have seen fit to set up this scholarship."

"I... look, dude, I don't wanna be a jerk here, but you're leaving a ton of blank space. There's stuff outside money and work, right? What am I supposed to do to get this scholarship?"

The chiseled jawed wizard smiles at me with all the compassion of the guy who sells me weed hearing that I got my paycheck for the week. "Why, simply accept, of course." He says.

"Accept what?"

"Accept the scholarship. It is an important part of the spellwork of the generosity that participants be willing, obviously." This motherfucker really likes saying 'obviously', doesn't he? "You simply need to agree to attend, and then do so. That is the cost. Additionally, should you fail to suitably complete an education, you will owe the true cost back again."

Well that's... I mean, I guess that's not unreasonable. A scholarship that actually requires you to go to school is basically just every scholarship ever. And, like, the dude did teleport into the building. I feel like I can't overstate that. Magic is real, and I've been handed a ticket to learn it.

So why do I feel so weird about this? It's not just the wizard apparently having my legal name on file and being confused about misgendering me. Or, you know, how fucking sudden the whole thing is. There's something creeping me out about this guy.

"Can, like, I take a couple days to think about this?" I ask.

The wizard's face darkens, and he shakes his head with a sad smile. "I'm afraid the magic that sustains the scholarship must be replenished regularly. If not you, then there are other candidates I can find, but I will have an answer within the candle." He says. "Ah, within the hour, for you." Thanks, dipshit, seven years of college and I never once learned how people used to use candles to keep time.

My stomach churns. I am so bad at making decisions, and it only gets worse when I'm put on the spot. And this guy is offering... what, being a wizard? Witch? Actually, that's kind of import- no, wait, it's not fucking important at all. Magic is real, who gives a flying fuck what I'll be called?

I do, I guess. "So, like, I get to be a witch?" I ask, stalling for time and trying to not sweat too much.

The wizard gives a small shrug. "If that is the path you wish to pursue. It seems you have some knowledge of our educational programs already, which may give you an advantage over other outside bloodlines." God, you could not have chosen a less reassuring sentence. "Of course, there are many different paths of study, and you are not bound by any one title or working."

Oh. Wait, I can just switch majors whenever? They just let you do that?

I want to scream. Wizard college is now even more appealing than normal college ever was.

I want to say yes. I want it, I want it, I want it. I could do magic, be a witch, or a *whatever*. I could... just be anywhere but here. Maybe I can abandon the normal world altogether. No more shitty job, no more debt, no more living in the most bigoted region of the US possible. I could just be *gone*, and also learning how to blow shit up with my mind.

But I can't make the word come out of my mouth. Because it's new, and terrifying, and at least I know what kind of misery to expect from my daily life. It's a predictable hell, and that goes a long way. But the tall man in the half-robe-half-uniform-thing gives a slight shrug at my indecision, turning to move back to where his weird portal is still bleeding breaking space onto my fucking chips. "Well. I do not have much time to wait. There are other candidates. Enjoy your evening, miss Hall." He says.

No. Fuck it. Fuck this.

*It literally cannot get any worse.*

"Wait!" I gasp out. "I'll do it! Yes! I accept!"

He pauses, and looks back. "Oh? Very well." He walks back to the register, holds his staff sideways and lets go of it to let it float in the air between us in a casual violation of physics. Then, in another one, he grips a small part of the wood and peels off a scroll of paper, fully

covered in lettering I don't recognize. Like what a fantasy author would think 'runes' meant, really. He places it on the counter, seeming disdainful of covering up the dirty plexiglass showing off lottery tickets with his precious wizard paper. "Place your hand here." He indicates a circle in the middle. "And speak your agreement. Be specific, that you are accepting the scholarship grant. This is to avoid ambiguity. You are choosing your destiny, after all."

My hand trembles, but I set it on the paper. He doesn't seem to give a shit about the fingerless gloves I'm wearing, so I don't bother taking them off, which is good, because I would probably take ten minutes and fumble them. "I accept the scholarship to the Grand Magistium Academy on the condition of full coverage in exchange for academic success." I say, getting a small sigh from the dude who probably never had to deal with a real lawyer in his life. But it doesn't matter. The paper under my hand lights up with a blinding red flare of fire, and I almost jerk back, but find I cannot move my arm.

A second later, the light show is over. "Very good." The man says, snapping the scroll closed around his staff, paper melding back into the wood. "You will have ten days allotted to gather what possessions you wish to bring with you. Room and board are of course provided..." holy shit, I didn't even think about that. Wait, I get to live in a fantasy dorm and they'll feed me? *Lead with that next time, you motherfucker.* "...and the beginning of the practical academic year will be one week after your arrival."

"W-wait!" I stammer out. "How do I arrive?!"

He sighs, stopping just outside his portal, kicking aside an open bag of Fritos and fucking up the floor even more. "As I said. In ten days, you and your designated possessions will be brought across. You have a weight limit of one..." he pauses, and flicks his hand, fingers moving in an odd pattern, before he looks back at me, "a weight limit of two hundred and five pounds. Do not exceed it, or you may perish during transit."

Oh my god, wizards don't have OSHA. I'm going to die.

He stops with one hand through his portal, not bothering to look back, speaking up to be heard through the noise of the breach. "You've made the right choice miss Hall. I'm sure you'll do magnificently." And then, he's gone.

I have ten days, before I get teleported to wizard college.

And... the floor is covered in crushed chips.

At least he didn't teleport out of a fridge. If he'd cut a bunch of beer cans in half for me to clean up, I would have shot him.

