

Nomad Void

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Sawellawell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

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Defiance

A stack of folders lands on the Magister's desk with a clap, expelling air in a blast that hits him right in the face. His eyes stop moving from left to the right and his eyelids close shut, air making a circle into his nostrils and out the mouth in a sigh. Bracing himself, he opens his eyes, lifting them from a document that rests in his hands and landing onto the stack.

THE MAGISTER

Please tell me that is the last of it.

HANE

That is the last of it.

Another puff escapes his lungs. He feels a relief as if the air exhaled has been charged with the stress he has steadily accumulated throughout the day.

HANE

...for today.

The Magister turns to look in her direction as she walks to a desk. His disapproving expression is met with a smirk.

After spending the next half-an-hour in silence disturbed only by rustling of paper once in a while, he loses his focus as a clang resonates in the room from a clock, which strikes twelve. A ringing fills a hallway on the other side of the doors the next moment. As soon as the sound reaches his ears, his brain sends a signal throughout his body commanding it to relax.

His chair scratches the floor as the Magister stands up and walks to a table near a window, where a metal self-boiler emits a bright flash as he pulls up a curtain.

Taking a long match from a box, he ignites a piece of charcoal in a chamber under the boiler. The burning wood's scent fills the air as the smoke seeps through small openings and into the window.

As the last drop of tea drips from a kettle, he pops open a box, the sound of which acts as a trigger, distracting Hane from the work before her. Her face

expresses a high degree of distaste as she observes the Magister pour two spoons of sugar into a steaming cup of tea.

HANE

If you want to clean the drains, there are better solutions.

THE MAGISTER

Don't be so judgemental about other people's tastes.

HANE

Taste is what you are killing by mixing this abhorrent substance with tea.

THE MAGISTER

I add it only to black tea. It just adds some substance to it.

HANE

I haven't seen you drink anything other than black tea, and...

Seeing how the Magister returns to his desk and unwraps a sandwich covered in paper makes her expression change from distaste to concern, even pity to a degree.

HANE

...you would not need substance in your tea were you eating properly.

THE MAGISTER

I know how it looks like, but I just can't digest food in large quantities. It causes a feeling of heaviness in my stomach.

After taking several bites, he casts a glance at the floor clock, which shows a quarter past twelve. This prompts him to stuff the remaining chunk of the sandwich into his mouth and wash it down the throat with the tea.

With his fingers intertwined, the Magister sits up straight, his eyes fixed on the doors.

Five minutes later, his pose does not change, but he is given a few gentle pokes from a doubt that he will see anyone walk through the doors. Five minutes more,

and the doubt looks him straight in the face, demanding the Magister to acknowledge its presence.

THE MAGISTER

Hane, you did relay invitation to Aeri, right?

In response Hane only frowns, seeing this as an insult to her professional duties.

THE MAGISTER

I know, I know. It just bothers me that she didn't show up on time.

HANE

If at all.

THE MAGISTER

I can only imagine what she must be going through. A counselling session must be the least of her concerns right now.

HANE

I don't think that's the reason.

THE MAGISTER

Then what?

In her usual manner, Hane gives the Magister a non-verbal response, frowning a little and raising a brow.

THE MAGISTER

Come now, I know you have some... prejudice towards aspiring witches, but even you couldn't possibly believe they're all unruly.

HANE

Oh, no. Definitely not her. You've witnessed it first-hand.

THE MAGISTER

We don't know the whole picture. I am sure that was just a misunderstanding.

After giving his chin a few rubs, immersed deep in his thoughts, he locks his gaze on a white metal bookcase standing in a room's corner.

THE MAGISTER

Maybe it was wrong to arrange a session so soon after the incident and in a formal manner. Maybe I should try another approach.

Standing in front of the bookcase, he skims his fingers over the folders stacked tightly on metal shelves, from top to the fourth and then across it. He stops at the folders whose name starts with “K”. There his search yields only confusion, making him go over the shelf from the beginning. His object of search, a folder titled “Kol of Omniscience”, only adds to confusion sitting in the “O” section. It quickly becomes obvious why: the other folders have “kol” after a name, not before.

Inside he finds four smaller folders, a tab on each folder bearing the name of a student.

THE MAGISTER

“So there are four of them in their kol. I wonder how the other girl is doing. Probably should check on her later.”

He pulls the folder with Aeri’s files inside and inspects the section that lists her address.

THE MAGISTER

“She lives at the dormitories. This complicates things. Don’t think Magistern visit dormitories often.”

Going over the page in the front, he notices a few pages peaking behind it.

THE MAGISTER

Oh, there is her extended reference. I bet she—

The very first line reads how she started a fight even prior to being enrolled, at enrolment paper submission.

THE MAGISTER

Oh...

The following incident occurred not that long after, during the first month of her admission.

THE MAGISTER

Ooohhh...

The list just goes on.

THE MAGISTER

Correct. I admit it. She might be a bit emotional and impulsive. Might require some more work than I expected.

HANE

I envy your confidence believing you can fix what those before you could not.

THE MAGISTER

Speaking of which...

He skips past the list to check any records of counselling sessions conducted in the aftermath of incidents involving her. They don't provide any useful insights, as all of them read "Counselling session conducted following an incident that had occurred on...". Only a date and the name of a Magister who conducted a session changes at the end of each line.

THE MAGISTER

They didn't put much effort into making these records.

Any further waiting is apparently futile, which leaves him to decide how he can spend remaining time. He could get back to documents, but that pile of papers on top of his desk starts draining sanity as soon as it appears within his line of sight. Taking a break instead, which could help him restore some mental strength, appeals more to him.

His legs carry the Magister to the most suitable place to have a rest: the inner square. For the most part, it represents a large open space, paved with six-sided stones, white and light-blue, with white placed in small clusters as if mirroring skies. Square in shape, it has a corridor along the perimeter with pillars on the inside. The passage on the farthest side transitions into veranda, with the whole site located on top of the first floor of the academy's main building. A garden

with a fountain located in the centre serves as the square's crown, to which four passages connect it with the square's corners.

A breeze of fresh air, sound of splashing water, and lively chatting of academy students walking around make him forget why he has come here or what ran away from. That is until he notices the initial cause behind having spare time: Aeri, the hot-headed girl.

Standoffish, unlike everyone else, she seems to have come here for the same reason the Magister did: to escape from her troubles. Though with arms folded, blankly staring at a spot on the floor, it doesn't appear to have the same effect on her. She does not even notice the man approach her.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri?

Lifting her head, she turns to look in his direction, her thoughts still elsewhere. The more her eyes focus on him, the more discontent manifests on her face.

AERI

Oh, it's *you*.

Her "greeting" relays just as much discontent, as if the Magister was someone or even something annoying.

THE MAGISTER

We were supposed to have a counselling session right now.

AERI

Maybe we were, so what?

THE MAGISTER

So that means you were expected to show up.

AERI

I have nothing to discuss with you, traitor.

THE MAGISTER

Mind your language, young lady. And I don't recall doing anything to deserve this title.

AERI

Then you have very short memory. But I don't. I damn well remember how you sided with that Sorceress witch.

THE MAGISTER

It appears you have a misconception of both the hearings process and—

AERI

I don't care.

Bending down to pick up her weapon, she tosses its belt over a shoulder before showing her back to the Magister.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri, you can't just leave. This is a serious matter.

AERI

Watch me. Tch! Can't even have a moment of rest. What an ass...

She continues marching towards the exit, leaving a trail resounding grumpy noises behind.

THE MAGISTER

It seems I will have to try a different approach after all.

The day slowly comes to a close. For the students, at least, not for the Magister. His desk is skewed with much more documents on the left, the "in" side, then it is with the finished read that rests to his right.

As another folder gets closed, he takes his time taking a new one, slowly dragging it off the top, as if each word on the papers inside was adding up to its weight.

Door handles move, and so do his eyes. They jump to the doors the instant they open as Aeri storms through, slamming her hands onto his desk, her furious eyes conveying a message before she opens her mouth.

AERI

What in the coven's name do you think you're doing?!

THE MAGISTER

Oh, my saviour!

AERI

W-what?

THE MAGISTER

No, nothing.

He coughs a few times, clearing his throat, and puts one hand on top of the other, as if trying to make some kind of impression.

THE MAGISTER

I am simply following standard procedures for a case like this. For a case like yours.

AERI

Do you have any idea what a letter from the coven means? Do you know what trouble it can get me into?

THE MAGISTER

Very much so. Up to the point of expulsion in case of non-compliance. It wouldn't be as effective without consequences.

Behind Aeri, Hane comes inside, closing the doors. As she walks to her desk, the Magister briefly looks at her, giving a nod.

AERI

I don't know what is it that you want with me. But you want to have a counselling session? Fine. I acknowledge my mistake. I was wrong. It will never happen again. There. Bye, old man.

The Magister barely has enough time to inhale as he is about to give a reply, but his chest expels air in a sigh when the doors close with a slam, with Aeri already behind them. He closes his eyes, taking another deep breath.

THE MAGISTER

Hane, send the message to the coven, please. This time for real.

He opens his eyes seeing Aeri again, who appears before him faster than the doors hit the walls.

AERI

Are you serious?

A silent gesture invites her to a seat.

AERI

Thank you. I'm fine.

The words have come through her gritted teeth, lips barely moving, as if it took her both mental and physical effort to utter each word.

THE MAGISTER

Now then. Let's start with your interpretation of the events that occurred that day.

AERI

She attacked us.

THE MAGISTER

Correct. If I understand correctly, a sorceress attacked you when you and your friends, as any students after a day of studies, lost your way to the dorms of your academy and accidentally ended up on the Sorceress Academy grounds. Did I get that right?

AERI

I— It was— We were there for a reason.

THE MAGISTER

The reason being...

AERI

We— That— We needed—

THE MAGISTER

U-huh. Yes. I see. Please continue. I think I start to see the picture.

Aeri's eye starts visibly twitching.

AERI

Fine, yes, you got me. I attacked her. But she provoked me, she was the one who started it all.

THE MAGISTER

It looks like we're making progress. So how exactly did she provoke you?

Something changes in Aeri's expression. It looks like she's frowning in anger, but there are notes of something unpleasant as well, something that reminds of pain.

AERI

She assaulted my friend, and she ended up in recovery. Harin is still unconscious.

The Magister recalls going through the kol's folder, where there were four student profiles. It now becomes clear why the fourth member is missing.

THE MAGISTER

Why? Did something happen between them?

AERI

I don't know and I don't care. You don't ask why somebody hits you, you hit them back.

THE MAGISTER

Do you at least have any ideas? Anything that could have led to this?

AERI

I have never seen her before. And I doubt Harin has. We have no business with Sorceress witches. Did not have. Until now.

THE MAGISTER

So you don't even know her? Then how do you know she was the one who attacked first?

AERI

Are you deaf? Were you even listening to what I was saying? *My friend* is in recovery and *she* is unharmed.

THE MAGISTER

There could have been a misunderstanding.

AERI

Misunderstanding? What kind of misunderstanding leads to someone ending up in recovery?

THE MAGISTER

For instance, one in which three witches assault a sorceress on an assumption that she assaulted their friend, which results in tragic consequences.

Her fists hit the desk, sending vibration across wooden surface.

AERI

Do you think this is funny?! Do you even imagine what it is like to succumb to mortal wounds? All of my friends are in recovery and unconscious, and I don't know when or...

A word is on the tip of her tongue, something she is reluctant to say out loud, though it is clear to him what kind of doubt is gnawing at her.

AERI

...when they are going to wake up.

THE MAGISTER

Under no circumstances would I ever consider something like this to be funny. And the only reason we are having this conversation is to prevent something like this from *ever* happening *again*.

Slight change in his tone cools down her temper. Up until now she's been baring her fangs at him, believing the Magister would not snarl back. But even though he did not, she's caught a glimpse of his teeth, which were surely sharp.

THE MAGISTER

Take some time to think this over. We will continue this conversation another time.

The opportunity is taken without any hesitation, with only wind left in the wake of angry girl's hasty leave.

As he sighs yet again, the Magister's gaze falls back to the desk, where a folder still hangs from the top of the stack. This session was supposed to take some load off his mind, even if just temporarily, not to add burden to it.

Her weapon lands on the wooden floor as Aeri drops on her bed. There, laying in silence, there is but one sound she keeps hearing still, that of the Magister repeating one word: "misunderstanding". She tries to make her mind as blank as the ceiling she's staring at, but the Magister's voice keeps persistently ringing.

She then decides to occupy her mind instead, first by reading a book, then maintaining her weapon, and even tending to studies she has barely had a break from. Alas, the opposite approach does not prove effective. Nothing can take her mind off that discussion.

A thought of cleaning her room immediately slides off its squeaky-clean surface. It brings up an image of another living space, that of her friends, Sumi and Harin. Missing its dwellers for just a few days, it is hardly in need of tidying up, yet there isn't much else she can think of to keep herself occupied. If not to silence the Magister's voice, then at least not to let it ring any louder.

Having approached a door on the opposite side of the hallway, her hand freezes as she is about to insert a key. There is a lingering echo of the anger she's felt the last time she's been here. Hearing the news of Harin's incident ignited her fury, taking the efforts of both Minali and Sumi to quell.

She takes a deep breath, the key turns in a hole with a clank. The door handle goes down and stays there as Aeri cautiously looks to both sides. After several more turns in both clockwise and counter clockwise directions, a thud can be heard on the other side of the door as if something hard and small hits the floor.

Stepping inside, she picks up a walnut-sized metal cylinder, the same size and shape as indentation on the inner side of the door lock.

The arrangement of furniture is mirrored inside: a bed in one corner and wardrobe in the other with a desk between them. The only shared piece is a table for dining under a window. A typical sight for a students' dorm room.

What, however, is not typical is how the dwellers' belongings are placed. Sumi's side on the right leans towards structure and order: books stacked on the desk, shoes placed on a rack, and a suitcase barely peeking from under the bed. Meanwhile Harin's side is a mess: tools all over the desk, spare parts and components in boxes protruding behind loosely closed doors of a wardrobe, and pyramid-stacked suitcases supporting her bed.

Both girls' weapons rest on the desks. Unlike Sumi's, which requires a stand to fit on the limited surface, Harin's, though bulky, easily fits there. It has three rods, just like Aeri's, protruding from the much larger body. Around the rods there are four rings pierced through by two thinner rods. There is no buttstock, a grip sits on top, and it has a handle where the centre of gravity supposedly is. The handle is thick, much thicker than a feminine hand needs it to be. It serves as compartment for belt that hangs from underneath it, flowing down the main body and forming a pile of folds next to it.

Crouched between Harin's desk and her wardrobe, Aeri tries to reach for the back of the desk. Then something quietly cracks outside, followed by something that sounds like gasp, interrupting her motions.

Imagination does not seem to cause it, which compels her to check what it was. Leaning over a windowsill, looking down from the fourth floor, there doesn't appear to be anything broken, neither is there anyone lurking beneath.

As she is about to brush it all off, a light blow of wind brings green strands of hair in her direction, tickling her face. A light-grey eyed girl in white trousers and a short coat stands on a ledge, her face almost blue as she tries not to breathe. A notepad hung on a string around her neck flaps in the wind as it carries the sound of rustling pages. A smile appears on her face in response to Aeri's annoyed gaze.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

E-he-he. You might be wondering how I ended up here. If you let me come in, I will gladly explain!

As the girl steps in through the window, Aeri meets her with arms folded and toes tapping the floor, impatiently waiting to hear her story.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

So, um, the lock on my door broke and I happened to be locked inside my room. And, um, I had no choice but to get outside through a window so that I could get in through someone else's room.

AERI

From your room on the third floor of the dormitory.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

E-he... he...

Her facial muscles relax, brows sink, awkward smile dissolves.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

Fine, fine. You caught me.

She no longer tries to deceive anyone with a forcefully cheerful tone.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

You are not going to fight me, right? Hey, I'm unarmed.

Without a word, Aeri walks to the door and opens it for the unwelcome guest, much to the girl's surprise.

GREEN-HAIRED GIRL

Oh, that is unexpected. Glad to see you act as a civilized—

Before her foot crosses the doorstep, a sudden kick to the butt helps her get out. She lands in the hallway, her aching butt up and head taking a dive.

AERI

Next time I catch you I will have my boot so deep up your butt, you'll end up in recovery!

The warning ends with her slamming the door.

With a sigh she returns to the desk, reaching behind it. Her fingers flip a mechanical switch. A moment after, another cylinder falls to the floor, this time under the desk.

From a drawer she takes out a pen, whilst her other hand goes under desk surface. The moment a fingertip touches a pattern drawn underneath, the desk ignites at the edges, creating a barrier along the perimeter. Its walls are not solid: bubble-shaped openings float all across it. Moving out of synch, they collide to form larger holes, before breaking apart a few seconds after.

Aeri catches a moment when a large opening forms, reaching through it, as the pen in her hand makes a swift stroke on a pattern under the weapon. The barrier fades and disappears.

She pushes a button to the side of the handle, pulling the belt inside the hollow compartment. Yet at the same time another sequence of motions occurs: the trigger on top of the grip activates on its own, causing the rings around the rods to start spinning.

AERI

What the... Oh, shite!

The device charges up in a second, giving Aeri no time to react. Fortunately, she is not in the way.

With a thunderous clap a yellow lightning appears. It follows in one zig-zag line, getting thicker and its turns getting sharper the further it goes. In less than a

second it turns into clouds of fire. The explosive expansion shatters the glass as it passes through window, which was luckily open.

Watching the flames jump onto the flammable surfaces, Aeri tries to think how to put out the fire in a state of confusion.

DORMITORY STUDENT

Are you crazy?!

A girl breaks in just a few moments later. Before Aeri responds, she darts away and promptly returns with a device in her hands. She points a wide canon-like barrel at the sources of fire, dousing them with water blasts. The blasts are no less destructive than the fires they kill, shattering wood and even damaging stone wherever they land. At least the destruction won't spread.

DORMITORY STUDENT

Are you an idiot using a contraption in your room— This isn't even *your* room! Just what were you doing?!

AERI

I— I— was just cleaning Harin and Sumi's room. I barely touched Harin's machina and it fired.

DORMITORY STUDENT

What? Don't you have safeguards? You first-years will lay ruin to the academy one day. Anyway, good luck explaining this to the Magisters.

She walks away, tossing her weapon over the shoulder.

Soaked and shocked, Aeri is left there to contemplate a few things: how has this happened and the cost of repairs.

Meanwhile, on his way home, the Magister gazes at the sky in the distance where a weird explosion has occurred a few moments ago.

THE MAGISTER

“Am I supposed to get used to this?”

His body gains momentum but stops short of making two steps.

A beautiful woman stands on the road a few meters ahead of him. Golden strands of her hair align flawlessly as they flow from under the hood of a green cape worn over blue dress. A shade falling over her face can't hide the glimmer of expressive green eyes.

Though gorgeous she is, the Magister finds it hard to admire her beauty. Her expression is cold, the silence unsettling.

THE MAGISTER

Um, hel—

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Magister, please, resign.

THE MAGISTER

Excuse me?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

You are not suitable for your job.

THE MAGISTER

What? What do you mean? Who are you?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

My identity is not important. What is important is that your behaviour is out of line, raising serious concerns.

It is more than apparent what she refers to. There has been but one incident that would match the description. Yet though the Magister wasn't aligned with his colleagues, that would hardly justify such request.

THE MAGISTER

And if I don't resign?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

At the very least, you will lose your job.

THE MAGISTER

I lose my job one way or the other. So I can only assume you mean there could be other consequence if I don't step down.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

There might, but doesn't have to. If you do so willingly, there are people who will help you find a suitable position elsewhere.

THE MAGISTER

And the girls?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Her case will be reviewed thanks to your efforts.

THE MAGISTER

'Her', not 'their'. And you haven't even clarified which girls I was referring to. But it doesn't matter, does it? You had the answer prepared beforehand.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

I have misspoken. It was obvious who you referred to.

THE MAGISTER

I don't believe you did. This conversation will not get us anywhere if you keep hiding your agenda.

There's been a slight change in her facial expression, barely visible, but having enough control of herself, she ensured it has not been for more than a second.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

You are perceptive, and not for your own good.

She takes a pause, deciding on her next words.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Her sentence is already decided. She will be expelled and her grimoire—sealed.

THE MAGISTER

I don't like that little pause you've just made.

Another change in her expression, this time more visible and taking a little more time to control.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

There is a high probability that her grimoire will be burned.

THE MAGISTER

I don't know what that means but I surely don't like how that sounds.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

It isn't as bad as it sounds. No actual harm will come to her. She will simply not be able to be a witch anymore. Not a big loss, since it wasn't her dream to begin with. Her motivation for becoming a witch was a result of a pure coincidence.

It might have been accidental, but she has spilt significant pieces of information. Knowing students' motives for becoming a witch means she has access to students' profiles. That is a privilege granted to Magistern and their aides. However, no Magister would be aware of an actual sentence passed on a student, not to mention specifics of the punishments known only to witches. She could be an envoy, a messenger sent by a coven. Yet her body language, her voice, the look in her eyes, this aura of intimidation, all tell him she would not be someone to simply run errands. This leaves only one option, which effectively means...

THE MAGISTER

You're a coven witch. What did this child ever do to you?

What little confusion was in his voice is gone. It is now but a mixture of other emotions: disappointment, disbelief, and disdain. He can't comprehend how such a powerful entity would use their power to harm an innocent girl.

The woman frowns in response, not even attempting to hide her emotions.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Magister, it isn't wise to say such things out loud. You never know if a witch keeps her identity hidden.

THE MAGISTER

You didn't answer my question.

Her comment does not have the intended effect: there is just no space in his soul for fear at the moment.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

She is believed to be a revenant. A very powerful witch and an extremely dangerous individual.

THE MAGISTER

A revenant? Like returned—

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

From the dead.

Accidents happen at academies all the time, and lethal outcomes aren't an exception. Becoming a witch would be far less appealing if it meant the students were risking their lives. He understands she does not mean revival and subsequent recovery, like the process Aeri's friends were subjected to.

THE MAGISTER

Is such thing even— Wait, *believed*? You're not even sure she *is* a revenant.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

This conclusion is based on specific evidence. You have witnessed her abilities in person. They are out of the ordinary for a student, not to mention the similarity to De—

She stops mid-sentence, catching herself on a thought she is about to reveal yet more information.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

This is as much as you need to know. You don't need more to make the right decision.

Silence befalls. He looks away for a second, his mind skimming over the bits and pieces the woman has fed him.

THE MAGISTER

Does she like witchcraft?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

What?

THE MAGISTER

Orena. Does she actually like witchcraft?

The question hits her from unexpected angle, causing confusion.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

I... don't know.

THE MAGISTER

So her profile doesn't say that. What about her friends? Does she have friends at the academy?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Given the rumours surrounding her, this is highly unlikely, though not impossible. What does it—

THE MAGISTER

So her profile doesn't mention that either. What about her hobbies?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

What are you getting at?

Her tone becomes a little aggressive as she regains her composure, irritated not so much by his questions but the Magister's mind game and her being unable to read him.

THE MAGISTER

I am merely pointing out a fact that you have drawn a conclusion about the girl based on a single line in her profile. And you even have the audacity to claim you know what she might or might not be dreaming of. This is hypocrisy in its purest form. If you make such a crude mistake at such a simple task as profiling someone, what are the chances— how many mistakes could you have made identifying her as this 'revenant'?

He takes a breath, feeling how emotions take over. Sensing the pause in his train of thought, she opens her mouth as the train gains traction again.

THE MAGISTER

Has it ever occurred to you that she could have been framed? I don't know anything about witchcraft, but what if someone made it look like she is the revenant? What if the real revenant is already within your ranks? This is rudimentary tactics: throw a decoy at someone and wait until they drop their guard. What if she wants exactly that? And as soon as you get rid of the poor girl, she makes her move when you least expect it?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

This is absurd. How would—

Although she attempts to ignore the idea, the amount of questions he unloaded on her is more than enough for a few to seep into her conscience.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“Come to think of it. They were quite swift in making the decision. It is not the first time she reappeared, so there should have been similar cases, yet there were none. It is possible this case is unique. However, the rumours of the girl being a revenant originated not in the coven but among the aspiring witches. And they spread fast. Too fast. How could students possibly know about Devaura? It is possible one or two of them are descendants of her victims, but they must hold a heavy grudge against her in order to spread rumours with such persistence. Regardless, there is a factor of time intervals. She should not have appeared in another four years, unless—”

Lost in the sea of her thoughts, she realizes that a short dive has taken her a little too deep. As she swims closer to surface, she realizes who has thrown her off the board.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Wait, how would you know any of this?

THE MAGISTER

Obviously, I do not. I have simply thrown the first wild idea that has come to my mind. But it appears it was enough to make you doubt your conclusion.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Yes, I admit. There are factors to consider. However, this won't be enough to sway the others as long as there is the smallest chance she is the revenant.

The Magister takes another pause. Having exhausted all possible arguments, it is apparent there is no point in further debate.

THE MAGISTER

No. As a Magister, I have a responsibility to aspiring witches. There is no one else to stand for them. Respective provisions of the Code are there for a reason.

Given she approached him with one thing in mind, one can only expect adverse consequence after such hardline response. What one wouldn't expect is her showing a smile. Not a malicious one but seemingly friendly.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

I am happy to hear that.

She approaches him, extending her arm.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“And I am very sorry for you.”

Though alerted by the drastic change in her attitude, the Magister still responds in a similar manner.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

My name is Yumi. I am—

The moment their hands touch, he feels his hand squeezed. Though force is excessive, her feminine muscles can't cause any pain, but it does not seem to be her intent. Something is wrong. It becomes clear when she clenches at the cloth near her heart, her eyes widening, her face an expression of shock.

The woman's hand slips from his grip as she loses the strength. Legs fail her, but the Magister catches her as she is about to fall. He gets to the ground, pulled by her weight, taking her in his arms.

THE MAGISTER

Hey. Hey! What's wrong?

Only a quiet wheeze in response. Fingers wrapped around her wrist miss one crucial sensation. He presses his head against her chest. Nothing. He then brings an ear close to her mouth. Nothing again.

Seeing how there is no one around, the Magister pulls a gun from his bag, pointing it at the sky. Instead of a clap, there is only a clank. Pulling the trigger again and again does not make it work.

THE MAGISTER

Curses! Why now of all times?!

The flare gun finds its way to the side of the road as he throws it away in a fit of confusion.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“What... just happened? Did my heart stop? I can't breathe. Am I... dying? So they finally decided to dispose of me. Even if I am brought for revival... no, this must be taken into account... this is the end for me one way or another.”

Her darkening vision renders the Magister, angry and panicked, slamming the head with the palms of his hand. He is saying something, which she can no longer discern.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“Ironic... the man I came here to dispose of... is worried over me... dying...”

THE MAGISTER

Think. Think!

In his mind, the image of the academy building gets erected from ground up. He walks out of it and goes through a large public space, taking a turn into a square,

through it, and into the spot he is currently at. Behind him a trail of footprints extends back to the last living soul he saw.

THE MAGISTER

“It’s been no less than 15 minutes. Even if I run, taking into account the time needed to find help and the return journey, it’ll be half an hour at best. By that time, it will be too late.”

He’s taken out of his chain of thought when his ears catch a rustling sound, but it’s only a newspaper carried by wind.

THE MAGISTER

Newspaper...

For an unexplained reason, this object captures all his attention. He focuses on it for a few seconds, but his focus is instantly broken when the head of the woman falls to the side as her body is drained of the last bit of strength.

The Magister places her on the ground and turns her head up.

THE MAGISTER

“Head. Newspaper. Article. Resuscitation.”

It finally clicks as another image appears in his head. This time, it is him sitting at home and reading a paper. In it, there is one article of a particular interest. A fight between a surgeon and his colleagues. It draws his attention because the fight was not metaphorical. The culprit was successful in repeatedly resuscitating his patients by applying ‘bellows-like rhythmic pressure’ to the workers. The idea was rejected by others, who argued it could do more harm than good if done carelessly or if applied to fragile individuals. Being unable to get through with his arguments, the surgeon instead tried to do so with fists. Luckily, the author went as far as to describe the proposed method in details.

The Magister takes off his shirt, folds it, and places under the woman’s shoulders.

THE MAGISTER

“Raise arms to expand the chest. Then cross the arms over the chest to apply compression, twice per second.”

Repeating this cycle for several seconds, he then checks her breath, yet her lungs remain still. One minute. Two minutes. He doesn't give up. Three minutes. Four. Her warm faint breath touches his skin as he leans closer to her.

Now that she can breathe on her own, he lifts her and takes to the nearest bench.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Uh... what...

Her vision is blurry, the senses are dull, and whole body feels numb as she wakes to the Magister's careful shake.

THE MAGISTER

Can you hear me?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

Y... yes. Who... Where am I?

THE MAGISTER

We were talking a moment ago, and then you fainted. Your heart stopped.

Listen, I'm going to get help, but I need you to stay awake. Can you stay awake?

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

I'm a little dizzy, but I will manage.

He takes a few seconds, looking closely at her, just to make sure she does not drift away.

THE MAGISTER

Good. I will be here soon.

Watching the half-naked man leave in a haste as he puts on his shirt, it slowly comes back to her, even if just bit by bit.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“I was supposed to talk to someone... that Magister. It must have been him just now. But how? I talked to him, and then...”

Everything that should have led to this moment is blank.

MYSTERIOUS WOMAN

“Did he say my heart stopped? How?”

For the next ten minutes nothing comes up.

Her arms and legs showing responses, she stands up and, though wobbly, starts walking.

Arriving almost twice as late as he expected to, her absence leaves the Magister quite confused and also much to explain to the people he has brought along.