

I wake up in a strange place, and immediately start to panic.

It takes me longer than I'd like, thrashing the blankets off and rolling to the floor on all fours in my underwear, to remember where I am.

Insomnia is a real problem for me, which should come as no surprise. It's more of a problem when I need to be up at 'normal' hours, and can barely make it through the tour of a wizard school before I have to crash.

Sometimes, not even terrified excitement is enough to keep me up. Which is a shame because I think I'll be experiencing a lot of that here.

Once I started climbing the stairs last night, everyone else followed me, and we found our 'floor'. I need to be clear about this, because it's kind of bullshit, but it's also exactly the kind of magical-mundane bullshit I'm going to need to get used to; this tower is very large, and yet, every staircase is exactly one flight of stairs to get to the destination floor.

I don't know how that works, I assume I will eventually learn how that works when I take a 400 level magical architecture course, and now that I've had that thought, I *kinda* want to go for that?

Oh fuck me, I've done it again. I've gotten into college without declaring a major. What am I fucking doing with my life. I'm gonna end up with another english degree aren't I?

I'm still on the floor. Okay. This is uncomfortable, and my head is clear enough. I take a deep breath, and push myself up, and suddenly have the fresh mundane terror that I am mostly naked in a room I'm sharing with someone I don't know.

Our tower floor is a ring of rooms on the outside, with a hallway that leads around to a few different long hall entrances into the public area that is the center of the floor, and also more direct doors that go to baths, a small kitchen, and a shared library.

The library is empty, for now. The public area also has a big double door made of some kind of quartz that leads to a balcony. I cannot express how fucking weird it is to go deeper into a building, and get to a balcony on the outside of the building.

As the first one up here last night, I got first dibs on a room, and I didn't really bother being picky. They're all different, and I don't care. Mostly, I kind of had this nagging feeling that there was going to be more people than rooms, and my socialized defense mechanism kicked in.

If I'm gonna have to share a room with someone, I'm gonna fucking force them to ask *me*, not the other way around. I've already gotten some weird looks from the other potential students here, either because I'm kinda older than all of them, or because of my gender, and I can think of basically nothing short of physical non-consensual torture that I'd rather go through than trying to get someone to actually agree to room with me.

The girl who is rooming with me is named Tai. She's way too energetic, and I can already feel my introvert nature eroding in her presence, but she's also legally allowed to drink in the states, which makes her way more comfortable to be around than an actual literal teenager.

She was trying to get me to trade nail polish tips with her while I was trying to awkwardly figure out where I wanted to shove my suitcase so I could sleep. She's... nice? I guess she's nice. I don't really do nail polish, but Tai's nice.

Have you ever been in a room and thought "this doesn't feel normal"? I got the impression once when I went to a museum in Colorado and walked through a recreation of a Midwest home from the early 1900s. A lot of stuff was recognizable, but everything was so... off. Less space, different furniture styles, features like stairs in different places than they should be. It was so obviously a home, even if it was a historical relic. But it was also a home that I had never lived in the like of, never seen anything close to before.

This shared bedroom is that. The beds are a sort of offset bunk bed kind of setup, but with the top one accessible via a ramp as the back of the room is kind of raised off the floor anyway. There's a desk up there, and a desk down here, and a single large armoire near the door, with an encircling brigade of cabinets to store the rest of our stuff in.

It's the bunk bed that's giving me the most confusion here. And I think it's because it's just not built for a human. Or if it was, it was built with a style that had evolved totally differently to what I was used to. Who, really, would want a smoothed stone bowl to put their mattress into?

My money is on this being some kind of merfolk type of bunk bed. Which is all at once hilarious and impressive. Imagine being a mythical creature of the sea, and still inventing bunk beds when you went to an overland wizard school.

I have taken the top bunk. It's comfortable, has enough space for me to stretch out, and is really lonely.

It *also* means that when I said I rolled onto the floor on all fours, what I meant is that I just bruised my palms and split open one of my knees.

I pull myself up, trying not to hiss in the dark, and realize that there's no one on the bottom bed. It's still dark in here, thanks to the blackout curtains that Tai had in her suitcase, but the edges of a golden light are peaking through the gaps of our window, and it seems like it's more morning than I expected. I must have slept for a while.

I don't feel particularly rested. I feel on edge. I'm somewhere weird, and I'm getting more and more the feeling that something is *off*. But it's way too late to turn back now.

There's no lights, another thing to get used to, so I just open the curtain to see what I'm doing. Outside, a cloudy sunrise sparkles off of a landscape of towers and stone walls, organized streets and amphitheaters, lecture halls and classrooms.

We're on, *presumably*, the fifth floor. I can already see enough, just from this height, to tell that when they said this place was an academy, what they meant was that it's a *city*. A whole city, dedicated to learning and teaching magic.

At least, that's what Magdera said. I think she was trying too hard to sell it.

Tai's left me a note on the door, a little yellow sticky note that just says 'breakfast!' on it with a smiley face. Breakfast sounds incredible. The last thing I had was... uh...

Half of Horn's ramen, yesterday?

Thinking of Horn brings a new type of pain. One that makes the physical ache in my hands worse, not easier to ignore. But my stomach overrules all of them as I catch a whiff of something edible from outside.

Getting ready to go out takes some time, but I rush it. Brush the tangles out of my hair, remember not to put it into a ponytail; it's better when it covers more of me, these days. Get dressed, quickly, because who knows when a roommate might come back; pick neutral clothes, pants instead of the skirt I like, just because I don't know anyone here enough to be that comfortable. Look with forlorn dread at the last dregs of makeup in my armory, and choose to skip smoothing the lines of my face today.

I put on my cracking black leather jacket, covering up the tattoos and scars of my arms. Armor. It's always been armor, but now I'm in a fantasy world, so it might mean something different.

And with that, there's nothing reasonable aside from my own bubbling anxiety to keep me from going out to get breakfast.

I push the door open, the carved wooden panel sliding with considerable effort into a small gap as it slides to the side, and I step out into the hallway. I wish the door had a lock.

The hallways here are pretty easy to technically not get lost in, but I imagine I'll probably spend at least a few total hours looping past where my room is on the ring, and doing extra circles, over the course of the next term. But the public space, which I am adamantly refusing to even think of as a common room, is easy to find. Just circle the wheel of the tower until I find a spoke that isn't a bathroom or kitchen, and follow it inward.

Breakfast is a buffet that has already been ransacked by thirty overeager teenagers. Which is to say, it's the best food I've had in a very long time. I get a fluffy roll and a tiny glass jar of what I assume is some kind of jam, and a few broken slices of a bacon-ish meat. I want to just call it

bacon, but I'm more than a little suspicious that pigs don't exist here. I also want to know where this food came from, but I was asleep, so I missed it getting set up. I'll figure that out later. Insomnia assures me that I'll be around for it at some point.

There's nowhere to sit, I realize as I turn to sweep the room. There are, perhaps by design, not enough seats at different tables for anyone to eat alone. There's the big doors to the patio, one of which is propped open somehow, letting in a cold morning breeze, and showing off the kids sitting out there to eat. They point to different stuff around the landscape, chattering excitedly. But I don't really have a place to sit myself.

Tai waves me over exuberantly, a smile on her face, and I suddenly sag in relief as I realize I have an extrovert for a roommate to use as a social shield. All I need to do is not fuck this up, and I can coast through situations like this until I get comfortable.

"Joy morning!" Tai says to me as I settle in to the bumpy padded chair with my plate. "You slept a *lot*."

I mutter something incoherent and add a slice of meat to my mouth. It is chewy and I think overcooked, but also the best thing I've eaten in a month, and I savor it. While chewing, I look at Tai, and decide to not worry about asking her questions. "Hey, what's up with the greeting?" I ask. "Like, is that just a normal thing for here?"

She gives me a look, tilted head and raised eyebrows, bronze skin tightening around her widened eyes like pools of curiosity. "I don't... think I'm from here?" Tai says. Not slowly, but like she starts saying something then realizes she wants to say something else mid sentence, chopping off her own words when it's convenient. "I'm from California!"

Okay, that's weird. "So, is the greeting, like, a personal thing? Or a religious term? Wiccan or something?" I for some reason get the feeling that I'm putting my foot in my mouth, even though I am pretty sure this is a normal conversation.

"It's an English thing." Tai says. "Oh! I'm sorry, are you from somewhere else? You speak English really well, for someone who has it as a second language!"

I have a masters degree. I am devastated on a level beyond what I knew was humanly possible. I am going to need skin grafts to undo the effects of this unintentional burn. "Okay, so," I decide to not touch on how demolished my ego is, "most people just say good morning?"

"What?" Tai looks confused. "No?" She turns to the rest of the table, the two boys and one girl I've been trying to ignore who have left a gap between the two of us and their little group like we're back at middle school trying to share cafeteria benches. "Hey guys! What do you say to someone you're meeting in the morning?"

When I was a teenager, there was a weird perception of a barrier in ages. Someone a few years older was cool, someone beyond that was old. I'm *old*. Tai's cool. Tai gets to ask the questions, I decide. Now she's my shield and my statistical modeling sword.

"Uh... we say good morning?" One of the boys says.

The girl rolls her eyes at him. "You say fine sunrise, you lout."

"I say kind morning, like a normal person." The boy shoves a half a roll into his mouth as he talks.

Tai asks where they're from. They're all from the west coast of the US, somewhere.

"Okay, that's... weird." I say, brain still waking up. "That probably means something."

Tai looks at me with a curious smile. "I think it means no one knows how to say joy morning." She tells me. "Now! Are you excited? We get to explore today!" Jesus, she's so happy about this. Like a puppy, only with better table manners. "Some of the boys already chased off after a ghost lynx. Who knows what we'll find!"

"Aren't we supposed to get guidance counselors to set up our class schedule or something?" I ask. "Or is this a 'read the course guide and figure it out' kind of college?"

"Oh, you missed the Middle Witch. We have three days to explore the tower, before we will be choosing our formal classrooms." Tai says. I make a mental note. Then I decide not to do that, and pull out my phone to make a real note. "What in the world is that?" Tai asks.

"Really old model iPhone, because I can't afford to upgrade." I say. "It still works though. No wifi here, obviously." Also no power plugs, anywhere. I'm gonna need to see about getting that solar battery set up in our shared window. I look up as I pocket my phone. "Sorry, hang on, did you say *ghost lynx*, or was I not... what?"

Tai leaned in toward me, long sleeves of her bright blue sweatshirt dragging across the table between us. "We're in wizard school, Kara!" She exclaimed. "Wizard school, with wizard things! We can be scholarship wizards!"

"Sarah." I corrected. But, like, a different correction than normal. Kind of refreshing. But her words bring up another concerning thought that I'm really not looking forward to voicing. "So, you're here on scholarship too?" I ask, trying to keep it casual.

I feel like I'm being stupidly paranoid. I feel like I should just shut up, and enjoy being at wizard school like Tai obviously is. But the voice in my brain that keeps me safe by reminding me that people are often violent untrustworthy monsters is trying to get my attention.

Tai nods. "Of course! I think a lot of us were." She looks around at the excited kids lazing after breakfast, the crowd thinning out as they leave in twos and threes to go poke around with their friends. A glance draws my attention to the kids at the end of the table who are huddled conspiratorially. "Are you three here on scholarship too?" Tai asks cheerfully.

The girl nods idly while not really paying attention, her and one of the boys looking at a piece of paper they have between them on the table. The other boy spares them a glance, then actually turns to engage in conversation like a normal person. "Yeah, I got in because of my lineage. I didn't even know magic was real until a week ago!" He gets distracted by one of his friends, and the three of them go back to whispering over their scroll or whatever.

Tai turns back and shrugs at me as I inhale warm bread, and try to ignore the fact that the jam I put on it is some kind of indescribable sensation that tingles my tongue and makes me feel like I've just eaten something from a world that never invented sugar but *did* distill the base nature of sour into a condensate and then used that to make breakfast spread. She giggles at my face, and I feel a flush of red across my cheeks from morbid embarrassment.

Briefly, I consider if I could bolt out of the room before she could say anything. I know this is stupid and petty and not important, but there's too many people around and I kind of want to just leave. Maybe go wander the tower. If nothing else, the sudden blush on my face has distracted me from whatever concerning thought I have about the nature of our seemingly group wide scholarship program.

I mumble something stupid through my mouthful of bread, and Tai's face turns sympathetic. "I'm not making fun at you!" She quickly says, not really making me feel better in the moment, but at least letting the part of my brain that functions properly know that she's an okay person. "Do you wanna go explore the tower?" She asks, possibly out of some kind of social obligation. "It looks like you're done with breakfast!"

I am done with breakfast. It wasn't much breakfast, but I didn't have to make it, and it was hot, which counts for a *lot* in my life.

And I would like to explore. I was planning on going off alone, and just taking a quiet walk, but the way Tai is looking at me, I probably won't say no. I think she might also be feeling the sting of being the only other person out of their teens around here.

"Sure." I say, rising to my feet and trying to figure out what to do with my empty plate. "Hey, did you notice that our bunk beds are made for merfolk or something?"

"I was thinking the same thing! Maybe there's a spell to give us fins!" Tai is way too excited about that.

I smile anyway, and follow her out to go see what this place has to offer.

