

The Library

Emma

We entered the library.

Or at least, I *assumed* it was the library.

As I quickly found myself thrust into a space that was far more *cramped* than it should have been.

Gone was the airy expansive atrium, and its connected halls that branched forever into infinity.

Gone too was the dark and dreary dungeon of obsidian, slate, and cobblestone, whose maze-like corridors folded and abstracted inwards into nothing.

In its place was a quaint room. Or at least, quaint by Nexian and library standards. As it felt more like the lobby of one of those heritage woodland hotels that was adamant on sacrificing *all* of the worldly comforts of modernity for the irreplicable experience of *authenticity*.

In the place of a complex design of at least four different stones per square feet, were solid beams of unlacquered wood that covered all four sides of the room, floor included. In the place of a ceiling that was second only to those grand revivalist domes in Europe was an open A-frame roof with a modest loft covered in layer upon layer of hand-knitted tapestries, and woven quilts. I could tell they were hand-knitted too, as unlike everything else in the Nexus thus far, their flawed design, and imperfect patterns, were on proud display.

No space was wasted in this small quaint room. As in a similar vein to those *solartown* communities, every inch of available space was smartly used up, all without risking walking into the trap that was clutter.

Bookshelves were *carved* into the four major support beams that kept the A-frame roof aloft. More shelving units of similarly *rustic* build quality lined all the available wall-space there was, which was to say, there wasn't much of them at all. But what shelves did exist were *packed* to the brim with books. Each of their spines consisted of titles with lettering that was haphazard and inconsistent, like they were each etched by hand as opposed to uniformly printed like the rest of the books in the library.

More interestingly, the language being used wasn't being translated by the EVI. Which meant it wasn't High Nexian. The strange lettering actually reminded me of the book of punishments Buddy had brought out earlier.

[Point of Active Interpolation: Logographic, Syllabic, Alphabetic similarities to HIGH NEXIAN... 0 PERCENT. Closest calculable relationship... UNKNOWN LANGUAGE 02 at... 97.3 PERCENT accuracy as calculated using current available datasets.]

A thought that was quickly corroborated by the EVI, as it immediately confirmed my suspicions without needing any prompting.

The IAS' eggheads did say the thing was adaptive to its user's input and 'command style' after all. It just didn't occur to me it'd be *this* quick in its adaptiveness.

Regardless, it was clear that even the rest of the gang seemed more or less shocked by this new setting. Each of them performed their own double-takes as they maintained a tight cohesive grouping around me and Ilunor.

Walking further in, we were almost immediately greeted by what could only be described as a 'front desk' of sorts. A wrap-around counter reminiscent of those bars you find at medieval themed inns.

Similar to the rest of the wooden constructs in the room, its surfaces were unlacquered, unpolished, and could barely be described as finished or processed in any way, save for the woodcutting used to bring it down to an appropriate shape and size.

Behind the counter was a corkboard, one that seemed to have different caricatures drawn on paper and haphazardly pinned up. One image in particular caught my attention, what seemed to be a sketch drawn in crayon of a bustling campsite, with a particularly large tent dominating the middle of the grounds.

[ALERT: CONTACT DETECTED. IFF UNKNOWN.]

But all of that was quickly put aside as the EVI quickly highlighted the appearance of a new contact.

My attention was hastily drawn back with a spike of adrenaline, as a humanoid figure of roughly Thalmin's height suddenly entered the fray from an unseen backroom just behind the wooden counter.

All four of us instinctively got into a battle-ready position almost all at once. Thalmin unsheathing his sword, Thacea poising herself for some sort of a magical strike, and Ilunor... quickly reaching for his blanket.

Yet before anything could happen, the figure's face finally came into view by virtue of a magical flame being lit on the counter, revealing his hooded shadowy face to be none other than that of a familiar, friendly vulpine.

“B-buddy?” I announced hesitantly, pulling my hand away from my holster.

“INDEED IT IS I, EMMA!” He exclaimed giddily, panting excitedly once more as in a matter of seconds, what had been a vaguely humanoid shape suddenly *burst open*, revealing at least 4 foxes underneath the large oversized suit of armor. Each of whom promptly scampered off into different directions, leaving a pile of leather, cloth, and bits and pieces of armor to fall limply to the floor in their wake.

“What... what *is* all of this?” I continued, my face scrunching up in confusion underneath my helmet, as the little fox settled down politely on the counter, shaking off the remnants of that outfit.

“I informed you earlier did I not, Emma?” Buddy cocked his little head in a way only a canine, or in this case, a vulpine could. His perky triangular ears bounced as a result. “The library will observe and-”

“-react accordingly.” I interrupted the fox, completing that sentence for him. Repeating those vague few words Buddy had used to affirm my little commitment to the bounty-hunting quest of bringing Ilunor in. I looked around once more, out of a habit and a desire to reinforce my current mood through these simple uses of body language. “How... how does any of this fit into the library *reacting accordingly*? And what was that whole deal with the outfit all about-?”

“Ah! Well, you see this was-”

“-*is*. Not *was*.” A familiar voice suddenly interjected. The librarian’s entrance this time was far more modest than it had been before. Gone were the huge gusts of wind and the *thump thump thump* of the flapping of his wings. Instead, he merely emerged from the back, walking along the counter until he once more found himself perched atop of Buddy’s head. “I will take it from here, *Buddy*.” He spoke, before turning towards me.

“This-” The owl gestured throughout the room with both wings. “-*is* the lobby, Cadet Emma Booker. A space that is reserved for those of private intent and unbound by written treaty to deliver *articles of interest* from the world outside. The space you-” The owl paused once more, taking a moment to carefully glare at Thacea, Thalmin, and Ilunor in rapid succession. “-and your *compatriots* find yourselves in, is referred to as *The Seeker’s Respite* by many who had once frequented this particular location within the library.”

“And I assume it’s been a long while since anyone actually used this space.” I paused, once more gesturing around me for good measure. “Let alone visited it.”

The librarian nodded promptly in response. “You would be correct in that assumption, Cadet Emma Booker.”

“The rustic design sort of speaks for itself. And the books sort of give it away too.” I pointed to one of the many overstuffed shelves. “The language used here, it’s not High Nexian now is it? Heck, I doubt it’s even in the same language family as High Nexian. I’m assuming it predates it or something along those lines?” I offered out my little theory with a confident grin.

“A prudent analysis.” The owl responded with an increasing hint of what I could only describe as *excitement* welling up in between each hoot. “No doubt a result of your... living, breathing, dynamic system of mathematics I presume?”

“That’s not up for discussion right now, Librarian.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t wish to sully this novel occasion by bringing up matters outside of its relevance.” The librarian hooted out apologetically, before narrowing his eyes to the Vunerian in a way only a bird of prey sizing up its next meal could. “Indeed, quite a novel occasion this truly is. For the first time in what the world outside would define as *untold eons*, the library now receives its first article of tribute by an independent agent, unbound, untethered, and completely removed from *any* of the ties that bind. An article which in today’s case, comes in the form of a handing off of the perpetrator of the great scarring. Which, through the process of elimination, I assume to be this *blue* Vunerian?”

Ilunor could only look on, unable to avert his gaze from the owl, as his whole body trembled in place.

I quickly jumped in, both literally and figuratively before any magical shenanigans could commence. Which, given there was no burst in mana radiation yet, meant that divination had yet to take place. “The situation is far more complicated than it might at first seem, librarian.”

“Oh? How so? For it seems as if you have brought this blue Vunerian in for a *reason*, Cadet Emma Booker. Am I to assume that he *isn’t* the perpetrator behind the great scarring?”

“No, he isn’t.” I responded matter of factly. “In fact, I brought him here because despite being the hand that dealt the library its grievous scars-” The whole room *shuddered*, this time, it felt even more *visceral* with wood creaking, bending, bowing, and visibly *shifting* in place, before finally... it died down as quickly as it started. “-he was merely acting as an unwitting hand, the forcibly conscripted agent of someone else.”

“Coerced and forced against his will into enacting the will and intentions of another, under a contract signed under duress.” Thacea quickly chimed in with a short and succinct chirp, an undertone of nervousness hidden underneath a layer of unwavering stoicism.

I nodded subtly towards Thacea, before pressing forwards. “I bring you this Vunerian because if I did not, then the Nexus would’ve brought him to you dead. Thus forever obscuring the truth behind his supposed actions. For the Vunerian is as much a victim in a grander conspiracy as you, Buddy, and the rest of the library is. A grand conspiracy that was prompted by my arrival,

perpetuated by my mere existence, and then acted upon by virtue of the fear inherent within those that see my mana-less innovations as a threat. The library, and indeed the information stored within its walls, was simply in the crosshairs of a greater conspiracy at play. One which is predicated on the understanding that the fundamentals of the game has changed, and that the Nexus, for the first time in its history, now finds itself at a disadvantage. A disadvantage incurred by virtue of the potential for a trade deficit, and the very real possibility that I might take advantage of it, as I already have with regards to the Null and the Minor Shards of Impart.”

“And forgive me for the brashness of my joining this conversation once more, great librarian.” Thacea suddenly chimed in, as if sensing that I was at the end of my own argument, and choosing to back me up before the librarian could have his say. She paused, only continuing after the librarian gave her the floor to speak with a slight nod of his head. “But as far as I am aware, there has yet to have been an instance that an individual, nay, a *representative* from a *newrealm* was in possession of information that was on equal bearing in *category*, and equal if not superior value in *weight* when it came to such topics as the Null or the Minor Shards of Impart. Indeed, for as far as I am aware, there has yet to have been an instance in which a *newrealmer* has so effortlessly utilized the services of the library, in trading for such matters which supersede even the most advanced of tomes in possession by the greatest of adjacent realms.”

Both the owl, and my own eyes, widened at Thacea’s sudden surge of confidence in addressing, if not outright challenging the library head on. “As a peer, a partner, and a historical and cultural liaison to Cadet Emma Booker’s presence here in the library and in the wider Academy, I believe it is my duty to not only clarify points of ambiguity as they arise, but to also provide vital context by which the magnitude and significance of certain actions should be assessed. Which, in the context of this conspiracy, is vital. As drawing from the available pool of information afforded to me by my station as an adjacent royal, I recall no other instance of such a feat being recorded in historical records... save for rumors and whispers of a similar incident during the Great War.”

“I second this notion.” Thalmin suddenly, and abruptly, entered the fray. A proud grin plastered across his face. “And it must be acknowledged that regardless of where the rumors start and the truths end, that such a critical shift in the information disparity will directly and invariably lead to a fundamental reshuffling of the balance of powers. A reshuffling the likes of which have not been seen since or prior to the Great War.”

“Which would inevitably lead to a disruption of the Status Eterna.” Thacea concluded Thalmin’s points with a hint of finality.

“Which would most assuredly lead to *any* within the upper echelons of power with any knowledge of Cadet Emma Booker’s existence to be *wary* at best and outright *panicked* at worst.”

“All of which leads to the formation of the conspiracy to rid me of my ability to take advantage of this information disparity to begin with.” I stepped in, bringing all of this back to where it all began. “By destroying the very information they feared I could’ve accessed with the deficit I hold.”

Those final few words of my opening argument reverberated throughout the small room. The librarian, who had remained silent all throughout our conspiratorial tirades, raised a single talon to where his ‘chin’ should’ve been. As he seemed to regard every bit of information carefully, with eyes deep in analytical thought.

But instead of replying in a way that directly addressed the case, he began speaking in a way that was... uncharacteristically *eerie*. Using the same tone and cadence of the chorus of foxes that Buddy had inexplicably escaped from. “*Mortal lives, breaking, fading, made of clay. Mortal minds, acting strange. Dominions fading, but they won’t change.*”

His voice *reverberated*, as if spoken through an audio filter that repeated his voice over multiple tracks, playing all at once in harmony.

Yet before any of us could address it, before any of us could even *process* it, the owl seamlessly returned to the conversation with a response that I expected to begin with. “With great claims comes the greater burden of proof, Cadet Emma Booker-” He paused, before turning to Thacea and Thalmin respectively. “-and friends. So I expect that enough evidence has been gathered to support your claims.” He spoke in a no-nonsense manner, not readily dismissing our grand claims of conspiracy, but not willing to accept it just yet.

All three of us turned to one another at about the same time, locking eyes, as if trying to gauge who would be best to lead the charge into this next, decidedly *difficult* chapter in the argument.

“The burden of proof is something that I’m very well aware of, Librarian.” I began, not once breaking the confidence in my vocal stride. “But it is also something that has been a challenge to come by, given the extensive nature of this conspiracy. To keep things simple, I will explain *everything* there is to be explained, from start, to middle, to end.”

The owl, with a firm and affirmative nod, urged me to continue.

Which I did.

As time began to morph into what was effectively an *abstract construct* in light of *everything* I had to say. I went over every detail, urging Ilunor to fill in the blanks whenever I got something wrong, or whenever something was lost in translation. Thacea and Thalmin remained surprisingly stoic throughout all of this, despite all of our collective mental and physical exhaustion.

It took just around a full *hour* to get everything laid out, as we covered *everything* from the nature of Ilunor's contract, to its foundation as a document signed under duress and blackmail, to Mal'tory's schemes and every single action committed by Ilunor as part of the contract. At the end of it all, we finally touched base on the nature of Ilunor's memory-curse, and the dangers that divination would have on his very life.

That last part proved to be a real sticking point for the owl.

All of this context however, led the owl to return to his initial requests, as he clacked his talons against Buddy's scalp. Resulting in something that more resembled a really intense scalp massage rather than its intended thoughtful movements. "And the evidence, Cadet Emma Booker?"

"Like I said, the contract itself is unrecoverable. However, I have other pieces of evidence, as well as *information* I would like to submit. As gestures of good will, and as a test of good faith of my intent." I spoke, before turning towards Thalmin, outstretching an expecting hand. The mercenary prince reciprocated almost immediately by handing me the first article in question. "Exhibit A." I began, my tone inadvertently stepping into the territory of those detective shows. "The aforementioned blanket-

"-cloak." Thalmin whispered, before I could fully commit to my mistake.

"-cloak of invisibility." I quickly corrected myself as I unfurled the quilted fabric. Shaking it a few times for dramatic effect before handing it over to the owl by rolling it up, and placing it right on the countertop. The owl peered down at it intensely, not yet responding, completely transfixed by each and every fiber of its woven detail.

"This is... *new*." The owl acknowledged with a nod.

"Which is exactly how the Vunerian was able to sneak around undetected. You had no knowledge of this particular method of magical invisibility, and as a result, you had no defenses against it to speak of." I proclaimed boldly, prompting Thacea's eyes to once more bulge out in incredulous shock, as if I'd just insulted some great deity or something.

But instead of being struck down by the hand of god, nothing of note really happened. In fact, we were rewarded by the presence of two foxes, each of whom began picking up the blanket on either side of its rolled up ends. Before they carefully, and in a surprising display of coordination, walked it off to the back where they all disappeared without a trace.

"Exhibit B." This time, I turned towards Ilunor himself, who at this point seemed to have had *all* the color drained from his face. He didn't so much as even *flinch* as both my, and the owl's eyes, once more peered down on his diminutive form. Prompting him to freeze in place, like a deer in headlights as he let out a small, barely audible, *meep*. "The source of this strange fire that was able to scar the library's books in the first place. I know, that you know, it wasn't just dragon

flame. Heck, I even got outside confirmation by a very reliable source that this isn't something in common circulation or that's even widely known amongst the circles of those in the magical-know."

Thanks Sorecar. I quickly thought to myself.

"Because dragon flame alone wouldn't have hurt the library. It was dragon flame, and *a little something extra.*" I quoted the man himself, before moving beside Ilunor, and patting him firmly on his back. "And I'd like you to take a look at it yourself. The remnants of this magical additive to dragon flame is still in his system. This should give you all the information you need. To confirm that it was *this* brand of flame in particular that dealt the library this blow, as well as how best to prepare for it so that you can better prepare for a potential future assault."

The owl took flight, hovering just above Ilunor as he spoke in no uncertain terms. "The library wishes to confirm these claims by casting several spells which will analyze, isolate, and *remove* any remnants of this supposed additive from your mortal form. Do you wish to comply?"

Ilunor nodded wordlessly at that, almost defeatedly, as several things began happening all at once.

The first of which, visually looked to be something akin to a magical spotlight, singling Ilunor out from the rest of the room.

Second, was the appearance of several foxes, who had come out of seemingly *nowhere*, emerging from unseen corners as they surrounded Ilunor in a perfect circle.

Third, the ground beneath the Vunerian began rising above the rest of the room, leaving a literal gaping hole into the *void* beneath it, which I recognized as the same white void that the windows in the library's typical configuration led to.

A few moments of silence punctuated the tense scene, before finally, the spotlight intensified, going sepia tone as if someone had applied an egregious aggressive AR filter to my lenses.

The Vunerian's eyes began rolling up, his pupils receding, as what looked to be a sickly, ghostly collection of gasses began emerging from his gaping maw; rising up into a collection of clouds that hung ominously over the whole scene.

A small vial was soon brought in by one of the foxes, which was quickly used as a storage container for the strange gasses. Soon enough, and without much fanfare, that same fox leapt up, grabbing the vial and then running off into the back, disappearing as suddenly as he arrived.

"This is likewise... *new.*" The owl suddenly spoke, breaking the ominous silence of the whole affair as Ilunor was suddenly brought out of that trance, yet the sepia tone that had enveloped

the room still remained. In fact, the platform was still raised, and the circle of foxes remained sitting, their noses pointed up towards the floating platform and the Vunerian standing atop of it.

“You have proven the guilt of the Vunerian, Cadet Emma Booker. And for that, the library thanks you.”

I felt my heart suddenly *sinking* right into my gut as I heard that, as I felt like I knew where all of this was headed, and the direction the library had taken. A looming sense of impending doom quickly gripped me, cinching its tendrils around my chest as it *tightened* with a vice grip. I felt my breath hitching, my mind running through the motions of bringing up the final few cards we had left to play.

“But by that same line of reasoning, the library finds itself at a loss.” The owl continued, prompting a sudden respite in my anxieties.

“These two pieces of evidence would be enough to condemn the Vunerian to his fate, ushering in the expectant results of a mortal’s greatest desires. The recognition, the potential for glory, and the tangible rewards upon completing a self-directed quest not seen in eons. Yet you dash this with your claims of conspiracy, and your attempts to frame this presumably simple case in a manner which outright prevents you from attaining this simple victory. And for that, the library wishes to ask, *why?* Why do you insist on pursuing a case with no evidence aside from the circumstantial, with no true links to that which you claim to be behind a greater plot?”

“Because that’s the truth, Librarian.” I answered simply and truthfully. “And is that not what the library is about?” I turned to face *upwards*, at the ceiling, mimicking the motions the owl and buddy had used before to address something else hidden in the darkness. “To search for the truth? To seek out what is real?”

The whole room *shuddered* once more in response to my words, with the wood audibly creaking and groaning under the weight of what sounded like something *above* the roof itself.

The owl didn’t reply, as if he was once more deep in thought.

“Well? Is it or is it not, Librarian?” I egged him on, once more prompting Thacea’s worrisome features to return to the forefront, this time triggering a similar reaction in Thalmin’s features.

“To *seek* out the truth, you could say, Cadet Emma Booker?” The owl responded inquisitively.

“Yes. And heck, you can check Ilunor’s mind right now for that mental trap spell curse thing! It’s there! Exactly as I explained! Who in their right mind would inflict that upon themselves? This is the work of someone else, and-”

“We know, Cadet Emma Booker. I have sensed it in the prior ritual.” The owl interrupted, before letting out a long, sonorous hoot. “With all of this being said... the library... *appreciates* your

candid nature, and your earnest spirit. It... reminds it of earlier times, in so much as this unscripted and highly unconventional *proceeding* has progressed.”

The sepia tone in the room suddenly lifted, this time, the whole space seemed to not only return to a normal shade of color, but a more *vibrant* one, as if someone had cranked my AR settings to a hyper saturated mess of settings.

“But as far as the matter of this case is concerned... there are two matters that still need to be settled. The first, being the matter of *punishment*. The second, being the matter of the *dues* which remain to be paid.”

I was about to interject, but it was clear the owl wasn't having it as he glared at me before I could get another word out.

“However, with all that being said, these matters may yet be resolved in a manner which befits your *novelty*. Your nature as an independent agent, and the proof of your abilities to act independently from Nexian interests, places you in a *very* unique position Cadet Emma Booker. Moreover, your spirit, and your very nature, seems to align closely to a certain type of mortal that the library has not seen in eons. In short, the library wishes to extend an *offer*, Cadet Emma Booker. One that should satisfy your intent for the resolution to this particular transgression, and one which would allow you more *time* as it were, to do so.”

My eyes began narrowing at the librarian, who remained flying at eye level, just a few feet away from me now.

“What are you proposing, librarian?”

“A *position*, Cadet Emma Booker. One which has not been filled since before the times of the Nexus, and one which may help to address all of the points you wish to accomplish. As today you have accomplished *all* of the trials expected of such an honored role. Your delivery of three unique tributes, your direct challenge to the library's assumptions, and your commitment to the sanctity of truth. These are the prerequisites so many have spent decades attempting to fulfill, for the hope that they may be offered the role which you are being offered now. Cadet Emma Booker, the library wishes to offer you the role of a *Seeker*.” The owl paused, that word seeming to prompt a *flurry* of mana-related warnings from my HUD as more and more foxes began poking from the few available corners there were in the room. Flooding it with a flurry of puffy red fur. “It is an intermediary role, a position that is traditionally bound to the accomplishment of a task at the behest of the library or at one's own personal journey. In this case, your role of seeker would be to accomplish one, very simple task. To exonerate this Vunerian, by virtue of *seeking* the knowledge which has been lost. And in doing so, clearing the Vunerian of his debts to the library.”

A new silence descended upon the room as the whole turn of events didn't just come out of left field, it came from somewhere in low earth orbit.

But I should've expected this.

In fact, I remembered the offer I'd made to Buddy earlier.

I guess the library's going to get a blast from the past, a taste of the wild times.

"You may resume your quest to search for the true culprit of this plot, if you wish to do so." The owl quickly added. "But your quest as a seeker will see you primarily working towards one single goal at first, to prove your worthiness of the role of seeker. Thus, your quest as seeker is simple. To uncover exactly *what* was lost. As the rediscovery of the contents of which, is not possible until we ascertain exactly *what* was lost. Return to the library upon discovering this, afterwhich, we may further discuss the details of exactly where we go from here."

"And what of the Vunerian?" I quickly asked.

"His fate will be tied to the success of your seekership." The owl spoke plainly.

"And what are the catches? What does *seekership* entail for me? What are the consequences if I fail to meet whatever requirements exist for this *seekership*?"

"In this case, Cadet Emma Booker? Failure means nothing for you, save for the revoking of your seekership. However, it has *everything* to do with the fate of the Vunerian." The owl responded flatly. "As the nature of your seekership sees him as the subject of your efforts."

The whole room went silent once again, as all eyes now rested on me, and the call I had to make.

"What say you, Cadet Emma Booker of Earthrealm?"