

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

Ilunor

The end was coming.

And I was fated to spend it alone.

Surrounded not by family or kin, nor those bound by oath and blood, but with a guard at my door, and a cell unbecoming of a noble of house Rularia.

But perhaps this was a fitting end.

For even that latter assertion was now categorically untrue given my most recent of brash actions.

So this was how it felt. To have reached the conclusion to a story before it even had a chance to develop. To end one's tale in the first quarter, before the rising tension was even established. To become nothing but a footnote, the loose end of a far more malicious tale. A frayed knot whose only purpose was to be tied off and forgotten.

That was the worst part of it.

Knowing that I was now a footnote to a series of stories destined for so much more than myself. Talunor, Thacea, Thalmin, and even the infernal *newrealmer*.

Theirs were stories yet to be fated, yet to be ensconced in brick and mortar. And whilst the fates of the latter three would probably end as abruptly as my own... they at least had the chance to become something *more* than just fleeting excerpts. For at least their legacies will be enshrined by the disruption they will inevitably inflict upon the Status Eternia.

At least their tales would serve as warnings for those who may challenge the Nexus.

At least they would *have* a legacy.

A legacy, *any* legacy at all right now, was what I so desperately craved to leave behind before it was too late.

But that was no longer an option for me. Because the only legacy I could leave behind now was a fable of liabilities for those I still cared about, for the lineage and name I dared not disrupt as a result of my own short-sighted mistakes.

It was a surreal experience, staring at the lupinor from the foot of my bed, knowing well that by tomorrow, his life would merely be mildly disrupted; his trajectory otherwise unaffected by my passing.

It was frustrating to know that the world, and all of the other stories progressing within it, would continue unabated, unaffected. Completely ignorant that my own journey will have since come to an end.

It was insulting, to feel the bed beneath my form, knowing well that it would be handed off to some would-be peer.

It was infuriating, knowing that no matter what I did, said, or spoke now, that my very presence meant *nothing*.

In a way, it felt like I was already dead, a soul in transit, existing only for the moment and nothing more.

The worst part of it however, was the understanding that the end to my story was not an unfortunate tale of victimhood, nor of maliciously directed conspiracy... It was merely one that was born of the convenience of others, taking advantage of the oversight that came only from the ambitions of my own pride.

If only I hadn't dropped that confounded bracelet.

If only I hadn't entered that elf hideaway.

If only I hadn't sat down with this insipid group.

If only I hadn't miscalculated my cunning and control.

If only I hadn't thought myself the potential *leader* to a pair of outcasts.

If only I had been more conservative, more cautious with my approach.

If only...

If only.

I finally stood up from the bed, Thalmin peering over his shoulder to observe my motions, like the true *guard dog* he was.

But his concerns were misplaced.

There was nowhere for me to go.

Nothing for me to do.

I could no longer count on the Nexus, and I could no longer infringe on my home.

The newrealmer was my only hope, and with her final departure, she so clearly implied that my fate was not worth fighting for.

I knew this... because if I was in her position, I would've thought the same thing.

It was the smartest thing for her to do.

And whilst I *could* have escaped with this invisibility cloak in hand, escaping my fate would mean dooming my line.

Which was simply unacceptable.

And so I decided to wait.

To wait for the inevitable conclusion to my story.

To wait and observe, as my time came to a swift-

SLAM!

=====

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

Emma

[INFIL-DRONE01 EN ROUTE TO MISSION LOCATION: OFFICE OF PROFESSOR MAL'TORY. MISSION: INFILTRATION AND INVESTIGATION.]

Saving the small thing was now top on the priority list.

It was so urgent in fact that not only did I choose to deploy a drone to scour for evidence in Maltory's office-

[TIME SENSITIVE OBJECTIVE: SAVE ILUNOR RALARIA]

-I even set it as such on my HUD for good measure, the typo being evidence of that fact.

But before I saved him, I wanted to start dishing out some long deserved just-desserts. Starting by returning the favor for each and every time he gave me, and the rest of the gang, mini heart attacks.

By pulling a page straight from his book: slamming the door wide open with a **THWACK** and a **SLAM**.

His reactions said it all, or rather, the loud *thump* coming from his short fall was enough to speak for itself.

Those colorful reactions were good enough for me to finally make my entrance, as I hopped in with the force of a hundred caffeinated post-doctoral, committee-appointed, candidates on their first round of thesis defenses in the slaughterhouse that was the AOA.

“I told you I’d be back.” I announced loudly over my vocoders, slamming the door shut behind me with *less* of a vendetta this time around.

Finding myself above Ilunor’s shocked and flustered form, I couldn’t help but to cock my head with a degree of incredulous confusion. “What? You didn’t think I wouldn’t keep my word did you? I told you, you could at least count on me coming back, right?”

The Vunerian, perhaps for the first time since I first had the displeasure of meeting him, remained utterly silent at that question. His expressions never shifted from what I could only describe as a shocked vacant look of disbelief, followed closely by small, little abrupt gasps that *almost* formed into words, but prematurely stopped before any could leave his snout.

“Erm, Earth to Ilunor, come in Ilunor. You still in there?” I shot back a second time, tentatively reaching a hand out to shake the blue thing’s shoulder, only for him to finally snap out of it before I had the chance to do so.

“Indeed... you are.” He finally responded, somehow, through some means, inexplicably returning right to that darker, brooding, desperate tone he’d used right before I left for the library.

It was jarring to see how effortlessly the little thing could slip back into that mentality, but I guess it was par for the course for a life of cutthroat nobility.

“And now that you’ve returned, I believe we may resume our conversation.” He continued, trying to grapple and take over the reins of the conversation once again.

But I wasn’t having it.

“Continue? Sure, but you’re sorely mistaken if you think we’re going to go down another long-winded conversation. No, we’re going to address the key points here and now.” I announced firmly, standing my ground as I refused to even take a seat, performing one of the

many *standing meetings* that the IAS' director was so fond of doing. "Ilunor, if we don't leave for the library before sunrise, you're going to die." I stated in no uncertain terms, prompting Thalmin's face to widen in shock and confusion, but leaving Thacea's poker-face completely unaffected. The princess either being desensitized to shocking revelations such as these, or simply being unaffected by virtue of already being aware of the whole situation.

Ilunor's expressions, whilst measured at first, started to show signs of wear as it was clear he *knew* this fact as well. "And I think you know that. No. I think you *knew* that from the very beginning didn't you?" I asked tersely, prompting the small thing to finally break eye contact, not that his eye contact was impressive to begin with.

"I... I had my suspicions as to that being the case, yes." He admitted, yet again skirting around the issue.

"Suspicious?" I sighed with a frustrated breath, before bringing out the letter Sorecar had painstakingly put back together.

The Vunerian's eyes grew wide at that, as he reached up to grab it, yet found himself unable to do that even as I held it at shoulder-height.

"That was not meant for your eyes, newrealmer!"

"I know, and I'm sorry. But given the crap you're embroiled in, and given what you're asking of me, I *need* to know the full scope of the story. If we're going to do this, if you're going to get out of this alive, I *need* you to be frank with me. I'm not going to be able to help you if I lack critical context that completely changes the math in this whole equation. Because trust me when I say this-" I paused, briefly glancing towards Thacea for just a short moment. "-what's coming up is going to require us to go over *every* detail, as minor as they may be, for the sake of this case."

Ilunor paused at that, at the latter word in particular, as he craned his head up with a look of genuine confusion. "Case?"

"Yeah, like a weird magical trial. You didn't think the library would just gobble you up whole, did you?"

"I... I assumed that the only option available was for you to utilize your library card to somehow excuse my actions-"

"If it were that easy, I'd have done it already." I interrupted with yet another frustrated sigh. "But this isn't your typical noble power play situation. The library's a whole different beast, Ilunor. It operates by its own logic and what it deems *fair*. And right now, it wants both justice to be served, and recompense to be paid." I clarified, before moving on just as quickly. "Now, I'm assuming you know about *divination*, right?"

That one word was enough for Ilunor to once more pipe back down, his eyes growing wide with equal parts worry and equal parts utter dread as he took a good half minute before responding. "Yes. What about it, newrealmer?"

"I'm going to be blunt with my question here, Ilunor. Do you or do you not have a divination-preventing spell, trap, curse, or whatever the hell magical-speak for it is, installed in your head? Because the library's way of ascertaining truth is by using that spell or what-have-you on a potential suspect. Now, your letter here leads me to believe that you think the library's going to find you guilty regardless. And I know you're smart enough to know that the Nexus is going to deliver you dead to the library tomorrow anyways. So the most logical way out is to turn yourself in, so that the library can read your brain to discover the full conspiracy. But clearly, judging by the letter and your assumptions on your fate, you somehow think that's impossible. This all leaves me with only one assumption, that there's something, somehow, blocking that simple fix to our whole issue. So tell me, is that true?"

The Vunerian once more broke eye contact with me, or at least, what passed for eye contact with his eyes finding it difficult to truly penetrate the opaque lenses as was the case with so many others. He hesitated, one of his arms reaching over to the other in order to grip it tightly, clenching at the ostentatious fabric that covered it. "Yes. Yes it is."

"Then why didn't you tell me-"

"Because I didn't want to give you the impression that I was a completely lost cause, newrealmer!" He finally admitted with an exasperated breath on the verge of breaking down. His voice, for the very first time, hitched up to a degree that teetered on the edge of sobbing. "Because I knew if I told you outright, it would immediately prompt a simple conclusion to be made... that there simply does not exist any other avenue out of my predicament. For what case is there to be made for my sake? And what hope do I have of convincing you to help me when *any* help, save for divine intervention from His Eternal Majesty himself, would've been an exercise in futility?" He violently gestured to the room around him, to nothing in particular. "I have no evidence to back up my claims of the black robe's involvement. There exists no trace of his plots and conspiracies save for the memories I hold in my head. And without evidence, then all hope at a case being made is lost. As a result, any hope of requesting aid is lost with it. For who in their right mind would risk their own skin and scale, their own reputation, their own standing with the library of all entities, defending a case that has no chance of success? Even you, newrealmer, would know a lost cause when you see one. This is why I assumed once you came across this fact, that you would..." The Vunerian trailed off, prompting me to complete his thoughts for him.

"Give up?"

"Yes. As you clearly are considering now I presume." The Vunerian sighed in defeat.

“You keep making miscalculations, Ilunor.” I began, seemingly acknowledging the small thing’s self-admitted fate. “And this assumption of yours, is yet another one of those miscalculations.”

That sudden shift in both tone and narrative direction clearly took Ilunor by surprise, as he quickly turned his attention back to me yet again, unable to see the reassuring grin currently manifesting underneath my helmet.

Hopefully, he’d at least hear it in my voice. “Let me tell you something, Ilunor. Before my arrival in the Nexus, I knew for a fact that there wasn’t a guarantee the armor would work as planned, nor was there a guarantee that the portal would be safe to begin with. You’re talking to someone who’s willing to take that leap of faith, to take the plunge, embrace the risk, even if it means my own death. It’s in my people’s nature to defy the odds, to say *screw it* to the risks, to throw caution to the wind, and to embrace the uncertainty of tackling what fate has to offer one punch at a time. So I’m not about to let one simple little complication... okay scratch that, one *big* complication, mess up what I’ve already committed to.” I quickly gesticulated to the door. “I told you I was going to the library to assess things for myself, and I have. I just *know* there *must* be ways of sidestepping this obstacle. Either through some clever finagling or haggling or whatever we need to do, we’ll get through this.” I paused my wild gesticulations, my long-winded tirade, to make one final point, to hammer home to the Vunerian my stance on all of this. “Simply put, Ilunor, you’re wrong. Because I’m not giving up. At least, not as long as there’s still a battle to be fought.”

The Vunerian’s face went completely *blank*, as his eyes stared up through to my own with a mix of disbelief and genuine vacancy. In a way, he looked almost like a discount plush toy right now with how lifeless and big his eyes had gotten.

“You’re insane, newrealmer.” He announced under a hushed breath.

“I mean...” I trailed off, shrugging. “I guess I can’t dispute that. That’s sort of a universal trait among those who want to stand out amongst my kind, after all.” I chuckled awkwardly.

“And yet you embrace that insanity with *pride* rather than with *shame*.” Ilunor replied, his eyes darting left and right, as if trying to visually calculate his options. “I admit, my hesitation to trust you with the whole picture might have indeed been a miscalculation.”

“That’s an understatement of the century if I’ve ever heard one.” Thalmin added snarkily, prompting Ilunor to side-eye him for only the briefest of glances.

“And I admit my shortcomings on that front.” He spoke with a great deal of hesitation, clearly unaccustomed to admitting *any* mistakes or pitfalls of his own doing. “There’s no other way to go about it, newrealmer. What you have ascertained is correct. A curse has been placed on me, pertaining to a certain segment of my memories.” He paused, finally regaining appropriate eye contact, albeit through watery, tear-ridden eyes. “I think you can guess *which* memories in particular. But suffice it to say this curse was separate and distinct from the contract. Indeed, it

acts as the last line of defense between the conspiracy and the truth.” There was yet another pause, as Ilunor hesitated for a moment, before letting out a sigh and continuing with yet another shaky breath. “It is a *crude* curse, one that not merely blocks out *any* form of divination... but maliciously and actively destroys not just the memories affected, but *all* memories upon its activation.”

It was at that point that my heart just *dropped*, as the letter in my hand suddenly felt a little bit heavier.

“This is why-”

“This is why turning myself in would’ve been a *literal* death sentence anyways, yes.” Ilunor concluded, his tone of voice similar to those who were at death’s door.

“Alright.” I managed out with a sigh of my own. “First of all, let me state for the record-” I paused, meeting the gaze of everyone in the room. “-screw Mal’tory. Just... god... that dude... he just...” I began fumbling my words, prompting me to reorient myself with a steady breath. “Second of all, thank you, Ilunor, for telling me the whole picture.”

This prompted the Vunerian to nod sheepishly, as if unsure as to how to take that ‘compliment’.

“So with all that being said, I think it’s time we put our heads together for this thing.” I announced. “To summarize the developments on my end in rapid succession... One: We have to get Ilunor to the library before sunrise or else he gets axed by the Nexus. Two: Whoever brings Ilunor to the library gets to speak for him. Which guarantees the library will hear us out. Three, and probably most important: with the mind reading thing ruled out, we have to do this the old fashioned way - arguing our case with evidence.” The whole room stared at me with eager, awaiting eyes, as if ready for some final play by some grand chess master. “Alright that’s all I got so far, anyone have any ideas on how we could do this thing?”

I could feel the tension in the air actually *cracking*, the expectations *shattering* as laid out the groundwork for this *extracurricular group activity*.

Needless to say, Thacea’s expressions said it all: a look of complete and utter frustrated disbelief. This expression was even more pronounced on Ilunor’s face.

Thalmin, however, seemed to be the only one to truly embrace it in stride. If his eager look of determination was anything to go by. “Whilst we might not have the smoking hand, nor the radiant wand by which this conspiracy was fired, we do have the remains of its collateral.” He pointed to the Vunerian’s bed, or more specifically, what rested upon it.

The invisibility blanket.

“Oh. OH!” I shot out, snapping my fingers in the process... resulting in nothing but the insultingly unsatisfying sounds of two hi-grip, hi-friction palm-pads rubbing against one another fruitlessly. All eyes were on me as I tried, but failed, to get even a meek *snap* to form out of the two grippy surfaces. “Okay! Yeah! An nth-tier legendary artifact that was used in the scene of the crime. Now *that’s* something we can work with! That’s definitely something we can work with, right?”

“There’s still no means of connecting the blanket to Professor Mal’tory himself, Emma.” Thacea pointed out bluntly.

“True, but couldn’t we make a case that Ilunor couldn’t have possibly gotten his hands on it?”

“He’s a noble, Emma.” Thacea retorted without so much as a hint of mercy. “There is precedence for nobles and royals alike being able to attain such artifacts. At a high cost, perhaps, but it isn’t *impossible*.” I could feel a certain level of *noble-superiority* seeping through there, which Thacea seemed to realize as well, judging by the look of her face. “Not that I mean any offense at your commoner status, Emma.” She quickly corrected herself.

“No offense taken, princess.” I turned towards Thacea for a half-hearted sarcastic bow, before pressing forward. “Right, okay, scratch that then. We attack it from a different angle. We’ll still state our case, it’s the truth after all, but we’re going to emphasize the whole *trade* aspect of this. Hand this in as a gesture of good faith, showing the library that we’re willing to cooperate, and that we’re putting our best foot out by acquiring everything that was used *against* the library to better prepare it for the next attack.” I suggested, raising both of my hands up in the process.

“Then that’s not really a legal proceeding, Emma.” Thacea replied matter-of-factly, which prompted me to respond with a resounding nod.

“*Precisely!* The library’s shown to be quite flexible when it comes to arrangements. I’m sure that its court of owls and foxes isn’t going to be strict either.”

“You sound... overly confident about something drawn from conjecture.” Thacea once more shot back, this time with a questioning coo.

“And do you have more sources or data to pull from other than what we’ve both experienced so far?” I rebounded, not so much arguing, as I was trying to make my case.

That answer seemed to strike a chord in Thacea, as she relented with an exasperated sigh of her own. “Point taken, Emma.”

“Listen, the fact is, we’re going to be throwing everything at the wall to see what sticks.” I continued, trying my best to placate the princess’ worries by taking the edge off of the whole affair. Whether or not it worked was a different matter entirely as another idea hit me as soon as I spoke. “Which reminds me, Ilunor-” I turned to the titular blue thing in question. “-on the topic of

the blanket, you said Mal'tory gave you a potion to drink, right? One that changed your fire to be able to burn the books in the library?"

Ilunor nodded warily at this, still quite shaken up by that whole deal no doubt. "That's something else we can use to our advantage. Do you still have the bottle?"

But as with many things when it came to the Vunerian, the answer was a decidedly disappointing no. "I'm afraid not, Emma."

"Did you throw it away? Maybe there's still time for us to like rummage through collections or-"

"No. As is the case with *most* potion bottles, the bottle in question dematerialized upon consumption of its contents."

"Oh." I responded with a resounding look of disbelief. "Ok you know what, that actually makes a lot of sense. I just didn't expect the mechanic to apply in real life as well."

The whole gang looked at me with varying levels of confusion at that, which I dismissed with a wave of my hand. "Right, back on track then, I'm assuming your *fire* still has traces of whatever it is that messed with it?"

Ilunor's expressions shifted increasingly darker at that, as if I'd pointed out some deep-seated point of shame or something. "That seems to be the case, yes." He reluctantly admitted, which definitely helped to explain Sorecar's comments about how the letter was burned with a little something extra outside of dragon flame.

"Alright, I guess that's good enough. We'll also submit that as evidence, trading material, or whatever you want to call it to the library." I paused, before shifting my tone to something a bit less bombastic, and a bit more reassuring. "And I'm sure by submitting it, they'll be *extracting* whatever magic is causing your fire to go haywire as well, Ilunor."

This sudden bout of reassurance that went beyond the practical issues at hand seemed to trigger yet another error in Ilunor's code, as he stared back with a look of vacant disbelief.

"Emma." Thacea began abruptly. "Given the extent of your realm's... unconventional development. I must ask." Her eyes leveled against my own with a stark, no-nonsense stare. "Do manaless methods of divination exist?"

This caught Thalmin and Ilunor's full attention, as all eyes were once more focused squarely on me.

I knew where Thacea was going with this.

“Yes and no.” I answered sheepishly. “If you’re talking about full-on *mind reading*? Yeah, no, that technology was highly invasive and was *starting* to become abused before legislators stepped in. Heck, it was one of the pivotal events that cemented the ethics council as a legitimate political entity. If you’re talking about lie detectors? That’s a big *maybe*. However, the fact of the matter is that Ilunor’s anatomy and physiology is completely *alien* to my med-tech. It would require decades of research to get anything to be cross-species compatible, and we’re talking starting from the ground up with case studies to meta analyses and-”

[ALERT: INFIL-DRONE01 REQUESTING DOCKING AUTHORIZATION. STATUS: RTB. MISSION STATUS: PARAMETERS UNFULFILLED. CAUSE: PATHFINDING ERROR. DETAILS: Prestablished routes are incompatible with current sensor telemetry.]

I quickly turned towards the door, a pair of reticles highlighting the insect-like drone that had returned in a surprisingly speedy fashion after I’d sent it out to scout out Mal’tory’s office just an hour earlier before this whole back and forth with Ilunor began.

But instead of providing the answers we so desperately needed, or giving us *something* we could use as the ace up our sleeve, the small thing returned with nothing.

“Right, yeah, we definitely don’t have much beyond this to work with.” I admitted with a frustrated sigh. “You were right, Thacea.” I turned towards the avinor. “The path to Mal’tory’s office shifts and changes constantly, making the previous path from my trip to his office practically useless.”

We all stood there in silence for the longest while, the conversation springing back up to life again sporadically as we tossed ideas around, most of them falling flat, but some of them circling back to the same plans and ideas.

That we would be telling the library as much as we could, giving it what we had on hand, and then seeing where we could go from there.

I was, after all, arguing this from the *privileged* position of a patron.

That had to count for *something*, right?

=====

The Transgracian Academy for the Magical Arts. En Route to the Library. Local Time: 2300 Hours.

Emma

This was it.

Ilunor's endgame.

We managed to make it to the terrace without issue. However, instead of the dead silence of the night, I was instead met with a scene straight out of a period comedy. In fact, I could swear I 'heard' *marching music* of all things.

"NOW! TONIGHT, WE'RE GOING TO DO MARCHING UP AND DOWN THE TERRACE! That is... unless ANY of you have anything *better* to do?" I heard a distinctly *accented* voice assaulting my ears, one that I could *immediately* attribute to a certain eccentric apprentice. "WELL COME ON THEN, ANY *OBJECTIONS?*" The hooded apprentice continued, receiving nothing in response, nothing, but the sudden *click* of the doors that resonated louder than it should've in the otherwise calm and silent evening night.

"W-what?" The apprentice turned towards us, shocked, and genuinely taken aback. That was, until he narrowed his eyes, and his face did a complete return to his formerly authoritative tone. "You lot again?! What is with you and your constant *back and forths* with the library, huh?" He shouted in our direction incredulously, leaving the formation of gargoyles that remained inanimate.

"I could ask the same for you, good sir. Seeing as you're asking questions to..." I intentionally paused, gesturing to what was effectively just row upon rows of statues at this point. "... inanimate constructs."

The apprentice couldn't help but to guffaw incredulously at that question. But instead of providing any answers, he deflected it completely. "That is *Academy business*, young lady. Now, are *any* of you here planning for a *late night visit* to the *library?*" He turned to the rest of the gang, each of whom nodded with varying levels of confusion.

"And *you* then, are *you* the mastermind behind this gaggle of fools? Marching up and down the bridge whenever you feel like it? With you and your *golden library card?*" He directed that question towards me, prompting me to nod in response as well.

Yet instead of being stonewalled, or instead of being blockaded by some other absurd Nexian rule, the apprentice-

"Alright, off you go then."

-simply let us go.

We wordlessly inched our way around the man, the pitter-patter of our boots and shoes clacking all the way up and across the bridge.

About halfway across, I could once again hear the man piping back up. As if resuming his little drill sergeant larping without a moment's hesitation.

“Alright then! Senior Apprentice marching up and down the terrace with his formation, START!”

My rear cameras confirmed it.

The man was now ‘marching’ up and down the terrace.

But the gargoyles didn’t follow.

Instead, they remained static, with only their heads slowly following the man around the terrace.

Let’s hope the library would be more sane than the world around it.