Nomad Void

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Save Haven

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

Cover art by Sasazuka Shinon

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Wronged

With their seats evenly spaced in a chequered pattern, the Sorceress students' stark blue uniforms create contrasting spots in the sea of light of their classroom. The diagonal positioning allows the canvases before them to be perfectly lit by the sunlight without obstructing its path.

An elder woman navigates between the students, casting quick glances at the oil-painted recreation of a vase with blue and red flowers on a table near a chalkboard.

Noticing something off, she slightly bends, takes a brush from a student's hand, dips it into a pool of light paint, and makes a few strokes to recreate a radiant spot on the vase.

Her accompanied whisper is interrupted by a knock on a door.

Returning the brush to its owner, she gives the student a nod, and walks to a door.

SORCERESS TEACHER

What is it?

ORENA

Hello, teacher. Can we talk to Vitana Soloba for a moment?

SORCERESS TEACHER

You can do that after the class is over.

ORENA

It is important.

SORCERESS TEACHER

So important that you need to interrupt a class, whilst skipping the classes *you* should be in?

ORENA

Yes.

With her arms folding and brows going up, she signals Orena to expound on her reply.

ORENA

It's a life and death situation.

SORCERESS TEACHER

And whose life it is in danger?

ORENA

The Magister's. From the Vanguard academy. We have a Vanguard student with us.

She shakes her head in response, trying to make these disjointed pieces of information fall in their places.

LELYA

This student came here for help. She witnessed a Magister of her academy being kidnapped, and we think Vitana might know something that can help us find a lead.

SORCERESS TEACHER

And since when do students conduct investigations of kidnappings?

AERI

Since the Administrator told me the academy won't do anything about it.

SORCERESS TEACHER

Won't or can't?

AERI

Is there really a difference?

SORCERESS TEACHER

Regardless, what do you have to do with it?

AERI

I owe him. He helped me. And it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for me.

The woman sighs. As she is about to continue the conversation, her peripheral vision catches a student in the front row looking at her and hesitantly raising a hand.

SORCERESS TEACHER

Fine. You seem serious. Vitana, there is someone here who wants to talk to you.

A yellow-eyed girl with red hair, elegantly tied up in an embellished ponytail, swiftly replaces the teacher. Long silver earrings with green gemstones swing like pendulums as she stops in front of the girls.

VITANA

Hm? What is it? Who are you?

ORENA

I'm—

SORCERESS TEACHER

Take it outside.

VITANA

Sorry, teacher.

The girls take a step back as Vitana takes one forwards, closing the door behind her whilst examining the unfamiliar faces, inspecting the one in an unfamiliar uniform in particular, enough to identify her outstanding features but not enough to make the eye contact uncomfortable.

ORENA

I'm Orena. This is Lelya and Aeri. We are third-years. Aeri is from the Vanguard academy. We wanted to ask you about your former kol-mate.

VITANA

Which one of them?

ORENA

Yiya.

VITANA

Yiya? What of her? Why do you want to know?

ORENA

She might be connected to a kidnapping of a Magister from the Vanguard academy.

VITANA

What? How?

AERI

Her kol-mate Rada, or maybe former kol-mate, attacked me yesterday when I was with a Magister of my academy and kidnapped him.

VITANA

I don't know about this Rada, but Yiya being connected to it is horsehsite.

ORENA

You think she wouldn't take part in it?

VITANA

She would hardly take part in anything.

A sigh connects this sentence and the elaboration to follow.

VITANA

Our kol, former kol, was formed on a recommendation. Me and my friend didn't excel at anything, so we accepted to form a kol with two other students, including her, hoping together we would achieve something. Well, we were wrong. We would have been better off without them, just the two of us.

LELYA

Were they *that* bad?

VITANA

Uroda was good at something, but she was hard to work with. But Yiya was worse than bad. She was useless. Never took initiative. Never could do anything more than what was asked of her. And could never do anything other than what

was asked of her. She did not contribute anything to the kol and just dragged everyone down.

LELYA

I mean, isn't this why recommendations exist? You are supposed to find out each other's strengths and weaknesses and help each other improve.

VITANA

Yeah, the key part is finding out. You can't find anything out unless the other person talks to you.

LELYA

Was it that hard to get along with her? Is that why you think she wouldn't be involved in the kidnapping?

VITANA

I mean literally she wouldn't talk.

LELYA

Like mute?

VITANA

Didn't seem like it. She did manage to squeeze what seemed like words out of her at times.

LELYA

Do you know why? Maybe she had friends outside your kol? What about her parents?

VITANA

Didn't I say she wouldn't talk? How would I know?

Lelya quietly giggles, but Vitana's frowning eyes make her quickly snap back.

VITANA

What do you find so funny about it?

LELYA

Oh, no, nothing. It must be someone else.

VITANA

What are you talking about?

Lelya turns around and takes a look at her escort. Aeri smiles, not trying to hide it.

LELYA

What do *you* find so funny about it?

AERI

The irony.

VITANA

The irony?

AERI

Yeah. Listening to your relationship with your kol-mates reminded me about my pre-academy years. I would always cause trouble, mischieving out of boredom, and I would often get punished by my peers for it when caught. I hated them, I hated my school, hated Martetrad and all that is associated with them. But now looking back on it, I think they would beat me not because they followed rules. With how disciplined the Martetradian society is, this is the opposite of following rules. Now I think they would do this because they cared. A group, a circle, a battalion, a class: these words exist only in dictionaries. You know what Martetradians use for each of these words in everyday life? Unit. Unit means one. It doesn't have members or parts. You cannot blame any member of your unit more than you can blame your leg or arm. And if one is not functioning properly, you don't cut it off: you either fix it or adapt to it.

VITANA

Well, this is not Martetrad. You do for others as much as they contribute, and I tried to do much more for Yiya than she contributed.

AERI

Did you? You don't even know if she has parents. Would have been a real hustle visiting a Magister and asking a few questions, right? Imagine if she is an orphan and you were the only people she was clinging to, blaming herself for

being ‘useless’. You saw a person at the bottom of a well and didn't even bother throwing her a rope, expecting she would climb out of there on her own.

So immersed in her own speech, Aeri just now realises how the climate around her changed. Channelled at Vitana directly, her words were so heavily charged that the emotional baggage attached to them reached Orena and Lelya, all three now not knowing what to say and if they should say something.

AERI

Sorry, that was uncalled for. You're right. This is not Martetrad, and it's not my business. I'm the last person to talk about unity given which academy I come from.

The girls exchange hesitant glances, their eyes asking each other to utter some words.

ORENA

Um… thank you. Sorry for bothering you.

VITANA

No. It's nothing.

Vitana returns to her classroom activity, leaving the girls in another moment of silence.

LELYA

Well, that wasn't helpful. So where to next?

AERI

Let's go see the perpetrator.

LELYA

You don't want to see the other girl's kol?

AERI

Something tells me we won't learn anything useful.

LELYA

If you say so.

As they start moving towards their next destination, Aeri reminisces about the conversation they had.

AERI

So why did *you* laugh? I don't think my laugh was that infectious. And I don't think it was that loud.

LELYA

You still don't get it, do you?

ORENA

But it is hard to figure it out. I think I would also be confused if I didn't know about your Brand.

AERI

Huh?

ORENA

It's Lelya's Brand. She can feel emotions of other people.

AERI

Oh, I see. How does it differ from your own emotions?

LELYA

That's the fun part. It doesn't.

AERI

So how do you control it?

LELYA

How do *you* control your Brand?

AERI

Shite…

LELYA

You don't say. I thought I would go mad when it manifested, wanted to smash my head into a wall. My only thought back then was living in solitude for the rest of my life.

AERI

But you didn't, so I take it you somehow manage this.

LELYA

Thanks to my sister. She helped me learn how to understand which emotions are mine and which are not, how to make mine feel stronger. Also staying further from people helps. Except Orena. I fancy hanging around her because she's chill, or at least she was until you showed up. Now she's just as troubled as you.

ORENA

He's the only reason I'm still here. He's the only one who cared.

AERI

Same here. I wouldn't think there was a single person who gives a damn about students. He even believes those bitches can be fixed.

They make their way to the second floor into an arched hallway illuminated through window-sized openings. An archway at the end shows a stack of horizontal lines that take the shape of a long staircase as they near it.

AERI

Wait, does this lead into one of those high-ass towers?

LELYA

Yep.

AERI

Shite…

As Aeri steps through the opening, she leans to the side to get an overview of the road ahead. A phantom metal screech echoes in her mind as she beholds this behemoth of a snake spiralling in a square path around a pillar.

About five minutes through, the snake split into two: one above her and one below, both biting into her to poison her desire to live. She can only hope the sweat she left on the steps will eventually let the rust eat it away.

AERI

Why does it have to be so high?

LELYA

For self-reflection.

AERI

Aren't the rooms at the top for self-reflection?

LELYA

Those are for the athletic factions. They would use the staircase as a warm-up. But we, the etherials, makes you self-reflect going up and down for meals, toilet, and shower several times a day.

AERI

And what about those who visit them?

LELYA

Reflect on not getting in situations where they would need to visit them, I guess.

After clearing the staircase, they push themselves to one of the doors on the floor with what remaining bits of strength they have left.

Lelya's hand sweeps through the air as the door she was about to knock on suddenly opens with an unwelcoming face welcoming them from the inside. The woman staring them down has all aspects of her appearance thoroughly matched: the locks of her matte purple hair are mixed with numerous braids that have silver ribbons, complimentary to her grey-bluish eyes, woven in; this colour theme is recreated in the lacquer of her armour, the sledgehammer strapped on her back, and even her dress having silver edging instead of the regular golden.

SORCERESS

What is your business here?

LELYA

We are here to visit Vira. We need to talk to her.

SORCERESS

No.

LELYA

But we have a permission.

SORCERESS

From whom?

LELYA

Magister Kostes.

The ornate piece of paper gets yanked from her hands the moment Lelya's hand starts stretching forwards. After running her eyes through it, the woman crumples it and throws it behind her into a bin.

Contrary to the message conveyed by this gesture, she then steps aside, unblocking the view of a white room with thin notches for windows under the ceiling, a poorly done bed in one corner, and a desk with a chair occupied by the red-eyed girl reclining in it in the other.

As they step in, Vira confusingly looks at them over a shoulder, but their peripheral vision registers a third person: a black-haired woman in a uniform painted olive. Her yellow eye follows them with each step that they make, whilst her right eye is covered by a yellow eye-patch. Her bare legs are covered with something that looks like segmented leggings embedded with five spheres each, just like her arms that have segmented bracers with similar spheres.

VANGUARD WITCH

And what do they—

Her focus immediately shifts to Aeri the moment she crosses the doorstep.

VANGUARD WITCH

What do *you* want here?

AERI

Something I've learnt you don't care about.

As they near the desk, Vira is already standing there with her arms folded.

VIRA

Oh. Look who's 'ere. Came 'ere to gloat?

LELYA

Um… can we talk in private?

SORCERESS

No.

VANGUARD WITCH

No.

LELYA

I see, he-he. So, I am Lelya—

VIRA

Skip it. I don't care who you are. What d'you want?

LELYA

So, um...

Lost, Lelya looks at Orena.

ORENA

We… um…

The awkward pauses make the two guarding witches look at the girls with suspicion.

AERI

Oh, screw it! Did your coven order you to kidnap the Magister?

Shock runs through both Orena and Lelya. The guarding Sorceress tenses, standing up straight from a leaning position, whilst this information does not appear to affect her colleague at all as she just continues observing the students.

ORENA

Why did you—

AERI

They know why we're here. There's no point beating around the bush.

As if stunned, for a moment Vira stares at Aeri confused, and then bursts out laughing.

VIRA

Ha-ha-ha-hah! Kidnap a Magister? What're ya even on about?

AERI

Drop it. If you have a bit of worry for your cronies, you better start talking. Because once I find this Rada, I'll smash her skull. And if I find they did something to the Magister, I'll fry them until there is nothing left to revive.

Vira's smile instantly goes upside-down.

VIRA

What? What does Rada have to do with it?

AERI

Oh. I take it what happened yesterday was just a coincidence.

VIRA

D'ya have any brains in that skull of yours? I've been 'ere for a few days now.

Lelya looks at Aeri, subtly shaking her head.

AERI

So you have no idea that your kol-mate attacked me and kidnapped a Magister of my academy whilst you were away?

VIRA

Imagine that. How d'you even know it was Rada? Don't think we've met.

AERI

Making friends in other academies helps, so I know it was her. I don't know if the two others are involved, but I will find out once I find Rada. The sooner that happens, the more likely it is I'll let them live. I don't think they revive drop-outs, especially—

VIRA

'Specially murderers. You did yer homework. Almost. Unfortunately for ya, I don't know what those bums are up to. We parted ways months ago.

Aeri just clenches her teeth watching the girl indifferently landing back in her chair.

VIRA

You really ain't the brightest, are ya? Guess you were desperate coming 'ere. Should've started at your academy. Maybe his friends could help ya with that? He seemed to be friends with that white-haired lad. Maybe ask 'im.

AERI

How do you know who I was talking about?

VIRA

Ya know it when ya see it. He's someone who doesn't fit. Such people don't last long. What d'you think happened to the poor lad who bunched our kol together?

She marks the end of the discussion by turning away.

Orena and Lelya turn to look at Aeri, whose face boils with irritation. Unable to quell it, she starts tracing her way back outside only to find the Sorceress blocking her way next to the door.

SORCERESS

Mind telling me what was it that the League felt the need to send students after a Magister of another academy?

AERI

Maybe ask someone from your coven to fill you in.

SORCERESS

I am afraid the League lacks the telepathic abilities to reach into the mind of a girl to find out what is going on there that she would reach such a conclusion.

Aeri keeps silent, fighting off the psychological pressure, but whilst her mental fortitude shields both Lelya and her, the pressure gets to Orena.

ORENA

It's because of m—

LELYA

Don't tell her anything. We don't owe her an explanation.

SORCERESS

Because of… you. And a Vanguard student is somehow involved. That can only mean that you are the one.

The Vanguard witch that has been silently observing them this whole time finally leaves her spot. As she stops in front of Orena, she bends forward a little, looking into her eyes, which express the discomfort due to prolonged examination.

VANGUARD WITCH

You want to tell me that this timid little girl is what got your coven shivering?

SORCERESS

My coven? Your coven is just as afraid of her.

VANGUARD WITCH

It wasn't my coven that ordered a Magister to be kidnapped for whatever reason related to her.

SORCERESS

For whatever reason. And if we are to believe this, it was a Magister of your academy, which means that your coven was complicit. I don't think you are so ignorant as not to know what danger the revenant poses.

VANGUARD WITCH

Whatever danger she poses was successfully dealt with in the past.

SORCERESS

Not without casualties.

VANGUARD WITCH

I won't be amongst them. Her priority will be the inner circle, and as soon as she returns, I'll just hide and wait out until the coven deals with her.

SORCERESS

Have you no shame admitting you're a coward? How did you even make it into the coven?

VANGUARD WITCH

I made it into the coven by being smart. But I take it you are different.

SORCERESS

I won't run away.

VANGUARD WITCH

But you won't charge into the fight against her either, will you?

AERI

Can we go? You can keep it between you two.

The sorceress takes a step to the side and opens the door for the girls whilst not breaking the eye contact with her opponent.

LELYA

So where to now? Do we visit the other kol's members?

Prompted by the lack of response, she looks at Aeri, who appears to be immersed in her thoughts as she walks.

LELYA

Ae—

AERI

This can't be a coincidence.

LELYA

What?

AERI

That she mentioned Eraban, the ‘white-haired lad’, on accident. He seemed suspicious earlier today when I mentioned I was attacked.

LELYA

Yeah, it was like she was pointing at someone specific. I hope this does mean he knows something. Good luck to you then.

AERI

Can I ask you to help?

LELYA

I mean, I don't mind, but all I did was guide you around the academy. I am not much of a help outside it.

AERI

But you can tell if someone is lying.

LELYA

No? I'm not a mind reader, I can only feel emotions, and lying is not an emotion.

AERI

That should do the trick. If I ask him the right questions, his reaction should tell me what I need to know.

LELYA

In theory. Some people are good at keeping their emotions under control. Also I won't be able to tell whose emotions those are or feel subtle emotions if I am overwhelmed by stronger emotions, so you better keep your emotions in check.

AERI

Right. I can do that.

LELYA

Well then, lead the way.

****

In the same corridor where her pursuit started, Aeri now remains static next to a wall. Her eyes on a door on the opposite side, slowly sinking down to handles, she gets an impulse that makes her hand gravitate towards them as her body pushes her forward, but her will suppresses it in a second.

Ten minutes pass. Another impulse builds up. This time she has just enough will to stop herself from pushing down the handles. Unwillingly, she returns to her post.

The remaining will keeps her in place for a little more than five minutes, but before she moves forwards, her waiting is awarded at last. The door opens as two men leave the office.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Oh, you again, young lady. I have already filed a report.

AERI

Yeah. Thank you. Can I talk to the aide, please?

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

If this is about the kidnapping, I have already told you that there is not much we can do. We are cooperating with constables and are providing them with what information we can. Sorry, but we are busy people and don't have time to spare.

AIDE ERABAN

That's all right, Administrator. The girl is worried. You can understand. I'll be with you shortly.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Fine. I will be waiting.

Both lock their eyes on his back as Chusuran walks away, turning towards each other as soon as he is out of sight.

AERI

Can w—

AIDE ERABAN

I take it you did not give up on the case.

AERI

No. And that's what I wanted to talk to you about. But not here. Can we go somewhere more private?

AIDE ERABAN

Aeri, you should not get involved in this.

Up until now, Aeri has been keeping a clueless, unbothered expression, as if she were a predator trying not to spook prey, but this sentence stripped her of this disguise, returning her to the usual self.

AERI

You know something, don't you?

AIDE ERABAN

I— No, forget. Just, please, stay out of it.

Aeri stops Eraban as he starts walking away. She relays her next message with frowning eyes instead of her mouth, the resolve on her face just as firm as her grip on his hand.

AIDE ERABAN

Aeri, the real status of Magisters is known only to people affiliated with covens. If it is not someone from within the coven or the academy, it is either someone desperate or dangerous. Students should not expose themselves to danger.

AERI

Aide, all of my friends are unconscious. I watched two of them die. And the bitch that orchestrated it treated it like it had been a part of her studies. I am already exposed to it by being a student.

The difficulty of his decision to continue can be felt through his sigh.

AIDE ERABAN

The person that you mentioned, the blonde girl, I might know who that is.

AERI

How? Who is it?

AIDE ERABAN

I don't know her identity or affiliation. Apparently, she dwells somewhere around the abandoned Ruta hospital. That's all I know. If there is hope of finding her or Magister Rensin, it would be there.

Filled with agitation, Aeri's eyes started sparkling with hope.

AERI

Thank you, aide!

Energised, she springs into motion without waiting for a response.

AIDE ERABAN

Aeri, be careful. She might not be alone.

AERI

Don't worry. I'm not alone either.

AIDE ERABAN

Not alone either?

After a five-minutes sprint through the narrow spaces of the academy and then through the square, Aeri arrives at a reinforced metal door serving as an entrance to a garden-sized space enclosed with high concrete walls.

Her hands on a large vertical rod, she pulls the door, using her legs rather than arms to channel the force. Once opened, it reveals a passage between two inner walls, crossed by another one right in the centre of this construction.

AERI

You can come out.

As she stands at the intersection, metal screech comes from the direction she is looking in. Orena and Lelya come from one of four walled-off spaces, a little confused.

LELYA

I take it he's not coming.

ORENA

What happened?

AERI

He told me everything.

LELYA

What? How?

AERI

He just did. He seemed hesitant, but I convinced him. He said he knew where I could find Rada. Possibly.

LELYA

Possibly?

AERI

He didn't say it was her, just that it's someone who matches the description.

LELYA

And… you trust him?

AERI

He seemed convincing. He could have told me that right away, but he seemed worried I was getting into something dangerous. And we don't have any more clues, so I am willing to take my chances with whatever we have.

LELYA

If you say so. So where do we find her?

AERI

Somewhere around Ruta hospital.

LELYA

Ruta hospital? Where is that?

ORENA

The spooky area.

LELYA

Spooky?

AERI

Yes. The hospital has been abandoned, and nobody lives near it. So it only makes sense someone would be hiding there.

LELYA

Well, let's see how spooky it is then.

****

Buildings, lampposts, and people substitute one another as the girls observe the moving scenery from the static cabin of a tram car. The tracks underneath clank almost in synchrony with the road turns between the buildings as the tram passes them.

At each stop, a few dozen people are waiting there to replace those inside.

At the next stop, only three people wait near the doors, and not a single soul can be seen outside.

The slits between the stones that make up the platform around the tracks are filled with dirt, making the surface smooth, almost flat. It's even more prominent in the gaps between the platform and tracks, where the ground is covered by grass.

As the tram leaves, it unblocks the view on the epicentre of this desolated area: Ruta hospital. The enormous brown-brick building complex claims a land patch of about one hundred metres in width, spreading in all directions from the central block like a butterfly with blocky wings.

A flagpole halfway to an entrance sways lightly under the wind currents above, where they would play with a flag that was supposed to be there a long time ago; the rope hanging along it must have already grown rigid to the point of accepting its current shape as the permanent state.

If it weren't for dirt and the overgrown surrounding green space, one could hardly tell the place has been abandoned: the walls are intact; apart from a few shattered windows, most are in place; hinges still carry the weight of their doors; and the only litter that can be seen on the surface is carried here by the wind and swiftly taken away.

A shade blankets the premises as the clouds move, blocking the sun, as if the place wanted to tell them the visitors aren't welcome here.

LELYA

This is not how I imagined an abandoned hospital.

AERI

How *did* you imagine it?

LELYA

Ruined, I guess. Why would someone abandon such a big hospital?

AERI

A 'curse', apparently.

LELYA

You know that curses don't exist, right?

AERI

Of course, I do. I didn't mean a literal curse. That's what people say.

LELYA

What really happened then?

AERI

Don't know. I've only heard about it a few times and only seen it whilst passing in a tram.

ORENA

Patients would disappear in their beds, some were found dead, some would go mad. People would even refuse to be taken here even when their lives were in danger.

LELYA

That does sound cursed. Are curses really not a thing?

AERI

No. But witches are. Though I don't know what kind of witchcraft would cause this.

ORENA

A Vanguard witch used to work here. People thought she exercised witchcraft because she could do what no other doctor could. I don't think she would not notice someone causing harm to patients.

AERI

A Vanguard witch? That's unlikely.

As Aeri involuntarily tries to draw a connection between this place and her coven, her mind conjures the events of the previous day.

AERI

No, actually, that *is* likely. And if it's true, then she might very well have been the cause of it.

LELYA

What true?

AERI

The ERC. Forget it. It's the academy's internal stuff.

The girls stop at the entrance to the hospital territory, getting an overview of the complex and the surrounding residential area.

LELYA

This is a lot of searching work for the three of us. So who goes where?

AERI

I don't think we should split. She might not be alone.

LELYA

I mean, look at the size of it. Just the hospital itself is enormous. Not to mention you having gooseflesh doesn't help me sensing other people.

After glancing at the hospital one more time, Aeri heavily sighs.

AERI

You're right. I'll search the hospital, you two can take the surrounding area. Let's meet here in three hours if we don't find anything. No, make it four.

ORENA

What do we do if we encounter them?

LELYA

I guess, we should alert each other. We need some kind of a signal.

ORENA

I can invoke light to launch a light projectile, but it's hard to see in daylight, even with clouds.

AERI

A signal…

Aeri starts rummaging through her bag, where she locates a much smaller one. Sunlight flashes, reflected off the polished surface of two flare pistols procured from it.

AERI

There are two. Lucky us.

She gives each to Orena and Lelya.

LELYA

What about you?

AERI

This thing is loud.

Aeri's nails meet the metal surface of her arcane contraption in a few taps.

AERI

If a fight breaks out, you'll know it's me. Right. Let's not waste time.

Orena and Lelya nod in response before the tree of them spread.

Making her way to the entrance, Aeri casts a glance to both sides, mentally mapping the complex as well as her route around it. One step before reaching the doorstep, she extends her arm forwards, but as she turns to look at the doors, she notices a rusty chain wrapped around the handles with a lock connecting its ends.

A few hits on the lock with her weapon's buttstock prove that whoever has chosen the lock did not spare a few extra coins.

In the search for an alternative entrance, she takes a jog to the right. After a turn, her eyes slide over the glass surface of windows until they reach a rectangular opening.

A careful hit removes a sharp spike in her way. Shards fall and crack on the floor with another crack following when Aeri lands on the inside.

The further she distances from the point of entry, the cleaner the interior gets. Only layers of dust speak of the hospital's abandonment, with the clearer evidence found above, where sharp ceiling corners are concealed behind layers of webs.

Not long after traversing the corridors, she encounters the remaining inhabitants when she opens a door, startling several rats in the room behind it.

Whilst Aeri takes time getting acquainted with the silent but numerous hospital population, Orena and Lelya are given an opportunity to interact with actual people, though much less numerous and not really talkative.

Travelling between residential buildings is not an enjoyable experience either as there appear to be no caretakers left amongst the few remaining inhabitants.

As the time allocated for search starts running out, Orena and Lelya are forced to return to the hospital as they hear a thunderclap echoing from inside its walls. Worried due to the absence of any subsequent noise, they hasten the pace.

Both arrive at the back of the central block, inspecting their surroundings, waiting for a clue to lead them in a certain direction.

LELYA

Aeri!

ORENA

Aeri!

A beacon taking the shape of a lightning bolt shooting upwards takes them to the opposite side of the building, where Aeri stands calm and unscratched.

ORENA

What happened? Did you encounter them?

AERI

No. It was a distorted. Scared the shite out of me.

LELYA

A distorted? In the middle of the city? Are you sure?

AERI

Might have been something else. It was too dark to say for sure. I followed a trail I thought were footprints and it led me to it. What about you?

ORENA

I didn't find anything.

LELYA

Me neither.

ORENA

There is a block to the north. We haven't searched there.

LELYA

I've been there. I didn't get to look into the buildings, but I surveyed the area, didn't feel any unusual emotions.

AERI

Shite. That can't be it. I refuse to believe he lied to me.

ORENA

What about there?

Orena's finger directs the girls' gazes to the opposite side of the street, where, amongst the same vacant buildings, one stands out in particular, two storeys taller, wind freely travelling through empty frames, sun hitting the floor of the upper story with no roof in-between.

AERI

This is the only place left. If they aren't there…

Instead of finishing the thought, she begins her way towards the next destination.

Behind the façade of the street, that is the front row of buildings, hides an abandoned construction site. Unlike the surrounding houses, this one is given more space to breathe with a planter bed dug around it. The building itself was aimed at something fancier with arched window frames as opposed to the common square ones.

As they make their way to a door frame, Aeri's eyes trace the dust carried by wind through the ground. She then inspects the short path ahead until her eyes meet a wall. It makes her frown.

LELYA

What is it?

AERI

There are no footprints. If somebody was here, there should be some traces.

LELYA

There might be another way inside. Can you bring your anxiety down a little? If there is someone here, I won't be able to tell.

AERI

Sorry, I'll go ahead.

Aeri hastens her pace, disappearing in a turn behind the door frame.

ORENA

Me too.

After Orena follows the suit, Lelya enters the building. She looks at the two in a corridor several metres away and gives them a nod. All three then proceed with the search at the regular pace.

Soon they arrive at a spacious hall lined with two rows of thick round columns down the middle and two sets of rectangular ones aligned with the walls to form two narrow corridors.

After they make a few steps down the hall, a figure appears in a doorway on the opposite side. Her black hair transitioning into dark-ruby at the tips contrasts against the grey of the cloak that ends at the knees. Her face is partly obscured by the shadow cast by a hood.

She stops before entering, half-way turned to the girls, who also freeze in their places.

AERI

Um… hi.

GIRL

Hello.

Both the girl and Aeri keep a calm, unbothered look. The girl's eyes briefly inspect Aeri's blue coat and then fall onto her weapon, whilst Aeri's eyes do the same: first taking a note of the girl's legs, where a blue golden-edged skirt splits into two vertical parts hanging beneath the grey cloak, and then the long wooden pole that rests in her left hand.

When their eyes meet again, they signal aggression.

The girl reaches for her left shoulder, yanking the cloak and throwing it forwards. With a step, she charges her body, making a spin that ends with both of her arms on the pole. A following motion makes the pole split the air in a swift horizontal swing. As if it was an invisible extension of the pole, a narrow blast

wave bursts outwards, widening the further it goes. Her light-grey eyes, now illuminated by the bouncing light of the room, become deep blue with two light-blue spirals slowly rotating around the pupils, dissipating outwards like a cometary tail.

Aeri jumps left, Orena jumps right, both using pillars to cover. The wave hits the pillars and the walls further, leaving a visible trace as it splits the dust layer with explosive force.

Whilst Aeri is building a charge, Orena retaliates the next second. Wind currents concentrate in her hand, forming a spindle-shaped wind dagger, which she hurls towards the opponent, taking the aim with her ears before her eyes lock onto the girl closing in in an arching trajectory.

With a projectile flying her way, she is forced to take cover as well.

By this time, Lelya arrives at the scene, establishing eye contact with Aeri through a doorway, whilst remaining hidden from the enemy's sight.

AERI

Hey, Ma'aya or Yiya, before we proceed to— I mean, before *I* proceed to smashing your head, mind telling me if the Magister is alive?

As her mouth communicates with the girl, her left hand relays a message to Lelya: she swiftly shows Lelya her palm, brings it down vertically, then raises it with the palm facing herself, and ends the message with the middle finger wrapped around the index one.

Whatever she tried to communicate failed to get through to the recipient, who relays the failed delivery with confused eyes.

AERI

This will help me greatly in deciding whether to keep *you* alive.

After making a sweeping gesture with her hand and a spiralling one with her finger, she visibly struggles to continue the message.

AERI

You're screwed anyway. We just need to keep you here long enough until help arrives.

With a look given to Lelya, marking her as the intended recipient, she nods to Aeri and starts silently moving away, dashing as soon as she reaches the exit.

Waiting for a trigger to set her in motion, Aeri releases a charge as soon as she hears the girl's feet touch the ground, but the moment her finger relaxes, the girl's next step takes her upwards.

With the springing motion she not only shoots herself above her head, but also makes a front flip and spins. The discharge deviates after missing its target, making the lightning hit a column further behind her.

The spinning motion creates another blast wave. The shock is absorbed by the column, but Aeri fails to hide completely, with her shoulder taking a hit. Even then it makes her body turn halfway as it follows the shoulder.

The girl lands and takes cover as well.

GIRL

"That was close. The sorceress does not seem like much of a threat, but the Vanguard is no joke. Hopefully this created enough noise to alert Rada."

With neither side initiating the next move, only the crackling of electricity resonates in the air.

GIRL

"What are they waiting for? They know about Yiya, so they must know about Rada. They know I am not alone. She might not have been lying about help."

AERI

"What is she waiting for? Could she be waiting for her friends? I can't wait."

GIRL

"I need to act now."

"I need to act now."

Although their decisions come at the same time, Aeri's comes into action with a second's delay, needed for her to give Orena a nod.

Aeri makes to step to attack, but the moment she exposes herself, the girl already stands in the open making a swing. She takes cover and prepares to attack in the short window before the next blast comes her way, but it takes just a second. Then the next blast comes, and another one, again and again, giving Aeri no safe opportunity. The girl makes a spin with each step as she closes the distance.

Despite not hitting her physically, each strike does take a toll on her nerves, each stacking on top of the previous one. After another wave breaks against stone surface, Aeri drops to the ground. The violent current flies above her as she releases a charge, but misses again with the girl making another leap upwards.

Aeri's disappointment turns a regret the next moment in the anticipation of a direct hit when the girl swings the pole forwards along the front flip.

An invocation hits her much sooner than she expects, but instead of hitting her in the face, it pushes her sidewards. Strong enough to make her tumble away, but not as strong to cause any damage when she hits a wall.

The first thing she sees after recovering is Orena extending her palm towards her, but her face gets obstructed by the opponent appearing a few seconds after.

Orena then swiftly relocates around the pillar, evading a vertical wave.

Arc Emitter starts crackling, its sound a predator's growling behind its prey. Though instead of being startled and running away, the prey decides to kick back.

The girl blindly shafts her pole back horizontally. Aeri does not even see the projection of the aerial force, but she feels it as it tears through her right sleeve. Missing the mark just by a few centimetres, the strike bites into the wall behind Aeri, forming a small but deep indentation.

As if her movements are all linked in a planned sequence, her pulling the weapon back smoothly transitions into an upwards swing via a spin, forcing Aeri to mirror Orena's evasive movement.

After the cycle of strikes and evasions repeats two more times, Aeri switches her focus from the girl to Orena. As soon as a swirling dagger is hurled in the opponent's direction, she drops a metal cylinder at her position and heads to the next cover.

Wary of a suspicious object ahead, the girl jumps away the moment it lights up with electric arcs.

Immediately, Aeri takes the initiative, throwing another cylinder at her, and another one, eventually forcing her to escape into the open.

A hurled wind dagger from the right makes her react. Feeling the pressure, she jumps to evade it, transitioning defence into offense as she sends a vertical wave in Orena's direction. Before the gravity initiates her descent, three objects bounce across the ground and stop around her.

GIRL

"Shite!"

She lands into a half-crouching stance, her heart pumping blood at an accelerated pace and her leg muscles racing against the time before the contraptions go off. The springing motion launches her backwards the moment they burst. To her surprise, instead of engulfing the area in a lightning storm, they release volumes of water.

GIRL

"Water? Electricity. So that what she plans. Had those been electric, I would have been toasted already."

A step back, a spin, and a retaliation against Aeri. She continues the spin, sending another wave to her right. It strikes Orena, throwing her into a narrow corridor behind her where she collides with a wall.

Another device lands under her feet. A jump to the side and a retaliatory wave. One more is thrown towards her. This time she evades with a jump that brings her closer to her opponent with a blast wave to follow.

With just a few metres now between them, four cylinders hit the floor, effectively turning the whole floor into a zone of denial with up being the only possible escape vector.

The ground beneath her lights up as she leaps upwards. Instead of retaliating immediately, she holds one end of the pole directed slightly downwards.

AERI

…furuso tonova!

A chilly sensation runs across the girl′s skin.

GIRL

"A frost invocation? So she wanted to freeze me in place with this. I can f—"
Uwah!

As she lands, instead of sure footing her feet find a slippery surface. She almost finds her balance, when Orena appears. The drilling force of a wind dagger propels the girl through the floor as she uses her pole to block it.

She falls and tumbles after her feet reach the edge of the ice.

It takes her two seconds to reestablish a connection with surface, another is needed to orient herself and prepare for Aeri′s attack, though with the lit-up barrel already pointed at her, she can only brace herself for an imminent impact.

Lightning finally finds its target, seizing the control of her body as she convulses and drops to the ground.

Still alerted, Orena walks towards the motionless girl with an invocation already swirling in the palm of her hand, whilst Aeri reloads her weapon, replacing one cylinder with every few steps.

AERI

Stay on alert. Her friend—

…approaches the site like a storm, her loud steps warning the girls just in time as they take cover from an invisible wall that destroys the ice surface and sweeps it away.

AERI

Oh, hey, Rada. How are you doing? Haven't seen you since yesterday.

RADA

Where's Ma'aya?

Whilst giving Aeri an opportunity to respond, Rada denies her any to act, shaking the room with another blast that spreads from her fist as soon as she sees an edge of Arc Emitter sticking behind a pillar.

AERI

Taking a nap. You look like you could use one too. Though before that I need to know if the Magister is alive. Your friend wasn't very talkative.

Aeri attempts to peep at Rada, but can only catch her with her peripheral sight before another wave forces her back.

RADA

He's fine. You can leave now. This has nothing to do with you.

AERI

You might have missed nailing me to that tree in-between.

Rada lets her fists continue the conversation, now spewing one striking argument after another.

Aeri probes the ground with a cylinder thrown at Rada, but it is immediately bounced back and bursts in lightning in a far corner.

She then builds a charge and attempts to strike Rada, making a blind shot with just her weapon sticking, but the second she release the trigger, another wave hits Arc Emitter, making the invocation miss the mark. Her muscles and tendons undergo heavy stress as they try to keep her joints in place, barely managing to hold the grip on the weapon.

Even though the relentless barrage does not leave an opening, Aeri dashes to Orena's position barely managing to evade the next wave.

AERI

I can't find an opening to strike her. Can you block her invocations somehow so that I can take aim?

ORENA

No. Her invocations are too strong for me to block.

AERI

What about that invocation you used to defend against me?

Both make a break to another pillar to compensate for Rada steadily closing the distance between them.

ORENA

Vacuum Barrier only works against fire and lighting. I cannot block air masses with it. I can put up an Air Barrier, but with that force I can only soften the blow.

AERI

Can you use this to withstand the blow?

Releasing a strap from across her body, she takes Minali's grimoire from her back as they make a break for another cover.

ORENA

A glass pane?

AERI

It's Minali's grimoire. This thing is harder than diamond.

ORENA

I can try, but I am not sure I can properly focus on a projection whilst holding it.

AERI

Right. Let's try something different then.

With Rada nearing them, Aeri unexpectedly dashes from behind her cover, the grimoire in her hands held like a shield.

The first hit clashes with an invisible barrier and dissipates against the glass shield. The residual force is still enough to stop Aeri and push her back slightly.

After resuming her run, she manages to take a few strides before another strike halts her, this time with a subsequent blow following on a short notice. With nothing to soften it, Aeri is blown away.

Before Rada knows it, her next opponent appears directly in front of her, holding Aeri's contraption already charged. With her right hand drawn back, she makes a punch. Though being fast, her muscles are not faster than lightning, which reaches her before an air wall reaches Orena.

The discharge zaps her. The residual energy blinks sporadically around her body, each blink a momentary shackle breaking the linear movement she attempts to make with her limbs.

Severely weakened, she gathers the strength to blast away a cylinder thrown her way, but there is no strength left to do anything against Aeri, who already stands in the open with Arc Emitter ready to fire. Rada can only respond to the imminence with a hateful glare.

A lightning strike douses the fiery-pit glow of her eyes, giving a glimpse of the natural green hue of her irises before her eyelids cover them as she falls.

After Orena joins Aeri, they take a look at the girl who looks malnourished with her sunken cheeks.

AERI

That takes care of two of them. I bet we will find the third one along with the Magister.

Orena responds with a nod, and the two venture deeper into the building.

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The Magister's eyes slowly open with just as slow blinks in-between, letting more light through each time he lifts his eyelids.

As he comes to his senses, the senses strike back: around his stomach and inside his skull. The sensation of pain helps him fully awaken.

He tries to push his body into an upright position only to find both of his hands tied together, just like his legs.

Now conscious of his precarious situation, he inspects his environment.

A few layers of torn rags separate him from the damp floor. His eyes slide forwards across the cold stone surface dimly illuminated by a single oil lamp hung on a wall. The central piece of the room is a cooking tripod constructed of what looks like metal construction rods, a bucket being a substitute for a cauldron. Around it, similar rags make up three beds with plates, cups, and spoons beside them. A box in a corner must be a food storage judging by the a few potatoes peeping from it.

At last, he gets to inspect an inhabitant of this place. A girl clad in what a sorceress uniform would look like if not taken care of walks back and forth in front of the entrance. Her uncut waist-length greyish-blue hair is held by a rectangular hairclip with green-purple glass and a silver rim, holding the sagging locks, which reveal light grey eyes at each turn of her body. A rope around her waist holds a silver box with a multitude of different locks.

Her nervousness radiates both from her unsure footsteps and her posture with her hands closed in fists, one on her chest and the other one near her mouth.

THE MAGISTER

Um, hi.

TIMID GIRL

Eek!

The girl freezes, staring at the Magister for a few seconds before resuming her walking routine, the only change now being her casting a momentary glance at him every few seconds.

The Magister pushes himself from the floor into a sitting position.

THE MAGISTER

So… I assume you are my captor.

The lack of reaction forces him to take a closer look at the girl, searching for something that he could use to get her to talk.

A glint on her chest grabs his attention. As he focuses there, he notices that her left hand is not clenched but is fondling a gold ring on a silver chain around her neck.

THE MAGISTER

That's some beautiful ring you have there. Did it belong to your mother?

TIMID GIRL

Eek! H— how d-did you… know?

With what agility his tied hands provide, he reaches under his shirt to bring two silver rings on a similar chain into her view.

Hesitantly, she starts taking steps towards him, until the distance allows her to distinguish the object whilst still leaving a sizeable space between them.

TIMID GIRL

T— two?

THE MAGISTER

They belonged to my parents.

TIMID GIRL

H— how?

THE MAGISTER

They… died when I was young. I can barely remember them.

Briefly caught in his memories, he quickly focuses back on the girl.

THE MAGISTER

But I take it at least you still have your father. He is lucky to have such a cute girl as his daughter.

Her facial muscles attempt to shape her mouth into a smile, but her eyes focusing on his tied hands instead force terror to manifest on her face as she puts more distance between them.

TIMID GIRL

Eek!

THE MAGISTER

Listen, I don't believe you do this out of ill will. I don't assume you'd tell me who made you do this. Can you at least tell me why you do this? Will this get you out of this… place?

The girl shakes her head subtly.

THE MAGISTER

Then why?

TIMID GIRL

O— our… friend—

Before she can continue, the door is kicked open, Aeri bursting in with Orena.

AERI

Magister!

One second spent locked on the object of her anxiety to relieve it, they jump to a person next to him, her eyes frowning as she brings Arc Emitter into the aiming position, lightning already filling its cage-barrel.

Orena follows the suit, wind gathering in the palm of her hand as her eyes darken.

The girl starts fervently shivering, casting glances around her as if in the search of an escape route.

AERI

Don't let her fool you. They wouldn't have left her alone with the Magiser unless she's more trouble than the other two.

Each make a step sideward to take different attack angles on their target.

Before they can make more, the girl closes her eyes and collapses.

AERI

Or… not?

As the two start moving towards the Magister, Orena assumes a defensive stance, her palm stretched in Aeri's direction as she hears her weapon discharging, but fails to see anyone.

ORENA

What happened?

AERI

Nothing. I just discharged my contraption.

ORENA

Why?

AERI

I can't exactly put the invocation back once I push the trigger, you know.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri. Orena? What are you doing here? How did you get here? How did you find me?

The girls hastily sprint to the Magister, with Aeri keeping an eye on the motionless girl whilst Orena unties him.

AERI

It's a long story. Where do I even begin?

After the Magister is set free, Aeri starts explaining the chain of events that led the two girls to him.

Meanwhile Orena walks outside to keep the watch over the two unconscious adversaries as she waits for Lelya's return, hopefully with some backup.

When Orena and Lelya come back, they are accompanied by a black-haired girl, who stands out in more ways than one. Instead of carrying anything in her hands, her contraptions, shaped like elongated blocky animal heads, hover beside her: a blue-and-black wolf and a silver-and-yellow bird of prey. Her uniform not only features a unique design, having the frontal opening of her coat form a zig-zag line as the right and left parts overlap, but is made of glossy grey fabric with emerald matte edging which accentuates the silver shine of the base.

Behind them, Ma'aya and Rada walk with two other Vanguard students behind them, both clad differently: a blue-haired girl in an olive uniform with brown edging, and a white-haired girl with a long ponytail in a black uniform with red edging. Whilst the former has something that looks like tinfoil sheets folded into triangular shapes following her, the other holds two contraptions shaped like swords.

The one common feature all three girls share is a red armband around left sleeve.

The black-haired girl casts a glance at the unconscious body.

She casually walks to the girl, giving no mind to the Magister and Aeri, gets down and slaps Yiya a few times with moderate force.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Wake up.

Yiya opens her eyes and lets out a terrified cry. She takes a few moments looking around. An eye contact with Ma'aya and Rada makes her calm down, but in a depressed manner of accepting her situation. She just obediently stands up and follows the girl.

THE MAGISTER

Wait, I want to talk to them.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Eh? On what authority?

THE MAGISTER

On a Magister's authority?

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Magister? Which academy?

THE MAGISTER

Your academy.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Really? Haven't seen you before.

AERI

He *is* a Magister.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

I don't know who you are either, so I'm not taking your word for it.

THE MAGISTER

Do we really need to go through this?

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Yes, we do.

The expressions of the two other girls that came with her incrementally sour, whilst she appears to be acting in full seriousness.

THE MAGISTER

If only I had my bag with me…

AERI

It's here, I have it.

Aeri hastily procures his bag from hers and hands it to him.

The Magister reaches inside and shows a rectangular card to the girl, who, after inspecting it for a few seconds, looks at him, her green eyes expressing genuine cluelessness.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

I can't read.

Whilst the girl in the black manages to restrain herself, the blue-haired girl places her palm over her eyes as the tinfoil objects beside her drop to the ground.

BLUE-HAIRED GIRL

Nara, stop it already. This is getting embarrassing.

As Nara throws her head up, a stream of guttural sounds erupts from her mouth, filling the room, which makes not only her comrades but everyone in the room feel uncomfortable.

NARA

FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINE!

THE MAGISTER

Right… So, what was it about your friend?

YIYA

She…

RADA

Yiya, leave it. We've dealt with Vanguard enough already.

Yiya looks at her friend, then back at the Magister. She closes her eyes and clenches her fists, producing a squeak that feels like a scream that takes an enormous amount of effort.

YIYA

No!

RADA

Yiya…

Rada reacts as if she witnessed something that defies her beliefs.

MA'AYA

Heh. Even if Yiya objects.

RADA

Not you too.

MA'AYA

What? Do you believe whoever it was really wanted to help? And what do we have to lose?

Rada snorts in response and looks at Yiya.

RADA

So what did you tell him?

Yiya just shakes her head.

RADA

Our hat, Vira, seems to have got herself into some trouble with Vanguard. Somebody offered to get her out of it if we agreed to kidnap you.

THE MAGISTER

Vira? Vira Sagaydachi?

RADA

Yes. They told us you were the one to condemn her, so it was in our interest to kidnap you.

THE MAGISTER

They?

RADA

We don't know. Somebody just came down here and left before we even could chase them. They left a letter with the summary of Vira's hearing, which didn't make sense, but Vira was definitely involved. There was a note attached, saying that they could help her if we kidnapped you. Once we did this, we were to await further instructions.

THE MAGISTER

What do you mean it didn't make sense?

RADA

Vira cannot copy a device just by touching it. It was said it was her Brand, which is false, because— I can't tell you, not until I know I can trust you. Let's say that the events described suggested she was involved. So we had to believe it.

THE MAGISTER

You mentioned a letter. Do you still have it by any chance?

RADA

It's under my bed.

Rada points to a rag closest to the entrance by looking at it.

The Magister approaches the 'bed' and lifts a few corners until he finds the letter. The longer he reads it, the more concerned he becomes.

THE MAGISTER

"This is a copy of the hearing's summary. Is this the coven's doing? Did she really mean it? But… why would they use aspiring witches to kidnap me?"

He switches the sheets. The message on it is imprinted with the letters of a typewriter, making the identification of the author impossible. The straightforward manner of the language used does not give any clues either. Apart from limiting the circle of suspects, the only other use for these sheets is to serve as criminal evidence.

THE MAGISTER

Right… That aside, the more important question is what are you doing here? It appears this isn't a temporary residence for a few nights.

RADA

This is our hiding place. We… are wanted for murder.

Aeri, Orena, and Lelya know that already, so it doesn't shock them. The other three girls show a reserved response, suspicious if anything.

THE MAGISTER

So what really happened?

Rada hesitates for a second, surprised by this question more than anyone else.

RADA

Half a year ago we were supposed to meet a Magister of the Vanguard academy and some students whose kol was formed under the same circumstances as ours. When we arrived at the meeting spot, we found the Magister dead. Before we could decide what to do, somebody saw us and ran away. Magister Tepan said something was suspicious, so he told us to run and hide until he figured out what was going on. We… haven't heard from him since.

THE MAGISTER

Who is Magister Tepan?

RADA

As I said, our kol was formed under unusual circumstances. We all were failing and facing expulsion. That's when Magister Tepan came in and offered to form a kol amongst ourselves.

THE MAGISTER

I see… You can't be accused of a murder on a simple account of being at the site of a crime. There must be more to it. Even more so given it is related to a Magister's death. I— I can't promise anything, but will ensure a fair hearing and a proper investigation.

MA'AYA

You want to help us? After what we have done to you? You're weird.

THE MAGISTER

It is a Magister's duty to stand for aspiring witches regardless whether they were wronged or they wronged someone. And the latter is the failure of your academy's Magistertum more than anyone else's.

NARA

Are you done with the speeches? Can we go now?

THE MAGISTER

Yes. But I think we should stop to have a meal along the way.

Nara opens her mouth, her lungs expanding as she sucks in the air as if she were to expunge it in a powerful invocation, but it gets stuck in her throat as she glances at the sunken cheeks of the malnourished girls.

NARA

Fine… but my duties end in less than an hour, and I am not dragging my arse to the Sorceress academy in my past-time, so they'll be spending the night—

Her eyes quickly skim over the room.

NARA

…somewhere that is… not nearly as awful… as this place…

THE MAGISTER

I think we can live with that.

AERI

Since we are heading to the academy anyway, we can just drop by our cantina.

THE MAGISTER

Good idea.

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As a tram stops, Aeri bids her friends farewell as the rest disembark and take the road to the academy's grounds.

On their way to the academy, Nara turns to look at the other two Vanguard students.

NARA

You can go. I'll escort them.

BLUE-HAIRED GIRL

You sure?

She casts a glance at the sorceresses walking a few steps ahead of them.

NARA

Look at them. You think they'll attempt to run?

BLUE-HAIRED GIRL

If you say so. See you.

WHITE-HAIRED GIRL

Good bye.

The Magister breaks from the group as they cross the cantina's doorstep and talks to a woman by the food shelves. Her eyes widen in shock and she covers her mouth as the Magister points to the three hungry girls. She doesn't respond and just nods, after which the Magister returns to the group.

THE MAGISTER

I've talked to the cantina worker, so you can eat whatever you want. You can also visit the cantina tomorrow in the morning before we depart. Enjoy your meals.

AERI

Aren't you going to stay with us? You haven't eaten for a whole day.

THE MAGISTER

I'm not used to the cantina food, and some food is going to go bad soon at home, so I'll head there.

AERI

I see. See you tomorrow, probably.

THE MAGISTER

Yes, about tomorrow. A lot of things have happened too fast. I'm still trying to sort it out in my head, so as you are a key person in this case, can I ask you to accompany me to the Sorceress Academy tomorrow, just in case.

AERI

Sure. You don't need to ask.

THE MAGISTER

Thank you. See you tomorrow then. Oh, I'll arrange some clean clothing, so if there is anything else you need, I'll need to know before we leave tomorrow.

RADA

We… could use some compound.

Whilst the Magister tries to match this word with the concepts known to him, it appears to be very familiar to both Aeri and Nara, whose faces sour with a mix of aversion and empathy.

AERI

Shite…

NARA

Maybe they keep some in the recovery ward, but if anything, I live nearby, so I'll go get some after we're done here.

THE MAGISTER

Right. See you tomorrow.

NARA

You go ahead. I'll be waiting here.

Nara walks to a wall next to the doors and leans on it with her arms folded as the four girls come to the food shelves.

Aeri goes first, taking a tray and placing a bowl onto it. Steam rises from a metal container as Aeri opens a lid on it, carrying the aroma of stewed potatoes with vegetables and meat into the air. She pours a few scoops into the bowl, takes a few slices of bread and a cup of uzwar, and then moves to a desk where the cantina worker gives her a plate with caramelized onions.

After observing Aeri with the eyes that radiate excitement for food, the girls take their trays and selectively open containers, each filling one bowl.

As Aeri is about to move to one of the tables, she casts a glance at the trays.

AERI

This is it? You don't need to be shy. The food is free for students anyway. Take whatever you want.

A bit hesitantly, the girls take a few more bowls and fill them, having a full meal with both solid and liquid dishes and salads. Adding drinks and a few slices of bread, they then join Aeri who is already seated at the nearest table.

Aeri spreads the onions on a slice of bread and is about to take a bite when she raises her eyes to look at the girls on the opposite side. Slowly, they take spoons and bring them to their mouths. Their eyes sparkle as soon as the food touches their taste buds. They then start to devour the dishes with no hesitation, barely chewing the food before sending it down their throats.

As Aeri observes them, the bread in her hand moves away from her mouth.

For a moment, Rada takes her eyes away from the food and notices Aeri's blank stare, which interrupts the consumption, and takes a napkin to wipe the traces of food from around her mouth.

RADA

Please pardon our manners. We haven't had proper meals in a while.

The other two girls follow the suit as they look at Aeri.

AERI

Oh! No, no, no. It's not like that. It's just… seeing how just a proper meal makes you this excited, I can only imagine what you have gone through.

RADA

It was rough, but manageable. At least we didn't have to scavenge for food. Could have been much worse if it wasn't for— let's say we had the means of procuring food.

AERI

I see.

RADA

You show quite a lot of concern for someone who assaulted you.

AERI

I know what it is like to be manipulated, and I'm still not over it, so all of my anger is currently concentrated elsewhere.

Yiya lifts a spoon, but something prevents her from putting it into her mouth. Noticing her eyes looking away, Aeri follows her gaze and sees a few students observing them.

AERI

Haven't seen people eating? What's your problem?

The onlookers break the eye contact and return to their meals.

STUDENT

Glad you asked, cause I do have a problem.

AERI

Please do tell me what that problem is.

A malicious smile appears on Aeri's face even before she stands up and turns to look at a blue-haired girl in an orange uniform with green edging, whose long-bow shaped contraption hangs on her back.

STUDENT

My problem is having bums from the Sorceress academy on the Vanguard's grounds.

AERI

What a coincidence. I too do have a problem with bums on the Vanguard's grounds. Unfortunately, they wear Vanguard uniform.

STUDENT

You are pretty daring for a fourth year. I would be more careful if I were you, especially when confronting a senior.

AERI

Oh, I am sure a senior can beat me… in an open confrontation. Surely it doesn't mean someone will ambush and beat the shite out of them afterwards. But I bet someone like you has nothing to fear. Always looking around, keeping her Ward up all the time. Must be exhausting being this cautious.

STUDENT

Spoken like someone who's made a habit out of it, like someone who has never faced the repercussions of their actions.

AERI

Oh, of course, there are stubborn ones. But usually the third time is enough to make a statement.

STUDENT

Were amongst them those that had body-length flesh wounds? Parts of their bodies scorched? Bones fractured after falling from a dozen metres?

NARA

Sorry, I couldn't hear it from over there. Care to tell me what troubles you, fifth year?

The girl looks into Nara's frowning eyes and then at a red armband.

STUDENT

Consider yourself lucky.

AERI

Yeah, tuck your—

Before she can finish throwing her remark at the girl, who is walking away, a fist lands on her head.

NARA

Are you familiar with the concept of shutting up? Since you're finished, let's go.

AERI

Sorry, we have just started when—

As she turns back, she sees the bottoms of empty bowls, with only Ma'aya finishing her soup with one last spoon.

AERI

I guess I'll finish my meal alone then. See you tomorrow.

RADA

Yeah. Thanks. See you.

MA'AYA

Bye.

Instead of saying something, Yiya just nods and the three are escorted away as Aeri returns to her meal.