

# Nomad Void

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# Sawellwell

With Reignited Flames

# Copyright

SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES  
NOMAD VOID

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## Distress

With a flick of her wrist, Aeri draws a small arc in a stroke, finishing a drawing of a wobbly ellipse with a circle inside. She then connects it with a wavy line to a similar shape to the right.

As her eyes jump between the notebook and the chalkboard, she proceeds to add annotations to it, occasionally adjusting her pose between a palm under her chin and leaning her cheek on the fist.

She gets distracted by the page becoming increasingly darker. Shifting the focus to the world beyond a glass window, she sees a large cloud obstructing the sun. Before getting back to the classroom activity, she notices a smaller yet much darker cloud, not in the sky, but expanding to it from the ground.

TEACHER

Aeri, do you think the cityscape is that much more interesting than our class?

AERI

Ah! N-no. I was paying attention. I don't think cell structure is boring.

TEACHER

Neurons, Aeri. And I didn't mention anything about it being boring.

AERI

S-sorry, teacher. I just got distracted by fire. I mean, smoke.

TEACHER

Smoke?

STUDENT

No, I think it is fire.

SECOND STUDENT

Where?

STUDENT

Over there, look. You can see the illuminated area under the smoke.

The teacher tries to draw the attention of students by slightly hitting the board with a pointer stick.

TEACHER

Girls, please. Whatever you see there is not a reason to—

Interrupted by a collective gasp, the teacher is prompted to come to a window and take a look outside.

Where a pillar of smoke was rising a moment ago, now rises an expanding cloud of fire. In a few seconds a barely audible explosion reaches their ears.

STUDENT

That seems to be coming from that new chemical factory.

SECOND STUDENT

I hope nobody's injured.

TEACHER

Alright, everyone, unless there are firefighters amongst you, I suggest you take your places and we continue the class.

The sound of chairs moving a short distance across the floor fills the room as the students return to their seats, unwillingly tearing their eyes away from the windows.

Aeri spends the remaining half of the class focusing back on the subject, though she can't help but cast a glance back at the window every few minutes, getting short boosts of attention by occasionally making eye contact with the teacher.

Finally, a ring resonates in the halls, making her exhale with a relief. Though the relief doesn't last long. Her face darkens as she collects her belongings into her bag, and it remains dark as she traverses the halls of the building.

In a few minutes she arrives at the doors with the depiction of two blue leaves placed together in the shape of a heart. Behind them lies a long corridor with an alcove at the entrance where a black-haired student in a white uniform with a blue armband sits at a desk.

Aeri presents her student card to the girl. After looking at it, she takes a pen and writes something down, whilst her right arm shows Aeri a way down the corridor.

Taking the gesture, Aeri then walks through the corridor, which is lined with five numbered doors on each side and one at the end.

She stops to face the door number eight, pushes the handle, and enters inside.

AERI

Harin, Sumi, Minali, hi. I've come to visit.

She is greeted by silence as the three occupants lie still in their beds.

Aeri takes a chair under a window on the other side of the room, which she places next to the bed of the marine-lustre-dark-haired girl. She puts her bag and the weapon on the floor and then takes a seat.

AERI

I— I don't even know where to start. The last week has been quite eventful.

In her head, Minali's words ring: 'A Sorceress witch? Why would she do that?'; 'I'm not saying we should do nothing. I'm just calling for not acting on emotions alone.'

Aeri clenches her fists.

AERI

You were right, Minali. You were right all along. I—

Another voice replaces Minali's as cold purple eyes surface from the depths of her memory: '...what happened afterwards was the result of your own impulsiveness.'

She clenches her fists even harder.

AERI

That bitch is right about one thing: nothing of this would have happened if I just listened to you. Oh, right. You're probably wondering what I'm rambling

about. Well, it turns out that one mad bitch from our academy orchestrated it all. She—

Her head abruptly turns to the door, her eyes widened, when she hears a familiar voice echoing from the corridor.

NALI

already received a request?

KIARA

With an incident of this scale, we should expect one. Even on such a short notice.

Aeri's teeth screech as her jaw muscles tense, rage swirling within her, when four girls in grey uniforms briefly appear in the door frame.

She jumps from the chair.

Her trembling hands reach downwards to grab Arc Emitter but suddenly freeze as yet another voice rings in her head: 'Mistakes that lie on the surface are easily correctable, others are rooted deeper...'; 'Bruises can be healed, but she won't be able to wash away the guilt as easily.'

Her hand remains in suspense as her emotions clash with the reason. The clash is soon interrupted by a sudden thud as something hard hits the floor behind her.

As she turns, she finds a large glass-plate-looking object near the bed.

AERI

Minali? Minali! MINALI!

Aeri grabs her friend by the shoulders in panic whilst alerting the girl at the desk, who appears in the door within seconds.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Hey! Do you want me to throw you out of the window? You're in the damn ward!

AERI

It's Minali! Something's wrong! Her grimoire suddenly veiled-out.

## BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

What?

The girl darts back to the desk and returns, carrying a box with the same two-leaved symbol that has a thick vertical line crossed by two thinner lines carved into it.

After checking that Minali has pulse, she paces the box on a cabinet next to the bed and opens its lid. With a push of a button, the box emits a short crackling sound as nine vertical slits on the inner side of the thick lid flash yellow along with two coin-sized lights that flash red and green.

She then takes out a small circular object from an indentation, connected to the box via two cords, and places it on Minali's chest.

The vertical slits begin flashing in spikes, a bar in each slit reaching a different height. The first spike draws a curve that starts high at the first and the second bars, then rapidly falls through the next two, and goes low until hitting the bottom at the seventh. The second spike follows almost immediately, drawing the same curve but a bit lower. This pattern repeats in an even rhythm, each two spikes followed by a flash of green light.

The girl then rotates a few knobs and adjusts the position of the sensor, placing it above Minali's left breast.

This time the bars draw a less sharp rounded hill with a small bump at the second bar and then having a steady decline. Instead of brief spikes, the lights on the bars rise and fall slowly. The second rise, which reaches a little bit higher, is followed the green light flashing again.

After putting the sensor back in its place, the girl places her palm on Minali's forehead.

## BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

Her vital functions are normal. Even if any of her organs were failing, there would at least be symptoms, any change to her condition.

AERI

Then why did her grimoire veil-out?

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

What am I, a grimoire expert? Go ask the coven. But I can tell you one thing...

Aeri looks at the girl with anxiety, expecting a worrying revelation, but what she gets is a fist that lands on her head.

BLACK-HAIRED GIRL

If you ever cause a commotion like that again, I'll make sure you get to stay with your friends permanently on that fourth bed! Got it?

The girl closes the box and angrily leaves.

AERI

You could be a little quieter yourself.

With a sigh, she looks back at her friend...

AERI

Minali, just what—

...when she hears the Ashen kol's voices again.

YEONA

Should we make haste? Every minute counts.

KIARA

The next tram leaves in five minutes. We won't make it in time even if we run. So we will have to wait for another fifteen minutes until the next one arrives.

Aeri is pulled back into the state of uncertainty, but calms down a bit after glancing back at Minali.

AERI

Maybe I should treat it as a sign. They'll eventually get what they're asking for. Though if they don't, I still have the option of giving it to them.

She places her hand on the chair, about to seat, when a thought crosses her mind.

AERI

“Wait, what are they even doing here? If all four of them are here, whom could they be visiting?”

Aeri darts to the door, peeping into the corridor.

After seeing the Ashen kol off with her gaze, she approaches the room number nine on her toes. The door handle slowly goes down, given caution not to trigger a clank. With her head squeezed through the gap, she sees four vacant beds.

Aeri closes the door and as she looks to the left, she finds red eyes staring directly at her, the girl's arms folded with her index finger tapping on her forearm.

AERI

I... um... so... there was... I thought I heard something...

The longer it takes Aeri to come up with something, the more the girl's eyes narrow, the heavier each tap of her finger becomes.

AERI

I was already leaving!

She dashes past the girl and dives into the room, picking up her contraption and bag in a haste. As she is about to leave, her eyes fall onto Minali's grimoire by her bed.

She stays motionless for a few seconds, her eyes glued to it.

Pushing the chair aside, she opens the door of the cabinet behind it where a dark-blue messenger's bag rests.

AERI

Sorry, Minali, I'll need to borrow this if I am going to carry it around.

She takes out a symmetrical metal device that consists of two forearm-length rods with clamps on both ends, a strap closer to one end, and a handle on the

opposite side. She then attaches the device to the grimoire's crystal body, and fixes it on her arm, before leaving the room in a rush.

With the ward's doors behind her, she tries to locate her adversaries amongst the crowd of people walking around but without success. Trying to locate them through the hall's windows yields no success either.

AERI

“Next tram in five minutes, another in fifteen... This doesn't tell me shite. My best bet is the closest tram stop.”

Aeri finds her way to the academy's entrance and sets off on a ten-minutes sprint.

Her bet pays itself off when a tram stop finally comes into view, where a few dozen people stand near the tracks, her targets amongst them.

Aeri finds the nearest wall to stick to, hiding herself, in case an occasional glance comes her way, and waits.

Ten minutes pass. The ground under her feet starts to tremble as over a dozen tonnes of metal move over the tracks until coming to a halt at the stop.

When the doors slide to the sides, Aeri patiently watches the passengers seeping inside and filling the seats until the four students in grey enter the car in the front. She then waits some more, expecting them to take seats as well, but after travelling half the length of the car, they just stop.

AERI

Tch! Screw it.

With the window of opportunity starting to close, she dashes to the tail car's doors and dives into the first vacant seat her eyes find.

The tram takes her on a ten-minutes journey, during which Aeri fixes her head to face the car's window with only her eyes changing the focal point at every stop to monitor the state of her targets.

At last they move at the fourth stop.

Aeri gets up and walks to the doors, her eyes following the group of four girls. After they disembark, they exchange a few words, and then hasten eastwards.

Aeri leans forward and lands, one foot after another. With enough distance put between her and the group, she follows them at the same pace.

The more distance she covers, the more medical presence she takes a note of. People wearing red coats appear in different places, most of them showing the signs of fatigue as they take a break sitting at tables, stretched over benches, or drinking water around a corner. She then notices that the bright white of the carriages running the opposite way is not there to make them look fancy, but is a signature colour of medevac transport.

It finally hits her when a gust of the wind from North-East hits her nostrils with smoke that has some unfamiliar scent to it, something not natural but rather man-made. She looks in the direction the wind blows from and sees a dissipating black veil stretching into the sky.

AERI

“Is that the site where the explosion occurred?”

When she focuses back on the road, the four girls vanish following a left turn on the road.

At the turn, she halts her pace for a second to inspect the environment. The road stretches for fifty more metres, ending at the gates that serve as an entrance to a stone-wall enclosed area, housing an array of buildings enveloped by a web of thick metal tubes. The smoke appears to be coming from the centre of it.

The girls finally stop at the gates, through which people and carriages pass every few minutes. After talking to people that stand guard outside, the girls are gestured to enter, and disappear behind the walls.

Seeing how this might be the end of her pursuit, she switches to walking.

AERI

Excuse me, can I—

## MAN AT THE GATES

---

There's more. Good. Your friends are already inside. Just follow the signs inside. They'll lead you to the ward.

## AERI

---

No, I mean, I'm... I'm here...

As the man starts looking inquisitively at her, she decides to break the conversation before it becomes awkward.

## AERI

---

Thank you.

“I'll figure out something once I figure out what they're up to.”

As instructed, she follows a chain of red arrow-shaped signs. Each sign bears a hand-drawn symbol depicting two opposite spirals that flow into each other through a slanted vertical line, which is crossed by two horizontal lines in the middle.

All around her a lot of people create constant motion, a few stand in groups as they discuss something. Nobody has their hands empty: pen and paper, axes, mauls, and... stretchers, carrying people whose exposed body parts are covered in burns, bruises, cuts, and blood that spreads through bandage threads. It makes the nerves in her stomach ripple with unpleasant sensation.

The signs bring her to a large open area lined with two rows of dark-green tents, their fabric diffusing the painful moans mixed with loud commands given left and right.

Her ears shift focus amongst the chorus of voices as she walks down this space.

## YEONA

---

Are you sure that will suffice?

## KIARA

---

Me and Eunah can handle it. There's only one difficult case. In the worst case scenario...

YEONA

---

Got it. Nali, let's go.

A second before Yeona's head appears between tent curtains, Aeri jumps into the space between tents and hides behind one.

After Yeona and Nali move to the opposite side, she gets closer to the back of the tent where the other two Ashen Kol members remain. The back curtains loosely connect, creating a gap through which Aeri tries to observe what the two girls are up to. Having a hard time observing through the limited angle, her fingers gently move the curtains' left side.

The two girls stand next to the third of six beds inside. Aeri can't see what they are doing exactly, only imagine as she hears fabric get torn and metal tools pull something from flesh. The man they operate does his best not to let the pain seep through his teeth.

Eunah then takes two vials with brown and black liquids inside, opens a cap on the brown one, and brings it to the man's mouth.

WOUNDED MAN

---

What's... this?

EUNAH

---

Analgesic.

WOUNDED MAN

---

Heh. Could've given it earlier.

EUNAH

---

It's effect quickly wears off, and we have limited supply.

WOUNDED MAN

---

Then keep it for someone who needs it.

EUNAH

---

I'm going to apply a coagulating agent. It will hurt. A lot.

## WOUNDED MAN

---

I'll manage.

## EUNAH

---

If you say so.

She closes one vial and opens the other, carefully measuring the flow of the liquid as it drips onto a wound. The moment a drop splats, the man clenches his teeth and shuts his eyes tight.

After Kiara bandages the man's leg, they move on to a bed on the opposite side, unveiling a bandage that doesn't have a white spot on it left, blood overflowing the fabric onto the bed.

She squeezes scissors to make a clean horizontal cut, exposing Aeri to a grotesque sight as Kiara pulls the bandage away: a large open wound with torn flesh. Blood starts spilling from it, its volume restrained only by a tourniquet tied above.

Gently she then applies pressure with her index and middle fingers to an area surrounded by a torn crevice on three sides. A large chunk of flesh moves along the vector of pressure.

The girls look at each other, with Kiara shaking her head, after which Eunah walks into a corner and starts looking for something in a black bag.

The repulsive feeling building up in her stomach forces Aeri to take her eyes away from inside the tent.

## AERI

---

“I've seen enough.”

Aeri walks from behind the tent and, after confirming the other two girls are not outside, traces her way back to the gate.

As she is about to leave, a ruckus draws her attention.

A blonde woman and a younger brown-haired girl loudly argue. They stand near a carriage with two men holding a patient on a stretcher.

GIRL

---

Don't you see the deformation on his chest? And the breathing? This could be a punctured lung.

WOMAN

---

*Could!* Whilst we have people with severe burns!

GIRL

---

And some of those cases are not as life-threatening as a puncture.

WOMAN

---

Whilst not as life threatening, external damage is a factuality, whilst an internal injury is a probability. I acknowledge the criticality of both cases, even if one is unconfirmed, but you are just an intern, so I have to use the seniority card.

Aeri stops and then hesitantly approaches the two.

AERI

---

Excuse me. Do you say this man might have an internal injury?

The blonde woman near the carriage sighs and covers her eyes with her hand momentarily.

WOMAN

---

Listen. We appreciate you, Vanguard students, lending a hand to an extent that your proficiency allows, but this is way outside it. Even trained professionals can't confirm this. You have neither the knowledge nor tools.

AERI

---

I know I don't have knowledge in medicine, but—

WOMAN

---

Then what are you even doing here?

AERI

---

I'm... I was just here to... accompany other students.

WOMAN

---

Then what do you even want?

The woman starts losing patience, showing signs of irritation.

AERI

I might be able to help you confirm internal injuries.

WOMAN

HOW?

AERI

I have a way.

Aeri releases the grip on Minali's grimoire and places it onto the ground along with her arcane contraption and the bag, from which she swiftly produces two metal pieces, which levitate and detach.

AERI

I can use it to look inside. Kind of.

WOMAN

Kind of?

AERI

It can't exactly show what is happening inside. It's hard to explain. Better if I just show you.

Approaching the man on the stretcher, she turns to look at the two.

AERI

So where do I need to look?

The younger girl immediately jumps to her side, pointing at a bruised dent in the lower part of the man's chest whilst her other hand pulls his shirt up.

GIRL

Here.

Aeri's hands guide the device, placing the two metal pieces to both sides of the chest. A lightning arc jumps from one piece to another through the man's body, illuminating his skin for a split second. She then lifts the device and places it vertically between the two medical workers.

They come closer, their eyes stressed as they look at the lightning arc that now jump in three dimensions instead of a plane, creating a shape that recreates a section of the man's body.

AERI

---

So...

GIRL

---

So... what am I looking at?

AERI

---

Everything that's inside. I know it's not a perfect image, but you can see the shapes of bones, tissues, vessels, etc.

GIRL

---

There is something that is reminiscent of bones, but I can hardly tell them apart exactly. Even less so with tissues.

Aeri then turns to look at the woman, who shakes her head in response.

AERI

---

Damn it. Maybe my eyes are just used to reading it. Just tell me what to look for. If it's not something difficult, maybe I can at least confirm if it's there.

GIRL

---

That dent on his chest with the bruise. There should be a fractured rib that goes into his lung.

Aeri intently inspects the flickering image, rotating it and stressing her eyes.

AERI

---

No... his lung appears to be intact.

GIRL

---

Are you sure?

AERI

---

Yes. And I don't see any fracture either. His rib... ribs. They just bend in a weird way, as if they were shaped this way.

GIRL

---

Bend? This can only mean that—

WOMAN

---

He has a chest deformation. His life is not in danger, so take him back to the ward.

The two men reorient themselves in the opposite direction and promptly leave.

GIRL

---

This is amazing. I didn't know Vanguard has such devices.

AERI

---

No, we don't. This is not a device. It's my grimoire.

GIRL

---

Grimoire? Like a book?

AERI

---

Yes. I can't explain it. It's just what it is.

WOMAN

---

Don't you think there are more pressing issues than satisfying your curiosity?

GIRL

---

Ah, right. Let's go. There are other patients you can help with.

AERI

---

I guess I could—

The girl grabs her arm and pulls along with her back to the ward.

AERI

---

“Damn it, I might run into them there. ... No. Screw it. I don't care.”

Back at the entrance, the girl points to a tent on the other end of the ward.

**GIRL**

---

Start with that tent. Ask if any patients there might have life-threatening internal injuries. I'll go from the other side to see which patients we must prioritise.

**AERI**

---

Understood.

After they split, the girl drops into two tents, and then tries to enter the third one, where she almost collides with Kiara, who was about to go outside.

**GIRL**

---

Sorry. Um... you're...

**KIARA**

---

Kiara.

**GIRL**

---

Kiara, right. Are there any people here who might have internal injuries?

**KIARA**

---

Actually, yes. I was about to go looking for you regarding one such case. There is a man who has just been brought here. I suspect he has a punctured lung, so I would suggest putting him in a queue for evacuation.

**GIRL**

---

Oh, his life is not in danger. Your friend has confirmed there are no internal injuries. It's just a chest deformation.

**KIARA**

---

That's not like Yeona. Maybe there was some kind of a confusion. I'll need to check with her.

Both exit the tent with Kiara skimming over the area. Not being able to locate Yeona or Nali, she lets out a call.

**KIARA**

---

Yeona.

Shortly after, Yeona shows up from a tent on the same side a few metres away.

YEONA

I'm here. What is it?

KIARA

I've been told that you have checked a patient—

GIRL

No, not her. It was the other girl.

KIARA

Nali? She wouldn't take the responsibility of making such an unsure conclusion.

YEONA

What conclusion?

KIARA

A punctured lung, most likely.

YEONA

We definitely have not tended to any patients with anything like that.

GIRL

I think we're talking about different people. The orange-haired one in a light-blue uniform. I didn't ask her name.

Kiara's face responds on her behalf as she frowns to the extent that her cold emotional front allows her to.

YEONA

Is she talking about...

KIARA

Where is she now? Can you take me to her?

GIRL

Sure, she should be at the other end.

Trailing the girl, Kiara comes to a tent on the far end of the ward territory, inside which Aeri stands next to a bed.

Her face shows unconcealed displeasure when she confirms Aeri's identity.

KIARA

What are you doing here?

Aeri's hands momentarily tighten the grip on her grimoire as Kiara's voice reaches her eardrums.

AERI

Not smashing your face into a wall. But maybe that's just because my hands are busy. Stick around for a little longer and we'll see how long that lasts.

Whilst Kiara remains unaffected by this response, this seemingly personal joke prompts the girl to uneasily smile.

KIARA

You are not qualified for this job.

AERI

Oh, I forgot you to ask. Though I have no doubts you know who is capable of what.

KIARA

I do know for fact that you lack the knowledge of either medicine or physiology to conduct an examination of injuries. So, please, explain what made you think you have the right to diagnose people.

As the degree of the conversation continues to rise, making the animosity between the two more apparent, the girl's nervousness makes her steadily lose control of her facial muscles as her smile starts dissipating.

AERI

You don't know? So much for spying on other students. I thought you would know about the contraption that allows me to identify injuries.

KIARA

A contraption for identifying injuries?

Unexpectedly, this brings a change in her attitude. Somehow this information makes her look both curious and surprised.

AERI

Yes.

Aeri closes her grimoire, turns, and takes a few steps to look directly into her adversary's eyes.

AERI

It's called 'None of your damn bitch's business'.

Kiara's face morphs back to displeasure, with now some resentment added on top.

GIRL

I'm sorry! I'm so very sorry! I didn't know there was such tension between you.

AERI

Sorry.

KIARA

Forgive us.

Both then turn around with Aeri returning to examining a patient and Kiara tracing her way back outside, stopping just shortly for one last remark.

KIARA

I hope you are ready to take the responsibility if any harm comes to anyone as a result of your misdiagnosis.

AERI

AHAHAHAHAH! That's rich! You're the one to talk about harming others. Or maybe manipulating people into harming each other doesn't count?

Kiara does not respond, just continues her way.

Outside, her friends still stand together where she left them, looking at her with curiosity.

KIARA

It's her.

YEONA

Should we leave her like that? Do you trust her?

KIARA

No, I do not. But I trust the professionals. They wouldn't just take her word for it if she didn't prove her ability.

The group then exchange a few more words and disband, returning to tents in the same pairs.

Time flies, the shades around the ward stretch and morph as the sun moves through the sky, and the area becomes progressively emptier. With fewer people in the need of medical care, some medical workers get to leave to take a much deserved rest.

Aeri closes her grimoire after inspecting another patient and exits a tent, where her guide finishes talking to her superior.

AERI

I'm done here. Neither had any fractures. Where to next?

GIRL

This was the last one.

She approaches Aeri, grabbing and raising her arms, holding them close to her chest, her eyes sparkling.

GIRL

Thank you so, so much!

AERI

I didn't do that much.

GIRL

You did a lot more than you think! You might have even saved someone's life.

AERI

Um... I hope I have. I mean, not that someone would have died otherwise. I—I will get going then! Take care.

She hurries to leave until the embarrassment becomes too unbearable, slowing her pace as she nears the exit, and coming to a full stop just short of taking two steps outside.

The embarrassment instantly vanishes, replaced with familiar animosity as she locks her eyes with the group of four witches standing a dozen metres away.

EUNAH

Do you think we should be worried?

KIARA

No. Not after experiencing this. She is reckless, but not shameless.

After a few seconds of intense staring, Aeri is about to take her leave when a loud shout shifts her focus.

GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

Hey, you, Vanguard.

A group of four girls approach the Ashen kol with aggressively confident steps. Their blue uniforms are covered with pieces of metal armour, each wearing different pieces covering different parts of their bodies, each carrying different arms, be it a sword or a halberd.

They stop two steps away from each other. A green-haired girl with orange eyes assumes a leading position closer to them, her arms resting to the sides atop two straight swords sheathed on her waist.

GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

What have you been doing here?

YEONA

---

Whatever we have been doing here is none of your—

Kiara raises her arm, interrupting Yeona.

KIARA

---

This is not your academy's ground. You don't have the authority to demand any sort of explanation from students of another academy regarding the circumstances of their whereabouts. Unless you seek to provoke a confrontation, you should first introduce yourself and state your grounds for demanding an answer.

Kiara's stoic demeanour reflects as irritation in the girl's eyes.

GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

---

We are the Naguard Investigation and Counteraction Committee. And as the name suggests, we are investigating Naguard's involvement in industrial incidents.

KIARA

---

The name 'Naguard' does not tell me anything.

GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

---

Naguard, Unity?

KIARA

---

I am aware of the existence of other covens, however, that does not extend to individual kols within them.

GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

---

Not knowing about the most nefarious coven movement in Inakray? Seriously?

YEONA

---

Maybe you have a lot of time on your hands to poke around into other coven's business, but we have better things to do, like actually study.

Yeona's snappy remark seems to make a sufficient response for Kiara not to add anything to it.

#### GIRL IN KNIGHT'S ATTIRE

Whether you know of them or not doesn't matter. I have stated why I need to know what I asked. So care to explain or do you want to waste each other's time?

Yellow eyes of a silver-haired girl to the right momentarily move to the side where she notices Aeri, who, seeing how this conversation is of no importance to her, turns her feet in the other direction and starts walking away.

#### SILVER-HAIRED GIRL

Tayra.

The girl taps on the group leader's shoulder. After following the direction her kol-mate's finger is pointing to, she gives her a nod. The girl then breaks from the group as Tayra turns her attention back to Kiara.

#### KIARA

We were dispatched here to provide medical assistance to the medical workers on site.

#### TAYRA

Dispatched by whom?

#### KIARA

By our academy.

#### TAYRA

Since when does Vanguard academy dispatch their students to provide medical assistance?

#### KIARA

Since the 12th of Heatherin, 151 with the establishment of Emergency

Meanwhile the silver haired girl catches to Aeri.

#### SILVER-HAIRED GIRL

Excuse me, I must ask you to halt.

AERI

---

What? Are you talking to me?

SILVER-HAIRED GIRL

---

Yes. What is your name?

AERI

---

Aeri. And who are you and what do you want from me?

SILVER-HAIRED GIRL

---

Nayun Chonm'yenko, Iron Kol of the Witch Knights of the Academy of the Sorceress League. I must ask you to wait here until our hat finishes talking to the other students of your academy. She has questions to ask about your presence here.

The demanding tone makes her intestines stir.

AERI

---

Well, Nayun of the Iron Kol of whatever, I don't have to answer any questions from Sorceress witches.

NAYUN

---

I'm afraid I have to insist.

For a few seconds Aeri fiercely locks eyes with the girl, whose unshaken reaction infuriates her even more. Unexpectedly, Aeri relaxes, mirroring the calmness of her opponent.

AERI

---

Fine. If you insist...

Casually, she then opens her bag and produces a metal cylinder from it. With a push of a thumb, a round disc at the top sinks into the case with a click.

AERI

---

Here, take some rest.

She lightly tosses the device to the girl, who catches it and looks at it with confusion.

#### KIARA

---

...and despite the voluntary basis of dispatches, a student must meet certain requirements that qualify her for providing the basic first aid at the minimum. Given the small number of students taking interest in fields related to medicine, this usually limits the participation to 6th year and late 5th year students. The four of us possess advanced knowledge in respective fields and therefore we volunteered—

#### TAYRA

---

I wasn't asking for a lecture on history when I—

A continuous discharge of electricity makes everyone turn their attention towards the gates just as Nayun falls to the ground.

Tayra and two other girls turn around and assume aggressive stance, their hands reaching to get a grip on their arms.

They move half-a-metre before Arc Emitter emits a thunderous roar, giving the three a warning like an animal baring its teeth.

#### AERI

---

Go on.

As if not even acknowledging their threat, Aeri keeps a relaxed stance, her body half-turned towards them with her right arm resting on the weapon's buttstock, pushing it down so that it looks in their direction as it keeps hanging over her shoulder.

After a few moments of prolonged silence, Aeri bends down, takes the device from the hand of the girl on the ground, and walks away. With enough distance put between them, Aeri releases a lightning discharge into the sky.

As the three girls follow Aeri into the sunset with their eyes, Nali silently breaks from the group towards the nearest alley whilst Yeona touches a chain of flat metal pieces atop her right hand, making a web-like pattern on both of her arms flash light-blue for a second.

TAYRA

---

What is the meaning of this?

KIARA

---

If the difference in our uniforms is not an indication clear enough, this girl is not from our kol.

TAYRA

---

You've only mentioned that the four of you volunteered. You didn't mention anything about other students.

KIARA

---

I am not aware of that girl's agenda. My assumption is that she followed us here for some reason.

TAYRA

---

Are you really not? I know that trick you've pulled on me: overwhelm an opponent with irrelevant information until they forget what they have even asked about.

KIARA

---

My field of expertise is medicine, not psychology. And as I've already said, her reason for being here is unknown to us. So if you will excuse us, we will take our leave. If you have further questions, you can direct them to the Magistertum of our academy.

TAYRA

---

I would rather have my answers now.

YEONA

---

We've had enough of this nonsense.

Yeona walks from behind Kiara and attempts to go past the girl but stops with an arm pushing against her shoulder. She looks at Tayra and then places her hand over the girl's forearm.

A quiet electrical crackle follows and Tayra jolts back.

TAYRA

---

If that's how you want it.

One hand over the other, she pulls out her swords. One of them falls to the ground even before it disconnects from the sheathe as the hand holding it unfurls and starts convulsing.

TAYRA

---

I'll break both of your arms for this!

She seemingly regains control over her limb and attempts to swing her other sword but the hit lands onto the concrete as she suddenly falls to one knee.

TAYRA

---

Is this how Vanguard fights, with dirty tricks?

YEONA

---

This isn't a fight. You are not our enemy.

TAYRA

---

The feeling is not mutual.

Tayra looks back at the two other girls, who respond by drawing their arms.

The girl in front of Eunah draws her halberd with blades on both ends of the shaft just in time to deflect a cylindrical projectile from Eunah's contraption, propelled by an audible expansion of air. The metal shell bounces upwards.

As she is about to close the distance and make a swing, she looks at her raised arm. From the metal object that should have flown away stretch several green-brown vines that tightly envelops her hand, binding it to the shaft and slowly creeping down her forearm.

The distraction gives Eunah an opportunity to make another shot, which the girl fails to parry. With just a few centimetres between the girl and a shell, a web of vines sprawl from it, wrapping around her hands and her torso. A following shot ties together her legs. She struggles to balance her body for a few seconds and falls.

At the same time, the third girl draws a large two-handed sword from behind her back, it's wide elongated blade flashing bright reflecting the sunlight. As if pumping fire through veins, the area around her eyes glows, making the whites glow red around the edges underneath the brown forelocks.

The blade flies away and lands on the ground behind her after her wrist gets hit by an air blast. She immediately locates where the attack has come from, seeing Nali aiming at her from a balcony on the second floor of a building behind Yeona. She makes a sidestep to block Nali's sight, putting Yeona between them, and gets into close quarters in two rapid steps.

As she raises her hand to land a blow with her fist, Yeona ducks a split second before another blast hits the girl in the chest, sending her flying. After sliding through the concrete for a few metres, she manages to group up and get on her two, but hesitates to take action again.

The scene gets frozen in time with only their eyes jumping around, not knowing what to expect from their opponents.

The Ashen kol move in unison, just walking away as if nothing has happened.

TAYRA

We won't forget this.

YEONA

Then next time I'll make this permanent.

Yeona does not stop or even turn as she leaves a reply.

EUNAH

The more you resist, the stronger it grows. Also, don't open your mouth: this is a parasitic species; if it gets inside it will start growing there until it bursts from your chest.

The girl on the ground clenches her jaws tight, sweat breaking, and fear manifesting through her widened eyes.

Nali appears from the valley and promptly catches with the rest of the group.

Before they take a turn and vanish from their opponents' sight, Yeona chuckles.

YEONA

What made you say that?

EUNAH

Got inspired by your warning. Thought I would give them one more reason to reconsider engaging us again.

\*\*\*\*

With her gaze directed ahead along the straight path that she walks, Aeri's mind appears to be somewhere else.

She doesn't react and continues her way even as the Magister stops right in front of her.

THE MAGISTER

Hi, Aeri.

AERI

Oh, Magister. Hello. Where are you heading?

THE MAGISTER

Home. As does everyone in this hour.

AERI

R-right. Me too. Mind if I tag along?

The Magister mentally retraces his steps to the point where he has walked past her dormitory just a few minutes ago.

THE MAGISTER

Sure...

For the next five minutes both walk in silence, though the Magister catches her casting occasional glances at him. Eventually, the Magister opens his mouth, but so does Aeri, both interrupting each other.

AERI

---

Yea, you go first.

THE MAGISTER

---

I take it you had an eventful day.

AERI

---

Is it that obvious?

THE MAGISTER

---

Kind of, when you receive a report on a student missing her classes.

AERI

---

Oh, yea, sorry. It's just... I was visiting my friends in the recovery, when I... saw that— her and her cronies. So I trailed them.

Her eyes jump to him, expressing some guilt, as if a puppy looking at its master after doing something regretful in anticipation of scolding.

AERI

---

You don't seem to be angry.

THE MAGISTER

---

For one, I don't see any bruises or burns, so we can call this progress. But you don't seem to be angry either. So what got you so perplexed.

AERI

---

It's what I've seen them doing. There was an incident at a factory not far from the centre of the city and they went there. They were... it looked like they were treating the injured, but I don't buy it. What could they be after so that they even skipped classes? They must be up to something.

The Magister switches his focus to inside his mind as he goes silent for several seconds.

THE MAGISTER

---

Emergency Relief Corps. That must be it.

AERI

---

Emergency Relief Corps? What is that?

THE MAGISTER

---

It's an office within the recovery ward that handles requests for emergency medical assistance within Inakray. Kiara and her kol must have responded to one such request.

Aeri's mind recreates the image of the corridor in the ward that she visited few times so far. The part that lied beyond her friends' room has been covered in fog until now. With the fog now dispersed after the Magister's explanation, she could see the image that was etched on the door at the end of that narrow space.

Unlike the numbered doors on both sides, it had a depiction of a pink circle, broken into two parts by zig-zag gaps in the sides with a small spike going inside from each part, and a red drop overlain by a black rhombus within it. The image was crowned with a sign that reads 'ERC'.

AERI

---

ERC... Emergency Relief Corps. So that's what it is. Hmm... You're telling me they volunteered to help people, after what they had done to my friends? You may think what you want but their actions speak for them. But forget that. That doesn't even sound right for Vanguard. They must be using it to improve the academy's image or use this as an opportunity to dig around in people's intestines.

THE MAGISTER

---

Actually, yes, that is exactly the case.

AERI

---

What do you mean?

THE MAGISTER

---

It is the Emergency Relief Corps' stated agenda: they provide emergency medical services as an opportunity to advance students' knowledge in fields related to human biology.

Aeri doesn't comment. Instead her facial muscles freeze, reflecting her mind being paralysed by frustration.

AERI

This doesn't make any sense!

THE MAGISTER

But you just said that it should be the case.

AERI

Yes, but they shouldn't be open about it. We might not be friendly towards each other, but that does not extend to people outside the academy. Treating people as study subjects and even advertising it? Who does that?

THE MAGISTER

Sorry, but I really don't have an answer to this.

AERI

I don't expect you to. Sorry. I was just expressing my frustration.  
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! It's killing me. I feel like my head's going to explode. Let's change the subject. Oh, right. What happened to that Sorceress witch?

THE MAGISTER

Who are you referring to?

AERI

The trespasser, from the other day.

THE MAGISTER

Oh, her. You don't hold them in high regard, do you? Is there some sort of rivalry between your academies?

AERI

Huh? No. I can't speak for the entire academy, but that girl, Orena, was the first time interacting with them. Where's this coming from?

THE MAGISTER

---

You refer to them as ‘Sorceress witches’, which, I take, is a derogatory term.

AERI

---

This is not a derogatory term. It’s what they are, witches from the Sorceress academy.

THE MAGISTER

---

*Students* from the Sorceress Academy. That makes them sorceresses.

AERI

---

And what’s the difference between a sorceress and a witch?

THE MAGISTER

---

I really don’t know.

AERI

---

None.

THE MAGISTER

---

Then why do they identify as Sorceress League?

AERI

---

I don’t know. Ask them. But before they became the Sorceress League they were known as the Coven of Origin. Imagine trading such name for ‘Sorceress League’.

THE MAGISTER

---

That actually makes sense. I haven’t heard any Magister saying ‘aspiring sorceress’.

AERI

---

Speaking of whys, what’s with that *Magister* thing? I thought you were from Lydzariv or something, but you don’t have an accent.

THE MAGISTER

---

Well, technically, I am.

AERI

---

Technically?

THE MAGISTER

---

I am from Inakray, so that makes me a citizen of Lydzariv.

AERI

---

Oh, right. I sometimes forget Inakray is not a separate country. Though that's not what I asked.

THE MAGISTER

---

I'm just sticking to the original pronunciation of the term.

AERI

---

How? It's the first time I'm hearing this.

THE MAGISTER

---

I understand the confusion. But it's not the academic title used in educational establishments.

AERI

---

Then what is it?

THE MAGISTER

---

A mockery.

AERI

---

A... mockery? I'm even more confused now.

THE MAGISTER

---

Magistern is a combination of two words: 'magi' and 'stern', which mean—

AERI

---

'Magic' and 'clean'. These are Martetradian words.

THE MAGISTER

---

Yes.

AERI

---

I always thought it was just a coincidence it sounds similar. What is it about being clean and what do those performers have to do with witch academies?

THE MAGISTER

---

Not that kind of magic. Magic as in witchcraft. The two concepts have not always been distinguished, so people would call both magic, including witches. They didn't hold regular people in high regard, but those were regular people who would do all the chores at the academies, one academy to be precise, since Vanguard were the first to employ non-witches. And to refer to them, they came up with this term, 'magistern', 'clean of magic', meaning 'those who cannot use magic'. However, some believe that there is even more derogatory meaning implied as 'stern' can also be translated as 'subservient' and 'magi' as 'magicians' or 'witches' to be precise. They wouldn't even distinguish individuals, using it both for a collective and a person.

AERI

---

And here I thought witches of the past were nicer. Not that I would know what the actual coven witches are like. I can only assume it's at least just as bad as in the academy. Wait, if they treat you like that, why would anyone even want to become a Magister?

THE MAGISTER

---

Things changed. Not drastically, of course. We went from disposable menial labour to essential clerks. The pay and work conditions are good. But more importantly, someone has to stand for students.

AERI

---

We can take care of ourselves. We're not slaves.

Aeri blushes and breaks eye contact with him.

AERI

---

Though the coven definitely thinks of us that way. How did we even get here? Ah, so what's with that Sorceress witch?

THE MAGISTER

---

She confessed that she did cause the commotion so that she could steal something.

AERI

---

Something?

THE MAGISTER

---

Never mind. It's not important.

AERI

---

What, am I not worthy of trust?

THE MAGISTER

---

No, it's not that. It's just Hane's right. I should refrain from discussing sensitive matters with students. This case keeps bothering me and it will inevitably come down to witchcraft. I don't want you to get into trouble with the coven because of that.

AERI

---

Let me be the judge of it. The Oath prohibits teaching witchcraft, not discussing it. And the consequences are pretty clear, so I would know when to shut up.

The Magister casts a glance at Aeri, the internal struggle written all over his face.

THE MAGISTER

---

Extraction chamber. You know what that is, right?

AERI

---

You bet I know what the thing that makes the Vanguard coven the Vanguard coven is.

THE MAGISTER

---

That girl, Vira, said she obtained the extraction chamber blueprint.

AERI

---

How? There is no extraction chamber blueprint. Not at the academy for sure. Why would the coven keep it there? The only reason extraction chambers are at the academy is for students to access them, because where else, coven's lair? But the blueprint?

THE MAGISTER

---

One touch is what she needed.

AERI

---

What?

THE MAGISTER

---

She said that she needed just one touch to get the blueprint and it would end up in her head. Is there witchcraft that can do that?

AERI

---

Witchcraft does not work like that. There is no list of invocations witches can perform. We don't even know what the witches from other covens are capable of apart from commonly known stuff, like their Prime Offensives.

THE MAGISTER

---

Prime Offensives?

AERI

---

An element of nature that a coven teaches their students to use as their primary means of offense. We don't have one because we rely on this.

Aeri slightly lifts Arc Emitter.

AERI

---

There is a joke amongst the Vanguard students that our Prime Offensive is iron.

THE MAGISTER

---

I see. So there is no way of knowing if that is even possible?

## AERI

---

If what she said is true, even though I find it hard to believe, given she said ‘touch’, that means it was an inherent invocation. And to understand how something works through an inherent invocation... It can only mean a Brand.

## THE MAGISTER

---

Brand?

## AERI

---

It's like an invocation that only a specific witch can perform. They tell us about it even less than ritual invocations. Probably because they don't know much about Brands themselves. Some say witches are born with them, others say it is granted by a grimoire. And some say that every witch has it, others say it's unique. I don't know whether I was born with it or if it was granted to me by the grimoire, I only know that my Brand allows me to see things, well, not things, certain events that happen—

The dust on the pathway ahead gets swept away by a wall of air that rushes towards them. The force of collision sweeps both away just as easily. Whilst the Magister tumbles and lands on the ground, Aeri takes a much harder hit, her body meeting the trunk of a tree.

As a gap starts forming between the wood and her back, another hit nails her back. Much stronger, it hits her right in the guts. Her stomach shrinks under the excessive force of the blow, making her spit the air in a yelp.

After hitting the ground, she attempts to get up, but the pain that radiates from her core drains all the strength from her limbs. She barely manages to lift her head, allowing her to see someone walk up to the Magister through the blurry veil of her impaired vision.

The last thing she sees before her vision completely fades is the Magister's unsuccessful attempt to communicate with the person, which results in her throwing a punch that doesn't reach him, but produces a shockwave that makes him fly outside Aeri's field of view.

\*\*\*\*

Everything's red.

Aeri opens her eyes and instantly frowns as the rays of the sun hit her eyes.

AERI

Uh... what...

The irritation on her retinas is soon joined by the pulsing pain in her head and around the stomach.

AERI

Ack!

“Where am I? Why am I here?”

She gets up, looks around, trying to locate any clues that would point her to how she has ended up here. Her eyes then lock on a bag on the pathway.

After she walks to the bag and picks it, images flash in her head in rapid succession, restoring the picture of the events that preceded.

AERI

Magister! MAGISTER!

She looks around in distress only to soon realise she is crying in vain. There is no one around and nothing to give her any more clues.

After picking up her contraption, she promptly scurries away.