Nomad Void

illustration Sasazuka Shinon



# Save Haven

## With Reignited Flames

# Copyright

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 formed contrasting spots in the sea of light of their classroom. The diagonal positioning allowed the canvases before them to be perfectly lit by the sunlight without obstructions.

An elder woman navigated 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, she slightly bent, took a brush from a student's hand, dipped it into a pool of yellow and white paints, and made a few strokes to recreate a radiant spot on the vase.

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

Returning the brush to its owner, she gave the student a nod, and walked to the door, seeing Orena, Aeri, and Lelya.

"What is it?"

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

"You can do that after the class is over."

"It is important."

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

"Yes."

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

"It's a life and death situation."

"And whose life it is in danger?"

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

She shook her head in response, trying to make these disjointed pieces of information fall in their places, which Lelya attempted to help her with.

"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."

"And since when do students conduct investigations of kidnappings?"

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

"Won't or can't?"

"Is there really a difference?"

"Regardless, what do you have to do with it?"

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

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

"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 replaced the teacher. Long silver earrings with green gemstones swung like pendulums as she stopped in front of the girls.

"Hm? What is it? Who are you?"

"I'm—"

"Take it outside."

"Sorry, teacher."

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

“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.”

“Which one of them?”

“Yiya.”

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

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

“What? How?”

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

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

“You think she wouldn't take part in it?”

“She would hardly take part in anything.”

A sigh connected this sentence and the elaboration to follow.

“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.”

“Were they *that* bad?”

“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.”

“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.”

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

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

"I mean literally she wouldn't talk."

"Like mute?"

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

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

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

Lelya quietly giggled, making Vitana frown, promptly restoring Lelya's serious attitude.

"What do you find so funny about it?"

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

"What are you talking about?"

Lelya looked to both sides. Aeri was smiling, not trying to hide it.

"What do *you* find so funny about it?"

"The irony."

"The irony?"

"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."

"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."

"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 realised 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 how to respond and whether to respond at all.

"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 exchanged hesitant glances, their eyes asking each other to say something, with Orena finally breaking the silence.

"Um… thank you. Sorry for bothering you."

"No. It's nothing."

Vitana returned to her classroom activity, leaving the girls to their business.

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

"Let's go see the perpetrator."

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

"Something tells me we won't learn anything useful."

"If you say so."

Shortly after they moved to their next destination, something about the recent conversation prompted a question as Aeri reminisced about it.

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

"You still don't get it, do you?"

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

"Huh?"

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

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

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

"So how do you control it?"

"How do *you* control your Brand?"

"Shite…"

"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."

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

"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."

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

"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 made their way to the second floor into an arched hallway illuminated through window-sized openings. An archway at the end showed a stack of horizontal lines that took the shape of a long staircase as they neared it.

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

"Yep."

"Shite…"

As Aeri stepped through the opening, she leaned to the side to get an overview of the road ahead. A phantom metal screech echoed in her mind as she beheld this behemoth of a snake spiralling in a square path around a central 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 could only hope the sweat she had left on the steps would eventually let the rust eat it away.

"Why does it have to be so high?"

"For self-reflection."

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

"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."

"And what about those who visit them?"

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

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

Lelya's hand swept through the air as the door she was about to knock on suddenly opened with an unwelcoming face welcoming the girls from the inside. The woman staring them down had all aspects of her appearance thoroughly matched: the locks of her matte purple hair were mixed with numerous braids that had silver ribbons woven in, complimentary to her grey-bluish eyes; this

colour theme was 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.

"What is your business here?"

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

"No."

"But we have a permission."

"From whom?"

"Magister Kostes."

The ornate piece of paper got yanked from her hands the moment Lelya's hand started stretching towards the woman. After running her eyes through it, she crumpled it and threw it behind her into a bin.

Contrary to the message conveyed by this gesture, she then stepped 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 stepped in, Vira confusingly looked at them over a shoulder, but their peripheral vision registered a third person: a black-haired woman in a uniform painted olive. She had one eye following them with each step that they made, whilst her other eye was covered by a yellow eye-patch. Her bare legs were covered with something that looked like segmented leggings embedded with five spheres each, just like her arms that had segmented bracers with similar spheres.

"And what do they—"

Her focus immediately shifted to Aeri the moment she crossed the doorstep.

"What do *you* want here?"

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

As they neared the desk, Vira was already standing there with her arms folded.

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

"Um… can we talk in private?"

"No."

"No."

"I see, he-he. So, I am Lelya—"

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

"So, um..."

Lost, Lelya looked at Orena.

"We… um…"

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

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

Shock ran through both Orena and Lelya.

The guarding Sorceress tensed, standing up straight from the leaning position, whilst this information did not appear to affect her colleague at all as she just continued observing the students.

"Why did you—"

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

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

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

"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 went upside-down.

"What? What does Rada have to do with it?"

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

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

Lelya looked at Aeri, subtly shaking her head.

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

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

"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—"

"'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 clenched her teeth watching the girl indifferently landing back in her chair.

"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."

"How do you know who I was talking about?"

"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 marked the end of the discussion by turning away.

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

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

"Maybe ask someone from your coven to fill you in."

"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 kept silent, fighting off the psychological pressure, but whilst her mental fortitude shielded both Lelya and her, the pressure got to Orena.

"It's because of m—"

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

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

The Vanguard witch that had been silently observing them this whole time finally left her spot. As she stopped in front of Orena, she bent forward a little, looking into her eyes, which expressed the discomfort due to prolonged examination.

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

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

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

"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."

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

"Not without casualties."

"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."

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

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

“I won't run away.”

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

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

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

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

Prompted by the lack of a response, Lelya looked at Aeri, who appeared to be immersed in her thoughts as she walked.

“Ae—”

“This can't be a coincidence.”

“What?”

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

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

“Can I ask you to help?”

“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.”

“But you can tell if someone is lying.”

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

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

"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."

"Right. I can do that."

"Well then, lead the way."

****

In the same corridor where her pursuit had started, Aeri now remained static next to a wall. Her eyes on a door on the opposite side, slowly sinking down to handles, she got an impulse that made her hand gravitate towards them as her body pushed her forwards, but her will suppressed it in a second.

Ten minutes passed. Another impulse built up. This time she had just enough will to stop herself from pushing down the handles. Unwillingly, she returned to her post.

The remaining will kept her in place for a little more than five minutes, but before she moved, she finally got what she had been waiting for: Chusuran emerging from his office accompanied by the aide Eraban.

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

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

"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."

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

"Fine. I will be waiting."

Chusuran walked away, and as soon as he was out of sight, they both turned to look at each other.

"Can w—"

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

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

"Aeri, you should not get involved in this."

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

"You know something, don't you?"

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

Aeri stopped Eraban as he started walking away. She relayed her next message with frowning eyes, the resolution on her face just as firm as her grip on his hand.

"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."

"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 could be felt through his sigh.

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

"How? Who is it?"

"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.

"Thank you, aide!"

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

"Aeri, be careful. She might not be alone."

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

"Not alone either?"

After a five-minutes sprint through the narrow spaces of the academy and then through the square, Aeri arrived 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 pulled the door, using her legs rather than arms to channel the force. Once opened, it revealed a passage between two inner walls, crossed by another one right in the centre of this construction.

"You can come out."

As she stood at the intersection, metal screech came from the direction she was looking in. Orena and Lelya came from one of four walled-off spaces, a little confused.

"I take it he's not coming."

"What happened?"

"He told me everything."

"What? How?"

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

"Possibly?"

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

"And… you trust him?"

"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."

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

"Somewhere around Ruta hospital."

"Ruta hospital? Where is that?"

"The spooky area."

"Spooky?"

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

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

****

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

At each stop, a few dozen people were waiting to replace those inside the steel walls.

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

The slits between the stones that made up the platform around the tracks were filled with dirt, making the surface smooth, almost flat. It was even more prominent in the gaps between the platform and tracks, where the ground was covered by grass and weeds.

As the tram left, it unblocked the view on the epicentre of this desolated area: Ruta hospital. The enormous brown-brick building complex claimed 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 the entrance swayed lightly under the wind currents above, where they would have played with a flag that was supposed to be there in the past; the rope hanging along it must have already grown rigid to the point of accepting its current shape as the permanent state.

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

A shade blanketed the premises as the clouds moved to block the sun, as if something wanted to tell them they are unwelcome here.

"This is not how I imagined an abandoned hospital."

"How *did* you imagine it?"

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

"A 'curse', apparently."

"You know that curses don't exist, right?"

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

"What really happened then?"

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

"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."

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

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

"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."

"A Vanguard witch? That's unlikely."

As Aeri involuntary tried to draw a connection between this place and her coven, her mind conjured the events of the previous day.

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

"What true?"

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

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

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

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

"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 sighed.

"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."

"What do we do if we encounter them?"

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

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

"A signal…"

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

"There are two. Lucky us."

She gave each to Orena and Lelya.

"What about you?"

"This thing is loud."

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

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

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

Making her way to the entrance, Aeri cast a glance to both sides, mentally mapping the complex as well as her route around it. She stretched a hand towards a handle one step before reaching the doors, but as she turned to look in front of her, she noticed a rusty chain wrapped around the handles with a lock connecting its ends.

A few hits on the lock with her weapon's buttstock proved that whoever had chosen the lock had not spared a few extra coins.

In the search for an alternative entrance, she took a jog to the right. After a turn, her eyes slid across the glass surface of windows until they reached a rectangular opening.

A careful hit removed a sharp spike in her way. Glass fell and cracked on the floor with another crack following when Aeri landed inside.

The further she distanced from the point of entry, the cleaner the interior got. Only layers of dust spoke of the hospital's abandonment, with the clearer evidence found above, where sharp ceiling corners were concealed behind layers of webs.

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

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

Travelling between residential buildings did not make for an enjoyable experience either as there appeared to be no caretakers left amongst the few remaining inhabitants.

As the time allocated for search neared the end, Orena and Lelya were forced to return to the hospital hearing a thunderclap echoing from inside its walls. Worried due to the absence of any subsequent noise, they hastened their pace.

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

"Aeri!"

"Aeri!"

A beacon taking the shape of a lightning bold shooting upwards took them to the opposite side of the building, where Aeri stood calm and unscratched.

"What happened? Did you encounter them?"

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

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

"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?"

"I didn't find anything."

"Me neither."

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

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

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

"What about there?"

Orena's finger directed the girls' gazes to the opposite side of the street, where amongst the same vacant buildings one stood 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.

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

Instead of finishing the thought, Aeri began her way towards the next destination.

Behind the façade of the street, that is the front row of buildings, was hiding an abandoned construction site. Unlike the surrounding houses, this one was 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 were making their way to a door frame, Aeri's eyes traced the dust carried by wind through the ground. She inspected the short path ahead until her eyes met a wall. It made her frown.

"What is it?"

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

"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."

"Sorry, I'll go ahead."

Aeri hastened her pace, disappearing into a turn behind the door frame.

"Me too."

After Orena followed the suit, Lelya entered the building. She looked at the two in a corridor several metres away and gave them a nod. All three then proceeded with the search at the regular pace.

Soon they arrived 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.

Less than a quarter of the way into the hall, a figure appeared in a doorway on the opposite side. Her black hair transitioning into dark-ruby at the tips

contrasted against the grey of the cloak that ended at her knees. Her face was partly obscured by the shadow cast by a hood.

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

"Um… hi."

"Hello."

Both the girl and Aeri kept a calm, unbothered look. The girl's eyes briefly inspected Aeri's blue coat and then fell onto her weapon, whilst Aeri's eyes did the same: first taking a note of the girl's legs, where a blue golden-edged skirt split into two vertical parts beneath the cloak, and then a long wooden pole that hung loosely in her left hand.

When their eyes met again, they signalled aggression.

The girl reached for her left shoulder, yanking the cloak and throwing it away. With a step forwards, she charged her body, making a spin that ended with both of her arms on the pole. A following motion made the pole split the air in a swift horizontal swing.

As if it was an invisible extension of the pole, a narrow blast wave burst outwards, widening the further it went. Her light-grey eyes, now illuminated by the bouncing light of the room, became deep blue with two light-blue spirals slowly rotating around the pupils, dissipating outwards like a tail of a comet.

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

Whilst Aeri was building a charge, Orena retaliated the next second. Wind currents concentrated in her palm, forming a swirling spindle-shaped wind dagger, which she hurled towards the opponent, taking the aim with her ears before her eyes locked onto the girl closing in in an arching trajectory.

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

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

"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 communicated with the girl, her left hand relayed a message to Lelya: she swiftly showed Lelya her palm, brought it down vertically, then raised it with the palm facing herself, and ended the message with the middle finger wrapped around the index one.

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

"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 struggled to continue the message.

"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 nodded to Aeri and started silently moving away, dashing as soon as she reached the exit.

Waiting for a trigger to set her in motion, Aeri released a charge as soon as she heard the girl's feet touch the ground, but the moment her finger relaxed, the girl's next step took her upwards.

With a springing motion she not only shot herself above her head, but also made a front flip and spun. After missing its target, lightning deviated, hitting a column further behind her.

The spinning motion created another blast wave. Aeri hid. The shock was absorbed by a column, but Aeri failed to hide completely, with her shoulder taking a hit. Even then it made her body turn halfway as it followed the shoulder.

The girl landed and took cover again.

*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 crackling electricity resonated in the air.

*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.*

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

*I need to act now.*

*I need to act now.*

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

Aeri made a step to attack, but the moment she exposed herself, she saw the girl already in the open making a swing. She took cover and prepared to attack in the short window before the next blast came her way, but it took just a second. Then the next blast came, and another one, again and again, giving Aeri no safe opportunity. The girl made a spin with each step as she closed the distance.

Despite not hitting her physically, each strike did take a toll on Aeri's nerves, each stacking on top of the previous one. After another wave broke against stone surface, Aeri dropped to the ground. The violent current flew above her as she released a charge, only for it to miss the mark as the girl leapt upwards again.

Aeri's disappointment turned a regret the next moment in the anticipation of a direct hit when the girl swung the pole forward along the front flip.

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

The first thing she saw after recovering was Orena extending her palm towards her, but her face got obstructed by the opponent appearing a few seconds after.

Orena swiftly relocated around a pillar, evading a hit.

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

The girl blindly shafted her pole back horizontally. Aeri did not even see the projection of the aerial force, but she felt it as it tore through her right sleeve. Missing the mark just by a few centimetres, the strike bit into the wall behind Aeri, forming a small crater.

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

After the cycle of strikes and evasions repeated two more times, Aeri switched her focus from the girl to Orena. As soon as a swirling dagger was hurled in the opponent's direction, she dropped a metal cylinder at her position and headed to the next cover.

Wary of a suspicious object in her way, the girl jumped away the moment it lit up with electric arcs.

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

A hurled wind dagger from her right made her react. Feeling the pressure, she jumped to evade it, transitioning defence into offense as she sent a vertical wave in Orena's direction. Before the gravity initiated her descent, three objects bounced across the ground and stopped around her.

*Shite!*

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

*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 continued the spin, sending another wave to her right without even seeing the other opponent. Orena took a hit, which threw her into a narrow corridor behind where she hit a wall.

Another device landed under her feet.

A jump to the side and a retaliatory wave. One more was thrown towards her. This time, she evaded with a jump that brought 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, making upwards the only possible escape vector.

The ground beneath her lit up as she leapt upwards. Instead of retaliating immediately, she held one end of the pole directed slightly downwards.

"…furuso tonova!"

A chilly sensation ran across the girl's skin.

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

As she landed, instead of sure footing her feet found a slippery surface. She almost found her balance when Orena appeared. The drilling force of a wind dagger propelled the girl through the floor as she used her pole to block it.

She fell and tumbled after her feet reached the edge of the ice.

It took her two seconds to get on her feet, another one was needed to orient herself and prepare for Aeri's attack, though with a lit-up barrel already pointed at her, she could only brace herself for an imminent impact.

Lightning finally found its target. Her body convulsed and dropped to the ground.

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

"Stay on alert. Her friend—"

…approached the site like a storm, her loud steps warning the girls just in time as they took cover from an invisible wall that destroyed the ice surface and swept it away.

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

"Where's Ma'aya?"

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

"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 attempted to peep at Rada, but could only catch her with her peripheral sight before another wave forced her back.

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

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

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

Aeri probed the ground with a cylinder thrown at Rada, but it was immediately bounced back and burst in lightning in a far corner.

She then built a charge and attempted to strike Rada, making a blind shot with just her weapon sticking, but the second she released the trigger, another wave hit Arc Emitter, making lightning miss its mark. Her muscles and tendons underwent heavy stress as they tried to keep her joints in place, barely managing to keep the grip on the weapon.

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

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

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

"What about that invocation you used to defend against me?"

Both made a break to another pillar to compensate for Rada steadily shortening the distance between them.

"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."

"Can you use this to withstand the blow?"

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

"A glass pane?"

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

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

"Right. Let's try something different then."

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

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

Aeri immediately resumed her run, managing to take a few strides before another strike halted her, this time with a subsequent blow following on a short notice. With nothing to soften it, Aeri was blown away.

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

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

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

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

After Orena joined Aeri, they took a look at the girl who looked malnourished with her sunken cheeks.

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

Orena responded with a nod, and the two ventured deeper into the building.

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The Magister's eyes were slowly opening, blinking just as slowly in-between, letting more light through each time he lifted his eyelids.

As he came to his senses, the senses struck back: around his stomach and inside his skull. The sensation of pain helped him fully awaken.

He tried 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 inspected his environment.

A few layers of torn rags separated him from the damp floor. His eyes slid forwards across the cold stone surface dimly illuminated by a single oil lamp

hung on a wall. The central piece of the room was a cooking tripod constructed of what looked like metal construction rods, a bucket being a substitute for a cauldron. Around it similar rags made up three beds with plates, cups, and spoons beside them. A box in a corner must have been a food storage judging by a few potatoes peeping from it.

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

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

"Um, hi."

"Eek!"

The girl froze, 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 pushed himself from the floor into a sitting position.

"So… I assume you are my captor."

The lack of reaction forced 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 grabbed his attention. As he focused there, he noticed that her left hand was not clenched but was fondling a gold ring on a silver chain around her neck.

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

"Eek! H— how d-did you… know?"

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

Hesitantly, she started taking steps towards him, until the distance allowed her to distinguish the objects whilst still leaving a sizeable space between them.

"T— two?"

"They belonged to my parents."

"H— how?"

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

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

"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 attempted to shape her mouth into a smile, but her eyes focusing on his tied hands instead forced terror to manifest on her face as she put more distance between them.

"Eek!"

"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 shook her head subtly.

"Then why?"

"O— our… friend—"

Before she could continue, the door was kicked open, Aeri bursting in with Orena.

"Magister!"

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

Orena followed the suit, wind gathering in the palm of her hand as her eyes darkened.

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

"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 made a step sideward to take different attack angles on their target.

Before they could make more, the girl closed her eyes and collapsed.

"Or… not?"

As the two started moving towards the Magister, Orena assumed a defensive stance, her palm facing Aeri, when she heard Aeri's weapon discharging, but failed to see anyone.

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I just discharged my contraption."

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

As the Magister was set free, Aeri started explaining the chain of events that led the two girls to him.

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

When Orena and Lelya returned, they were accompanied by a black-haired girl, who stood out in more ways than one. Instead of carrying anything in her hands,

her contraptions, shaped like elongated blocky animal heads, hovered beside her: a blue-and-black wolf and a silver-and-yellow bird of prey. Her uniform not only featured a unique design, having the frontal opening of her coat form a zig-zag line as the right and left parts overlapped, but was made of glossy grey fabric with emerald matte edging, which accentuated the silver shine of the base.

Behind them Ma′aya and Rada walked 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 had something that looked like tinfoil sheets folded into triangular shapes following her, the other held two contraptions shaped like swords.

The only common feature all three girls shared was a red armband around left sleeve.

The black-haired girl cast a glance at the unconscious body and casually walked to the girl on the ground, giving no mind to the Magister and Aeri, got down and slapped Yiya a few times with moderate force.

"Wake up."

Yiya opened her eyes and let out a terrified cry. She took a few moments looking around. An eye contact with Ma′aya and Rada made her calm down, but in a depressed manner of accepting her situation. She just obediently stood up and followed the girl.

"Wait, I want to talk to them."

"Eh? On what authority?"

"On a Magister′s authority?"

"Magister? Which academy?"

"*Your* academy."

"Really? Haven′t seen you before."

"He *is* a Magister."

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

"Do we really need to go through this?"

"Yes, we do."

The expressions of the two other girls that had come with her soured incrementally, whilst she appeared to be acting in full seriousness.

"If only I had my bag with me…"

"It's here, I have it."

Aeri hastily procured his bag from hers and handed it to him.

The Magister reached inside and showed a rectangular card to the girl, who, after inspecting it for a few seconds, looked at him with clueless green eyes.

"I can't read."

Whilst the girl in the black managed to restrain herself, the blue-haired girl placed her palm over her eyes as the tinfoil objects beside her dropped to the ground.

"Nara, stop it already. This is getting embarrassing."

As Nara threw her head up, a stream of guttural sounds erupted from her mouth, filling the room as she screamed for a few seconds, making not only her comrades but everyone in the room feel uncomfortable.

"FIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIINE!"

"Right… So, what was it about your friend?"

"She—"

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

Yiya looked at her friend, then back at the Magister. She closed her eyes and clenches her fists, producing a squeak that felt like a scream that took an enormous amount of effort.

"No!"

“Yiya…”

Rada reacted as if she witnessed something that defied her beliefs.

“Heh. Even if Yiya objects.”

“Not you too.”

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

Rada snorted in response and looked at Yiya.

“So what did you tell him?”

Yiya just shook her head.

“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.”

“Vira? Vira Sagaydachi?”

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

“They?”

“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.”

“What do you mean it didn't make sense?”

“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.”

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

“It's under my bed.”

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

The Magister approached the ‘bed’ and lifted a few corners until he found the letter. The longer he read it, the more concerned he became.

*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 switched the sheets. The message was imprinted with the letters of a typewriter, making identifying the author impossible. The straightforward manner of the language used did not give any clues either. Apart from limiting the circle of suspects, the only other use for these sheets was serving as criminal evidence.

“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.”

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

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

“So what really happened?”

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

“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.”

“Who is Magister Tepan?”

“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.”

"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."

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

"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."

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

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

Nara opened her mouth, her lungs expanding as she sucked in the air as if she were to expunge it in a powerful invocation, but it got stuck in her throat as she glanced at the sunken cheeks of the malnourished girls.

"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 skimmed over the room.

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

"I think we can live with that."

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

"Good idea."

****

As a tram stopped, Aeri bid her friends farewell as the rest disembarked and took the road to the academy's grounds.

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

"You can go. I'll escort them."

"You sure?"

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

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

"If you say so. See you."

"Good bye."

The Magister broke from the group as they crossed the cantina's doorstep and talked to a woman by the food shelves. Her eyes widened in shock and she covered her mouth as the Magister pointed to the three hungry girls. She didn't respond and just nodded, after which the Magister returned to the group.

"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."

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

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

"I see. See you tomorrow, probably."

"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."

"Sure. You don't need to ask."

"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."

"We… could use some compound."

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

"Shite…"

"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."

"Right. See you tomorrow."

"You go ahead. I'll be waiting here."

Nara walked to a wall next to the doors and leaned on it with her arms folded as the four girls came to the food shelves.

Aeri went first, taking a tray and placing a bowl onto it. Steam rose from a metal container as Aeri opened a lid on it, carrying the aroma of stewed potatoes with vegetables and meat into the air. She poured a few scoops into the bowl, took a few slices of bread and a cup of warm uzwar, and then moved to a desk where the cantina worker gave her a plate with caramelized onions.

After observing Aeri with the eyes that radiated excitement for food, the girls took their trays and selectively opened containers, each filling one bowl.

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

"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 took a few more bowls and filled them, having a full meal with both solid and liquid dishes and salads. Adding drinks and a few slices of bread, they then joined Aeri who was already seated at the nearest table.

Aeri spread the onions on a slice of bread and was about to take a bite when she lifted her eyes to look at the girls on the opposite side. Slowly, they took spoons and brought them to their mouths. Their eyes sparkled as soon as the food touched their taste buds. They then started to devour the dishes with no hesitation, barely chewing the food before sending it down their throats.

As Aeri observed them, she moved the bread in her hand away from her mouth.

For a moment, Rada took her eyes away from the meal and noticed Aeri's blank stare, which interrupted her consumption of food, and instead took a napkin to wipe traces of it from around her mouth.

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

The other two girls followed the suit as they looked at 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."

"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."

"I see."

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

"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 lifted a spoon and brought it to her mouth, but something stopped her. Noticing her eyes looking away, Aeri looked around and saw a few students looking at them.

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

The onlookers discontinued the observation and returned to their meals.

"Glad you asked, cause I do have a problem."

"Please do tell me what that problem is."

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

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

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

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

"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."

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

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

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

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

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

"Consider yourself lucky."

"Yeah, tuck your—"

Before she could finish throwing her remark at the girl, who was walking away, a fist landed on her head.

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

"Sorry, we have just started when—"

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

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

"Yeah. Thanks. See you."

"Bye."

Instead of saying something, Yiya just nodded and the three were escorted away as Aeri returned to her meal.