

Nomad Void

illustration Sasazuka Shinon



Sawellwell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

Cover art by Sasazuka Shinon

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Consequences

With the Magister's eyes running through the lines of a document before him, his free hand crawled across the desk's surface in a blind search of a cup. Having found it, his hand froze mid-air just as he was about to take a sip. The cup was already cold. Had he been a witch, he could probably just heat it up in his hand. The thought made him curious.

"Hane."

"Yes?"

Hane answered without looking at him, busy writing something in a journal laid open on her desk.

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

"No, I cannot."

"Oh, you must have dropped out early."

"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."

"They sealed your grimoire, I get it."

"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."

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

The pen in her hand stopped scratching paper, making the room silent before the next reply.

"A coven witch?"

“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.”

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

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

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

With her tone changed from concerned to relieved, Hane resumed her writing activity. That didn't last long as another reply disturbed her peace of mind.

“I am not leaving.”

“Come again?”

“I am not leaving.”

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

“Obviously because I refused to resign.”

“You what?”

Hane pushed herself out of her seat and momentarily appeared towering above him.

“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?”

“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.”

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

Her thought instead continued with a sigh filled with utmost disappointment.

“But I wasn’t—”

His eyes following Hane as she returned to her desk, it crossed his mind that perhaps it would be better to keep her out of it.

Having forgotten how his question had come in the first place, he reflexively reached for the cup on the desk. As cold sensation spread through his palm, he got up and walked to the boiler.

After a curtain had gone up, his sequence of motions was interrupted when a familiar light-blue uniform appeared in his peripheral vision in the outside square. Leaning against a pillar, one leg in front of the other, Aeri stood in the middle of a pathway connecting the main academy building and gates. At first glance it looked like she was immersed in her thoughts, but her body language told a different story: with arms folded, her fingers were tapping on her left arm; her head was fixed straight, but her eyes were jumping between the students of the academy in the uneven flow of the crowd.

“I’ll be back in a minute.”

Aeri appeared to be too focused looking for something, so focused she did not pay attention to the Magister even as he walked up to her.

“Aeri.”

“Wha— oh, Magister.”

“You left abruptly earlier. Is everything all right?”

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

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

“Oh, that? Right. I just realised something. It’s not something... it’s just something personal.”

Aeri’s eyes locked on a group of students in grey uniforms walking in the background behind the Magister. Just like Aeri, who had a grey patch with the depiction of a golden gear pierced by an eight-point star with two slanted lines

connecting one ray with the next, they had insignia at the base of the right sleeve: square black patch with a black outline of an hourglass the top part of which was shaped as flames with the bottom transitioning into an array of dots as if crumbling. Below it was a hexagonal patch that—unlike Aeri’s six-point star, which was missing two petals shaped like incomplete rhombuses—was filled with six hollow triangles.

The Magister tried to follow her gaze in the search of whatever that had made her look angry, but he did not notice anything out of ordinary.

“*Very* personal... Sorry, I must go.”

She then adjusted her contraption belt and disappeared, blending into the crowd.

As another day of studies came to an end, there was but one student already outside of the academy’s classrooms. Same place, same pose as it had been yesterday, Aeri had her eyes directed at the top of the academy building. With slanted white walls sharply receding with each of eight storeys, the building resembled a ziggurat, where full-height windows on odd-numbered storeys only cemented the impression.

The hall bells rang. Her eyes dropped and focused on the building’s entrance as students began emerging from it. She intently stared into the depth of a hall, barely blinking, until a group of students in grey made an appearance. In addition to the three Aeri had already seen, there was also a timid looking girl. A lock of her ash ruby hair appeared to be purposely affixed with two hairclips in a curtain-like manner to cover her right eye, leaving only the left amber eye visible.

Unlike the last time, there was little more than just disdain in Aeri’s eyes. Before the group crossed the doorstep, Aeri straightened and walked through the front gates.

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

“Kiara.”

“Yes?”

“I found—”

She cautiously looked around and brought her voice down a little.

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

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

“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.”

“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 stopped voicing her thoughts and instead let them take more solid shape in her mind.

As the girls navigated the streets, the chatter around became quieter and the air around easier to breathe, until they took a turn down an empty pathway. Only rustling of trees filled the silence as the wind passed through the grove on both sides.

The light-haired girl with a braid then subtly changed in face when she looked at the bushes along the pathway.

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

She waived at her friends and hastened the pace, taking Kiara out of her immersed state.

“Take ca—”

Having barely ran a few metres, Eunah stopped, distracted by a sharp mechanical sound. The source of the sound revealed itself the next moment as four metal cylindrical contraptions shot up from the ground around her. In a second, electricity started running across their surface before expanding and saturating the air around with blinding lightning arcs. The cylinders fell to the ground along with the girl.

“Ah! Ambush!”

The timid girl pulled up her arcane contraption, which looked like a full-metal crossbow with a short scope, and ran through the bushes.

“Nali, no!”

When Kiara tried to give her a warning, the girl had already jumped into the thick of the growth, realising the error when she tripped over the wires hidden inside. Electric currents enveloped and shackled her body as she fell with a whimper, residual energy causing her fingers to make a few erratic moves.

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 colourful hair nervously cast glances all around her until stopping in the direction of the turn that they had taken.

“Let’s retreat. There shouldn’t be any traps where we have come from.”

She then accelerated to trace her path back, passing Kiara, who stopped her by grabbing her hand.

“No, she could be—”

A sound of electric charge accumulating somewhere inside the grove caught her attention. She jumped away, releasing her grip on the hand, just a fraction of second before her friend got hit by lightning. A powerful impact made her stagger backwards into the bushes on the opposite side, where another set of concealed wires knocked her out flat.

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. I have to eliminate it.

Her hand reached behind her waist, grabbing a white-silver staff-like contraption that hung on her back. With a mechanical clank it detached from the belt tossed diagonally across her torso. The contraption made a spin as she brought it before her, the left hand going to the top into a hollowed out space inside a flat box-like attachment with slanted edges that looked like inverted butterfly wings.

Her thumb pushed a switch in the clockwise direction around the staff's axis, making four metal rods at the top retract with two flat arched plates taking their place, after which her index finger squeezed a trigger on the opposite side, forcing a stream of fire to appear as she held the contraption upright. A downwards swing sent a thin vertical wave of flame rolling towards the direction the lightning had come from, cutting through the bushes in front like a blade and leaving behind only scorched ground. Without any delay, she followed the smouldering path.

Once inside the grove, her eyes started jumping from one tree to another, trying to find the enemy, her muscles tense in the readiness to react. Her body received a signal to jump behind the nearest tree as she caught the same crackling sound of electricity. In a few seconds, lightning hit the tree behind her.

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

“Oh, don't worry about that.”

As Aeri answered, her left hand made 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 took out two other and inserted them into the circular indentations.

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

Aeri pulled her hand from the bag once more. This time, her palm was wrapped around a spherical metal contraption.

“Be it your way then.”

A blue pill found its way from a breast pocket into Kiara’s mouth just a second before the sphere appeared about five metres above her, drawing attention with a mechanical clank. It broke apart, releasing volumes of water that came down raining on her. She had barely enough time to react: switching her contraption to the previous state, she drew an arc with it over her head in a swing. A stream of expanding fire covered her like an umbrella, evaporating water with a hiss and creating a cloud of steam. An electric discharge followed, hitting her cover again.

With plates replacing rods on her weapon again, Kiara assumed a stance. Another sphere appeared, this time bouncing over the ground. Being prepared, she made a big step with her right foot, stepping out of the cover and facing Aeri’s direction as her hands made an upwards swing with the staff, hitting the sphere and sending a cutting flame wave behind it. The sphere exploded halfway between them in another big water blast as the wave went through it.

Standing in the open a dozen metres away with her contraption aimed at the opponent, Aeri jumped and rolled to her left seeing the fire coming her way. Her finger slipped from the trigger, releasing an electric discharge, with the enemy safely away from its path. Aeri immediately took cover behind another tree as she got to her feet. Had her reaction been a little bit slower, she would have taken a hit, so she was lucky to have only an edge of her coat burnt off.

Holding down the trigger as another charge built, Aeri peeped from behind the trunk, searching for the enemy, whose grey coat could no longer be seen sticking where she had been a few seconds ago. The search did not take long when another wave came her way. She hid again, though the flame went by her position more than a metre away, setting on fire a few other trees.

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

Another sphere in her hand, she made a throw and waited for the opponent’s reaction. After another scorching wave passed by, accompanied by the sound of

water evaporating, Aeri dashed out of cover. She moved in an arc around the cloud while it blocked the line of sight of her enemy.

Just two steps between her and the spot she ran for, her movement got interrupted by a black metal orb that landed there, followed by another one behind her, but much farther away. With them being seemingly thrown in blind, Aeri found a space to jump away while firing in the approximate opponent's direction at the same time. Just as her feet touched the ground, orbs exploded, engulfing large area in clouds of fire. The flames reached Aeri, yet there was no explosive force behind them. The combustion set a few dozen trees on fire, with the whole surrounding now being lit.

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

Aeri coughed, feeling the smoke finding way into her lungs, as the hunger of flames consumed the oxygen. Not only that: with the surroundings burning, her cover options shrunk. The fires, the smoke, and the fog though prevented the girls from seeing each other. Using this to her advantage, she sporadically threw three spheres around her, which saturated the ground with water.

The fog slowly let some light through, while she replaced three cylinders at the back of Arc Emitter. After the third was fixed in place with a click, she took another, slightly bigger, identical to those that had taken out Eunah.

Her eyes squinted, she tried to catch an outline of the enemy, but the enemy revealed herself first when an orange glow pierced the thick of the fog. A throw made the cylinder land a few metres away from Aeri.

Electric arcs started jumping around the metal case of the cylinder, crackling louder than the charge building inside Aeri's weapon. The glowing light moved half a metre up in response.

Aeri fired and lightning lunged forward, though there was no confirmation of the opponent getting hit: no sound, the light did not even move. It took her some time to assess what had happened, time that her opponent used against her: when Aeri heard a metal object land near her and turned to look at it, it

exploded. This time there was even no fire, just a shock wave, which filled her ears with deafening ringing.

While Aeri was dazed, Kiara sprinted towards her staff-like contraption, which was plunged into the ground. Its arched plates were now in a horizontal position, spinning around the centre, and at the top of four rods glowed a ball of concentrated fire. Chunks of soil erupted as Kiara pulled the staff from the ground. Having served as a conductor for lightning, her contraption emanated heat, which she could feel through the lover rubber-wrapped grip as it slowly started softening.

With a pull of a trigger, the ball thrust forward with arrow speed, leaving a tunnelled trail as it tore through the fog. When Aeri recovered, there was no time to evade. She shielded from the impact with her weapon. The flames from the explosion were much more intense compared to the devices that had gone off on the ground, and the explosive force threw her a few metres back.

Before hitting the ground, she squeezed the trigger and released a charge in the opponent's direction as soon as her feet gave uneven balance to her body. It didn't hit Kiara, but made her hide from it, which gave Aeri enough time to jump behind a large rock. Taking deep breaths as she tried to replenish the oxygen in her lungs in the suffocating environment, it took her a few moments before she could gather her thoughts.

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 lifted her hand off the ground and looked at the wet brown pieces covering it.

This might work.

She took another cylinder and threw it from behind the cover, this time to where she had seen the opponent, as another charge built in her weapon. In response another explosion hit the rock from the opposite side.

“Seruze voporu minie horodo zamisut tepora.”

As her ears discerned feet touching the ground, she jumped from the cover and moved, following her opponent in a parallel path.

After the enemy took cover behind another tree trunk, an exchange followed: Aeri threw another cylinder and at the same time had an orb flying her way. She moved away, covering one ear with her left hand, the right hand holding tight grip on her weapon.

“Myotiro sutane zovia zokomu mizuho...”

As if anticipating Aeri’s next move, Kiara stayed there only for a split second and swiftly ran further even before the electric contraption landed near her, and the route that she took seemed to be chosen with caution, putting one trunk after another between her and Aeri. Both contraptions went off on the ground at the same time: electric arcs could not catch Kiara, who was already past their range, and while Aeri managed to distance herself from the orb, the air burst it produced made one of her ears ringing again, but not enough to disorient her.

“...vonuto risinim tazovi nisinim suvitom.”

Aeri focused on the spot to the right of the next tree her opponent had hid behind, but Kiara appeared on the opposite side, sending another flame wave in Aeri’s direction. Aeri jumped to the side and fired, but the time it took for her to aim and evade prevented her from hitting the target.

“Neporu sunei vogonu zupinit vesuruh...”

Kiara stepped from behind another tree, throwing a metal orb at Aeri directly and aiming her staff as a blazing ball started forming at its end. Surprise painted her face when instead of evading or hiding Aeri took Arc Emitter and used it as a bat to send the orb flying back. Knowing what’s coming, Kiara ran sideward from it, and with the speed of the flight, was lucky a blast occurred a dozen meters farther from her.

“Tiruki nosupa rahune furosu tonova!”

As the last word left her mouth, a frost wave covered the ground, spreading in all directions from her in less than a second. The moist ground and all the puddles within ten metres of her turned hard.

Before reaching a cover, Kiara almost tripped over as one of her feet got glued to the ground with ice. She caught her balance with the other foot that had been above the ground when the wave had hit.

Got you.

Seeing electricity lighting up the hollow cage-barrel, there were few options for Kiara and even less time. The ice cracked as the staff's pointy end got driven into the ground. Lightning stroke just as her hands let go off her weapon. She avoided a direct hit, but the lightning jumped from the staff onto her. Though weakened, the discharge paralysed her for a few seconds.

Through a tight grip Kiara yanked the staff from the ground, and in response, Aeri pushed the trigger, expecting to release a lightning discharge before her enemy took her aim. To Aeri's misfortune, her contraption stayed silent, but misfortune hit Kiara as well when the heat of the metal shaft forced her to let go off the lower part of her weapon, where the rubber had already melted away, tilting her aim and making the blazing ball fly a metre above Aeri's head.

Neither of them wasted any time: Aeri ejected one empty cylinder as her hand dived into the bag for a replacement, while Kiara took an orb from her pouch and threw it between her and Aeri. The contraption combusted, veiling her with a cloud of steam.

The sound of feet rapidly touching the ground acted as a signal, sending Aeri into a chase as her hands made inept movements trying to finish the replacement on the move. She channelled the strength into her leg muscles feeling how oxygen-devoid air had been making her slower.

As she tore through the cloud, she caught the opponent's silhouette trying to distance away. Finally managing to reload Arc Emitter with just one charge, she aimed, but the target vanished behind a fog cloud after another combustion.

Just a moment before Aeri broke through the visual obstacle, a contraption exploded again, but this time in the air. Coated in fog, Aeri could barely see it shooting down a short burst of fire in a conical shape directed downwards.

Opponent's shape appeared in sight once again, yet when Aeri pointed her weapon forward, a pattern appeared on the ground just as her foot landed within it. As if rippled by her touching the ground, glowing lines started drawing a circle crossed by a square with various shapes and symbols inside.

A qantigram? When did she—

Her reflexes took control of her body as she made two jumps back. Before she could distance herself any further, an unseen force started pulling her into the pattern. Her feet scooped the ground as she tried to resist it.

The force wasn't that strong to pull her inside, but enough to affect the surroundings: it sucked in the air, bending tree branches in its direction as the currents of air doused the flames. The fog and the smoke formed steadily growing mass of black water at the qantigram's centre. When it reached about a metre and half in diameter, the force vector reversed, making it burst in a large splash, soaking Aeri, and pushing her back.

Aeri landed on her rear and attempted to get up when a fire projectile came her way. Having no time to raise Arc Emitter, she shielded with her arm as the ball made an impact. Somehow, the explosive force was weaker than the last time she had been hit.

She tumbled and landed flat on her back, heavily breathing, the upper left part of her coat burnt away. While she was gathering strength, her blurry vision rendered a grey-white spot, which was gradually taking the shape of her opponent, calmly walking to her. On her way to Aeri, she bent and picked a black orb, etched with two silver circles on top and an array of slits at the bottom, floating in the water that filled a large indent in the ground formed in the wake of the burst and placed it into one of her pouches. Another two steps and she took the pill out of her mouth and returned it back to the pocket.

She finally stopped in front of Aeri, who responded by picking her weapon, but Kiara did not react in the slightest, holding her staff-like contraption upwards on the ground near her. Aeri could barely hold Arc Emitter steady with trembling hands, her lungs failing to support them with oxygen. Yet the tremor was not only physical, but mental as well: being all soaked, the squeeze of the trigger would electrocute her, and in her state, she would knock herself out. The indifferent look in the purple eyes directed at her told her that her opponent knew that as well.

“I assume you are ready to talk now.”

“Tch!”

“Why did you attack us?”

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

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

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

“And you know that *how*?”

“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 had not triggered any change in her facial expression, hearing this made her eyes widen.

How can 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?

“It’s on your face.”

“You are correct. There is no denying it now.”

“Why, you bitch? What did she do to you?”

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

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

“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.”

“A contraption, breakthrough? What is this damn nonsense? Even if it were true, how could 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.”

“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.”

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

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

A brief pause followed as she waited for any further inquiries.

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

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

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

Her finger made a slight move and a blazing ball formed at the top of her weapon. She then brought it in a horizontal position, with less than a metre separating the flames from Aeri’s face. She didn’t fire but waited for Aeri’s response.

“That is enough!”

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

“Stranger, it isn’t wise to intervene in a conflict between witches.”

“Even less so to assault a Magister.”

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

She brought her staff back into the upwards position and released the blazing projectile soaring into the sky.

“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 a reply, she started walking away.

“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 stopped Kiara in her steps. She turned to look him in the eyes.

“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 continued her way, leaving the Magister there paralysed with confusion, before Aeri got up and looked at him.

“Hey, what’s with that face?”

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

He took a flare gun from his bag, but Aeri grabbed his hand as he was about to point it at the sky.

“Cool down. They will be fine.”

“Aeri! Even if that girl harmed your friends—”

“I only shattered their Ward.”

“Ward?”

“The Ethereal Ward.”

Recalling the Magister knew little about the witchcraft, her tone became calmer.

“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.”

“But then your friends...”

“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.”

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

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

She became a little embarrassed noticing how the burnt off part revealed a part of her chest and tried to pull the black edge to cover it.

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

She turned away, but there was a load that kept her in place. She ought to take it off first.

“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.”

“Ah. Yes. You’re welcome.”

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

An unfamiliar place. Though 'place' could hardly describe the environment he found himself in. The skies were both up and down, stretching into the non-existent horizon like an endless mirror. They were filled with clouds whose body was that of fire and blood. As if boiling, their magma-like substance formed protrusions, detaching as they transformed into chunks of concrete debris, crushing and turning to dust as they collided with their counterpart in the middle, and then dissolving back into the shapeless mass in reverse.

But something was strange about him as well. As he looked down, he saw his arms bent, as if carrying something, or someone, but the space there was empty. A shadow blinked in and out of existence: as if an afterimage of someone held in his embrace. He tightened his grip, compelled not to let go, even if his force pushed against nothing.

Something drew his attention. He felt an unseen presence ahead and tried to focus his gaze there. The more he looked in its direction, the more it felt like his consciousness was being absorbed. Darkness started slowly veiling the world around. Among the cracking of fire and crushing of concrete, a sound of mechanical ticking emerged, getting slower and heavier with each tick, along with distant echoes of a cacophony of female voices.

“We are not your enemies. None of us are.”

“They have stolen our future.”

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

“Run! I will stop them. Just run.”

When the last tick resounded, heavy as a lock closing a vault, everything dissolved into nothingness.

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

She opened her eyes, raising her head, and looked all around, just to find herself tied to a stake in a spacious room. Despite her condition, she was surprisingly calm. She then turned her eyes directly ahead, where a few people were standing concealed by the shadows.

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

“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.”

“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 one of them only walked out of the shadows and raised her hand, palm facing the ceiling. As she bent her fingers one by one, fires emerged in the stack of firewood below the girl's feet. The flames shrivelled when she looked down at them, as if rivalled by her cold look, before redirecting her purple eyes back to the shadows.

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

The flames grew and burnt more intensely, erasing the scene before his eyes, until the Magister woke up in his room, feeling all tired.

It's still dark. Have I even slept?

His assumption was quickly discarded as the first ray of light hit his peripheral vision through a curtain.

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

But there was something else that disturbed him. Something that he had not woken up with ever before: a lingering ominous feeling that he could neither explain, nor shake it off.