

Nomad Void

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Savellawell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

Cover art by Sasazuka Shinon

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Circumstances

With the Magister's thoughts isolated from the outside world, a black iron fence to the right was the only visual guide that kept him from wandering off his course.

He snapped out of it having almost bumped into a student of his academy, who crossed his path in a jog as she entered an enclosed space inside the fence heading towards a wide four-storeyed building.

A dormitory?

Next to gates he quickly found a plate with the address of the building.

That's Aeri's dormitory. She skipped classes for the remainder of the last week, but now that it's the beginning of the week... I should probably check on her.

With a new objective in mind, he took a turn and walked through the gate.

As he made his way closer to the dormitory's entrance doors, he couldn't help but notice the eyes of a few academy students drawn to him. Magister indeed seemed to be infrequent visitors here. It became obvious the moment he crossed the doorstep.

He was greeted by a lone student next to a desk near the stairs. Her long black hair was neatly done in a ponytail with only a clean cut bang in the front. Clad in a short coat and a skirt of the standard academy's white-black colours, she had two pistol-like weapons holstered on a black belt, whilst holding a contraption shaped like a metal musket in her hands.

"Hell—"

"Male intruder. Die."

She instantly aimed her weapon at the Magister.

"W-wait! I'm a Magister."

After he pulled his identification card from the bag, the girl's blue-green eyes inspected the document held in front of her, whilst the Magister's eyes

inspected hers. The hue of her right and left eyes seemed to be a little different, but ever so slightly that he couldn't tell if it was just a trick of light.

Having looked at it for a few seconds, the girl withdrawn the contraption and placed it vertically on the floor as she assumed a stance at attention, directing her gaze forward past the Magister.

“My apologies, sir. Yansun Jong'yuk, 4th year, Gunslinger Kol. How can I be of assistance?”

“Right. I am here to visit one of the students. There is no problem with that, correct?”

“A relationship between a student and a Magister is not prohibited as long as it does not break the laws of Inakray, sir.”

“Please don't let people hear it.”

“Understood, sir. I will keep your relationship a secret.”

“No, that's not what I meant. We are not in a relationship. I am just here for a talk.”

“Of course, sir. I will not inquire why you chose to visit a student at the dormitory instead of making an arrangement at the academy.”

“That's because she hasn't shown up at the academy for a few days now.”

“This is a very believable explanation, sir.”

Her dry tone conveyed the opposite impression.

“Right. Can you tell me where I can find Aeri Uylonyuk?”

“Fourth floor, room seventeen.”

“Thank you.”

He proceeded to ascend up the stairs past the girl.

“Good luck with your date, sir.”

As if hit on the head by the weight of these words, he froze there for a second, not sure how and if to respond, before deciding to proceed to his destination in silence.

Having arrived at the door, he stood before it for a short while with his hand raised and ready to knock: due to the sudden nature of the visit he needed to think at least how to properly start a conversation.

A knock on the door was followed by an instantaneous response.

“It’s open.”

“It’s me. Can I come in?”

“Yes, yes. Come in already.”

The opened door revealed Aeri in unexpected attire: beige undergarments. She stood by a table under a window, pouring hot tea into a cup, her back facing the Magister.

“What do you w—”

The sight of an unexpected visitor shackled both her body and mouth. As her eyes widened, her hand blindly reached for a ceramic kettle that she has just put on the table, sending it flying to the door as soon as her fingers got a grip on the handle.

The Magister barely managed to avoid a hit as the kettle shattered and spattered the tea on a wall. He then hid to the side of the door, not wanting to find out how many more throwable items there were in the room.

“What are you thinking entering a girl’s room?”

“I knocked and even said it was me.”

As he replied, he heard an eruption of chaotic sounds: wooden doors and drawers opening and closing and fabric being unfolded and put on, accompanied by a series of angry footsteps around the room.

“As if I was expecting it. What kind of Magister casually walks into a student dorm?”

“The one that has something to discuss? And you know, people usually wear something like a pyjama at home.”

“Oh, so that’s your fetish? Maybe you didn’t like the colour, huh? I have other undergarments. Maybe you want to see me in one of those, pervert?”

“Right. This doesn’t seem like the right time to talk. I’ll come back—”

“Stay right where you are!”

This command made him feel like a prisoner waiting for an executioner to make preparations.

After a minute the room became quiet.

“Come in.”

Cautiously, the Magister accepted the invite. He peeped behind the door frame before stepping into the room, in the middle of which Aeri stood with folded arms and an angry facial expression. The sun behind the window shone through untidied strands of her hair, creating a fiery veil around her as they flown down her uniform instead of being tied up in a ponytail as usual.

“What do you want?”

“I came to check on you, see if you are all right.”

“Huuuh? Is that it? Are you really here not to look at girls in their undergarments?”

“Aeri, you haven’t shown up at the academy for quite a few days now.”

“Oh, that. Right.”

Her eyes that had been looking straight at him, conveying her dissatisfaction, suddenly jumped to the side.

“I just needed a few days to calm down so that I don’t smash her face into a wall the next time I see that bitch. I was going to return tomorrow.”

“And that is it? You are not planning to fight her again?”

“No... not until I figure out a better plan.”

Even though the whispered part had been clearly audible, the Magister pretended he hadn't heard it.

“Right. On that note, I know you said that witches at the Vanguard Academy aren't quite friendly towards each other, but is the competition that bad that students would try to get others expelled?”

“Sorry, I forgot where I put my notes with all the students that got expelled.”

She felt a little bit awkward seeing the Magister's face almost begging her to give a serious answer.

“No. What she did crosses the line.”

“Could Harin really have been working on something that important that Kiara could see as a threat?”

“Kiara? So you know the bitch's name?”

“I wouldn't— yes. I've looked into her profile.”

“Oh? And what did you find there?”

Something that had been on his mind since after the day Aeri had clashed with Kiara.

The first thing on the Magister's list the next morning had been an inspection of the book case with students' profiles. The insignia on Kiara's right arm had been an indication of her being a sixth year student, narrowing the Magister's search to one shelf. The very first folder to land in his hands had been labelled *Ashen Kol*.

“‘Ashen Kol'? These children sure aren't optimists.”

One by one he had opened the files, looking only at photos inside. The photo in the fourth folder had depicted a familiar face.

“That's her. Kiara Kostenabe.”

He had skipped the front page, hoping to find insights in the extended reference page, but she had appeared to be an exemplary student, excelling at all disciplines and being the best at a few. It had prompted him to go back and study the front page in detail, and he shortly had found one: the line stating her motivation right under her name.

“This is— What happened, Kiara?”

“From the looks of it, she is one of the top students at the academy. Hence I asked about Harin.”

“Harin is two years behind her. So to be a threat to a sixth year? Hardly see it possible. Though, she managed to surprise people even before we entered the Dedication years. She is the top student amongst fourth years. We don’t share everything we work on with each other—not because we don’t trust each other, but to stimulate individual thinking—so she might have been cooking something. But if we didn’t know about it, beats me how that bitch could have. Though it’s Harin we are talking about: she is careless, and I’m always telling her to be more discreet. But even if she *was* working on something, even if that bitch knew about it, what does it matter?”

“I hope this will help me get to the bottom of this conflict.”

“What bottom? You already know what she did and why. Why would you want to dig into it?”

“To help her before she makes any more mistakes.”

“Help her?”

Aeri’s face instantly exploded in emotion, emanating a wave of negative energy.

“She almost murdered my friends and even dragged a student of another academy into it, and you want to help her? What is wrong with you?”

“I understand your feelings, and they are justified, but— Remember how we first met? You attacked Orena on false assumptions.”

“That was different. It was a mistake. I wasn’t aware of the situation. But that bitch knew what she was doing. What was it that she said? ‘Calculated and done in cold blood?’”

“Mistakes that lie on the surface are easily correctable, other are rooted deeper and you first need to know where they are coming from.”

“Then good luck finding it on your own. I know you helped me, but this is asking for too much. I don’t care for what reason she did it. All I care about is that she pays for it.”

“Then all the more you should help me.”

“What kind of twisted logic is that?”

“Can you think of any way of making her pay other than violence?”

“I can— ... No, I can’t. And I don’t need to. She can’t understand the pain that she caused unless she feels it.”

“But it’s not Harin’s pain that you want her to feel, it’s yours. And this pain is not physical. If it is what you want, you should make her realise her wrongdoing, regret her actions. Bruises can be healed, but you cannot wash away the guilt as easily. And even if she earns the forgiveness, she will never fully forgive herself.”

Aeri stayed silent for a few seconds, her face a mixture of surprise and confusion.

“Wow, that’s wicked. I almost feel like beating the shite out of her would be a mercy compared to your idea.”

“I didn’t mean to make that impression. I was just—”

“It was a *joke*. I get what you mean. But... I’m just not in the right state of mind right now. Let’s talk about this tomorrow, all right?”

“Of course. I’ve come to check on you in the first place after all. So—”

His eyes focused on the window behind Aeri, where lightning briefly appeared, shooting upwards.

“Right. It seems I do have to get used to this.”

“Huh? What are you talking about? Get used to what?”

In around five seconds a thunderclap followed the lightning.

“This.”

Aeri turned around and came to the window, looking into the distance as she tried to locate the source of the sound. Then another lightning flashed, partly obscured by the academy building.

“Oh, that’s normal. Somebody must be testing a contraption or something.”

Just as the sound of it reached her ears, a diagonal stream of fire appeared somewhere within the academy’s walls.

“Though sharing the testing ground with someone else is not that common.”

Fire erupted again, but this time in an explosion, after a bright projectile hit the upper floors of the main academy building.

“Not to mention damaging the academy.”

“I should better go see what it is.”

“Do you have to get involved every time there is a conflict? It’s probably just two students fighting.”

“You’re probably right. I left earlier, so other Magistern should still be there.”

However, there were no signs of the chaotic show quelling. On the contrary, fire and lightning flashed with increasing intensity.

“Somebody will intervene and resolve whatever is happening there...”

Air blasts joined the stage, creating visible expanding shockwaves.

“Eventually...”

“All right, all right, this is definitely something serious. I’ll go with you.”

After the Magister exited the room, Aeri picked her weapon from under her bed and followed him, tying her hair into a ponytail on the go.

When both arrived at the academy's gates, they beheld a disastrous sight: several academy students were lying unconscious before the main building's façade. The walls bore radial scorch marks, and a few windows were shattered. The fence had also taken some hits, its steel rods bent like flower petals in a few places and having convex indents in a few other.

There was but one girl still conscious, sitting on the ground, her back against the gates.

“Are you—”

Burns and bruises falling into his sight through the damaged parts of the uniform made the question he was about to ask redundant.

“Hang in there. What has happened here?”

“These monsters... they suddenly appeared. They started attacking everyone and it turned into chaos.”

“Monsters?”

“Just what in the coven's name is going on here?”

The sound of stone crushing in the wake of a powerful impact on the opposite side of the main building drew Aeri's attention.

She dashed forward to a corner of the building and peeped from behind it, confirming there were no threats down the path, before proceeding further.

“Just hang in there. I'll be back soon.”

He ran to the spot where Aeri vanished from his sight and saw her at the end of a path between the fence and the building's wall. She was observing what was happening in the backyard around the corner, now with a little more caution. Before he could reach her, she dived into the corner again.

“Aeri—”

After he followed her and taken a turn, Aeri rammed into him, pushing him back. A blazing flame arrow then flew near the spot he had occupied a moment ago, leaving a deformed hole in the black rods of the metal fence as it melted its way through.

“You have a death wish? You’re not a witch: one hit and you’re dead. Stay out of— just stay behind something.”

“So what’s going on?”

“As if I’d know! I have just got here. All I can see are flashes and explosions from invocations. I don’t know who is fighting whom, but I assume it’s students fighting...”

She cautiously peeped around the corner again.

“...them.”

“Them?”

Trailing her movements, he took a look, his head above hers.

There were two students taking turns performing attacks: one behind a corner of an annexe attached to the opposite side of the main building, the other hiding behind the stairs leading to the inner square in the centre of the backyard.

The former held a contraption that looked like a large metal bow. After inserting a long cylindrical object into a larger one in the middle of what looked like a metal bow string, she pulled it back, made a step outside, and released the string. When the string straightened and the cylinder made contact with a large metal part near the grip, flame erupted in the front, taking the shape of a spearhead as it soared through the air towards the opponent.

The girl behind the stairs peeped from behind them and ducked immediately. The blazing projectile went over her head creating a wave as it collided with the wall. The kinetic energy pushed the flames across the stone surface in the direction of the Magister and Aeri. They could feel the residual heat drying the skin on their faces even as they dived back to avoid the blast.

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Look closely. The one on the stairs.”

The Magister looked outside again squeezing his eyes as he tried to get the details of a girl with sparse dark-brown hair. He finally caught the feature that Aeri had hinted at when the girl turned around, placing a spherical object into a cannon-like barrel of her arcane contraption. Her face was distorted beyond recognition. A closer glance revealed it to be a face of the dead: the skin was dark, dehydrated, torn, and riddled with rotten-through holes.

“What is this? She looks like she’s...”

“A corpse.”

“Is this even possible? I thought reanimation of the dead was just a rumour from the old times.”

“No. I mean, maybe. I don’t know. It’s one of the forbidden fields of research in witchcraft. So I guess it is possible.”

The girl at the stairs tensed, holding her weapon tight. Neither she nor her opponent made any moves, both waiting for the other to act first. When they finally moved, it happened in synchrony: a flame arrow thrust forward with a spherical projectile flying the opposite way. The flames hit the target, knocking the girl out, and whilst the sphere’s trajectory was off by a few centimetres, the impact shattered the corner, hitting the girl with debris. Then a secondary burst of air blasted her away, making her hit the fence and lose consciousness.

“Now’s our chance. Stay behind me.”

They quickly moved to the stairs, where a disfigured girl lied. Aeri stopped one step away from her, the weapon in her hands on the ready, with the Magister looking over her shoulder. Aeri’s eyes ran along the length of the body, her face showing disgust the longer she stared at it.

“Well, for one, I didn’t hallucinate. It is a corpse.”

“I don’t smell anything.”

“What? You mean figuratively?”

“No, it doesn’t smell. There should be the stench of rot or decay.”

“You’re right. I don’t smell anything either.”

“And look at the uniform: other than the damage caused by the fire, it’s in perfect condition.”

As he looked closer at the burnt out hole in the uniform, he noticed the girl’s chest expanding a little and then sinking back.

“Wait, her chest is moving. Is she breathing?”

“Breathing? A corpse does not need to breathe. Maybe this has something to do with how this reanimation works. It might have reactivated some of the vital body processes.”

The Magister then attempted to move past Aeri and get down, but his movement was blocked by her arm.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to have a closer look. Maybe there’s something else that we’re not seeing.”

“We don’t even know what it is exactly. It can wake up and attack any moment.”

“We need to understand what is happening.”

“Since when have you become an expert in witchcraft? Leave this to the coven. The only thing we can do is help put down those things. I mean *I* can. *You* should leave. It’s not safe for you.”

“You can’t expect me to walk away from this as if nothing happened.”

“What else *can* you do? You see this is not a fight between witches.”

“What do *you* plan to do? Do you know the number of the enemies and what they are capable of? Do you know where they are concentrated, where to provide assistance first? Can you organise the students to bring—”

“All right, all right! You made your point. So what do you suggest?”

“First off—”

The Magister shrank momentarily right after a voluminous wave of flames rolled over their heads from the edge of the inner square, enveloping and charring the surface of stone railings.

“First off, let’s head to the inner square and see if we can find anyone there who can give us clues as to what is happening.”

“Do you instinctively rush into fires whenever you see them? Fine. Stay behind me, move only when I tell you.”

Aeri ascended up the stairs. Her eyes levelled the second floor, running forward through a green corridor between two square pavilions, encircled by chest-high trimmed bushes along their perimeter. Whilst the pavilion on the right was smoking with a tunnel burnt through it, the left one was still somehow intact.

“Come. Quickly.”

She took two steps forward, letting the Magister walk behind her, and then hid behind the bushes beside him.

“So what’s our next move?”

“Let me assess the situation.”

Raising his body just enough that only his head showed above the green façade before him, he observed the surroundings. The picture was the same as they had witnessed in the backyard and near the gates but on a much larger scale, with at least a dozen of students involved and another dozen lying around unconscious.

There were two people opposing each other in the open hallway with a balcony on the fourth floor at the far end of the square. The doors under the balcony were providing cover for two more people, targeting an enemy hiding in the far right pavilion. Another two adversaries were facing each other on the opposite sides of a pavilion on the left.

The latter two drew his attention as both of them looked the same as the monstrosity that was lying near the stairs. Moreover, their appearance seemed

almost identical to each other, which was hard to confirm at the moment given the situation.

An oddity caught his eye when he saw another monstrosity hiding behind a pillar in the middle of a passage running along the right edge of the square. Squeezing something that looked like a folded metal umbrella without a canopy, at first she appeared preparing for an attack, but whenever her body attempted to make a move out of cover, she would momentarily freeze midway and stick back to the pillar.

Just as she attempted to make a step outside yet again, a powerful water blast hit the pillar behind her, leaving a shattered scar. Another blast widened it to a concave with cracks spreading outwards like a web. A third blast forced the girl to tumble as the upper part of the pillar got shattered to pieces.

Whilst she was getting up on her feet, her adversary, a blonde girl in stark blue uniform, took the aim to finish the job. She pulled the trigger, but from a large hollow barrel only a stream of air appeared. It reached the girl, causing her only to fall again after she had barely straightened up.

The blonde girl then took one of the blue-coloured capsules placed in a row on her belt, opened a box on the left side of her contraption, and replaced one of five identical capsules inside. The moment she closed the box and raised her weapon, her target had already vanished behind a corner, appearing in the direct sight of Aeri, who did not hesitate for a second before aiming at her.

“Aeri, no! Wait!”

The Magister grabbed her by the sleeve just as her weapon started emitting the crackling sound.

“What are you doing?”

“Let me talk to her.”

“What? Have you gone mad?”

“Just trust me. There is something wrong here.”

As she turned her head to look at the creature that now seemed to cower in fear, covering her head with her hands in the anticipation of Aeri's attack, she saw the pursuer closing the distance as her silhouette blinked behind the passage pillars.

"Damn it!"

As her left hand freed the other, taking the hold of the grip, she dived into her bag for a spherical metal contraption that flew towards the blonde girl the moment the latter appeared ahead in the corner. With a clang it found the blonde's forehead, bouncing upwards.

"Ouch!"

"Don't move, Lyuta."

"Aeri? What is the meaning of this?"

"I said don't move!"

Aeri moved Arc Emitter closer to the shoulder, demonstrating her readiness to act in response to Lyuta attempting to raise her contraption.

"Do you have something to do with this?"

"Don't be an idiot."

"Then what is your game here?"

"I'm not the one calling the shots right now. He is."

Aeri slightly tossed her head towards the Magister, keeping her eyes glued to Lyuta.

"And who would that be?"

"I'm Magister Rensin."

"And what do *you* have to do with this?"

"I am trying to help resolve whatever is happening here."

"You? I have never heard of Magisters getting involved in witch business. And how exactly do you plan on 'helping'?"

“First off, I am going to talk to her.”

He made his reference clear walking from behind Aeri towards the disfigured girl on the ground.

“Wait! What are you—”

Ignoring Aeri’s concerns, he approached the girl and got on one knee, drawing her attention with a gentle touch to her hand.

“Hey, it’s all right.”

Cautiously, she lowered her hands and raised her head to look at the person in front of her.

“Can you hear me? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

The girl slightly nodded in response.

“Are you a student of the academy?”

She answered his question again with a nod.

“You can’t be serious. This is ridiculous!”

“Shut up! Let him do his job.”

Ignoring the quarrel of the two, the Magister continued with the questions.

“What happened to you? Do you know why you look like this?”

At first, she just looked at him with confusion. Then, when she tried to utter something, it came out as a distorted guttural sound, from which mostly vowels could be discerned. She wrapped her palm around the neck, trying to check if something was wrong with her throat. With yet another attempt to communicate resulting in the same indiscernible noise, she covered her mouth and coughed a few times. As she took the hand off and looked at her palm, shock and horror manifested on her face. She whimpered in terror, rubbing one hand against the other as if trying to clean it. Her attempts making no change, she even resorted to scratching the skin with her nails.

“Stop! Calm down.”

The Magister grabbed both of her arms to prevent her from inflicting further self-harm.

“We will figure out what has happened to you. It’s going to be all right. Just calm down.”

His assurances seemed to have little effect as she still tried to break free of his grasp.

“What’s happening to it?”

Seeing how Lyuta’s attitude toned down a bit, showing much less aggression and some confusion, Aeri lowered her weapon and came closer to the two on the ground.

“To *her*. If it didn’t shine down on you, she wasn’t even aware she looks like this.”

“Do you have any idea what it could be? Maybe some kind of curse?”

The confusion on Lyuta’s face spoke before she did.

“A curse? What are you talking about?”

“There is no such thing as a curse.”

“Then what could it be?”

“My guess is as good as yours. They don’t teach us how to turn people into monsters, or make them look like them. But I’m just a fourth-year, maybe a senior student knows more.”

Aeri then redirected her eyes to a senior standing to the right of the Magister.

“This must be some complex invocation. Maybe a ritual.”

“Something I *don’t* know?”

“Sure. Just point me to anything other than her. Can you?”

“Is it so hard to admit you don’t know something?”

“No, seriously. Just show me something, anything.”

“A senior is just as clueless. So it’s up to the coven to figure it out. But first this mess needs to be sorted. So what’s the plan?”

“Obviously, we need to stop the fighting.”

“We barely managed to reason with Lyuta. Do you want the three of us —”

Shifting her gaze, Aeri looked at the terrified girl, who despite all the talking still didn’t fully come to her senses.

“Make that two. The two of us won’t be able to take down everyone. We can’t explain to them what is happening, so we can only side with unaffected students to —”

“No. We don’t know who is behind this or why. Harming the affected students might even be a part of this ritual you’ve mentioned.”

Lyuta sighed with a bit of irritation.

“This is not how rituals work. Her looking like this *is* the result of a ritual invocation.”

“You don’t even know if it *is* a ritual. And even if it is, how do you know there is no underlying ritual taking place?”

“One ritual on top of another? Where did you even get that idea? You wouldn’t even know how to perform one ritual invocation.”

“I doubt you would either. But I know the theory, so it’s not impossible. The rituals might not even be directly connected, and whoever is behind this might just need one death.”

“Why would they go so far instead of killing someone themselves?”

“Can you two postpone this discussion until we get the situation under control?”

“Right, sorry. So if fighting the affected students is out of the question, what would you have us do?”

“If we could just grab everyone’s attention for a few seconds, it might be enough to stop this.”

“*If* they listen to us. You’ve seen how much effort it took just to convince this one.”

“This is called being cautious. A hot-head like you wouldn’t know what that means.”

“They might not listen to *you*, but I think they’ll listen to *me*.”

“Or you’ll just make a new target.”

“The situation is chaotic, but I believe they are still in their sane mind.”

“Maybe so, but how do you want to get their attention? *Everyone*’s attention.”

“Anything in your witch arsenal you could put to use?”

Lyuta’s face soured.

“Like what? Freeze time?”

“Freeze... I could freeze everyone in their places were there enough water.”

“Water...”

The Magister peeped out from the bushes, focusing on the centre of the square.

“What about the fountain?”

Aeri inspected the fountain and then the surroundings, taking a note of the combatants’ distribution.

“No. Even if we blast it somehow, there is not enough pressure to fill the area with water fast. And it definitely won’t reach the upper floor.”

Aeri’s eyes briefly fell onto Lyuta’s contraption.

“What about you?”

“I can adjust my invocations to cover everything in water in a small area, but it can only burst on impact. Those two on the fourth floor are close to walls and pillars. I can probably hit the balcony from below to disperse water onto the two

fighting one of those— the affected student within the pavilion. The last one too: I can hit the tree she is hiding behind. But that's about it."

"I can take care of the two around the other pavilion. There are also at least two on the side passage above us, but I can't see shite from here."

"We don't need to stop everyone. Just enough to briefly disrupt the commotion and get attention."

"If you say so. But remember, the ice will only restrain them briefly. They'll quickly break free. So whatever you want to grab their attention for should be just as brief."

She came to a corner, muscles tense, her knees bent. Before setting out, she turned around and gave Lyuta a nod with a nod given to her in response. Deep breath in, she pushed herself outside.

"Seruze voporu minie horodo zamisut tepora..."

First stride, her left foot created a pivot point, redirecting momentum in a sharp turn towards the middle of the square. Lyuta made her first shot, hitting a wall behind a student in the far left corner on the fourth floor. Soaked from head to toe, the affected student got confused for a second, trying to pinpoint the direction the hit had come from, whilst Lyuta dived back and prepared to make the next shot.

Two strides, three, four; Aeri thrown a sphere that landed at the feet of a student behind a row of green bushes of the far-left pavilion. Her reaction was decisive and quick: she ran away from it towards a staircase between two walls to her left. The sphere burst before she could escape, water splashing her from behind, but she didn't stop. Another water blob emerged from a wide barrel of Lyuta's contraption, cutting through the air and hitting the opposite side of the passage on the fourth floor, drenching another student.

Five, six, seven. An affected student showed from behind the opposite side of the pavilion, hearing her opponent running away. She took her aim, ready to fire, but ducked the next moment as a sphere appeared in her peripheral vision. Volumes of water rained down on her as the sphere burst open right above her.

Lyuta followed with the third shot: it hit the wide balcony from below creating a shower. Although it barely splashes two students hiding behind the door frame under the balcony, a large puddle formed, stretching wide enough to reach their feet.

Eight, nine. Aeri locked eyes on the last affected student in her vicinity, hiding under a tree inside a pavilion to the right. Whilst her hand was rummaging in the bag in the search of the third sphere, Aeri's loud approach alerted the girl of the incoming danger. Seeing Aeri locking eyes with her, she shifted her focus away from the two behind the door frame. There were now only two things between Aeri and her destination: one step and a weapon directed at her.

Ten. Lyuta's shot shattered the top of the tree into splinters, spreading them around mixed into the splashing water.

“...furuso tonova!”

A frost wave hit the entire square. Frozen water turned every student inside the square into motionless statues whilst locking those behind the doors in their places as their feet got stuck in the ice.

Not wasting a moment, the Magister hastily walked to the centre.

“Everyone, stop! There are no monsters here. You are fighting your fellow students affected by some kind of witchcraft to make a distraction.”

Ice cracking and falling to the ground in chunks echoed throughout the square along with angry groans. One by one students started breaking free of the cold shackles.

A student with a deformed face under the tree made the first move, pointing her contraption towards the two people near the fountain as soon as her hands regained the mobility. Aeri responded in an instant, drawing her weapon, but the Magister stopped her before she even touched the trigger.

Seeing this, the girl loosened a bit and looked around, taking a note of how everyone else around the square behaved.

After breaking the ice, a student on the fourth floor broke the verbal silence.

“And who are you?”

“I am a Magister.”

“A Magister? Or maybe *you* are the distraction.”

One of the girls behind the doors cautiously looked outside.

“And why would anyone believe anything you say? How would you know what is happening?”

“Because unlike you, idiots, he can use his brain. If they were enemies, they would have already used this opportunity to scorch your arses.”

Aeri’s short speech seemed to resonate with other students. From exchanging attacks they moved on to exchanging glances, examining one another.

After another prolonged silence, a hesitant mumble came from an affected student that Aeri forced to run earlier. Her attempts at communication seemed to be directed at her opponent, another affected one behind the bushes.

She responded. Though the words could not be discerned, the tonal pattern suggested she was posing a question as if to confirm something.

Both then cautiously came out and walked towards one another. They glanced over each other. Another unclear word inquisitively pronounced was responded to in a similar manner.

Their expressions then changed, as if they acknowledged each other, followed by an unexpected change in attitude with them yelling in turns, increasing the angriness with each sentence. It ended with one of them landing a fist on the head of the other. Rubbing an aching spot on her head, she made an utterance in apologetic tone.

All the while, the Magister observed this with puzzled expression.

“Is it just me or...”

“Nope. Didn’t understand a thing either.”

With the same hesitation, the rest of the students came forth and gathered at the centre.

“So what’s the deal? Who is behind this and how are you involved?”

“My understanding of the situation is very limited. All we have managed to deduce is that some of the students have been affected by... um...”

“It must be an illusion. They are fine both physically and mentally as you can see, but they look different and can’t properly talk.”

“So this is just a distraction? For what purpose?”

“Actually, the part about this being a distraction was made up.”

“What? You can’t be serious.”

“I had to make it more convincing. The situation called for it. I didn’t mean to deceive anyone.”

Aeri narrowed her eyes and frowned as something started brewing in her mind.

“Though you might have landed a blind shot.”

“Didn’t you say it was a ritual?”

“I said there *could* be an underlying ritual, but it was a wild guess. A distraction is just as likely.”

“Right. I guess it’s of no use dwelling on the source of this commotion. We need to put a stop to it first.”

“You have a plan? There shouldn’t be many students around this late, but the academy is still huge. We can go from one place to the other till dark.”

“There is no need. We will split to do it faster. Once you manage to explain the situation to other students, then those can do the same, like a chain reaction.”

“Like a chain reaction?”

Whilst Lyuta was attentively listening to the discussion of the two, her eye caught a lone student walking on the perimeter of the square. She emerged from

the side stairs and headed to the exit Aeri and the Magister had come from, casually walking as if nothing had happened around.

“Where does she think she’s going?”

Breaking off from the crowd, Lyuta headed to the exit on the course to intercept her.

“Hey!”

As if not even hearing the call, the girl continued down her path uninterrupted.

“Hey, you! I’m talking to you. Do you even hear me?”

With Lyuta almost catching to her, she finally stopped near the stairs. Her long untidied ash-grey hair revealed dark-red eyes as she turned to look in Lyuta’s direction.

“Uhm, yes?”

“Where are you going? Don’t you see what is happening?”

“I kinda did, hehe. But I’m not good at fightin’, ya know. I just don’ wanna be a burden.”

In response to the girl’s unusual speech, Lyuta involuntarily frowned.

“What are you, a freshman or something?”

“In a way.”

With a sigh, she was about to say something, but the words got stuck in her throat as her eyes fell on the girl’s left sleeve, where six triangles filled a hexagonal patch.

“In *what* way? And how are you walking around without your contraption?”

“Oh, that thingy, hehe...”

This response rose a flag that made Lyuta go on alert. Even more so when the girl showed a grin.

“It’s right in front o’ ya.”

The girl's face got distorted as if a lens appeared between Lyuta and her. It instantly widened, distorting the space even more, giving Lyuta no time to process what it was. In the next moment it created a blast wave, sending her flying towards the crowd around the Magister where she collided with one of the students.

“What the deacon?”

As everyone turned their attention towards the other side of the square, the girl dashed away, prompting some of them, including Aeri, to set off in pursuit.

It didn't take long till the first bump in the road showed up: two girls in front of Aeri were abruptly kicked back by expansions of air.

Aeri instinctively stopped, assessing the situation, but the sound of the girl's steps fading as she put more distance between them pushed Aeri to resume the pursuit. With the potential danger lying ahead, she ran through the burnt path in a pavilion and vaulted over the railings. After the landing, she saw the target disappear behind a corner, catching her making a gesture as her fist unfurled into a palm.

Running towards the corner, Aeri noticed the straight lines of the building bulge a little, changing the curves as she moved closer to it. Keeping an eye on the distorted space, she adjusted her path to keep her distance from it.

The girl cast a glance back, locking the eyes with her pursuer for a moment. Aeri caught her making the same gesture again. Knowing what to look for, she almost instantly identified a distortion that appeared in the air and swiftly avoided it.

It didn't do anything as I passed it by, and those two were hit when she was already down there, which means they must have collided with it, so what if...

Her hand took up from where her thought ended as it grabbed another spherical contraption from the bag.

The girl took another look back, frowning as she saw no change in the distance between her and Aeri. With her next step, she created a pivot with her right heel, displacing the soil as she made a spin. Her hand drawn an arc, and an array of

distortions appeared in an uneven line. Her left foot landed and she continued the run without losing momentum.

The moment the girl showed her back, Aeri pitched the sphere. The collision caused the distortions to burst in a chain, the explosive force hitting the girl in the back. She got propelled a dozen metres ahead, tumbling several times until hitting the fence.

In a spurt, Aeri closed the distance, electricity crackling within her contraption as she squeezed the trigger.

The girl's arms shaking, she made an effort to lift her body from the ground with Aeri already standing above her, the barrel of her contraption pointing downwards.

“Don't even think—”

Finishing her warning became unnecessary as the girl's attempt to rise failed after which she seemingly lost consciousness.

She passed out? No. I shouldn't let my guard down. She might be feinting it.

A few minutes later, the Magister and a few other students caught up.

“What happened? Who is she?”

“I can tell you who she is *not*: a Vanguard student. From what I can tell, she is a Sorceress witch. And I bet my arse the commotion is her doing.”

“Eek!”

Everyone turned around to the scream of one of the affected students behind. She frantically slapped a bag that hung on her shoulder, trying to put out a fire that appeared to come from within.

At the same time, a charm strapped to the waist of another affected student caught fire as well. She promptly tore it off and cast it aside.

Seeing how her friend still struggled with the burning bag, she grabbed it and dumped the contents onto the ground, dropping the bag after emptying it. A few

items along with the bag got flattened under her feet as she stomped them to extinguish the flames with the owner's futile attempts to prevent it.

"Ueeeeehheeee! I really liked this cute charm. Now where am I going to get another one?"

"Hey, you're back to normal."

The girl on the ground brought her hands up, inspecting them from the palms to the back.

"Yeah... Ah! You too!"

The other girl took a look at her skin in a similar manner.

"You're right. Oh, the voice too. I can clearly speak now, to tell you what an idiot you are."

"I already said I was sorry. What were I to think? I turn away for a second, there was you, and then there was a monster."

"You were to *think*! Instead you started attacking me."

"If these two are back to normal, the others around the academy should be as well. That takes care of one problem. So what now?"

As Aeri turned to look at the Magister, he, in turn, looked at the unconscious guest on the ground.

"I hope we'll find out once she comes to her senses."

Strolling through a long hallway alongside aide Eraban, the Magister was fixated on the documents in his hands, tearing his eyes away from them only once in a while to avoid collisions with people.

"What's on your mind?"

"I have my doubts presenting this as evidence."

"Why? It looks very convincing from my perspective."

“It does, from the perspective of people not familiar with witchcraft.”

“You mean to say you have an insight into this from a witch’s perspective?”

“No. None of us, Magistern, has. And that is exactly my concern: it does look convincing, but there is no solid proof she was behind it. I have even asked Aeri, one of the students, if this can be somehow verified, but she said that the only way to know for sure is to see someone perform an invocation.”

“A student from another academy appears amidst a commotion in the Vanguard Academy and assaults a Vanguard student when confronted. This can’t be a coincidence.”

“Even more so, there might be more to it than it seems from the outside.”

“Why do you think so?”

The Magister’s mind flashed with the faces of Kiara and Yumi.

“Just a feeling.”

“We haven’t even heard her defence yet, so there’s that.”

As they entered a room where a hearing was to be held, five of six people turn their attention to them. The only one who didn’t pay any mind was the grey-haired trespasser. Sitting next to a man on the left, she was immersed into the process of drawing, switching the tools such as compasses and rulers and taking a pen to add annotations to it once in a while.

Upon their entry, Eraban froze for a moment, his gaze directed at the two.

“Something’s the matter?”

“No, nothing. Just a familiar face.”

After taking their places and exchanging introductions, the Magister was given word.

“The Magistertum of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven hereby presents an accusation against an aspiring witch of the Academy of the Sorceress League Vira Sagaydachi.

On 12.06.157 U.C., Vira Sagaydachi was encountered on the territory of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven. Upon contact with an aspiring witch of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven, Lyuta Patonori, she immediately attacked her, resulting in light injuries.

Prior to that, an unknown invocation affected several aspiring witches of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven altering their appearance to make them appear as reanimated dead. The sudden alteration of their appearance resulted in hostility from unaffected aspiring witches with five aspiring witches becoming incapacitated and suffering moderate injuries and eleven more suffering light injuries. Not only did Vira appear during the resulting commotion, the effects of the invocation disappeared right after Vira got incapacitated by a pursuing aspiring witch of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven, Aeri Uylonyuk, which indicates that Vira is also responsible for the commotion and its aftermath.

Based on this, the Magistertum of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven presents the following accusation against Vira Sagaydachi:

One, trespassing the territory of another academy with malicious intent.

Two, third degree assault on an aspiring witch of another academy.

Three, application of non-offensive invocation with malicious intent.”

After attentively listening to the Magister’s speech, a bald man by the table in the centre turned his head to the opposite side of the room, giving a nod to the man next to Vira.

“The Magistertum of the Academy of the Sorceress League does not have a Statement of Innocence and therefore acknowledges the accusations presented by the Magistertum of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven.”

“What? Again? Is negligence of your duties a common thing at the Sorceress Academy?”

“Please, Magister. I understand your assumption given the performance of my colleague in the other case, or rather the lack thereof, but my ward simply refused to form a statement.”

“You can’t seriously expect me to believe this.”

Vira's pencil stopped its run, leaving a gap in a rectangular shape, as she redirected her eyes to the Magister. She then laid it down, straightened, and folded her arms.

"Believe it or not, 'tis what it is, ol' man. Guilty of everything."

"Why would you admit to it? Did they force you into it somehow?"

"'They' who? Nobody ain't forced me to do anything."

"Then why? With these charges you are facing an expulsion."

"Oh, I think I already am. You know, I've been skipping classes for 'bout... half-a-year."

After hearing this revelation, the Magister found himself at a loss, not even knowing what to appeal to.

It seems that the Sorceress Magister wasn't aware of it either as could be judged by his reaction when he turned to look at his ward with surprise.

"But it doesn't matter anyways. Even if they've already expelled me, they'll have let me back in if they want this."

Vira grabbed her unfinished work on the table, showing it to the Magister with a stretched arm. The reaction to this was just silence, and her reaction to everyone's silence was a sour face.

"I know I ain't best artist, but this isn't the reaction I expected after showing you Vanguard's most guarded secret."

"Vanguard's most guarded secret? What even is that?"

"Huh? What d'you mean what is that? Oh. Ye. Ain't no way they'd let you near it. This is the blueprint of an extraction chamber. Well..."

She briefly turned the sheet of paper to look at the blueprint.

"...a part of it. I didn't have time to finish it, but 'tis enough to send the message, ya know."

“An extraction chamber? How would you even have it? The facility is guarded by the Vanguard coven witches themselves. It’s off-limits even to Magistern, but we would at least know if there was a trespassing attempt.”

“Didn’t you say it wasn’t coincidence I appeared during that ‘commotion’? What d’you think I was doing ‘ere?’”

“So it *was* a distraction. But even if so, even if it somehow allowed you to sneak into it, I highly doubt you could have studied and memorised the schematics of an extraction chamber, unless the blueprint was somehow lying around.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! I didn’t sneak in, I simply *walked* in. D’you think I can only make ‘em look like worm food? I can make anyone look like anyone. All it took was to wait for one student to walk outta chamber and walk back in in her stead. ‘Sorry, I forgot something in there. I’ll be back in a second.’ They didn’t even notice I didn’t even have that arcane thingy. So much for guarding the most guarded secret, ha-ha-ha! But I need no blueprint, just a touch, and poof: it all ends up ‘ere.’”

She tapped on her temple with an index finger.

“Well, till I get it onto paper.”

“That doesn’t make sense. If you wanted to avoid punishment, you could have secretly relayed the message to the Sorceress League.”

“Oh, I could’ve, but that’s no fun. Consider it my lil vendetta against the coven. After all, it was them who set me up. So if they want to have the Vanguard’s secret, they’ll have to put up a lil fight.”

“Set you up? How?”

“For a murder. Ye. If you didn’t know, I’m a murderer. I didn’t spend half-a-year in the slums cause I didn’t wanna attend classes, you know.”

“Are you really a murderer?”

“What does it matter? Why d’you care?”

“Because it is within my authority to address the wrongdoings both committed by aspiring witches and those committed against them.”

“Oh. So you’re just like him. Never thought I’d see someone like that.”

For a moment, her attitude changed, there was no trace of that mocking arrogance she had been displaying all this time.

Whilst the Magister was thinking how to respond, the bald Magister in the middle used this as an opportunity to interject.

“Forgive the interruption, Magister, but we have strayed from the topic. This no longer has anything to do with the current hearing. So unless you have any more questions pertaining to the task at hand, I suggest we wrap this up.”

“I—”

The Magister glanced back at the young witch. The smirk on her face discouraged him from questioning her any further.

“...don’t have any more questions.”

The two Magistern by the central table turned to look at each other and exchanged a few words.

“What does she think she’s doing?”

A comment Eraban intended to keep to himself seeped through his teeth in a whisper, catching the ear of the Magister, who saw usually unemotional face of the aide display barely contained dissatisfaction.

“You too think this is fishy?”

“Huh? Oh, y-yes. There must be something else going on.”

“It’s as if she wants to be punished. I don’t like it one bit.”

“With the accusations presented and the opposite party refusing to present a Statement of Innocence, the aspiring witch of the Academy of the Sorceress League Vira Sagaydachi is hereby found guilty of the following as stated by the Magistertum of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven:

One, trespassing the territory of another academy with malicious intent.

Two, third degree assault on an aspiring witch of another academy.

Three, application of non-offensive invocation with malicious intent.

Additionally, as confessed by Vira herself, she trespassed the territory of the Academy of the Vanguard Coven with the intent of obtaining a Vanguard Coven's secret and therefore is found guilty of:

Four, illegal acquisition of another academy's asset.

Due to the nature of her wrongdoings, the verdict will be passed to both the Vanguard Coven and the Sorceress League, who will then make a decision regarding the measure of punishment.

Does anyone have any objections?"

A quick glance from one side of the room to the other pictured a silent agreement.

"Good. This hearing is hereby concluded."

As the Magister was gathering his papers, a comment slipped off his lips.

"I don't like it one bit and I hate that I can't do anything about it."

"I am surprised you didn't use your extrajudicial authority."

"It's not a magic wand that I can wave around. First and foremost, it requires a cooperation from an aspiring witch. In Orena's case—"

"Magister..."

With her escort behind her, Vira stopped between the doors, not looking back as she talked.

"I appreciate you trying, but this is no longer something you can handle. Stay out of it."

"No longer?"

She resumed her course, leaving the Magister perplexed. With no clarity provided, his mind fell into the state of retrospection, trying to maybe find something that he had missed, only for the fall to be interrupted by Eraban, who replaced Vira in the same spot.

“Ah, right, I don’t want to pressure you, but Administrator Chusaran asked for an update on Orena’s case. Any progress? Unless you did it outside work hours, I didn’t see any requests for a visit to the Sorceress Academy.”

“Oh. Correct, yes. That won’t be necessary. I haven’t asked her directly, but I believe I can persuade Aeri to reconcile.”

“After what happened to her friends?”

“Yes. It was a terrible misunderstanding, and she understands that, but she needs just a bit more time to calm down. I’ll include this into my report once I’m done with this case.”

“That’s impressive. Administrator will be happy to hear that.”

After vacating the room and navigating the halls of the academy for a few minutes, Eraban arrived at another room’s door. A few knocks prompted a response.

“Come in.”

Inside, a man in his early thirties sat at the desk by the window in the middle of the room. With a book in a hand, his other hand was pressed against his right cheek, the index finger tapping on the temporal bone under a lock of blonde hair that reached a little below his ears.

“How did it go?”

“The girl from the Sorceress Academy admitted to everything. The hearing concluded with a unilateral vote of condemnation. She appears to have trespassed the academy ground to acquire the blueprint of an extraction chamber.”

“And she admitted to it? That sounds suspicious to me. I can only assume that prompted him— Did you say concluded?”

“Yes. As I said, it was a unilateral vote of condemnation.”

“I’ll need some more details about the hearing.”

After listening to Eraban's retelling of the proceeding, the man changed in face with a concern written in his darkened expression as he closed the book, the frequency of his index finger motions dropping.

So he wasn't just handed the original code by mistake. He seems to be pretty aware of the extent and limitations of its content. "I see..."

"If this continues, he might draw some unwanted attention."

"Attention to what?"

"To some minor edits to the Code, of course. Wasn't it what made Magister Tepan a similar obstacle?"

Administrator's finger froze in place before the next tap, and his eyes shifted to Eraban's face.

"What are you implying?"

"Simply that I can help you with certain tasks that, let's say, fall outside of my line of responsibilities."

"And what would the price be?"

"Oh, don't worry. I don't ask anything in particular. I simply aim for a better partnership. The best benefits always come on their own from a fruitful partnership."

As if nothing had happened, the Administrator then focused back on the book as his finger resumed the repetitive motion.

"I see. You need not to concern yourself with this matter. I have it all covered."

"Understood, Administrator."

Eraban made his way to the doors, stopping briefly with his hand pushing down the door handle.

"Oh, by the way. If due to unforeseen circumstances, I won't be able to carry out my duties, I instructed some people to deliver certain information to the coven."

“Threats aren’t the best way to start a fruitful partnership, Eraban.”

“Of course. A fruitful partnership is established with trust. We are birds of a feather, so you can trust me to know what to expect from people like myself. Insurance is imperative in our line of activities.”

His last words ended with a mechanical clank of the door lock.