

Nomad Void

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Sawellwell
With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

Cover art by Sasazuka Shinon

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Distress

With a flick of her wrist, Aeri drew a small arc in a stroke, finishing a drawing of a wobbly square with a circle inside. A wavy line then connected it to a similar shape to the right.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Smoke?”

The room started getting more and more noisy as other students joined in on the discussion.

“No, I think it is fire.”

“Where?”

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

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

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

Interrupted by a collective gasp, she was prompted to come to a window and take a look outside.

Where a pillar of smoke had been rising before, now was rising an expanding cloud of fire. In a few seconds a distant explosion reached their ears.

“That seems to be coming from that new chemical factory.”

“I hope nobody's injured.”

“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 filled the room as the students returned to their seats, unwillingly tearing their eyes away from the windows.

Aeri spent the remaining half of the class focusing back on the subject, though she couldn't help but cast a glance back at the window every few minutes, though the teacher catching her getting distracted with angry eyes would give Aeri a short boosts of attention.

Finally, a ring resonated in the halls, making her exhale with a relief. Though the relief wouldn't not last long. Her face darkened as she collected her belongings into her bag. Gloomy, she traversed the halls of the building.

She soon arrived to a room with two blue leaves placed together in the shape of a heart depicted on both sides of the doors. In a long corridor behind the doors only a black-haired student in a white uniform with the same two-leaved symbol on a blue armband sat at a desk in a small alcove.

After Aeri presented her student card to her, she took a pen and started writing something in a journal. Before she was done writing, she stretched her right hand sideways.

Taking the gesture, Aeri walked down corridor lined with five numbered doors on each side and one at the end.

She stopped to face the door number eight, pushed the handle, and entered inside.

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

She was greeted by silence from the three occupants who laid still in their beds.

Aeri crossed the room to take a chair under a window, which she then placed next to the bed of the marine-lustre dark-haired girl. After putting her bag and the weapon down, she took a seat.

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

In her head, Minali’s voice rang: ‘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 clenched her fists.

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

Another voice replaced Minali’s as cold purple eyes surfaced from the depths of her memory: ‘...what happened afterwards was the result of your own impulsiveness.’

She clenched her fists even harder.

“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 turned to the door, her eyes widened, when she heard a familiar voice echoing through the corridor.

“...already received a request?”

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

Aeri clenched her teeth, rage swirling within her, as four girls in grey uniforms briefly appeared in the door frame.

She jumped from the chair. Her trembling hands reached downwards to grab Arc Emitter but suddenly froze as yet another voice rang 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 remained in suspended state as her emotions clashed with the reason. The clash was interrupted by a sudden thud as something hard hit the floor behind her.

As she turned, she found a large glass-plate-looking object near Minali’s bed.

“Minali? Minali! MINALI!”

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

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

“It’s Minali! Something’s wrong. Her grimoire suddenly veiled-out.”

“What?”

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

After checking Minali’s pulse, she paced the box on a cabinet next to the bed and opened its lid. With a push of a button, the box emitted a short crackling sound as nine vertical slits on the inner side of the lid flashed yellow along with two coin-sized lights that flashed red and green.

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

The vertical slits began flashing in spikes, each bar reaching a different height. The first spike drew a curve that started high at the first and the second bars, then rapidly fell through the next two, and went low until hitting the bottom at the seventh bar. The second spike followed almost immediately, drawing the same curve but reaching smaller heights. This pattern repeated in an even rhythm, each two spikes followed by a flash of green light.

After that, the girl rotated a few knobs and adjusted the position of the sensor, placing it above Minali's left breast.

This time the bars drew a less sharp rounded hill with a small bump at the second bar followed by a steady decline. Instead of brief spikes, the lights on the bars rose and fell slowly. After the second rise, which reached a little bit higher, the green light flashed again.

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

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

“Then why did her grimoire veil-out?”

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

Aeri looked at the girl with anxiety, expecting a worrying revelation, but instead got a fist landing on her head.

“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 closed the box and angrily left.

“You could be a little quieter yourself.”

With a sigh, she looked at her friend...

“Minali, just what—”

...when she heard the Ashen Kol's voices again.

“Should we make haste? Every minute counts.”

“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 got pulled back into the state of uncertainty, but calmed down a bit after glancing back at Minali.

“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 placed her hand on the chair, about to seat, when a thought crossed her mind.

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

Aeri darted to the door, peeping into the corridor. After seeing the Ashen Kol off with her gaze, she approached the room number nine on her toes. She slowly pushed down the handle, cautious not to trigger a clank, and squeezed her head through the gap, seeing vacant beds in an empty room.

She dived out and closed the door.

As she looked to the left, she found red eyes staring directly at her, the girl’s arms folded with her index finger tapping on her forearm.

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

The longer it took Aeri to come up with something, the more the girl’s eyes narrowed, the heavier each tap of her finger became.

“I was already leaving!”

She dashed past the girl and dived into the room, picking up her contraption and bag in a haste.

As she was about to leave, her eyes fell onto Minali’s grimoire by her bed. She stayed motionless for a few seconds, her eyes glued to it. Pushing the chair aside, she opened the door of the cabinet behind it, where a dark-blue messenger’s bag rested.

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

She took out a symmetrical device formed of two metal forearm-length rods with clamps at both ends, a strap closer to one end, and a handle on the opposite side. After attaching the device to the grimoire’s crystal body and fixing it on her arm, she left the room in a rush.

With the ward's doors behind her, she tried to locate her adversaries amongst the crowd of people walking around but without success. Trying to locate them through the hall's windows yielded no success either. She then recalled the bits of their discussion she caught in the corridor.

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

Her bet paid itself off after several minutes when a tram stop came into her view, where a few dozen people stood near the tracks, her targets amongst them.

Aeri found the nearest wall to stick to, hiding herself, just in case an unwanted glance would come her way.

Ten minutes passed, tremor started spreading through the concrete under her feet, as two dozen tonnes of metal spread neared the stop.

When the doors slid open, Aeri patiently watched the passengers seeping inside and filling the seats until the four students in grey entered the car in the front. She then waited some more, expecting them to take seats as well, but after travelling half the length of the car, they just stopped.

Tch! Screw it.

With the window of opportunity starting to close, she dashed to the doors of the tail car and dived into the first vacant seat her eyes could locate.

The tram took her on a ten-minute journey, during which Aeri fixed 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 moved at the fourth stop.

Aeri got up and walked to the doors, her eyes following Kiara's group. After disembarking, they exchanged a few words, and then hastened eastwards.

Before the doors closed, Aeri leaned forward and landed, one foot after the other. With enough distance put between her and the Ashen Kol, she followed them at the same pace.

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

It finally hit her when a gust of the wind from North-East hit her nostrils with a scent of smoke that had some unfamiliar scent to it, something not natural but rather man-made. She looked in the direction the smell was coming from and saw a dissipating black veil stretching into the sky.

Is that the site where the explosion occurred?

When she focused back on the road, the four girls vanished following a left turn on the road. After reaching the spot, she halted her pace for a second, inspecting the environment down the turn.

The road stretched for fifty metres, ending at the gates that served as an entrance to a stone-wall enclosed territory, housing an array of buildings, enveloped by a web of thick metal tubes. The smoke appeared to be coming from somewhere in the centre of it.

The girls finally stopped at the gates, through which people and carriages passed every few minutes. After talking to people that stood guard outside, they were gestured to enter, and disappeared behind the walls.

Seeing how this might have been the end of her pursuit, she switched to walking.

“Excuse me, can I—”

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

“No, I mean, I’m... I’m here...”

As the man started looking inquisitively at her, she decided to break the conversation before it became awkward.

“Thank you.”

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

Like instructed, she followed a chain of red arrow-shaped signs with a hand-drawn symbol depicting two opposite spirals that flow into each other through a slanted vertical line, which was crossed by two horizontal lines in the middle.

All around her a lot of people were in constant motion. A few were standing in groups discussing something. Nobody had their hands empty: pen and paper, axes, mauls, and... stretchers, carrying people whose exposed body parts were covered in burns, bruises, cuts, and blood that spread through bandage threads. It made the nerves in her stomach ripple with unpleasant sensation.

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

She continued her way, now arbitrarily navigating through the narrow corridors between the tents, her ears shifting focus amongst the chorus of voices.

“Are you sure that will suffice?”

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

“Got it. Nali, let's go.”

A second before Yeona's head appeared between tent's curtains, Aeri jumped into a space between two tents and hid behind one.

After Yeona and Nali walked away, she got closer to the back of the tent where the other two Ashen Kol members remained. The back curtains loosely connected, creating a gap through which Aeri tried to observe what the two girls were up to. Having a hard time observing through the limited angle, her fingers gently moved the left side of the curtains.

She saw the backs of two grey coats standing next to the third of six beds. They spent there about ten minutes. Aeri couldn't see what they were doing, only imagine as she heard fabric get torn and metal tools pulling something from

flesh. The man they operated did his best not to let the pain seep through his teeth.

Eunah then took two vials with brown and black liquids inside, opened a cap on the brown one, and brought it to the man's mouth.

“What's... this?”

“Analgesic.”

“Heh. Could've given it earlier.”

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

“Then keep it for someone who needs it.”

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

“I'll manage.”

“If you say so.”

She closed one vial and opened the other, carefully measuring the flow of the liquid as it dripped onto the wound. The moment a drop splat, the man clenched his teeth and shut his eyes tight.

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

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

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

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

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

I've seen enough.

Aeri walked from behind the tent and, after confirming the other two girls were not outside, traced her way back to the gate.

As she was about to leave, a ruckus drew her attention.

A blonde woman and a younger brown-haired girl in white loudly argued. They stood near a carriage with two men in red holding a patient on a stretcher.

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

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

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

“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 stopped and then hesitantly approached the two.

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

The blonde girl near the carriage sighed and covered her eyes with her hand momentarily.

“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.”

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

“Then what are you even doing here?”

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

“Then what do you even want?”

The woman started losing patience, showing signs of irritation.

“I might be able to help you confirm internal injuries.”

“HOW?”

“I have a way.”

Aeri released the grip on Minali's grimoire and placed it on the ground along with Arc Emitter and the bag, from which she swiftly produced two metal pieces, which levitated and detached.

“I can use it to look inside. Kind of.”

“Kind of?”

“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 turned to look at the two.

“So where do I need to look?”

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

“Here.”

Aeri's hands guided the device, placing the two metal pieces to both sides of his chest. After a lightning arc jumped between them, she lifted the device and placed it in a vertical position between the two medical workers.

Both came closer, their eyes stressed as they looked at the lightning arc that now jumped in three dimensions instead of a plane, creating a shape that recreated a section of the man's body.

“So...”

“So... what am I looking at?”

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

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

Aeri then turned to look at the woman, who shook her head in response.

“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.”

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

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

“No... his lung appears to be intact.”

“Are you sure?”

“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.”

“Bend? This can only mean that—”

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

The two men reoriented themselves in the opposite direction and promptly left.

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

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

“Grimoire? Like a book?”

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

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

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

“I guess I could—”

The girl grabbed Aeri's arm and pulled along with her back to the ward.

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

“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.”

“Understood.”

After they split, the girl dropped into two tents and was about to enter the third one, where she almost collided with Kiara, who was headed outside.

“Sorry. Um... you’re...”

“Kiara.”

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

“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.”

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

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

Kiara joined the girl outside and skimmed over the area. Not being able to locate Yeona or Nali, she let out a call.

“Yeona.”

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

“I’m here. What is it?”

“I’ve been told that you have checked a patient—”

“No, not her. It was the other girl.”

“Nali? She wouldn’t take the responsibility of making such an unsure conclusion.”

“What conclusion?”

“A punctured lung, most likely.”

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

“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 spoke on her behalf as she frowned to the extent that her cold emotional front allowed her to.

“Is she talking about...”

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

“Sure, she should be at the other end.”

The girl took Kiara to a tent at the far end of the ward territory, where Aeri stood next to a bed. Even from the back, Kiara instantly recognised her, her face showing unconcealed displeasure.

“What are you doing here?”

Aeri’s hands momentarily tightened the grip on her grimoire as Kiara’s voice hit her eardrums.

“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 remained unaffected by this response, the girl smiled with unease, not sure if it was a joke.

“You are not qualified for this job.”

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

“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 they continued their discussion, the girl grew increasingly nervous, making her steadily lose control of her facial muscles as her smile started dissipating.

“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.”

“A contraption for identifying injuries?”

Unexpectedly, this brought a sudden change in Kiara’s attitude. Somehow this information made her look both curious and surprised.

“Yes.”

Aeri closed her grimoire, turned, and took a few steps to look directly into the purple eyes.

“It’s called ‘None of your damn bitch’s business’.”

The change in Kiara’s expression didn’t last long, with now some resentment added on top.

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

“Sorry.”

“Forgive us.”

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

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

“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 did not respond, just continued her way.

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

“It’s her.”

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

“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.”

After exchanging a few more words, the group disbanded, returning to tents in the same pairs.

As the shades around the ward stretched and changed the angle following the movement of the sun, the area became progressively emptier. With fewer people in the need of medical care, some medical workers got to leave to take a much deserved rest.

Aeri closed her grimoire after inspecting another patient and exited a tent, where her guide finished talking to her superior.

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

“This was the last one.”

She approached Aeri, grabbing and raising her arms, holding them close to her chest with sparks in her eyes.

“Thank you so, so much!”

“I didn't do that much.”

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

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

She hurried to leave until the embarrassment overcome her, slowing her pace as she neared the gates, and coming to a full stop just short of taking two steps outside.

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

“Do you think we should be worried?”

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

After a few seconds of intense staring, Aeri was about to take her leave when a loud sound shifted her focus.

“Hey, you, Vanguard.”

A group of four girls approached the Ashen kol with aggressively confident steps. Their blue uniforms with gold edging were covered with pieces of metal armour, each having pieces that covered different parts of their bodies, each carrying a different arms, be it a sword or a halberd.

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

“What have you been doing here?”

“Whatever we have been doing here is none of your—”

Kiara raised her arm, interrupting Yeona.

“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 reflected as irritation in the girl's eyes.

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

“The name ‘Naguard’ does not tell me anything.”

“Naguard, Unity?”

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

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

“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 seemed to make a sufficient response for Kiara not to add anything to it.

“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 briefly moved to the side where she noticed Aeri, who, seeing how this conversation was irrelevant to her, turned her feet in the other direction and started walking away.

“Tayra.”

The girl tapped on the group leader’s shoulder. After following the direction her kol-mates index finger pointed to, she gave the girl a nod. The girl then broke from the group, whilst Tayra turned her attention back to Kiara.

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

“Dispatched by whom?”

“By our academy.”

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

“Since the 12th of Heatherin, 151 with the establishment of Emergency...”

Meanwhile the silver haired girl caught to Aeri.

“Excuse me, I must ask you to halt.”

“What? Are you talking to me?”

“Yes. What is your name?”

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

“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 made Aeri's intestines stir.

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

“I'm afraid I have to insist.”

For a few seconds, Aeri fiercely locked eyes with the girl, whose unshaken reaction infuriated her even more. Unexpectedly, Aeri relaxed, mirroring the calmness of her opponent.

“Fine. If you insist...”

Casually, she opened her bag and produced a metal cylinder from it. With a push of a thumb, a round disc at the top sunk into the case with a click.

“Here, take some rest.”

She lightly tossed the device to the girl, who caught it and looked at it with confusion.

“...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—”

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

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

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

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

“Go on.”

As if not even acknowledging their threat, Aeri kept 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 looked in their direction as it kept hanging over her shoulder.

After a few moments of prolonged silence, Aeri bent down, took the device from the hand of the girl on the ground, and walked away. With enough distance put between them, Aeri released a lightning discharge into the sky.

As the three girls watched Aeri walk into the sunset, Nali silently broke from the group towards the nearest alley whilst Yeona touched 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.

“What is the meaning of this?”

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

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

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

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

“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.”

“I would rather have my answers now.”

“We’ve had enough of this nonsense.”

Yeona walked from behind Kiara and attempted to go past the girl but stopped with an arm pushing against her shoulder. She looked at her and then placed her hand over the girl’s forearm.

A quiet electrical crackle followed that made Tayra jolt back.

“If that’s how you want it.”

One hand over the other, she pulled out her swords. One of them fell to the ground even before it disconnected from the sheathe as the hand holding it unfurled and started uncontrollably convulsing.

“I’ll break both of your arms for this!”

She seemingly regained control over her limb and attempted to swing her other sword but the hit landed onto the concrete as she suddenly fell to one knee.

“Is this how Vanguard fights, with dirty tricks?”

“This isn’t a fight. You are not our enemy.”

“The feeling is not mutual.”

Tayra looked back at the two other girls, who responded by drawing their arms. The girl in front of Eunah drew her halberd with blades on both ends of the shaft just in time to deflect a cylindrical projectile propelled from Eunah’s contraption. The metal shell bounced upwards.

As she was about to close the distance and make a swing, she looked at her raised right arm. From the metal object that should have had flown away stretched several green-brown vines that tightly enveloped her hand, binding it to the shaft and slowly creeping down her forearm.

The distraction gave Eunah an opportunity to make another shot, which the girl failed to parry. With just a few centimetres between the girl and a shell, a web of vines sprawled from it, wrapping around her hands and torso. A following shot tied together her legs. She struggled to balance for a few seconds and fell.

At the same time, the third girl drew a large two-handed sword from behind her back, its wide elongated blade flashing bright reflecting the sunlight. As if pumping fire through veins, the area around her eyes glowed, colouring the whites around the edges underneath the brown forelocks.

The blade flew away and landed on the ground behind her after a concentrated air stream hit her wrist. She quickly located where the attack had come from, seeing Nali aiming at her from a balcony on the second floor of a building behind Yeona. With a sidestep she blocked Nali's sight, putting Yeona between them, and got into close quarters in two rapid steps.

As she raised her hand to land a blow with her fist, Yeona ducked a split second before Nali made another shot, hitting the girl in the chest and sending her flying. After sliding through the concrete surface for a few metres, she managed to group up and get on her two, but hesitated to take action again.

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

The Ashen Kol moved in unison, just walking away as if nothing had happened.

“We won't forget this.”

“Then next time I'll make this permanent.”

Yeona did not stop or even turn as she left the reply.

“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.”

Eunah's warning forced the girl on the ground clench her jaws tight, sweat breaking, and fear manifesting through her widened eyes.

Nali appeared from the valley and then promptly caught with the rest.

Before they took a turn and vanished from their opponents' sight, Yeona chuckled.

“What made you say that?”

“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 walked, Aeri's mind appeared to be somewhere else.

She didn't react and continued her way even as the Magister stopped in front of her.

“Hi, Aeri.”

“Oh, Magister. Hello. Where are you heading?”

“Home. As does everyone in this hour.”

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

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

“Sure...”

For the next five minutes, both walked in silence, though the Magister caught her casting occasional glances at him. Eventually, he opened his mouth, but so did Aeri, both interrupting each other.

“Yea, you go first.”

“I take it you had an eventful day.”

“Is it that obvious?”

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

“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.”

She looked at the Magister, her face expressing some guilt.

“You don't seem to be angry.”

“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.”

“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 switched his focus to inside his mind as he went silent for several seconds.

“Emergency Relief Corps. That must be it.”

“Emergency Relief Corps? What is that?”

“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 recreated the image of the corridor in the ward that she visited a few times so far. The part that lied beyond her friends’ room was 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 doors at the end of that narrow space.

Unlike the numbered doors, 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 overlaid by a black rhombus within it. The image was crowned with a sign that read ‘ERC’.

“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.”

“Actually, yes, that is exactly the case.”

“What do you mean?”

“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 didn’t comment. Instead her facial muscles froze, reflecting her mind being paralysed by frustration.

“This doesn’t make any sense!”

“But you just said that it should be the case.”

“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?”

“Sorry, but I really don’t have an answer to this.”

“I don’t expect you to. Sorry. I was just expressing my frustration.
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH! 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?”

“Who are you referring to?”

“The trespasser, from the other day.”

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

“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?”

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

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

“*Students* from the Sorceress academy. That makes them sorceresses.”

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

“I really don’t know.”

“None.”

“Then why do they identify as Sorceress League?”

“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’.”

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

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

“Well, technically, I am.”

“Technically?”

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

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

“I’m just sticking to the original pronunciation of the term.”

“How? It’s the first time I’m hearing this.”

“I understand the confusion. But it’s not the academic title used in educational establishments.”

“Then what is it?”

“A mockery.”

“A... mockery? I’m even more confused now.”

“Magistern is a combination of two words: ‘magi’ and ‘stern’, which mean—”

“‘Magic’ and ‘clean’. These are Martetradian words.”

“Yes.”

“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?”

“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.”

“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?”

“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.”

“We can take care of ourselves. We’re not slaves.”

Aeri blushed and broke eye contact with him.

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

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

“Something?”

“Nevermind. It’s not important.”

“What, am I not worthy of trust?”

“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."

"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 cast a glance at Aeri, the internal struggle written all over his face.

"Extraction chamber. You know what that is, right?"

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

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

"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?"

"One touch is what she needed."

"What?"

"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?"

"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."

"Prime Offensives?"

"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 lifted Arc Emitter.

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

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

“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.”

“Brand?”

“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 got swept away by a wall of air that rushed towards them. The force of collision swept both away just as easily. Whilst the Magister tumbled and landed on the ground, Aeri took a much harder hit, her body meeting the trunk of a tree.

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

After hitting the ground, she attempted to get up, but the pain that radiated from her core drained all the strength from her limbs. She barely managed 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 saw before her vision completely faded was the Magister’s unsuccessful attempt to communicate with the person, which resulted in her throwing a punch that didn’t reach him, but produced a shockwave that made him fly outside Aeri’s field of view.

Everything was red.

Aeri opened her eyes and instantly frowned as the rays of the sun hit her eyes.

“Uh... what...”

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

“Ack!”

Where am I? Why am I here?

She got up and looked around, trying to locate any clues that would point her to how she ended up here. Her eyes then locked on a bag that lied on the pathway.

After she walked to the bag and picked it, images flashed in her head in rapid succession, restoring the picture of the events that preceded.

“Magister! MAGISTER!”

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

After picking up her contraption, she promptly scurried away.