

The Library

Thacea

I remember the tales of old, sung to me in flights of fantasy: of a world of heroes, an era of adventure. A time when anything was possible.

I remember the legends of these heroes, of those who slew great demons, of many who convened with the gods, and many more who spoke to the inhabitants of higher planes.

This epoch of heroism was a time where the mortal and higher plains coexisted, a time where both interacted freely without boundaries, without order, and without any of the ties that bind.

Such things have been cast into the light of mysticism in the contemporary era. Seen by many as a period of poorly recorded history born out of imaginative fixation, rather than a documentation of truth.

To many, this era of fantasy was accurate to its namesake... a mere fantasy, and nothing more.

This was what I was led to believe.

This was what I truly believed.

And yet here I was, witnessing the manifestation that all but defied those beliefs.

A physical embodiment of those fantasies.

A faceless knight clad in blue, heraldry proudly drawn, speaking freely to those of higher planes without prompting, without deference, without decorum... without being beholden to the ties that bind.

Moreover, she spoke in a manner only portrayed in songs of legend, as equals in peerage, and contemporaries in dignity.

This was, as Nurse Pelka would say, *the stuff of legends*.

And I was acting not as a mere witness to the birth of this legend, but as a participant in the drafting of its course.

But as with all legends, this was not without its challenges. As point after point that was raised began chipping away at the reality that I thought I understood, a worldview I thought was absolute; prompted first by the library's self-admitted limitations, and its desire to overcome those limitations for the sake of transaction.

It was actively redrafting its eons-old rules, in adaptation and in service purely for Emma's unique needs.

It was a personalized direction that betrayed the library's vested interests in this newrealm.

A not-so-subtle hint at its assessment of Emma, and by extension, Earthrealm's potential.

This would later be all but confirmed by the librarian himself, at the behest of Emma's incessant ramblings.

Ramblings that would traditionally be seen as novice in typical discourse, but was clearly more in line with the library's straightforwardness, and very much in line with its preference in conducting trade.

I watched on, trying my best to ignore and block out the sudden surge in activity within the foreign ebb and flow of the library's manastreams. It was a silent and unseen fight that eventually ended in the library's victory, but only momentarily, as it overcame my learned decorum prompting my feathers to flare out in a natural response.

I continued bearing witness to Emma's back and forths with Buddy and eventually the Librarian, as the library morphed, contorted, and changed, redrafting the canvas of reality on a whim just to illustrate its points to Emma. I noted at the corner of my eye, an entire *section* dedicated to the Earthrealmer. I listened, as Emma continued her points of clarification, demonstrating Earthrealm's particular acumen for trade assessment.

I hung on every word of every sentence, as the realization quickly came that what was rapidly developing wasn't merely a typical exchange of information. It was a trade of immense significance, one that should have only been possible by the Nexus, owing to its seemingly endless stores of clandestine information.

My whole body stood still, as Emma preempted her trade of this *Radio*, with a speech befitting of an Elven Nexian diplomat in its delivery and content; as well as its flair and bluster. I dissected each concept, as Emma described a tale that reflected the tale of many a realm, until finally, it reached a point that no realm could match. None, except for the Nexus itself. I listened closely as she described the functional limitations of a civilization never before seen, never before heard of, never before imagined save for the Nexus, and a few outliers such as Aetheron prior to the reformations.

A civilization so large, so expansive, so driven in its course and its direction for more, that it required nothing short of miracles to maintain its ferocious hunger.

Miracles that came in the form not of mana-driven derivatives of Tethers, Puddlejumping, or Flares, and not even brute-forced into existence by the gifts of flight, speed, or water-sprinting, but by a wholly foreign concept that had only been revealed to me a few days prior.

A concept that up to this point had been nameless, vague, and formless.

A concept, no, a system... known as science.

And its derivative, *technology*.

A method and system of civilizational advancement that could only be compared to magic and mana in its potential and capabilities.

On a scale so vast that only the greatest of adjacent realms with the most advanced of magics could ever hope to match.

That was my assertion, at least, until I heard a collection of words that simply did not fit into the narrative of Earthrealm.

*“Our destiny was always to cross the distance of oceans. Regardless of if they were oceans of water or **oceans of stars.**”*

A collection of words that I'd at first dismissed as mere window dressing for the sake of a trade. A quirk of colorful language and nothing more.

However, I should've known better than that.

The Earthrealmer wasn't the type to mince words.

Moreover, she was the type to say *exactly* what she meant, in as little words as possible.

So as her speech went on, and more was revealed, a revelation dawned on me that I remained actively opposed to for the sake of my own sanity.

“...In our race to expand across the heavens...”

“...Traditional communication using radio waves would be insufficient to these ends...”

“...We learned that lesson across our tentative first few steps across the stars...”

A revelation so far reaching, so extensive, that it would lead to nothing but a redefinition of the worldview I held.

I held onto that root of doubt, that network of skepticism, for as long as I could.

Until finally, I could not.

As the library itself would act as the third party assessor which would uproot any of these doubts, in a fashion so simple, that it left me speechless and listless.

“Earthrealm... and your kind, are utterly fascinating Cadet Emma Booker.”

The librarian himself spoke, not once doubting, not once refuting, not once denying any of the Earthrealmer’s claims.

“Even after all that has transpired, and the trauma that has been incurred upon it, the library wishes to express nothing but adamant appreciation and wishes to reciprocate fairly and accordingly.”

In fact, it was nothing short of *grateful* for this revelation.

Meaning that its veracity was undeniable.

Emma’s realm, her world, her *minor-realms* unbound by skies, was *real*.

Which meant that there was no adjacent realm that could parallel her own.

Except for the Nexus itself.

...

I felt nothing one moment.

...

And in another, for the very first time, I felt *everything*.

Fear.

Dread.

Confusion.

Curiosity.

And most confusing of all... hope.

This new *mana-less* realm, powered by *mana-less* means, driven by a ferocious appetite for *more* that could only be matched by the Elven and Draconian races... was a potential *rival* to the established order. This civilization constructed on the principles of novelty, taken to the

extreme, defying all Nexian narratives on the supposed 'dead-end' nature of such empiricist sentiments, could very well be the asymmetric rival to the Nexus' grasp on power.

There was a potential, as slim as it may be, for something new to emerge from the frayed branches of the old.

And it was all because of an anomaly, a direct result of a species of hungry, ravenous, thinking minds, that would not and could not be stopped by their inherent limitations.

My mind raced back to the moving images Emma showed, of grand manufactoriums forging metals and more, and her reasoning as to *why* it was all necessary.

Why they had been pushed in this strange direction in the first place.

"Because we had no other choice."

They simply had no other means to satiate their ceaseless and seemingly endless hunger for progress.

But as important as that former observation was, it was the latter that was just as, if not more important.

For it was one thing to have the *potential* to rival an endless and boundless empire... it was another to have the *will* to see it through. And that willpower was more than exemplified through their ambitions.

The likes of which seemingly knew no end, as evidenced by Emma's mere presence here; an affront to her natural mana-less state of being.

I just hoped for Earthrealm's sakes, and for perhaps the sake of the future yet unwritten, that they haven't yet flown too close past the sight-lines.

...

THUMP!

My internalized thoughts were brought to a rude and abrupt pause as the librarian's end of the promise was quickly made manifest.

This came in the form of the conjuring of a grand table — exactly two seats — and the arrival of several piles of books being pulled from shelves far and wide.

It was around the same time that I was pulled from my reverie that I noted the librarian's questionable offer, and decided that I needed to immediately counter for the sake of future transactions.

"Emma." I quickly interjected, drawing Emma's attention almost immediately as her two red lenses glared ominously back at me. "These other topics are known to me, and thus we may discuss this *later*." I stated a matter of factly.

This seemed to be all that was needed as Emma's trust in my judgment was nigh instantaneous. She rejected the offer without a second thought, deferring that decision entirely to me.

This was... something that I was still unaccustomed to, on account of my tainted status having the opposite effect on almost all parties I encounter. It was... in a way, a novel, refreshing state of affairs. One that brought me this foreign sensation, this alien and bizarre feeling of what I could only describe as *belonging*.

The superfluous books on Tethers, Flares, and Puddlejumping were pulled immediately.

This finally left us with the task at hand.

I took a moment to compose myself, before taking a seat and quickly taking a hold of the first book that was open.

It was conveniently the one most relevant to our queries.

So with a deep breath, I began reading, my eyes going over preambles of a subject matter I was already vaguely familiar with. Except instead of the watered-down synopses provided by the Nexus to our Ministries of Conveyance, this read as far more straightforward, factual, and lacked the *fluff* and *glut* of misdirection that riddled our own reference texts on the matter.

My thoughts were now preoccupied by equal parts musings and equal parts analytic fervor on the pages before me.

Yet the more I read, the less I could devote my musings on to the matter of Emma's recent back and forths. As with each turn of the page came new revelations that weren't even hinted at in reference material on similar topics back in the Aetheronrealm Royal Archives. More and more, I came across details that were at first, seemingly minor, but had massive ramifications for the function of the status communicatia.

From the revelation that there existed more than *five* types of minor shards.

To the downright insulting reference to an entire *field* of magic dedicated to its study and operation.

A field of magic that had all but been conveniently left out by the Nexian representatives within the Ministry of Conveyance, or the Royal Archives.

But that wasn't the end of it.

In fact, it was far from it.

As detail after detail emerged that made our records look like children's books, rather than the greater tomes of magical knowledge they were purported to be.

Details on color were expanded beyond the 10 primary shard colors, into a dizzying array of over 1000 varying shades and their associated meanings.

Details on shape revealed a seemingly *infinite* number of configurations, and even delved into what the Nexian mages referred to as *compound configurations*, that would immediately place our methods as nothing but *primary-level*.

Details on crystalline composition were expanded beyond what was capable of being seen by the naked eye, into what the Nexus referred to as *scales of magnification utilizing the system of clear-glass mana-imbued microscopy*, starting first with incremental magnification, before intensifying its effects by doubling, quadrupling, and enhancing their analysis of crystals on a scale impossible to see with the naked eye.

And it wasn't as if our magics weren't capable of affording us the same effect.

It was just no one thought to look further, no one thought to consider these finer details, no one knew that these... *infinitesimal crystalline architectures* were at all relevant.

It was always assumed that anything below a certain size, below what the naked eye could see, was too small and thus too irrelevant to matter in the function and operation of shards of impart.

This assumption, this reassurance by the Mages of the Ministry, the Mage-Advisors to my uncle, was all but a blatant sham.

My worldview was once again coming apart at the seams.

But this time it wasn't so much prompted by Emma, as it was prompted by a complete upending of the knowledge that we believed was absolute.

Emma's trades however, brought upon illicit knowledge that was for all intents and purposes, never before seen.

This trend went on seemingly forever. Page after page brought about newfound knowledge ranging from the minor and seemingly inconsequential, such as the proper time frame and scheduling of a shard's ceremonial cleaning, to the sky-shattering revelations bordering on the same significance of what I'd just uncovered a few pages prior.

However none of that could hold a candle to what was in store on the final few pages.

Not a single piece of information that had been divulged thus far, could match the intensity of what was the final piece in this story yet untold.

As I flipped the page to reveal a now-familiar depiction of an amethyst dragon, detailed in accurate and vivid color and movement.

My imagination took control before my logical mind had the ability to fill in the gaps of knowledge. My mind began going through eccentric postulations with outlandish theory upon outlandish theory, much in advance of the actual fact of the matter. My eyes scrambled to counteract these propensities for the fantastical, as they scoured the pages word-by-word, and line-by-line, picking and tearing at every concept and every topic until all that needed to be known was scored into my ravenous mind.

The first two pages consisting entirely of information-dense preamble didn't entirely upend all I knew, moreso, it added vital context as well as never before seen chapters on the topic of these minor shards of impart that had never before been seen.

I continued picking apart at every single word, until suddenly, and abruptly, the pages stopped; scorch marks present at the very edges, but coming nowhere close to the contents within.

And it didn't so much stop at any major points of information either, rather, at a ledger indexing all the realms associated with this particular dragon-derived minor shard of impart.

Stopping precisely at the second to last instance of the latest recipients of this particularly uncommon shard of impart.

I leaned back against my seat as I confirmed that that was indeed the last page of the book. A few moments later, after having successfully recovered my composure, I quickly turned towards Emma, flipping the pages to the Amethyst dragon, and pointed at it urgently. "Emma." I spoke, urging her attention.

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The Library

Emma

They say that before everything makes sense, that everything will have to first *not* make sense.

Well I call crap on that, because there was always this nagging, harebrained part of me that *knew* the dragon had to be related to all of this *somehow*.

Sure, the *life-archive* could've had it stored away for some convoluted reason, in a similar fashion to how literally every chimeric beast under the sun seemed to be stored there.

But a *dragon* just felt out of place.

So as soon as Thacea pointed at a picture of that dragon, in a book on the minor shards of impart no less... I just about lost it.

"EVI, put one point in my crazy ideas tally if you would please?" I spoke jubilantly into my helmet, prompting the EVI to beep once in response, pulling up a small HUD of a crudely drawn tally board, with EMMA on one side, and the EVI on the other. This was promptly accompanied by a crudely drawn two-frame animation of a dancing suit of power armor.

Eye-calibration mode can be used for so much more than just calibrations... I internally chuckled to myself.

Quickly changing back to speaker mode, I quickly addressed Thacea. "Right, so, I'm guessing there's been some *major* revelations in that book, and that the dragon's the crux of all of it?"

Thacea took a moment to respond, as if pondering my question carefully, before nodding once with tentative restraint. "For the purposes of our particular quest for knowledge, yes. However, within the greater context of minor shards of impart and their relation to the status communicatia? Not quite." She paused, before promptly elaborating, by shuffling the book all the way back to the first pages. The book itself, strangely enough, never seemed to deviate from that photo-perfect look of a hardcover book opened right down the middle. Some magic-based shenanigans making it so that the pages never piled up on one side or the other. "Because as far as I'm able to tell, most if not all of what I've stated about the minor shards of impart is still accurate."

This prompted me to cock my head in confusion.

"The details revealed to me in this book are moreso an *expansion* of the knowledge base I've previously accrued. Expansions that have immense ramifications, but expansions all the same. The principles of the minor shards of impart are, for the most part, identical to my recounting."

"They're geologically compressed mana-derived crystals that the Nexus uses for communication?" I quickly clarified, summarizing Thacea's long winded explanation of that topic a few days prior.

“Correct.” Thacea nodded. “However, that wasn’t the whole truth. For you see, geologically-derived minor shards of impart are a relatively new development in Nexian methods of inter-realm communication. Prior to this, there seemed to only have been only one method of acquiring and harnessing minor shards of impart.” Thacea paused once more, flipping to the pages on the amethyst dragon, placing her finger atop of the dragon itself, revealing what I could only describe as a paper-back version of a hologram. As the page itself *lifted up*, the paper folding, contorting, before forming an origami that had more polygons than a 21st century videogame’s polygon count. The paper hologram revealed a rotating amethyst dragon, before morphing once again to focus in on a random crystal on its body, zooming in closely, and revealing what was undeniably a shard of impart. “And that method was by harvesting it from amethyst dragons.”

“So, wait, if that’s the case then...” I trailed off, my train of thought suddenly blocked as I realized I didn’t have much to go off of.

Thacea figured this out quickly enough, as she continued to elaborate without missing a single beat. “This method rapidly fell out of favor for the contemporary method of geologically-derived minor shards of impart. However, there are certain unique instances that simply aren’t suited for geologically-derived-”

“Can we just call them *geo-shards*?” I quickly interrupted, realizing that if I let this go on any further, we’d be in for a *lot* of unnecessary mouthfuls.

Thacea, after a split second expression of incredulity, reluctantly nodded in agreement. “*Geo-shards* it is. Now, you see, there seems to be a fundamental difference in the architecture between *Geo-shards*, and dragon-derived shards. The former seems to be more easily harvested and grown, and thus can be derived on a mass scale at predictable rates. The latter however, is the exact opposite for obvious reasons. This is not even taking into account the fact that it is a far more labor-intensive affair.” Thacea once more visibly shuddered at the thought. “There are, however, tradeoffs in the utilization of these geologically sourced shards, all of which result in them being functionally inferior to dragon-derived shards in almost every capacity. Most notable of which, in the case of your Earthrealm, Emma, is in its internal mana-stores.”

It was at this point that everything suddenly clicked, as my eyes went wide and my mouth hung limply.

“So that means-”

“I recall you describing how the first shards sent through seemed to be inadequate in maintaining any semblance of reasonable communication with the Nexus, correct?”

“Correct.” I responded with a nod.

“Those must be geologically-derived. Your mana-less realm *leached* all of its internal mana-stores before they could be useful. Now, I’m assuming that the minor shard of impart you possess does not look like any of the following...” Thacea paused, flipping the page back to the long list of crystals, all of which glowed different colors.

The EVI was quick to analyze each and every one of the thousands of colors at hand, none of which matched the color and shimmer of the one in the ECS. However, there was *one* that at least stood out. “This one.” I paused, pointing at an amber-green one. “This was one of the first ones they sent that was a near-complete dud. Afterwards, they sent ones that were more of a pinkish-blue hue, with veins of green and turquoise running through it.” I described, as Thacea took a moment to flip back to the page on the dragon, pointing at one of the variants of the dragon-derived crystal.

Needless to say, it matched my description *perfectly*. Except for the veins of turquoise.

I pulled up an image of the crystal on my data-pad, choosing hologram mode, projecting the image right up next to the magic equivalent of a hologram.

Thacea, whilst impressed and ruffled by it, quickly got back in the groove of things as her eyes darted between both crystals.

“Identical.” She stated affirmatively. “Though the veins of turquoise seem to be an aberration-”

“Correct!” Another voice quickly chimed in, as Buddy scrambled onto the table on two haphazardly flailing paws that were desperately scrambling for any purchase he could muster. “Aberrations are a potential ramification of prolonged or intense mana-siphoning and or use! One of these aberrations is the manifestation of so-called *veins of color*, turquoise being an indicator of a particularly high-drain modal state!”

Both Thacea and I cocked our heads towards the fox, confused as to why he was readily giving away information without prompting.

“Buddy, why are you telling us this?” I asked frankly.

“I am your library assistant Emma! I am currently here not just as your *Buddy*, but in case you wish for points of clarification to be made on details that may be tangential to the topic at hand! This is both a courtesy from the library, and a direct result of the tangential credits you have accrued!” He clarified, prompting me to quickly dismiss the concern as I lifted the little thing up onto the table, where he now sat politely, hinds legs crossed and front legs tall and taut.

Moving on swiftly from that, both Thacea and I continued to stare at the two crystal projections intently, both of our arms having found themselves resting on the table in front of us. Our elbows eventually met as we attempted to gain a closer look at both projections, prompting both of us to lock eyes momentarily, only to pull back just as sheepishly.

“So I’m going to take a wild guess and I’m going to assume that the use of this rare and ancient method of minor-shard procurement probably has something to do with the amethyst dragon that popped out of that basement?” I asked with a nervous cough.

“That is my current running hypothesis, yes.” Thacea acknowledged with a confident nod, a slight hitch of her voice, and a bit of ruffled feathers.

“Right, so, quickly addressing the points we need to hit. Point number one, procuring a minor shard of impart. Where does this new intel put us?”

Buddy, surprisingly, was quick to respond to this. But not with words, instead, placing a forepaw politely atop another open book, before sliding it over to Thacea silently.

Thacea flipped over to see the title of the section, her eyes growing wide once more as she began speed-reading through it. Five minutes later, we had our answer. “That question as it pertains to geologically-derived shards of impart is decidedly simple to answer. Geologically derived shards are guarded by the inner guard. Moreover, all sites of naturally-occurring geologically-derived shards are held by the crown directly, with no intermediary party claiming ownership over these sites. So procuring one would require a letter of assignment by the crown, an official inter-realm request by an Adjacent realm, or some other official transaction. It says here however that other forms of procurement have been reported, but it doesn’t specify what it was that-”

“THEFT!” Buddy interrupted gleefully.

My eyes worryingly glanced over at the polite looking fox, who quickly added some context to that sudden interruption. “There have been *some* recorded instances of thefts of minor shards of impart! Although many can be attributed to crownlands feuds rather than an outsider’s infiltration. Only during the Great War was an outside force reported to have successfully committed an act of thievery!”

Thacea nodded worryingly, before quickly turning towards me. “The procurement of a geologically-derived minor shard of impart is thus... distressingly difficult. However, not entirely beyond the realm of possibility as it also states that instances of spontaneous manifestation in particularly mana rich locations have been recorded.”

“I’m guessing that this doesn’t really apply to us though.” I quickly clarified, pulling the conversation back towards its intended path. “Given that we need a dragon-derived crystal, to connect back with the one back on Earthrealm.” I quickly clarified.

“That is correct, Emma. As stated previously, the structures of either constructs are fundamentally different. Thus for our purposes, we need a dragon-derived shard. However, this may turn out to be a benefit to our endeavors.” Thacea explained cryptically, before flipping a

few pages forward. "In typical circumstances, amethyst dragons are *exceptionally* rare. However, given that there is more than likely an amethyst dragon somewhere in the vicinity of Elaseer-

"-we actually have something to work towards. Instead of having to invade the crownlands for a crystal, all we have to do is find the dragon and..." I trailed off, realizing that my harebrained schemes more or less lost all semblance of steam when it came to exactly *what* I would do once I came face to face with the dragon. "... you know what, we'll tackle that issue when we cross that bridge. The first thing we have to do is to find the dragon."

Thacea reciprocated this with a nod of her own.

"There is another point I'd like to quickly raise, Emma." Thacea quickly added, before swapping to the first book on the minor shards of impart, and flipping all the way towards the back on what looked to be a ledger of names, places, and realms. With the bottom most row strangely missing.

It was clear something was meant to be there.

But it looked to be just... gone.

"This is a ledger which documents every single realm that had received a dragon-derived shard. The last of which was struck out. I had assumed it was Earthrealm given the unique qualities of the shard, and now that you confirmed it, I am left wondering *why* exactly it was removed."

I turned to Buddy, as if expecting an answer.

The fox, however, gave me one that I sincerely wasn't expecting. "The ledger was given to us in an incomplete manner." The fox concluded. "The individual in question traded quite a few new developments in the realm of amethyst-dragon derived shards of impart. However during the trade, they inadvertently halted the ledger, leading to the construction of a row, without details." The next part of his explanations however, was more in line with what I was expecting. "Moreover, whatever would have been on that final row was also a target of the great scarring, yesterday, Emma." He whined out.

A litany of questions suddenly dawned on me, as well as Thacea, as her eyes came to rest on the bottom of that page.

However, despite it all, this gave way to another question that needed to be addressed now rather than later.

One that I was holding off on until we had the intel we needed.

“So, with all of that being said, I have one more question for you, and maybe the Librarian as well if he wishes to address it.”

Buddy cocked his head, awaiting my question.

“What do you plan to do to the perpetrator of this great scarring?”

“That’s rather simple Emma.” Buddy responded, devoid of emotion, looking up at me with an expression that rapidly shifted to a knowing nervousness as the space between the darkness of the bookshelves suddenly lit up with a thousand beady little eyes. This was followed by a chorus of voices, speaking all in unison, save for Buddy himself.

“Punishment.”