

There was a feeling that came about from being on family vacations, once I hit an age that could charitably be described as 'adulthood'. As a kid, vacations were extra days off school, going to weird places and seeing weird things. But as an adult...

Vacations became something more like a chore. An obligation. I felt like I had to go, like I couldn't say no, because my parents made it abundantly clear in a lot of small ways that if I did say no, they'd stop cosigning on my student loans. And what, exactly, was I supposed to do with no teaching credentials stuck halfway to an english degree?

The feeling this led to was one where I would find myself in a hotel in a foreign nation, dependent on people who were hostile to me for any kind of money, dressed in a way that made my skin itch, my normal life interrupted, *waiting*. Waiting is a special kind of hell, really. Especially for someone who has become connected to her phone and suddenly needed to justify the twenty money-unit fee per day to use the wifi.

I'd just sit there. Or walk loops of the resorts my parents loved for some reason. Going around and around the courtyards and swimming pools, not ever having the wherewithal to join in on anything I saw going on, just killing time. Perpetually a little bit on the outside. Watching the clock run down, begging for the moment I got tired enough to sleep and pass to the next day. Getting more frustrated and angrier the whole time, desperately trying to keep it from boiling over.

Seven days into waiting for my teleportation platform to wizard college I was starting to feel a similar discontent. I also really wish I'd paid attention and knew the actual name of the place. Something Magistarium?

I'd let the ire slip out of my grip a few times already, snapping at roommates for shitty behavior. On the one hand, it really didn't matter if I was leaving. On the other hand... why did it feel like it mattered so much?

I'd gotten fired via voicemail on day three of waiting, and it had taken a reminder from Horn that I actually was supposedly on a time limit to push me to go get my final paycheck. My old boss had tried to withhold it, and I'd threatened in a shaky voice to call the police, before he'd thrown it at me and I'd practically fled the store.

There had been, not even in the back of my mind, but playing front and center, some fantasies about quitting. Maybe I burn the place down, maybe I just walk out mid shift and leave the doors open with a 'free' sign on everything. Maybe I steal a *lot* of energy drinks.

Okay, I stole a lot of energy drinks. The boss doesn't seem to get that there's a blind spot in his cameras, and I just wheeled a hand cart with a few stacks of them out to my car. I stole a lot of stuff on the way out.

I'd be discovered if anyone did inventory, but not until well after I was hopefully gone.

There was a moment where I'd sort of started believing, really, that I was leaving. Nothing had changed exactly. I'd just told myself it must be true, and the comfortable blanket of certainty had draped around me. It had to be true, because if it wasn't, the wreckage of my life I was leaving in my wake would be a problem.

I'd lost my job, I was probably in legal trouble, I was absolutely going to be in trouble when my bank figured out just how much I'd overdrafted and had no intention of paying back. My roommates would probably be pissed with one fewer person paying rent; Horn had all my actual cash and was sworn to secrecy.

Horn. Fuck. We needed to talk about this, but neither of us knew what to say. Neither of us wanted to start the conversation. So instead, he just patiently helped me weigh out clothes, and pick a portable solar recharging battery off Amazon.

We made bad jokes about me becoming a witch, we hung out every day, we fell asleep with his arms wrapped around me, and we fucked in every spare moment between these things. I think he actually took time off work to spend with me? And we absolutely did not say a word about what we were, or what we weren't, or how I'd be gone, or how we weren't *really* talking.

Part of me felt like I was heading toward a fresh start. Part of me felt like I was heading to my execution. I think both parts were a little right.

By day eight of waiting, my other roommates were getting annoyed with me trying to find stuff to do, which was probably because they were enormous fucking babies who thought that me cleaning the kitchen to distract myself was somehow an act of hostility.

By day nine, even Horn was getting annoyed with me. All the packages I'd ordered had arrived. I'd sorted everything I wanted to take into either the backpack that would leave me at just under two hundred pounds counting all my bones and internal organs and stuff, and the suitcase for if my bones and internal organs and stuff didn't count toward the weight limit.

I'd started to try to invent new and horrible swear words for wizards who didn't stick around to explain things. It wasn't going well, I was just too stressed. And since 'staff' was already kind of an innuendo, everything just sounded... mundane.

And on the last day, I was just a fidgeting mess. I sat in the living room with my luggage, getting in everyone's way, getting weird and unkind glances from my other roommates as I sat on the arm of the couch and kept looking out the windows, at the door, back down the hall, anywhere really.

"Hey." Horn said to me, coming out of our no-longer-shared room. "You all ready to go?"

"You're going on vacation?" Lindsey asked as she passed by, curious but with a tone to her voice that I couldn't stop taking as cruel, even if she didn't *mean* for it to be. "Is that why you've been so fucking spastic lately? I thought you couldn't even afford car insurance."

"I can't." I said. "I'm... it's a long story."

"Eh, sure." She kept walking, setting a small tower of plates covered in food scraps and grease on the counter next to the sink, and then walking off like it wasn't her one single fucking job to...

You know, I'm sure she'd figure it out.

"I'm ready to go." I told Horn, who gave a gentle snort of laughter, settling one of his heavy hands on my shoulder and squeezing me through the material of my dress. "I still think I should have a robe."

"We'd only be able to get you a bathrobe, and you'd feel silly, and then you'd feel a lot worse for feeling silly." He said, and I hated that he actually knew me that well, because that was probably true. The bastard. "Hey, I got you a going away present." He reached over to a shelf piled with random crap, and dusty books, which was the perfect hiding place for anything in this apartment.

I felt a tremor go through my arms. I hated getting gifts. But this time, I had a perfect deflection. "Wait, you got me something with my money?" I asked with a smile, trying to not think about the next hour of my life.

"Nah." Horn said. "This was something I had. My uncle gave it to me, a long time ago." He held out a long wooden box, and cracked the lid. Inside was a dark wooden rod, with a brass cap on one end and a tapered point on the other. The haft was cut with the image of a coiling snake, a hundred hand carved small diamonds in the wood providing an area that was obviously meant to be gripped. "It's an old riding crop. He got it from his time in Africa, like, a few decades ago I guess?" He shrugged. "Figured it couldn't hurt to have something to use as a wand."

I stared at the object being offered to me. It wasn't particularly detailed or even well made; a lot of the carvings were uneven, the rounded brass that capped it off was kinda warped, and the snake had some weird bulges going on. But it was something far worse than that. This was something unique, and personal, and far, far heavier than I could deal with right now. Heavier in the emotional sense, not the weight one, though when I opened my mouth, that was the first dumbass thing that came out. "I can't... this weighs too much." I muttered.

"Oh, I figured I'd give this to you a week ago." Horn said easily with a shrug and a smile. "I added a line to your spreadsheet for it. Surprised you didn't notice, really. You're fine."

"Horn, I can't... this isn't..."

What I want to say is, that this is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. What I mean to say is that I don't think I'm deserving of something like that, that actually has a history and means something to someone. What I *should* say is that, even if I'm leaving, even if neither of us know when I'll be back, even with how shitty I've been, that I still care about him and look forward to seeing him again.

What I actually say is nothing. I just trail off, choking on my words.

I hate myself so much sometimes.

I am interrupted from the process of trying to pull my emotional head out of my ass by a soft explosion from outside that makes both of us jump in surprise. I hadn't even noticed Horn pull closer to me, but we smack our skulls together as we jolt from the noise.

"Uh." We say in unison, glancing at the scratched up front door of the apartment.

Time stretches out. I am not speaking metaphorically this time. Time extends and bends and forms a kind of shell around the apartment.

"Woah." Horn says, staring at the barrier where reality reasserts itself, eyes wide. "Okay. Woah. You're going to wizard college." He snaps his head back to me with a wide grin.

I am. I am, for real. It was real, I wasn't crazy. I haven't destroyed what fragments of my life were left intact for nothing.

There's a knock at the door, and I struggle off the couch, pushing past Horn to run to the door and yank it open, pulling hard enough that I don't have to get into an awkward fight with the one bent edge of the door.

A wizard stands there. The man is so flagrantly a wizard, and not just because of the staff that is actually three separate pieces of metal floating in relative position to each other, or the fucking jeweled crown thing he's wearing. He's got that wizard vibe. Also he arrived immediately after time got weird, so, you know, I can put the pieces together.

"Pleasant midday." He says in a voice that sounds like someone told a voice actor to 'be a wizard, but sexy, but not sexy on purpose'. "I am here to ferry you to—"

I cut him off. "The first guy said that I had a two hundred pound teleportation limit. Is that with or without *me* counted in the equation?"

The wizard blinks, and for a brief flash, I can see him get very, very angry at being interrupted. But then the question sinks in, and he straightens up slightly. "Without you, obviously. Why would we include the subject in the limit?"

God *damn* they all like saying 'obviously'. I'm gonna be hearing that word a lot, I guess. Also, I don't know why they would or wouldn't, but right now, I don't need to.

I rush back into the apartment, haul my overfull backpack up onto protesting shoulders, and take the handle of my suitcase from Horn. He looks at me, and opens his mouth like he wants to say something.

I stand there, staring at him, feeling like I should say something too. But I don't even know what I could do at this point, with an irate wizard tapping his staff on the concrete outside our front door, and the seconds ticking by.

"I..." he says, and then shakes his head, giving a little soft snort of amusement. "Hey, have fun, okay?"

Something safe. Something meaningless. Something that doesn't touch on anything we really should touch on. Just... a platitude. Empty words.

But maybe not so empty. "Yeah, you too." I say back with a strained smile. "Spend my money on an Xbox or something." I tell him. "Maybe me being gone for so long will get you a chance to get good."

"Fuck off." He laughs. The tension doesn't break or drain or fade at all. But we cover it up, like we always do, with the simple fact that we get each other.

"Excuse me..." The wizard at the door intrudes on our non-moment.

I am halfway to flipping him off when I remember what I'm supposed to be doing. "Yeah, yeah!" I say, tugging on the suitcase and dragging it over to the lip of the doorframe. "Okay. Let's go. How do we do this?"

"Simple." The wizard says, letting go of his staff, the three pieces of metal forming a triangle around the two of us. "Take my hand, hold tight to your belongings. The transition is instant, though may take some time. Please do not let go, as results may be fatal."

"Woah, wait, hang on." Horn is standing by the door.

I, too, have heard a word I do not like. "Yeah, go back to the fatal part?"

"It is perfectly safe, so long as you do not let go." The wizard says with contempt. I tighten my grip on his hand, the rough fabric of my fingerless gloves already getting sweaty against my palm.

“Hey.” Horn says, as the wizard’s staff starts to move and the man begins to hum something I can’t quite hear. “Be safe, okay?”

The earnest look in his eyes yanks on my heart, and I think of a million things we never said to each other. I open my mouth to tell him I’ll be fine, that I’ll be back, that I’ll miss him, to tell him I love him, to say anything.

I don’t get a chance. The wizard’s staff solidifies a pattern around us, and there is a crack that leaves my ears ringing.

And the world drops away.

I had really thought that being vindicated on the whole ‘teleporting to wizard school’ thing would be more of a relief and less of a wrenching feeling in my gut.