

Nomad Void

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Sawellwell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

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Consequences

With the Magister's eyes running through the lines of a document before him, his free hand crawls across the desk's surface in a blind search of a cup. Having found it, his hand freezes halfway to his mouth. The cup is already cold. Were he a witch, he could probably just heat it up in his hand. The thought makes him curious.

THE MAGISTER

Hane.

HANE

Yes?

She answers without looking at him, busy writing something in a journal that lies on her desk.

THE MAGISTER

Since you were a student here at the academy, that means you can utilise witchcraft?

HANE

No, I cannot.

THE MAGISTER

Oh, you must have dropped out early.

HANE

No, it's just... They wouldn't let drop-outs utilise their knowledge of witchcraft to perform invocations, so they just seal... It requires too much explaining about witchcraft.

THE MAGISTER

They sealed your grimoire, I get it.

HANE

Yes. Did you talk some more to that girl after the session? I suggest you refrain from discussing witchcraft with her. That 'need-to-know' rule actually applies

to coven witches, not students, so it might get her in trouble if she is not careful.

THE MAGISTER

Actually, it was a coven witch who told me that.

The room becomes silent as the pen in her hand stops scratching paper.

HANE

A coven witch?

THE MAGISTER

Yes, I met this strange woman the other day, who appeared to be a member of a coven, though from what I can conclude she must be from the Sorceress League.

HANE

You casually walked into a coven witch who happened to be in the mood to discuss witchcraft with you?

THE MAGISTER

Actually, it was she who found me, because she wanted me to resign.

HANE

Oh, I see. It was to be expected after your performance at the hearing. So, when are you leaving?

Somewhat relieved, Hane resumes her writing activity, until she hears another reply.

THE MAGISTER

I am not leaving.

HANE

Come again?

THE MAGISTER

I am not leaving.

HANE

I heard you the first time. *How* are you not leaving?

THE MAGISTER

Obviously because I refused to resign.

HANE

You what?!

Hane immediately materialises next to the Magister, towering over him, as he looks back at her with a bit startled expression.

HANE

Do you have the slightest appreciation of life? Your life means nothing to them. Refusing a coven's demand is asking for a death sentence. And... wait, how are you still sitting here after that?

THE MAGISTER

I am not sure what happened, to be honest. When I gave her a response, her attitude somehow changed. And then she approached me and suddenly collapsed. I didn't know what to do since there was no one around, so I tried a resuscitation method I've read about in a newspaper and... it worked. I then went to get help, but when I returned she had already been gone.

HANE

What? Is this supposed to be a joke? This is—

Her thought instead finishes with a sigh filled with utmost disapproval.

THE MAGISTER

But I wasn't—

As he watches her walk back to her desk, it crosses his mind that perhaps it is better to keep her out of it.

Having forgotten how his question came in the first place, he reflexively reaches for the cup on the desk. As cold sensation spreads through his palm, he gets up and walks to the boiler.

After lifting the curtain, his sequence of motions is interrupted when his eye catches a familiar light-blue uniform in the outside square. Leaning against a pillar, one leg in front of the other, Aeri stands in the middle of a pathway connecting the main academy building and gates. At first glance it looks like she is immersed in her thoughts, but her body language tells a different story: with her arms folded, her fingers are tapping on her left arm; her head is fixed straight, but her eyes are jumping from one student passing her to another.

THE MAGISTER

I'll be back in a minute.

Aeri appears to be too focused looking for something, so focused she does not pay attention to him even as he walks up to her.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri.

AERI

Wha— oh, Magister.

THE MAGISTER

You left abruptly earlier. Is everything all right?

AERI

Y-yes. As I said, there is something I need to take care of.

THE MAGISTER

Are you sure? I don't want to be obnoxious, but you seemed rather upset.

AERI

Oh, that? Right. I just realised something. It's not something... it's just something personal.

Aeri's eyes lock on a group of students in grey uniforms that walk in the background behind the Magister. Just like Aeri, whose grey patch has a depiction of a golden gear pierced by an eight-point star with two slanted lines connecting one ray with the next, they have insignia at the base of right sleeve: square black patch with a white outline of an hourglass, the top part of which is shaped as

flame tongues and the bottom transitions into an array of dots as if crumbling. Below is a hexagonal patch that—unlike Aeri’s six-point star, which is missing two petals shaped like incomplete rhombuses—is filled with six hollow triangles.

He tries to follow her gaze in the search of whatever that has made her look angry, but he fails to note anything out of ordinary.

AERI

Very personal... Sorry, I must go.

She then adjusts her contraption belt and disappears, blending into the flow of the crowd of students.

As another day of studies comes to an end, there is but one student who stands outside. Same place, same pose as it was yesterday, Aeri has her eyes on the top of the academy building. With slanted white walls sharply receding with each of eight storeys, the building resembles a ziggurat, where full-height windows on odd-numbered storeys only cement the impression.

The hall bells ring. Her eyes drop and fix on the academy entrance as students begin emerging from it. She intently stares into the depth of a hall, barely blinking, until a group of students in grey make an appearance. In addition to the three Aeri has already seen, there is one more: timid looking, wearing a skirt over white tights, a lock of her ash ruby hair appears to be purposely affixed with two hairclips in a curtain-like manner to cover one eye, leaving only the left amber eye visible. Unlike the last time she saw them, there is little more than a tint of disdain on her face.

Before they step outside, Aeri straightens and walks through the front gate.

The timid looking girl makes a few hastened steps, levelling with the purple-eyed girl in the front.

TIMID GIRL

Kiara.

KIARA

Yes?

TIMID GIRL

I found—

She cautiously looks around and brings her voice down a little.

TIMID GIRL

I looked into it. From what I managed to gather, a Magister stepped in and the hearing was postponed.

KIARA

A Magister... So they decided to keep it under wraps. The covens couldn't have changed their assessment of her.

TIMID GIRL

It wasn't a Magister from the Sorceress Academy. He is from our academy. And people even talk about how he got into a fight with another Magister, defending that girl.

KIARA

That doesn't make sense. Why would a Magister defend a student of another academy, not to mention get in a fight with another Magister. Could this intervention be the doing of another coven? But if what we know is true, she should be considered a threat to all covens. Yet he couldn't have acted without a coven's approval, our coven's approval. Being a student of the Sorceress Academy, she is of no value to the Vanguard coven, unless they are scheming something with her in mind.

She becomes silent, yet her face says her mind is loud.

As the group navigate through the streets of the city, the environment becomes progressively quieter and the air more breathable as the number of people around them gets fewer and fewer. Eventually they make a turn and walk down an empty pathway where only the rustling of leaves in the grove on both sides fills the silence.

The braided light-haired girl's gaze briefly sways to the left, following a line of clean trimmed bushes. Her face expresses a subtle realisation.

EUNAH

Oh, right, I almost forgot I'm running low on fertilizers. I need to visit a shop before they close. See you tomorrow.

She waives at her friends and hastens her steps.

KIARA

Take ca—

Eunah stops, having barely ran a few metres, distracted by a sharp mechanical sound. The source of the sound reveals itself the next moment as four metal cylindrical objects shoot up from the ground around her. In a second, electric arcs start running across their surface before they expand, saturating the air around with blinding lightning discharges. They fall to the ground along with Eunah.

TIMID GIRL

Ah! Ambush!

The timid girl pulls up her contraption, which looks like a full-metal crossbow with a short scope, and runs through the bushes.

KIARA

Nali, no!

Before she could listen to her friend's warning call, she has already jumped into the thick of the growth, realising her error when she trips over wires hidden inside. Electric currents paralyse her as they flow through her body. She then falls to the ground with a pain-filled whimper as residual energy causes her fingers to erratically move.

KIARA

“Multiple electric contraptions. This must be her, but why would she— No, the answer is obvious: she has found out. The only question is how.”

Meanwhile the girl with short colourful hair nervously casts glances all around them until stopping in the direction where the pathway makes a turn behind them.

SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

Let's retreat. There shouldn't be any traps where we have come from.

She then accelerates to trace her path back but is momentarily stopped with Kiara's hand holding her wrist.

KIARA

No, she could be—

The sound of an electric charge building somewhere within the grove draws her attention. She jumps away, releasing the grip on the hand of her friend, just a fraction of second before the latter gets hit by a lightning discharge. She staggers a few steps backwards into the bushes, getting zapped and knocked out flat by another set of wires concealed therein.

KIARA

“The first trap should have taken out all four of us under the ideal conditions. Nali and Yeona fell victims to contingency. And that attack just now: there was no trigger and the angle it came from was off. That is where she is. The longer I stay here, the more I am at a disadvantage.”

Her hand reaches behind her waist, grabbing a white-silver staff-like contraption that hangs on her back. With a mechanical clank it detaches from the belt tossed diagonally around her torso. As she brings the staff to the front with a spin, her left hand goes to the top into a hollowed out space inside a flat box-like attachment with slanted edges that looks like inverted butterfly wings.

Her thumb pushes a switch in the clockwise direction around the staff's axis, which makes four metal rods at the top sink into the main body with two flat arched plates sliding forwards to take their place, after which her index finger pushes a trigger, forcing a stream of fire to appear as she holds the contraption upright. A downwards swing sends a thin vertical flame wave rolling towards the direction the lightning came from, cutting through bushes in front like a blade

and leaving behind only scorched ground. Without the shortest delay, she follows the smouldering path.

Once she enters the grove, her eyes start jumping from one tree to another in the search of the enemy, her stance tense. Her body receives a signal to jump behind a tree as she catches the same crackling sound. A few seconds after, lightning hits the tree from the opposite side.

KIARA

I know why you are doing this. Is there any chance we can talk this out?

AERI

Oh, don't worry about that.

As she answers, her left hand makes a swift move detaching two of three metal cylinders at the back of her weapon and placing them into her bag. With the same swiftness, she takes out two other and inserts them into the circular indentations.

AERI

We will have plenty of time to talk once I finish beating your face into the ground!

Her hand dives again into the bag, this time emerging with her palm wrapped around a spherical metal contraption.

KIARA

Be it your way then.

Kiara takes a blue pill from her breast pocket and puts it into her mouth just a second before a sphere appears several metres above her, drawing attention with a mechanical clank. It breaks apart, releasing volumes of water that come down raining on her. She has barely enough time to react: switching her contraption into the previous state, she draws an arc with it over her head in a swing. The contraption releases a stream of expanding fire, which evaporates water with a hiss, creating a cloud of steam. A discharge follows, hitting the tree behind her again.

After the plates on her weapon take the place of the rods, she assumes a stance, ready to react to the enemy's move. Another sphere appears, this time bouncing over the ground. Being prepared, she takes a big step with her right foot, stepping out of cover and facing Aeri's direction as her hands make an upwards swing with the staff, hitting the sphere and sending a cutting flame wave behind it. The sphere explodes in another big water blast as the flame wave splits the released liquid in two.

Standing in the open a dozen metres away with her finger ready to fire, Aeri jumps and rolls to her left seeing the fire coming her way. Her finger slips as she falls, releasing an electric discharge, which hits a random obstacle in its path. She immediately takes cover behind another tree as she gets to her feet, while her enemy takes this opportunity to change her position. The fires have burnt off an edge of her coat: were Aeri's reaction a little bit slower, she would have taken a hit that instead went to a tree that instantly was set on fire.

Holding down the trigger as another charge builds, Aeri peeps from behind a trunk, locating her target, whose grey coat can no longer be seen sticking where she was a few seconds ago. The search does not take much time when another wave comes her way. She hides again, though the flame goes by her position more than a metre away, setting on fire a few other trees.

AERI

“Did she miss on purpose? She might be trying to have me drop my guard down.”

Another sphere in her hand, she makes a throw and waits for the opponent's reaction. After another scorching wave passes by, accompanied by the sound of water evaporating, Aeri dashes out of cover. She moves in an arc around the cloud while it blocks the line of sight of her enemy.

There are just two steps between her and the spot she runs for, but her movement gets interrupted by a black metal orb that lands there. With less than a second of interval, another one lands behind her but much farther away. With them seemingly thrown in blind, Aeri finds a space to jump away while firing in the opponent's direction at the same time. Just as her feet touch the ground, the

contraptions explode, engulfing large area in clouds of fire. The flames reach Aeri, yet the force of the impact is barely strong enough to leave a slight burn. The combustion sets ablaze a dozen more trees, with the whole surrounding now being lit.

AERI

“These contraptions aren’t explosive. Does this mad bitch want to burn the entire grove?”

Aeri coughs inhaling the air where the smoke starts replacing the oxygen devoured by flames. Not only that: with the surroundings burning, her cover options have shrunk. The fires, the smoke, and the fog though prevent both from seeing each other for now. Using this to her advantage, she sporadically throws three more contraptions, which saturate the ground around with water.

The fog slowly lets some light through, while she replaces three empty charges. After the last core is fixed in place with a click, she takes a contraption shaped like a metal cylinder, identical to those that were used to take out Eunah.

Her eyes squinted, she tries to catch an outline of the enemy, but the enemy reveals herself first when an orange glow pierces the thick of the fog. In that moment, she throws the contraption she holds to the side a few metres away, and right after that squeezes the trigger.

Electric arcs start jumping around the metal case of the cylinder, crackling louder than the charge building inside Arc Emitter. The glowing light moves half a metre up in response.

Aeri fires and hits, though there is no reaction from the opponent: no sound, the light did not even move. It takes her some time to assess what has happened, time that her opponent uses against her: when she hears a metal object land near her and turns to look at it, it explodes. This time there is even no fire, just a shock wave, which fills her ears with deafening ringing.

While Aeri is dazed, Kiara sprints towards her staff-like contraption, which is plunged into the ground. Its arched plates are now in a horizontal position, spinning around the centre, and at the top of four rods glows fire concentrated

into a ball. Chunks of soil erupt as she pulls the staff from the ground. Having served as a conductor for lightning, her contraption emanates heat, which she can feel through the softening lover rubber-wrapped grip.

The pull of the trigger makes the ball thrust with the speed of an arrow, leaving a tunnel behind as it tears through the white veil. When Aeri recovers, there is no time to evade. She shields with her weapon, preventing the projectile from reaching her face. The unleashed flames are much more intense compared to the devices that went off on the ground, and the force the explosion produces throws her a few metres back.

Before hitting the ground, she squeezes the trigger and releases a charge in the opponent's direction as soon as her feet give her uneven balance. She does not land a hit, but it makes her opponent take cover again, which gives Aeri enough time to jump behind a rock. Taking deep breaths as she tries to pump the oxygen into her lungs from this suffocating environment, it takes her some time before she can gather her thoughts.

AERI

“She is somehow one step ahead of me every time. She stays out of puddles, and even if I manage to catch her in one, the large area covered by water will weaken the charge. But...”

Feeling the moist soil through the skin of her palm, she lifts her hand off the ground and looks at the wet brown chunks covering it.

AERI

“This might work.”

She takes a cylinder and throws it from behind the cover, this time to where the opponent fired at her, and squeezes the trigger again. In response another explosion hits the rock from the opposite side.

AERI

Seruze voporu minie horodo zamisut tepora.

As her ears discern feet touching the ground, she jumps from the cover and moves, following her opponent in a parallel path.

After Kiara covers behind another tree trunk, an exchange follows: Aeri throws another cylinder and at the same time has a black orb flying her way. She moves away, covering one ear with her left hand, the right hand holding tight grip on her weapon.

AERI

Myotiro sutane zovia zokomu mizuho...

As if anticipating Aeri's next move, Kiara hides behind the next tree for only a second and swiftly runs further even before the electric contraption lands near her, and the route that she takes seems to be chosen with caution, putting one trunk after another between her and Aeri. Both contraptions go off on the ground at the same time: electric arcs cannot catch Kiara, who is already past their range, and while Aeri distances herself from the orb, the air burst it produces makes one of her ears ringing again, but not enough to disorient her.

AERI

...vonuto risinim tazovi nisinim suvitom.

Aeri focuses on the spot to the right of the tree her opponent took cover behind, but Kiara appears on the opposite side, sending another flame wave in her direction. Aeri jumps to the side and fires, but the time it took for her to aim and evade prevents her from hitting the target.

AERI

Neporu sunei vogonu zupinit vesuruh...

Kiara steps from behind a tree, throwing an orb at Aeri directly and aiming her staff as a blazing ball starts forming at the end of the rods. Surprise paints her face when instead of evading or hiding Aeri takes Arc Emitter and uses it as a bat to send the orb flying back. Knowing what's coming, Kiara starts running away to the side, though with the speed of its flight, a blast occurs a dozen meters further from her.

AERI

Tiruki nosupa rahune furosu tonova!

As the last word resonates in the air, a frost wave covers the ground, spreading in all directions from Aeri in less than a second. The moist ground and all the puddles within a dozen metres of her turn hard.

Before reaching a cover, Kiara almost trips over as one of her feet gets glued to the ground with ice. She catches her balance with her other foot that was above the wet surface when the wave hit.

AERI

“Got you.”

Seeing the hollow cage-barrel lighting up with bouncing lightning within it, she understands there are only few options and even less time. The ice cracks as the staff's pointy end is driven into the ground. Lightning strikes just as her hands let go of her weapon. Though not hit directly, the lightning still jumps from the staff onto her and paralyzes her for a few seconds.

Through a tight grip she yanks the staff from the ground, and in response Aeri pushes the trigger, expecting to finish Kiara before she fires her way. To Aeri's misfortune, her contraption stays silent, but misfortune hits Kiara as well when the heat of the metal shaft forces her to let go of the lower part of her weapon, where the rubber has melted away, tilting her aim and making the blazing ball fly a metre above the intended mark.

Neither of them waste any time: Aeri ejects one empty cylinder and reaches to take a replacement, while Kiara takes a black orb from her pouch and throws it between her and Aeri. The contraption combusts, veiling her with a cloud of steam.

The sound of footsteps accelerating acts as a signal, sending Aeri into a chase as her hands try to complete the reloading process with inept movements. She channels her strength into the muscles feeling how oxygen-devoid air has been making her slower.

Having torn through the cloud, she catches the silhouette of the enemy trying to distance away. Finally managing to reload the weapon with only one charge, she takes her aim, but the target vanishes behind a fog cloud after another combustion.

Just a moment before Aeri breaks through the visual obstacle, yet another contraption explodes, this time in the air. With her vision obstructed, she can barely see it shooting down a short burst of fire in a conical shape directed downwards.

The target appears in her sight once again, but when Aeri prepares to aim, a pattern appears on the ground just as her foot lands within it. As if a wave set in motion by her touching the ground, glowing lines spread from under her sole, drawing a circle crossed by a square, with various shapes and symbols inside.

AERI

“A qantigram? When did she—”

Her reflexes take control of her body as she makes two jumps back. Before she can distance herself any further, an unseen force starts pulling her into the pattern. Her feet scoop the ground as she tries to resist it.

While the force isn't that strong to pull her inside, it is enough to affect the surroundings: it sucks in the air, bending tree branches in its direction as the currents of air douse the flames. The fog and the smoke form a steadily growing mass of black water at the qantigram's centre. When the bubble reaches about a metre and a half in diameter, the force vector reverses, making it burst in a large splash, soaking Aeri and pushing her back.

Aeri lands on her rear and attempts to stand up when another blazing ball comes her way. Having no time to lift Arc Emitter, she shields with her arm. Somehow, the explosive force is weaker than the last time it hit her, but it is enough to push her a few more metres back.

She tumbles and falls flat on her back in a large puddle, heavily breathing, the upper left part of her coat burnt away. While she gathers her strength, the blurry vision of hers renders a grey-white spot, which is gradually taking the shape of

the enemy, calmly closing the distance. On her way to Aeri, she bends and picks a black orb, etched with two silver circles on top and an array of slits at the bottom, which floats in the water that fills a large indent in the ground formed in the wake of the burst. After she places it in one of her pouches, she takes a pill from her mouth and puts it back into the pocket.

She finally stops in front of Aeri, who responds by picking her weapon and pointing it at her, but Kiara doesn't react, holding her staff-like contraption upwards on the ground near her. Aeri can barely hold her aim steady with trembling hands, her lungs failing to support them with oxygen. However, the tremor is not only physical, but mental as well: she knows that being all soaked, the moment she squeezes the trigger, it will electrocute her. And in her state, she will knock herself out. The indifferent look in the purple eyes directed at her tells her that her opponent knows that as well.

KIARA

I assume you are ready to talk now.

AERI

Tch!

KIARA

Why did you attack us?

AERI

Don't play dumb on me! You know full well why. You've said it yourself.

KIARA

Indeed, I did. But I need to confirm my assumption.

AERI

I know that you are behind the clash between Harin and Orena.

KIARA

And you know that *how*?

AERI

I've talked to Orena. I know everything: how you let her eavesdrop on the discussion about a 'heritage work', how you hid a contraption in that abandoned mansion, how you rigged Harin's machina and pointed her to Orena. I know every little detail of your nasty scheme.

If the previous answer did not trigger any change in her facial expression, hearing this makes her eyes widen.

KIARA

"How could she have figured this out just from a conversation with that girl? The level of deduction required to do this should be above her abilities. Has my assessment of her been incorrect? Have I missed something?"

AERI

It's on your face.

KIARA

You are correct. There is no denying it now.

AERI

Why, you bitch? What did she do to you?!

KIARA

You know the answer. It is at the core of our academy. She is simply a competition.

AERI

A competition? What in the world are you even talking about?

KIARA

She has been working on a contraption that with a high degree of probability would bring her to a breakthrough that I made. I couldn't let that happen. Though her ending up in recovery was not my intention: I simply wanted her expelled.

AERI

A contraption, breakthrough? What is this nonsense? Even if it were true, how can she pose any threat to you? We are two years apart. Even if it is somehow a part of your graduation plan, that wouldn't make any difference. If anything, that would force her to work on something else.

KIARA

Graduation? You are naïve. Do you really believe that graduation is where it all ends? This is only the start. The real competition takes place within the coven, and any advantage you have over others increases your chances of staying afloat. You don't reveal everything you have to the coven. You will eventually learn this.

AERI

And Sumi and Minali? Are they also a competition? Am *I* a competition?

KIARA

It was never in my plans. Your friends— the incident that followed was the result of your own impulsiveness.

She makes a pause, waiting for any further inquiries.

KIARA

So, you have injured three of my friends. I assume we can call this even.

AERI

Even? My friends are unconscious in recovery. We are nowhere near being even.

KIARA

Then I will have to put you in recovery as well.

Her finger makes a slight move, and a blazing ball forms at the top of her weapon, which is then brought in a horizontal position. She doesn't fire, but waits for Aeri's response.

THE MAGISTER

That is enough!

The Magister appears half a dozen metres away, walking to them and placing himself between the two girls.

KIARA

Stranger, it isn't wise to intervene in a conflict between witches.

THE MAGISTER

Even less so to assault a Magister.

KIARA

A Magister? So you must be the one who... people have been talking about.

She brings her staff back into an upwards position and releases the blazing ball soaring into the sky.

KIARA

In this case, I will leave her to you. I hope you can talk sense into her. Otherwise... next time you might not be around.

Without waiting for him to give a reply, she starts walking away.

THE MAGISTER

Looks like she won't be the only one I'll have to have a talk with.

As if a lasso thrown around her neck, these words stop Kiara in her steps. She turns to look in his eyes.

KIARA

Magister, don't waste your time. I assume you have caught our conversation, so you must be thinking that I am a misguided girl, but you can't be farther from truth. I am nothing like this hot-tempered girl. My actions have been calculated and done in cold blood. Anything you have to say to me I already have an answer to. I am aware of the amorality of my actions towards her friend, but I simply follow the rules of the coven, and the coven follows the rules of nature. I can only wish you luck trying to change any of those. Now, if you will excuse me, I need to tend to my friends.

She then continues her way, leaving the Magister there paralysed with confusion, before Aeri gets up and looks at him.

AERI

Hey, what's with that face?

THE MAGISTER

Oh, sorry, I just— The girls! Curses, I got distracted after I saw them.

He takes a flare gun from his bag, but Aeri grabs his hand as he is about to point it at the sky.

AERI

Cool down. They will be fine.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri! Even if that girl harmed your friends—

AERI

I only shattered their Ward.

THE MAGISTER

Ward?

AERI

The Ethereal Ward.

Recalling the Magister knows little about the witchcraft, her tone becomes calmer.

AERI

It's an invocation that protects witches from external damage and accelerates recovery. It has its limits, but at least it keeps us alive under the conditions any other human would not survive. They will come to their senses in an hour or two.

THE MAGISTER

But then your friends...

AERI

What happened to them was not normal. Even by witch standards. That Sorceress witch exhausted us, and we can't— the rest is just details.

THE MAGISTER

If it is as you say, I'll trust you on this. Wait, you're injured, we should get you to—

AERI

Have you been listening to what I've just said? Apart from my uniform—

She becomes a little embarrassed noticing how the burnt out hole reveals a part of her chest and tries to pull the black edge to cover it.

AERI

...this is nothing. There won't be a trace of it tomorrow. So I'll get going. You take care.

She turns away, but there is load that keeps her in place. She ought to take it off first.

AERI

I should probably— no, I owe you one. Even two. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have sorted this out. So, thank you.

THE MAGISTER

Ah. Yes. You're welcome.

Only wind fills the void of silence, whistling through the branches of the charred grove as the Magister accompanies Aeri with his gaze into the distance before his legs start moving him home.

An unfamiliar place. Though 'place' can hardly describe the environment he finds himself in. The skies are both up and down, stretching into the non-existent horizon like an endless mirror. They are filled with clouds whose body is that of fire and blood. As if boiling, their magma-like substance forms

protrusions, detaching as they transform into chunks of concrete debris, crushing and turning to dust as they collide with their counterpart in the middle, and then sinking back in reverse.

But something is strange about him as well. As he looks down, he sees his arms bent, as if carrying something, or someone, but the space there is empty. A shadow blinks in and out of existence: like an afterimage of someone held in his embrace. He tightens his grip, compelled not to let go, even though there is no sensation.

Something draws his attention. He feels an unseen presence ahead and tries to focus his gaze. The more he looks there, the more it feels like his consciousness is being absorbed as darkness starts veiling the world around. Among the crackling of fire and crushing of concrete, the sound of mechanical ticking emerges, getting slower and heavier with each tick, along with echoes of distant voices.

SERENE FEMALE VOICE

We are not your enemies. None of us are.

BELLIGERENT FEMALE VOICE

They have stolen our future.

UNFRIENDLY FEMALE VOICE

There was someone who tried to make a change. Do you want to know what happened to *him*, what happened to *us*?

AGITATED FEMALE VOICE

Run! I will stop them. Just run.

When the last tick resounds, heavy as a lock behind a vault, everything dissolves into darkness.

An image begins to appear: a face of a girl with long straight white hair, eyes closed. Her skin is covered in bruises and cuts and her grey uniform is torn and riddled with holes.

She opens her eyes, raising her head, and looks all around, just to find herself tied to a stake in a large room. Despite her condition, she is surprisingly calm. She then turns her eyes directly ahead, where a few people are standing in shadows.

KIARA

Witches burning a witch... ironic. Looking a few centuries back, makes you think who is in the right.

WOMAN IN SHADOWS

There is no irony here: it has always been done by witches. But there wasn't a single witch burnt, only traitors. We will always prevail over traitors and we will punish them accordingly.

KIARA

Prevail? How exactly do you see yourself prevail? Maybe you think that you prevail by taking my life? You have already killed all of my friends, so taking my life hardly matters. Or do you think that you prevail in numbers, by reducing ours? Remind me, how many of you did Nali take down before you killed her? Four? Maybe five? You can't replenish your ranks now. Or do you naïvely believe that by killing me you will break the spirit of the others? My death will only fuel them.

In response a figure walks out of shadows and raises her hand, palm facing the ceiling. She bends her fingers, one by one, as fires emerge in the stack of firewood below the girl's feet. The flames shrivel for a second as if rivalled by her cold look as she briefly glances at them. Her purple eyes then lock back to the shadows.

KIARA

Mark my words: your time is borrowed. The fires that I have started will eventually consume you all.

The flames grow bigger and become more intense, erasing the witnessed scene, until the Magister wakes up in his room, feeling all tired.

THE MAGISTER

“It’s still dark. Have I even slept?”

His assumption is quickly discarded as the first ray of light hits his eye through a curtain.

THE MAGISTER

“It feels as if I have just fallen asleep a moment ago. How come this is morning already?”

But there is something else that disturbs him, something that he has not woken up with ever before: a lingering ominous feeling that he can neither explain, nor shake it off.