

The number of times I've inexplicably found a way to cause Buddy duress could be counted on a single hand, limited to two digits, and not a single digit more. The first of these wasn't even directly my fault, but simply a consequence of Buddy's overeagerness to trade, which inevitably resulted in a verbal dressing down by the librarian. The second of these was definitely my own fault, prompted by my question about the library's new paint job, which resulted in a response that was drenched in whines and whimpers.

I promised myself that there wouldn't be a third instance of this, because the pain I felt as a result was comparable to that guilt-ridden experience that any pet owner would've felt at least *once* in their lives. It was an experience that fell somewhere between forgetting to take your dog on walkies, and accidentally stepping on their tail.

Suffice it to say, it did *not* feel good to do, even if it was an accident. No matter how much you try to make up for it with headpats and treats.

But despite my best efforts, and despite my unspoken promises, I'd once again found myself face to face with the repercussions of another one of my blunders.

The chorus of foxes that had come to answer my question in Buddy's stead vanished just as quickly as they'd appeared. This prompted Buddy to tremble in a shaky display of concern, before staring back up at me with two, beady-eyes that widened and twinkled, and a throat that emanated only whines and whimpers.

"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 initiative of 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 answer 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.

"May I interest you in some light reading on the history of everything I just referenced?" He suddenly, and abruptly, went back to *polite customer service mode*. To which I had to decline with a single hand, before leaning forward closer towards the fox.

"No, Buddy, thank you. But if it's alright with you, I'd like to get back on track on discussing exactly *what* these punishments are." I clarified, prompting the fox to just as suddenly drop the *polite customer service mode*, going back to that grimmer *lecture mode* as I was quickly dubbing it.