

“Punishment.” The little thing finally repeated what the chorus had announced, in a manner that was in equal parts concerning in its delivery and equal parts menacing in its certainty. “That is what we plan to do to the perpetrator of the great scarring, Emma.” Buddy tentatively spoke, breaking the awkward silence with a whine-ridden response, interrupted by the *clack clack clack* of two forepaws nervously pawing at the hardwood table beneath them. “This is, of course, assuming the perpetrator is delivered to us *alive*.”

My eyes widened at that, as both Thacea and I shot glances at one another at just about the same time, as if turning to each other to perform a double take to what we’d just heard. “Wait what? I thought the Nexus, or in this case the Academy, would’ve wanted to deliver the perp to you alive?” I attempted to clarify, not yet bringing the existence of Ilunor into the equation. The revelation of which I knew would muddy the waters of this conversation, and the eventual case I felt was gearing up to be made.

Buddy paused, and for a moment inexplicably craned his head *upwards*, towards the ceiling that had suddenly changed from a grand dome reminiscent of some of the great *Revivalist* structures back home, to a literal dark void that the library seemed so fond of manifesting on a whim. His eyes seemed to be focused on *something* in that inky abyss, mimicking the owl’s movements during our long winded back and forths. Eventually, Buddy did crane his head back down, his eyes more tired and worn out than they were just a few moments ago. “I assume you recall the Librarian’s earlier conversations regarding the library’s... lack of investment in the worlds outside its domain, correct?” He spoke, his voice shaky, almost squeaking out each and every word with a mix of fear and worry.

“Yeah it was part of... well, *inferred* by rule number one.” I quickly turned towards EVI, as the VI seemed poised enough to bring up a transcript of our first interaction. Sure enough, right before rule one, was a brief description entertaining that very concept. “Or rather, it was stated right before rule number one.” I shrugged, quickly correcting myself.

Buddy, seemingly satisfied, responded with a single tentative nod before continuing. “There was once upon a time where this rule was sacrosanct. Where none entertained the concept of breaching that unspoken promise. Where the eternal sanctity of the library and its contents was universally respected in both the spoken word and the taken action.” He continued, before reaching for a previously unseen book. One that EVI *confirmed* wasn’t on the table just a moment prior.

“However that point in time has long since passed, and through the actions of a self-purported ‘desperate’ few, came with it a necessity to adapt to the newfound realities of a hostile world. The systems of punishments were birthed as a result, and to better provide context for your question, a *treaty* was drafted between the powers outside the library’s domain and the library itself. A treaty that clearly outlines the obligations that the *host* to the library’s corporeal entrance must uphold. These obligations defer the responsibilities of a speedy investigation, capture, and eventual extradition of those that have crossed the threshold from the world outside, to the host which is in control of said world outside. There have, however, been multiple recorded instances

where a perpetrator is brought in dead rather than alive; a result of factors beyond the control of those responsible for this task. This is why, prior to the discussion of the matter of punishment, I made mention of the potential of death. As the matter of punishment rests completely on the state of the perpetrator when they arrive through the threshold.” Buddy explained succinctly, or at least, what I assumed was succinct given the fact that with each sentence that passed, another book seemed to manifest right underneath his paw, creating a literal *pile* of books that probably all related to the information he was delivering.

“Right.” I managed out with a nervous sigh. “Okay, this puts things into a *whole new* perspective.” I continued, speaking to no one in particular as I leaned back against my seat, the leather upholstery never once showing signs of stress, not even so much as creaking or squeaking as I shuffled within it.

Death. The concept wasn’t foreign to me, as much as it was something that I’d always stuffed to the back of my mind whenever it wasn’t staring me right in the face. It was however, undeniably that death was always lurking, looming, peering into the picture of this story ever since I arrived. In fact, it was omnipresent even *before* I arrived, with every preparation going into *preventing* an untimely demise; as the shadow of the death of Pilot I loomed constantly overhead everyone within the IAS. I was about ready to face the cold... or in this case... the hot embrace of death right on arrival. But even after the initial rush of excitement of having cheated death on the trip over, its shadow still remained lurking. From the tension-filled orientation, through to the encounter with the null, and the events leading up to the bomb. The cold and unfeeling abrupt end that was death was always around somewhere.

But despite it all, confronting it was always so... *off*.

Moreover, the likelihood of death hitting someone you knew, as much as you hated or disliked them... was just something I found difficult to reconcile with.

The potential end to the blue thing wasn’t something I ever envisioned. It wasn’t something that truly hit me until now, as I was hit in the face with a series of cold hard truths.

That there was now a very real potential to the end of this Vunerian’s life. A life that was questionable at best and scummy at worst, but a life nonetheless.

I disliked the discount kobold, heck, I would’ve gladly punted him if I had the chance.

But it wasn’t like I’d ever go through with it.

More importantly, it wasn’t like I’d ever want him to *die*.

There were practical reasons for saving his skin, sure. But now... the circumstances have changed from preventing a potential punishment to preventing the loss of life. A loss that only I could prevent.

*Getting Ilunor through those doors before the Academy or the Nexus could get their hands on him was imperative now.*

“So what if the perp makes it?” I finally managed out after that lull of silence. “What if they make it through those doors?” I pointed at the set of doors that had seemingly always remained *somewhere* in view, despite all of the changes that had occurred within the library up to this point. “What then? Let’s circle back to the topic of his punishment. What can a violator, this rule breaker in particular, expect?” I continued.

“The punishments for those that cross the line, are as diverse and as severe as the lines that exist to be crossed.” Buddy spoke cryptically, his paws once again scraping across the varnished surface of the table. “Yet as diverse as the punishments are, they all share a similar sentiment.” Buddy made the effort to pause, before locking eyes with me as he inhaled sharply. “They will be made to repay their dues.”

That statement lingered in the air, overstaying its welcome as the fox paused uncharacteristically.

“This will be done, in a manner befitting of their violations.” He eventually continued, conjuring another book out of thin air, this one containing an actual title on its cover written in a script that was untranslatable by the likes of the EVI; one that looked oddly Cthulian. The book eventually opened, its pages flipping for far longer than it should given the physical size of the thing. Eventually, it stopped, revealing a crude infographic rendering of a humanoid standing atop a platform, surrounded on all sides by a literal swarm of foxes. Whilst superficially cute, it exuded an ominous vibe. Like there was something that was *off* about the whole drawing. This was proven right as the page flipped over, revealing the humanoid being covered in head to toe by page upon page ripped straight from open books. Before finally, on the very next page, was that same humanoid crudely interpreted as a ghostly visage of its former self. I could tell it was a ghost, by virtue of its legs becoming a formless floating mist.

“Punishments must fit the violation, but I shall start with the ultimate end of all violations, that being the *wardship of penance*.” The room literally *shook* as Buddy spoke those words, and if the EVI’s long range acoustic sensors were to be believed, the distant echo of unearthly moans would accompany the sudden vibrations. “There exists a place, deep within the library’s *core*, where only the Librarian is allowed to enter. This... *inner sanctum* is guarded for eternity by either the forms or the souls of those that have attempted to halt or interfere with the library’s eternal quest. Thus, the ultimate fate of those who interfere with this quest, is to forever facilitate this quest. For the violations they commit are felt not for a single lifetime, nor the lifetime of a culture or a species’ living memory, but for the *eternum of knowledge itself*. The only fitting punishment is one that lasts for as long as the harm they inflict, which in this case is *eternity*.”

The revelation of this newfound intel brought with it a whole new atmosphere to the library that I should’ve expected. But whilst I *did* feel intimidated, and whilst a new sense of dread and

dreariness descended upon me, I couldn't help but feel like this *wasn't* the true nature of the library. Or at least, this *wasn't* how things were supposed to go. Indeed, if the fox's history lesson was any indication, this *wasn't* how things were at the beginning at all. The library was an idealist at heart, very much owning up to its fairy tail-like aesthetics. But at the same time, the library was adaptable, fluid, and dynamic. It was only responding to the world outside with the same calculating ruthlessness that existed beyond its walls.

"That's extreme." I finally commented, garnering a nod of approval from Thacea. "But I can understand it." This latter statement however, most definitely did *not* garner a nod of approval from the bird princess. "If you're someone who constantly puts your best foot out, only to be burned time and time again... then I guess you have to eventually react." I offered, more or less paralleling my experiences in the Nexus up to this point. "I don't *agree* with it personally." I quickly added. "But given the *fantastical* nature of everything here-" I gestured to the room around me. "-I think we're operating under fundamentally diverging logic bases here. This is, of course, operating under the assumption that you have the right violator."

Buddy raised a brow at this, which prompted me to quickly move on to my final few points. "So, you said this was their *ultimate* fate. What happens before then? You said something about paying their dues right? How do you go about doing that?"

"In most cases, they become *collectors of dues*, Emma." Buddy replied succinctly, flipping the pages to reveal that same humanoid, except this time, fitted with a collar. A crude arrow drawn in what seemed to be *crayon* of all things however was present to circle around said collar, annotating it with the same mystery language that matched the front cover. "The collar here is symbolic. It symbolizes the fate of the violator. As a *collector of dues*, they are assigned to roam the lands outside of the library, to the very ends of the realms if need be, until they find knowledge which can offset the deficit they have incurred."

The explanation, whilst simple and straightforward, was laden with as much ominous mystique as the rest of the *dark side* of the library seemed to be steeped in.

"And what if their dues are, like, unreasonably high. Like the perp of the latest scarring?" I quickly asked.

Buddy's eyes darkened even further at that, as he pointed to a word on the page that remained untranslatable. "*Collectors of dues* have no set time limit to their quest. In fact, some still roam the lands, collecting their dues, ever since the end of the formation of the Nexus as a political entity."

That answer hit hard.

Knowing that somewhere, out there, were what were effectively *immortals* bound to this singular task for what was probably an impossible to accomplish quest.

I didn't know what was worse now.

Becoming a library ghost guard, or becoming a collector forced to roam the lands for eternity.

Either way, that was a fate that seemingly awaited Ilunor if the Nexus got their way.

That, or he would simply be offed.

Which was probably more than likely to happen given the fact that the Academy would rather tie up all loose ends rather than let the library dig further into the issue...

"Right." I managed out with a sigh. "I think there's just two more things I'd like to ask if that's alright?"

Buddy nodded tentatively, urging me to continue.

"In the case the perp arrives dead, how exactly do you collect their *dues*?"

"Simple, Emma. The burden of collection falls upon their next of kin or their estate." Buddy explained simply, not once elaborating further.

I nodded tentatively at that, before pressing on.

"So, with all of that being said... is there like, a trial or a proceeding or something? I mean, supposing the perp is brought alive, I'm sure you have a means of ascertaining their like... guilt or innocence right?"

Buddy nodded affirmatively, flipping the pages to reveal that infographic humanoid again, except this time, he seemed to be on an elevated platform, suspended above a white void, with fox-like eyes and ears, along with several owls hovering around him. "In a similar fashion to how the library ascertains *veracity*, so too will it ascertain the guilt of an individual by the divination of their memories."

My eyes lit up as my mouth hung agape with joy upon that revelation.

*That was the Nexus' game all along.*

*They were planning to deliver Ilunor dead with all evidence pointing straight to him.*

*Because if he was alive... then they'd be utterly screwed.*

*He'd have memories of Mal'tory and all of his illicit dealings.*

*This was my chance to clear Ilunor of his crimes, and strike back at the black robe at the same time.*

That was of course, assuming there were no other magical shenanigans going on *outside* of that contract. In which case... “So, is there anything else about this trial? Is it just a simple mind-read and forget thing or...” I trailed off, allowing Buddy to fill in the blanks.

“Typically speaking, those that bring the supposed perpetrator in are capable of speaking *for* or adding *to* the context of the perpetrator’s actions. In many cases, Nexian authorities defer all judgment to the library with not a word added. However in times before the Nexus, in the *wild times*, many a bounty hunter and adventurer would have their word heard on the delivery of their capture.” Buddy once more paused, as if realizing just what I was implying by inference. “Emma, are you suggesting-”

“I guess the library’s about to get a blast from the past then. A taste of the *wild times* you could say. As I’m your bounty hunter, and I’m about to bring you the truth about this supposed perp, and the conspiracy surrounding this whole thing.”

The library began once again creaking and shaking, the rattling even affecting the table and the fox that sat politely atop it. About the same time, Buddy began craning his head up to the ceiling that once more vanished into a sea of darkness. And just like clockwork, he looked back down with a tired expression, before responding simply, and frankly. “You are serious about this assertion, Emma?”

I nodded once in response. “Yes.”

“Then the matter is settled. There shall be no ceremony or fanfare for your sake. The library shall observe, and react accordingly.”

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**The Transgracian Academy for the Magical Arts. The Armorer’s Workshop. Local time: 2045 Hours.**

**Emma**

We left the library behind with a very confused fox and a promise of a bounty that the library hadn’t experienced in tens of millenia. This was, however, emphasized to be a very *informal* arrangement. As such a thing hadn’t been observed in so long, and so much leniency had already been given to me in particular, that the issuing of a new *Library-derived bounty* was just a step too far even for the dynamic library.

But instead of heading immediately to Ilunor’s room, I decided to pay a visit to a certain someone who could help in providing a bit more context to this story.

I was now on a direct course to defending the small blue thing. A blue thing that had clearly been hesitant on revealing the whole picture to me, if that burnt scrap of paper was any indication of his reluctance.

If I was to have any hope of representing him in the court of foxes and owls, I'd need some context into that final piece of the puzzle, which led me to the only man who I knew could help *unburn* the scrap of paper, to reveal contents hidden within.

A certain man who had revealed himself to be a skilled artificer, and someone who was well versed in restoring the broken and the rundown.

A certain man who was more forthright than anyone at the Academy so far.

An armored giant that I knew would be more than happy to provide a helping hand.

"I apologize for being unable to produce a restorative spell capable of undoing such damage, Emma." Thacea spoke under a hushed breath just as we arrived at the long corridor leading to the armory.

"Don't sweat it Thacea." I spoke reassuringly. "Like I said, you've done a heck of a lot already. Don't go stressing over stuff that you haven't learned about yet okay?" I offered once more, prompting the princess to simply nod in response.

We both went silent as several golems approached us.

Thankfully, I recalled what Sorecar told me, and after a few words exchanged, they led me wordlessly down the hall and back into his workshop.

"Thacea, do you have a heat dissipation spell or something?" I quickly asked just before we arrived.

"Yes, I do, why?"

"You might want to put one up, make it as powerful as you can possibly make it." I warned, as Thacea took a good few steps back just in case.

**ALERT: LOCALIZED SURGE OF MANA-RADIATION DETECTED, 450% ABOVE BACKGROUND RADIATION LEVELS**

Instead of the ball of protection I'd imagined, what instead formed was a small cloud above Thacea's head, one that seemed to... sprinkle down fine powdery snow.

I cocked my head at that, prompting the princess to respond without missing a beat. "This is more effective than it looks, Emma."

Suffice it to say, my warnings proved to be on point. Because the opening of those two doors was marked by a *rush* of steam that filled the hallway. This was followed by what I could only describe as another *grand* entrance befitting of both the armorer's Nexian origins, but also his *very* eclectic set of hyperfixative interests. As instead of the random industrial clanging of metal on metal, there was a strangely upbeat rhythm and tempo to the forging of his blades.

This rhythm continued even as I arrived, as the smoke and steam cleared, and the heat of the room began dissipating further. "Ah! Well if it isn't the knight of the hour!" He spoke, before peering over my shoulder to a confused Thacea. "And it seems like you brought a friend this time. I will assume they are not like the... *other* friend, are they?" If he had eyes to narrow I'm sure he'd be doing so at the snowing princess right about now. "So! How may I help you, Emma Booker? It's a bit late to be out and about is it not?"

"It is, Sorecar, but I need your help with something." I quickly opened one of my pouches, pulling out the burnt piece of paper that was now barely even a scrap. "Do you know restoration magic? There's a... message on here that I really need, but it's-"

"Ah, I see the problem there. Burnt by dragonflame and a little something extra hm?" The armorer spoke, as he looked everywhere and around the paper, craning his head, crouching, jumping from side to side to every possible angle around me.

"Would it be easier if I just handed you the paper?" I offered, garnering a sheepish nod from the man.

Handing it off to Sorecar, he held it daintily between his thumb and index finger, peering so close to it that I was afraid a strong gust of wind would've swept it right into his visor and down his armor.

Thankfully, there were no stray gusts of wind around, and after a few moments the man responded with a firm nod. "I can restore it alright, a simple enough task for a man like myself." He pointed a thumb to his chest, beaming out confidence throughout it all.

I nodded eagerly as he placed the scrap of paper on one of his workstations, standing right above it, he stretched out both hands and began *pouring* mana into that small scrap.

**ALERT: LOCALIZED SURGE OF MANA-RADIATION DETECTED, 750% ABOVE BACKGROUND RADIATION LEVELS**

Shockingly, it began *growing*, as the burnt outlines receded, revealing untouched and crisp parchment.



My mind began racing through just the awe-inspiring sight of it, of this fantastical spell being casted right before my eyes...

But alas, I was pulled out of my reverie with a sudden, abrupt, and awkward question that threw me for a loop. "The lofty pursuits of young love never ceases to amaze." The man spoke out of the blue, prompting me to stutter out an immediate response.

"W-what?"

"Oh, that's what I assumed this was! A burnt letter of some poor sap who was too shy to admit his affection for a blue knight in shining armor! Hence your insistence on coming so late to rekindle the flame of this potential love!"

"Oh my god Sorecar." I spoke, completely unfiltered and with an embarrassment that I wasn't counting on ever feeling at *any* point in this adventure.

"Oh? Have I misread the situation, Emma Booker?" The man cheekily shot back, as I could only respond with a restrained huff.

"It's not a love letter, Sorecar, it's a mystery letter that I need for a far bigger situation that's developing as we speak."

Sorecar, seemingly unsatisfied with that answer, and having just completed the letter's restoration, quickly and without warnings handed it back to me without even once taking a peak at it.

"Mmhmm! I'll leave you to it then, Emma Booker!"

It seemed as if the man was quick to dismiss any attempts at getting involved with the bigger stories developing outside of his workshop. Which, similar to the *gun* incident a few days ago, hinted at him clearly trying to keep his own awareness of my complex plots to a minimum.

Given his bound status to the Academy, I assumed this was for my own benefit.

Somehow, someday, I'd find a way to break through that someday.

For now though, I had a letter to read in private with Thacea.

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**The Transgracian Academy for the Magical Arts. Dragon's Heart Tower, Level 23,  
Residence 30. Local Time: 2100 Hours.**

**Emma**

We entered the dorm without stirring up much of a fuss. Thalmin of course, peered out from Ilunor's room only momentarily, his eyes betraying a look of utter exhaustion and frustration from having had to babysit the blue thing for a quarter of the day now.

A knowing glance was all it took for the mercenary prince to understand that his services were still needed, as he quickly pulled his head back into the apartment, allowing Thacea and I to head back into our own dorm to deliberate on the now-reforged letter.

We set ourselves down on one of the many couches within, and began reading.

*Mother,*

*I am sorry. I set out with aspirations to better both of our stations. I set out with dreams and flights of fantasy. I charted a course where none of my siblings could follow, in hopes of reaching heights not yet seen for our clan.*

*But I have failed. I will not waste your time on the burdensome details as to my follies and shortcomings. I will not waste your energy or breath on a third-rate child. I wish for you to focus your efforts elsewhere, perhaps on Talunor, who still has aspirations for greatness in the houses of the interior.*

*As for myself, I have only one request to ask you of.*

[ILLEGIBLE TEXT. UNABLE TO PARSE.]

*Please strike me from the records. Disown me and cut all ties the moment this letter is received.*

[ILLEGIBLE TEXT. UNABLE TO PARSE.]

*And consider this letter my abdication to the chair of the house, effective as I write this. No longer shall I tie my sullied name to the house of Rularia. Effective immediately, I am Ilunor-*

[TEXT ENDS.]

...

There was so much that I could say about the letter.

In fact, there was just so much I was currently feeling *from* said letter.

A whole new dimension of the discount kobold had been opened up, one that I could've never imagined.

I sat there for the longest while, dumbfounded, and with no words coming to mind as I went back and forth between the letter and Thacea.

Thacea however, looked at the same letter as if it were just another Tuesday to her. The princess never once showed even a *hint* of distress or shock, merely... stoic understanding.

"A noble act." Was all she could say. "To ensure that the burden of the library's debt ends with him, and not his house or clan." The avinor princess spoke dryly, in a way only a jaded lawyer could.

The princess more than likely accustomed to these sorts of letters... which gave me an exceedingly large amount of respect for her resolve.

"All of this doesn't add up. This letter proves that he knows he'll be dead anyways, so why not just turn himself into the library? Surely he could just... *ask* the library to be mindread. That way he'll be cleared of all charges, *and* he'll have evidence to defer the blame to his would-be master. Ilunor's not dumb, he wouldn't have resorted to this-"

I paused.

As the whole situation finally clicked.

It was clear to me as well that Thacea was also on the same page, as her eyes had lit up just before my open-air flow of consciousness even had even had a chance to sprout ideas in my mind.

"-unless he knew that being mind read would be a death sentence either way." I corrected my course, finishing my sentence, receiving a hesitant nod of approval from the likes of Thacea.

"The only two ways one could go about preventing the divination of one's memories, is by either removing them outright, or by preemptively placing countermeasures that will trigger the moment a spell of divination targets a certain memory. Given that Ilunor was able to describe to you in vivid detail Mal'tory's involvement, I am inclined to believe the latter precautions are in place, Emma."

"But why didn't it trigger when he mentioned the damning details of his involvement with Mal'tory?"

"The contract was established to prevent such things from happening, this countermeasure is designed to trigger with divination, not with speech. With the contract gone, I assume that measures were already put in place to remove any and all evidence of involvement involving Professor Mal'tory. Which means that all one is left with, are the empty words of a Vunerian. One that divination cannot even vouch for."

The seconds ticked on as I tried to wrap my head around the new turn of events, at the new complication that had just reared up its ugly head.

“We still don’t have any other option.” I announced. “He dies tomorrow at the hands of the Nexus anyways. But if I hand him in... there’s still a fighting chance I’ll come up with something.”

“And what do you propose, Emma?”

“A compromise, a bargain, *something*. Listen, the library’s proven itself capable of striking deals. And I intend on striking another one.”