

Nomad Void

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Savellawell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

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Pursuit

In a long hall, Aeri measures its width with her steps. The dark marks on the floor indicate she has been here for quite some time.

Anxious, whenever she finds herself biting a thumb nail, she pulls it away from her mouth to have some sense of control.

Bouncing between the two walls, she casts a glance into the depth of the hall at each turn, repeating this until two figures emerge heading in her direction.

Seeing how they take their time traversing the space, she moves towards them, accelerating the pace.

AERI

There you are! Finally. You should have been here half-an-hour ago!

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Excuse me, do we have an appointment? Eraban, do I have an appointment with representatives of any—

AERI

The Magister has been kidnapped!

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Oh, I see... Actually, no, I don't see. What are you talking about? Kidnapped? How? Which Magister? Miss...

AERI

Aeri. The one— What's his name? The new one. He was in the hearing with me last week.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Rensin?

AERI

Yes! Yes. That one.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

And you say he has been kidnapped? I don't think there are Magisters that rich to be kidnapped. Is this perchance some kind of a joke? If so, I don't have time for this.

Aeri lifts the bottom part of her coat and the black shirt underneath it, exposing her abdomen, painted in hues of blue and purple around the centre.

AERI

Does this look like a joke to you?

Chusuran responds by turning away and putting his hand in front of his face.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Please, young lady, refrain from such inappropriate actions.

Aeri pulls the shirt down, allowing Chusuran to re-establish eye contact.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

I can see you have quite a bruise, but what does it have to do with your statement?

AERI

'Quiet a bruise'? I thought I would spit my intestines out. If it wasn't for my Ward, I wouldn't be walking now. I doubt I would even be breathing. Somebody did this to me, and that somebody kidnapped the Magister.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

All right, I see you're quite serious. Mind if we take it to my office?

Not giving Aeri a chance to object, Chusuran walks past her, increasing his pace only to a symbolic degree. Her irritation almost reaches the boiling point when they reach the room doors.

Volumes of light flood the dimly illuminated hall as the doors open. Aeri gets dazzled as she crosses the doorstep, not by the contrast of light, but the contrast of the interior. With the earlier visits to Magisters' offices shaping the expectation of light pale-blue walls, functional white furniture, and just a few

extra items that would stand out, her mind takes a second to adjust it when instead she beholds paintings of snowy landscapes contrasting with warm yellow colours of the surrounding walls, wavy patterns of the dark-red wood of the furniture, and extra items that are larger both in number and quality, such as a wall shelf behind a desk with miniature bottles of liquors.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Eraban—

AIDE ERABAN

I'll brew coffee.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Yes.

As the aide walks to a corner, Chusuran takes a seat by his desk, places one hand on top of another, and looks at Aeri.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Let us start from the beginning. What exactly happened?

AERI

Yesterday I was walking home with the Magister. We were talking and then suddenly we were blasted away. I passed out, and when I woke up, he was already gone.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

And how do you know whoever did this to you kidnapped him? Did you consider the possibility of him just running away?

AERI

Because I saw him being assaulted by the same person.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Didn't you say you passed out?

AERI

I didn't pass out immediately.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

It is not uncommon for people to misinterpret things right before they lose consciousness.

AERI

So what do you suggest? The Magister ran away, left me there, and decided to take a day off?

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

It is dangerous for non-witches to get involved in witch fights, so he could have got scared.

AERI

You don't seem to know the Magister at all. And what are you suggesting? I'm making this up? Do I need to show you the bruise again?

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Please don't. I do not doubt that somebody assaulted you. I am just having a hard time coming up with a reason for anybody to kidnap Magister Rensin—*any* Magister. As I already mentioned, Magisters' salary is not reflective of their skills and knowledge. Do you happen to remember who assaulted you? Maybe it will give us some clues.

AERI

Yes. Yes! I remember. I didn't see her face, but she had blonde hair, short, and kind of messy. Grey trousers. And white shirt. Though you can hardly call it white, cause it was kind of dirty and torn in places.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

This is somewhat vague, but it is better than nothing. All right. We will give it an hour, just to be sure. If the Magister does not show up, we will take it to constables.

AERI

To constables?

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Yes... That's where you file reports on missing persons.

AERI

You should do something! We should start searching now! Who knows what they are going to do to him.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Young lady, it seems you have a wrongful impression of the Magistertum. We—
Eraban, help me out here.

After a short pause, where no response follows, both Chusuran and Aeri turn to look at him.

Eraban just blankly stares at Aeri, standing next to a cupboard with his hand reaching for a mug on a shelf.

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

Eraban?

AIDE ERABAN

Ah, sorry, I got lost in the thought. You see, Aeri...

As Eraban starts explaining, he takes the mug and returns to a table with a brewing machine.

AIDE ERABAN

...the employees of the academy are, well, employees. Harsh as it sounds, they are replaceable. So being employed by a coven does not grant one any protection by the coven or law enforcement. Neither does any coven grant a Magistertum any power outside the respective academy. In these circumstances, the case of the Magister's disappearance is no different from that of any other person.

AERI

So what, you are just going to sit here and do nothing?

ADMINISTRATOR CHUSURAN

We are not going to do nothing. We are going to do what we can. It's just what we can is not much.

Aeri's emotions reach the boiling point, forcing her to storm from the room like a cork on a bottle, expressing her frustration and anger in a scream that fills Chusuran's office.

The metal hinges almost tear screws from their sockets under the stress as Aeri pushes the doors on her way out. With her emotions clouding both her hearing and sight, she does not even notice the left door hitting someone.

STUDENT

Ouch! Hey!

The call fails to catch up to Aeri as her emotions drive her to her next destination.

AERI

Hane!

As Aeri bursts in, Hane almost jumps from her abrupt entry, the pen in her hand going astray from its intended path.

HANE

Have you not been taught manners? Do you always —

AERI

They've kidnapped him!

HANE

What are you talking about?

AERI

Somebody kidnapped the Magister.

HANE

Please tell me you're joking. He is late for the work so this would be a terribly bad timing.

Without a word uttered, Aeri's face tells Hane what she needs to confirm this. As she gets up and comes closer to her, she sees how deeply she's troubled through the distress in her eyes.

HANE

You *aren't* joking. Tell me everything.

AERI

I met the Magister on my way home yesterday. We walked home—I mean I told him I was walking home, and I was, but I wanted to talk to him, so I asked him to accompany me. We walked for some time and then somebody attacked us. She knocked both of us out, and when I woke up, he was already gone with only his bag left.

HANE

Who attacked you? Do you know her?

AERI

No. I didn't see her face. She didn't wear a uniform, but it was a Sorceress witch.

HANE

How do you know?

AERI

The invocations. She used air invocations and she didn't have a contraption, so she must be a Sorceress witch.

HANE

I understand. We need to take it to the Administrator immediately.

AERI

I have already talked to him, he said that they can only file a report, so I came to you.

HANE

There must be something more we can do. I will contact the Academy of Administration, but...

With whatever insignificant glimmer of hope Hane has sparked, Aeri already knows that this ‘but’ is going to douse it.

HANE

...the Administrator most likely tells the truth. I don't imagine what else we can do in this situation.

AERI

But... even you... I just can't with you, people! I'll do something myself!

HANE

Aeri—

The room windows slam as Aeri leaves the Magister's office, her anger channelled into the force with which she forcefully closes the doors.

Despite her bold words, she now stands in the hall, her hand on a handle, her thoughts and muscles both paralysed.

She lets go of the handle, and walks away, slowly, the control over her body giving her the sense of control over her mental state.

AERI

“Calm down. Think. Why would anyone kidnap a Magister? Why would— No, *who* would kidnap a Magister. A Sorceress witch... judging by her height, she must be a student. I don't imagine the coven ordering me to assault anyone. No, she must be a coven witch. But... her clothes. Worn and torn. A disguise? She chose the time when there was no one around. No. That doesn't make sense. She would have only drawn attention. Damn it! I'm back to square one. A Sorceress witch... Sorceress witch...”

Something clanks in the corridor, and a gentle breeze blows over Aeri: a student at the end of the hall has just opened a window.

Aeri approaches the window and stares into the distance. The vast cityscape of Inakray is all blurred. Only one object has clear outlines: a towering block of buildings with spires, their pristine white walls and silver bell towers shining bright in the rays of the sun.

After lingering there for a minute, she leaves.

As the tower bells ring, Orena swiftly closes a book and places her belongings into a bag.

Whilst traversing the halls of the academy, she catches occasional glances directed at her, be it a lone student passing her or a group of students suddenly going quieter as their eyes trace her in synchrony.

Her response to this attention is subtle: she just breaks eye contact and looks straight ahead, just going her way. Her face does not give away any emotion.

After crossing the doorstep of the main entrance, she exhales and skims over the area.

Some of the students take refuge from the heat in the shade under the protrusions of the U-shaped main building of the academy. Others choose a cosier place, resting under the trees of the surrounding park space.

Orena focuses on a space to the right side, which is less populated, and locates there a vacant bench.

She makes just a few steps, her mind already feeling her skin cooling down in solitude, when a loud shout draws her attention and that of a few students around her.

AERI

You there!

Orena's hand twitches, instinctively reaching to assume a defensive stance, as she sees Aeri approaching her, but stops midway as her consciousness takes the place of her instincts.

AERI

What is the deal with you and your wretched coven?

ORENA

What do you want from me? I have already told you everything. Leave me alone already!

She attempts to walk away from her unwanted acquaintance but is forced to turn back feeling a hand tightly grabbing her arm.

AERI

You're not walking away until I find out what you have to do with his kidnapping!

Orena yanks her hand, breaking free from the grasp. Anger manifests on her face whilst her eyes start to darken.

ORENA

I don't know what you are talking about!

AERI

The Magister that saved your arse on the trial. He has been kidnapped by your cronies and I bet it has something to do with you.

The anger dissolves in an instant, replaced by shock and frustration.

ORENA

What? How? What does it have to do with me or my coven?

AERI

I can't think how anyone else could have blasted me a dozen metres away with an air invocation. And I don't believe it is a coincidence that your academy did not bother defending you at the trial. I thought that they didn't care, but now I think they wanted you expelled. For some reason. And I need to know what that reason is.

ORENA

I—

Orena looks to the side, where a bunch of students stay silent observing the two.

AERI

What are you looking at? Mind your own business!

As if hit by the energy of Aeri's emotions, the people around stagger a little and start moving away.

Aeri abruptly turns to the other side with a similar effect. Only two students seem unaffected, one of them unsure what to do as she looks at her friend, who locks her eyes with Aeri.

AERI

Can I help you with something? Go on, ask.

The girl unwillingly turns and follows the suit of the others.

AERI

So?

ORENA

They want my grimoire burned. Maybe even me gone.

As she speaks, Orena changes in face. Her darkened expression emanates negative energy that spreads to Aeri, her anger now doused.

AERI

What? Gone? Just what did you do that your coven would go so far?

ORENA

Not just the Sorceress League. All covens. I am a threat to all of them, because I— Because I am the revenant.

Her tone changes with the last sentence, as if she mustered the strength to accept what she said.

AERI

What in the world is 'the revenant'?

ORENA

A witch of the old. She can steal the contents of other witches' grimoires, so she targets the most knowledgeable ones. Her victims lose the ability to exercise

witchcraft. She has been defeated in the past, but no matter how many times she is defeated, she always comes back.

AERI

I hardly doubt covens would have let such a threat live. So you are capable of something similar?

ORENA

That is what I meant by defeated. She is immortal. Every time she is defeated, she returns several years later.

From Aeri's expression, Orena can tell that the more she explains the more confusing it gets.

ORENA

I *am* her, Devaura reborn.

The thing that should have set things straight seems to have the opposite effect, making Aeri loose speech as she raises a brow.

AERI

That's quite a story. I wanted to ask if you were serious, but I know you are serious because of what happened. So if you are so dangerous and you know they want to burn your grimoire, why are you still here? What are you waiting for? What are they waiting for?

ORENA

I don't know. I didn't know they wanted to burn my grimoire before the hearing. And then I just thought it was over for me before the Magister stood up for me. And now he's gone. Maybe that's why.

AERI

He's *not* gone. Not until I see it with my own eyes.

ORENA

Sorry, I didn't mean that he's dead. Just that he's out of their way. My verdict was not decided. I think they will now find me guilty. He's the only one who knows what really happened.

AERI

What really happened?

ORENA

Sorry. I didn't want to hurt anyone. I was only protecting myself until you hit me. That must be when she wakes up, when I lose control of myself.

AERI

She?

ORENA

Devaura.

AERI

Didn't you say you are her? Is she in your head trying to take control of your body or something?

ORENA

I don't know.

AERI

Then how do you even know you are the revenant?

Although her lips remain sealed, Orena's face gives the same answer.

AERI

So you think you are the revenant just because your coven said so?

ORENA

It's not just the coven. Some students believe this too. It all started when my Brand manifested for the first time. Another student recognised it as Devaura's invocation because someone from her family had been a victim.

AERI

So you believe you are the revenant because your coven thinks you are one because one student saw a similarity between your Brand and an invocation of some old witch?

ORENA

Yes.

AERI

That wasn't a question. I just summarised what you said to show you how ridiculous it sounds. Never mind. You seriously need to talk to someone. Someone else. I have important things to do. So take care, I guess.

ORENA

What—

As if she were waiting for it, Aeri stops just as Orena starts speaking, having barely made a few steps after turning her back to her.

ORENA

What are you planning to do?

AERI

Exactly what you said. I am going to tell them what really happened.

ORENA

Do you think they will let him go?

AERI

Of course not! I am going to keep searching. But if anything, I can at least rob them of the satisfaction of having their way.

ORENA

But how are you going to search for him?

AERI

I don't know! What do you want me to say? I have zero clues! My only hope was for you to clear things up so that my damn Brand would kick in, but that didn't work!

ORENA

Your Brand? You mean you know how to make one's Brand manifest?

AERI

No. I have a Brand. I just don't know how it works.

ORENA

Then how do you know you have one and that it can help you find the Magister?

AERI

I know I have one because it manifested in the past. It allows me to see events from the past, but I don't know what triggers it. It must be something related to those events.

Seeing how Orena struggles to come up with anything useful, Aeri just breaks the conversation and starts walking away, when someone else grabs her attention.

TAYRA

You have some nerve coming here after what you've done.

As Tayra marches towards Aeri, her hostility radiates from every aspect of her physique: brows coming together, crevices on her face formed by tense muscles, clenched fists, and aggressively heavy steps that make dust puff from under her feet.

Aeri inspects the girl with her eyes squinted. It takes a few moments to recognise a face she only saw once for a brief moment, one she would not recognise if it weren't for the girl's knight attire.

AERI

Oh, it's you. I don't have time to deal with you.

Aeri's attempt to leave is denied as Tayra closes the distance, her hand firmly locking Aeri in place wrapped around her wrist.

TAYRA

You're not going anywhere!

In response, Aeri helps Tayra get even closer, pulling her to the point of another physical contact, where her fist meets Tayra's face.

Tayra staggers. Her shock expressed via wide-open eyes, she swipes the skin under her nose, feeling a drop of blood running down. After looking at the red liquid spread across two of her fingers, she closes her palm into a fist and looks back at Aeri with fury that manifests through the bright yellow glow of her irises and even brighter white glow of her pupils.

With a step forward she seemingly attempts to grab Aeri by the fabric of her uniform with her left hand, but pulls it away the moment Aeri throws another punch at her. Slightly twisting her torso, she shifts her weight to the left, which makes the first fly a few centimetres away from her head, whilst at the same time throwing a cross-punch with her right hand, following with a left hook, and finishing the job with a hit to the abdomen.

AERI

Ack!

If the first two hits just staggered Aeri, the third makes her fold and fall to the ground.

As if to cement her superiority, Tayra makes a quick circular move with her head to throw her long green ponytail, which got in front of her body, back to where it belongs.

TAYRA

There. That should make you cooperative. You should know better not to—

With her guard down, Aeri grabs Tayra's ankles and pulls them towards her. Her armour and swords clank loudly as her back hits the ground.

Aeri immediately jumps atop Tayra, relentlessly pounding her, trying to get at least one punch through as her opponent covers her head with her arms.

AERI

You! Were! Saying! I! Can't! Hear you!

Whilst the two are engaged on the ground, a girl with dark brown-red eyes clad in a standard blue uniform casually walks to Orena. A circular knitted pendant with an intricate pattern, hung around her neck on a gold-blue string under her lush blond hair, jumps lightly on her chest with each step.

BLONDE GIRL

Hi, Orena. What's up?

ORENA

Oh, Lelya. Hi.

LELYA

Didn't know you fancied brawling.

As if it were cats fighting, both calmly observe Aeri and Tayra as they talk.

ORENA

Ah, no. I was just here when it happened.

LELYA

That's something new. Somebody invited a student of another academy to the dance. Go get her! Argh, sorry.

ORENA

She is... an acquaintance of mine.

LELYA

An acquaintance of yours? Wait, it's a Vanguard student. You do seem to attract those.

ORENA

Well, you see—

Tayra suddenly throws her legs up, wrapping them around Aeri. With a pull, she reverses their positions.

With Tayra's left hand grabbing her collar and the other pulled back, Aeri covers her head, preparing to take a hard hit, when...

GREEN-EYED GIRLD

Tayra! What is this behaviour?

A girl with a long axe behind her back approaches the two brawling girls. Her greenish hair, cascading from the right to the left, appears to be the result of dying it blue as the roots of her hair reveal a bright yellow natural colour. With more parts of her body covered in armour compared to Tayra, some parts of it clank with each step.

TAYRA

Huh, Tenka?

The distraction gives Aeri an opportunity to strike back at Tayra. She grabs the opponent around the collar, pulls and head-butts her, and then adds a punch to make her roll to the side.

TENKA

What are you thinking attacking a student of another academy within the walls of our academy? Explain yourself!

TAYRA

She was the one to attack me!

TENKA

Do you want me to believe a Vanguard student came and started a fight with you?

TAYRA

She attacked Nayun yesterday when we were investigating an incident, so I was going to take her in for questioning, but she decided to fight.

TENKA

Take her in? I can see how this could have unfolded. Do you understand what impression of us such behaviour creates?

TAYRA

I could care less about our image. She needs to answer and she must answer for attacking Nayun.

TENKA

Well, *I* care. And as long as I am the leader, I decide what is important. If you disagree, you are free to challenge my authority.

Tayra snorts and looks away in an unwilling acknowledgement, after which Tenka's eyes fall on Aeri.

TENKA

Can you, please, explain what exactly has happened?

AERI

That's not your business.

Tenka looks at Aeri with utmost disapproval. Before her prolonged silence starts oppressing everyone present, she sighs and closes her eyes for a few seconds.

TENKA

Is it so hard to act civilised? I asked politely, didn't I? Did I sound intimidating?

Her question is instead directed at Orena and Lelya, who in response rapidly shake their heads. The three then in synchrony look at Aeri. Their faces, painted with just a bit of inquisitive tint, make her feel patronised, as if they were adults expecting a child to explain her behaviour.

AERI

We had a disagreement about my options.

TENKA

Your options?

AERI

Regarding my freedom.

Tenka asks Tayra to comment on the matter by silently looking at her.

TAYRA

She just asked her to wait.

AERI

‘I am afraid I have to insist’ is not exactly ‘asking’ if you can read between the lines.

TAYRA

Maybe she should have—

TENKA

Tayra! This isn’t the first time your communication methods cause conflicts.

Several guttural sounds escape Tayra’s mouth in her futile attempts to retort whilst scorched by Tenka’s judgemental look.

TAYRA

Fine, maybe I could have handled it better. So what, do you expect me to just forget about it and we just go our ways?

TENKA

You brought this situation on yourself. But you know how to fix it or at least try.

Tayra’s face morphs a few times, as if an internal conflict was boiling under her skin, building pressure that escapes through her mouth in a heavy exhale. Shen then turns to Aeri with a brand new expression, not that much friendly, but at least cleansed of anger.

TAYRA

I apologise for my earlier behaviour. I acted impulsively and was out of line. We are investigating involvement of other students in industrial incidents, and it was suspicious to see Vanguard students on the site. So can you, please, ex—tell us why you were at the factory yesterday?

Visually she keeps her emotions under control but the persistency of her neutral expression shows how much efforts it takes her to keep it that way.

Though the apology and polite tone were questionably honest, she did make some steps to bring down the tension, earning the acknowledgement of the three other observers. Not respecting it will make Aeri frowned upon, so she has no other choice but to accept this as a challenge from Tayra.

Aeri exhales and smiles.

AERI

See how easy it is? You should have started with it. Since you apologised and asked nicely, I'll gladly tell you.

Lelya covers her mouth to hide a bright smile, though a chuckle that gets stuck in her throat betrays her.

AERI

You see, I was just there trailing the four other students of my academy that you talked to.

TAYRA

And why would you trail Vanguard students that were dispatched by the Emergency Relief Corps to assist in treating the injured?

AERI

Exactly to find out what they were up to, so thanks for confirming it.

Tayra's neutral face breaks, brows coming together, eyes slightly squinting.

TAYRA

Why would you want to know that?

AERI

Because they are bitches, and that is as much as you need to know.

TAYRA

Not as much as I would like to know.

TENKA

If it's—

LELYA

That is as much as you need to know! What's not so clear about it?

Tayra's shock at this sudden outburst of emotions reflects in Lelya's furious eyes. It confuses Aeri, even more so when the girl cools down just as suddenly.

TENKA

She's right. Her reasons are her own. I hope you are satisfied, Tayra.

TAYRA

You know what? I actually am. Even more than that.

Tayra finally gets up from the ground, brushing the dust from her clothes. Whilst leaving in silence, she casts just one frowning glance at Aeri, who mirrors the look.

After she's gone, Aeri stands up and starts tidying up. As she lifts her coat's bottom to tuck the black undershirt into her skirt, she lets out a barely audible painful moan after touching her abdomen.

LELYA

She hit you hard, didn't she?

TENKA

Tayra...

LELYA

Chill, will you?

TENKA

Sorry. I've just been too lenient with Tayra. She has taken it too far. I could let it slide with Unity, but she is on the way to antagonise every academy.

AERI

What she said. Chill. She didn't hit me harder than I hit her. It's just reminder from the other day.

TENKA

If it were her kol-mates, it doesn't make it any better. She bears just as much responsibility for their actions.

AERI

Aren't you the leader?

TENKA

I am the Witch Knights' leader, not her kol's hat.

AERI

Oh, I see...

LELYA

No, you don't.

ORENA

Tenka is the captain of the Witch Knights faction within the academy. Tayra and her kol belong to the Witch Knights.

AERI

Faction?

LELYA

Yes. As in a group of people that share something in common. Don't you have factions at Vanguard?

AERI

Yes, we do. It's called a kol.

LELYA

Something other than being friends?

AERI

Your kol are your friends at Vanguard. The only other thing we share is the Vanguard emblem.

TENKA

Things are different here. Being a part of the investigation committee does not give Tayra the right or excuse to beat students of other academies. Even more so when they have nothing to do with it.

AERI

Nobody beat me.

ORENA

Somebody did.

AERI

Well, it wasn't her or her friends. And I was taken by surprise.

Tenka tilts her head forward and covers her eyes, staying silent for a few seconds.

TENKA

Please tell me it wasn't another Witch Knights member.

AERI

No, it was — Forget it. It doesn't have anything to do with you.

TENKA

I hope so. But it has something to do with our academy, doesn't it?

ORENA

She was attacked by a coven witch.

TENKA

The Sorceress League?

Orena nods in response.

TENKA

How? What happened? And how do you know it was a member of the coven?

AERI

That's what I thought initially. But as you said, things are different here: you have some kind of a hierarchy, so maybe the Sorceress League just sent a student instead.

TENKA

Who do you take us for? We are students, not the Sorceress League's army. You see? This is exactly the kind of reputation we get and why I have to act strict with Tayra.

AERI

Sorry, I didn't mean it like that. It's just— Tch. Never mind.

LELYA

Hey, hey, now. It's all right. No need to be so stressed.

TENKA

So what brought you here? You didn't come here to seek justice, did you?
Otherwise, you would have reported it to the Magistertum.

ORENA

They kidnapped the Magister. He was with her when someone attacked them.

TENKA

The Magister?

ORENA

One from the Vanguard academy. He stood up for me during a hearing after —
after I —

Orena's face darkens.

Lelya intently stares at her for a moment. Then, as if struck by a sudden
realisation, she turns to look at Aeri, whose eyes are directed away, her face just
as grim. She again looks at Orena and then at Aeri, repeating this action several
times.

LELYA

W-w-w-wait! D-don't tell me it's her! This can't be the one I'm thinking about!

ORENA

Yes.

The difficulty of her admitting to it can be felt as she produces this word with an
exhale rather than uttering it.

LELYA

W-what happened? How did you end up together? And why she isn't angry?

AERI

I *am* angry. More than you know. Just... not at her.

ORENA

You... are not?

LELYA

But you do hold some resentment.

Aeri makes eye contact with Orena again for a moment, whose brows sink after seeing the confirmation in Aeri's eyes.

AERI

I can't help it, all right! I can't control how I feel. I might hold some grudge, but I don't resent her. I wouldn't blame her for any of it knowing she was just a victim.

LELYA

Victim? Well, yeah, you were the one who attacked her.

TENKA

So it was you. I heard the talk about a Sorceress student who fatally injured students of another academy. I never thought it was you, and I still don't believe you did it. There must be more to the story than that.

AERI

You don't say.

Everyone looks at Aeri in eager anticipation of more explanation.

AERI

As I said, she was just a victim. They used her as a tool to blame Harin.

ORENA

They?

AERI

The Ashen kol. You've met them, or rather, they made it so that you'd meet them. You overhearing their conversation about a heritage work, pointing you

to that mansion, hiding a core or whatever it was there, making an appearance at the entrance so that they could tell Harin they saw you with a contraption that belonged to her family, pointing Harin to you: they planned all of that. All so that they could get Harin expelled.

LELYA

Wow, you weren't lying about your academy.

ORENA

But... I still wounded her. I don't know how that happened, but something must have happened to make me lose control.

AERI

Someone happened. They rigged Harin's machina to make it go off when she approached you. But they were also there when it happened to make sure it goes bad. You might not remember it, but they hit you when you performed that weird invocation.

LELYA

That's really detailed. I take it they aren't as good of fighters as Tayra that you beat that confession out of them.

AERI

I wish I did.

ORENA

Then how do you know?

AERI

It's— I've seen it. It's what I told you about my Brand. It showed me those events.

LELYA

That's some powerful Brand. But then you should know who attacked you?

AERI

No. I wouldn't have come if I did. I hoped to learn something from Orena to trigger it, but this stupid thing just doesn't work.

LELYA

Something? Like something specific?

AERI

Anything. I don't know.

TENKA

If it was a coven witch, I am afraid we can do little to help you identify her. Apart from a few representatives, we don't know the faces of the League.

AERI

Wouldn't be of help anyway. I could only see her from the side.

LELYA

Are you sure it was a coven witch though?

AERI

My first thought was that she was a student, given her height, but I couldn't think of a way a coven would force a student to commit a crime, and you just confirmed this. But... given her appearance, I don't imagine why a coven witch would look like this, unless she was pretending to be homeless.

LELYA

Her appearance?

AERI

Her clothes were dirty and damaged, and her hair was messy.

Lelya's face expresses concern. She looks to the sides, first at Orena, then Tenka.

LELYA

What's wrong?

TENKA

Rumours. Specifically, one particular rumour, which I hope to be just a rumour. About why our academy ranks first by the number of failed students.

AERI

What? That can't be right. From what I know, *our* academy ranks first.

TENKA

That might be true with the first and second year students, but not the Dedication years. They say that the Sorceress academy has low entry requirements and high evaluation criteria to make students fail, expecting some of them will agree to do the League's dirty work in exchange for keeping their grimoires or, even worse, because becoming a part of the coven is their only chance in life.

AERI

I don't assume you know any to narrow it down.

TENKA

Unfortunately, I don't. I can only help narrow it down to her faction. I assume she didn't wear any armour or cutting weapons. Did she wield any blunt weapon, by any chance?

AERI

No. She was barehanded. The first hit hit me like a wall, and then she knocked me out with a hit to the stomach, as if it was an invisible fist. She knocked the Magister out the same way.

TENKA

Then she is not with either of the athletic factions. It's in your — wait... That does remind me of someone. There was one girl during my third year. I don't remember her name. She used techniques similar to what you described. I memorised her because she would often get into fights with Witch Knights. I never took interest in it so I don't know why.

LELYA

I mean, this sounds like some very simple air invocations. This might exclude your factions, but not that much of a help identifying someone within the ethereals.

TENKA

The thing is, I haven't seen her in months. Not just because of the ruckus. She really stood out because I have never seen her wear the academy uniform.

LELYA

Now that you said it, this does ring a bell. Short blonde hair, always wearing a white shirt and grey trousers, right?

TENKA

Yes.

AERI

Yes. She must be the one. That's exactly how she looked.

LELYA

Then we only need to find someone who can tell us more about her. Do you know any?

TENKA

I can ask other knights. I doubt they know much about her, but maybe someone can point you in the right direction.

LELYA

That's fine. I know a person who can help us.

TENKA

In this case, good luck.

LELYA

Let's go.

After they part their ways, Lelya takes the lead as the three of them enter the building.

Most students can't help but stare at an unusual guest. Even those that would previously gossip over Orena stop talking as they notice Aeri.

They come to a door made of red wood decorated with silver in a few subtle curls and lines. After a knock, an unbothered male voice invites Lelya in. As the door handle goes down, the corners of Lelya's mouth go up.

A brunet man by a desk is busy scratching something in a journal before him. His curly hair creates a hazy silhouette around the head as the sun shines through it.

He tucks a lock behind his ear with his free hand and inhales, about to say something, when Lelya gets ahead of him with a cheerful tone.

LELYA

Hi hiii, Magister!

As the air inside his respiratory tracts becomes static, his writing hand freezes, and his free hand covers his eyes. For a few seconds, there is only silence.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

What do you want, little fiend?

LELYA

How can you greet a student like that? I have friends with me, you know.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Just get to the point.

LELYA

We need to find some student. Can you look through some profiles to find who we are looking for?

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Sorry, but student profiles are for Magisters' eyes only. Just because you—

Before his tongue spits what's on his mind, his eyes give his mind a signal to stop after they make a slight move to focus on two other girls.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

You get what I mean.

LELYA

Oh, but it's not for me. It's for her.

She clarifies who she refers to with her thumb pointing at Aeri, to which the man raises a brow.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

I don't know what your argument here is. There are even fewer reasons, if there were any at all, to provide information about Sorceress students to a student of another academy.

LELYA

Even if she is a drop-out?

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Why would you need information about drop-outs?

LELYA

She can explain it better.

AERI

Hello, Magister. I'm Aeri Uylonyuk, a fourth year student of the Vanguard academy. Yesterday, I was walking home with Magister Rensin of the Vanguard academy. We were suddenly attacked by a Sorceress — by an unknown sorceress. I was knocked out and the Magister was kidnapped.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

That's a lot to take in. For starters — No, forget the starters. A Magister. Kidnapped. By a sorceress. For what possible reason?

AERI

We believe it has something to do with Orena's case.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

What case?

ORENA

Where I... injured Vanguard students. Lethally.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

As far as I am aware, there was only one student. There is a record of this incident, but no case since there were no witnesses, and neither you, nor she can tell what transpired.

ORENA

There was another. A few days ago. I... injured two more students. And during the hearing Magister Rensin stood up for me.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Stood up? In what way? What was our Magister doing then? Who represented you?

ORENA

No one.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

No one? Sorry, I have a hard time believing that.

AERI

But this is true. I can confirm that because I was there.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

And how are you involved in this? Were you a witness?

AERI

No. I was the one who attacked her. I am a member of the Kol of Omniscience. The students that Orena injured, including the one you mentioned, they are my kol-mates.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

You attacked *her*. And now you are here with her, telling me that there was a hearing, which I haven't heard about, during which nobody represented her, where a Magister of another academy stood up for her, and that this is somehow connected to an incident where a student of a Sorceress academy attacked you and kidnapped the said Magister. Did I miss anything that adds up to this chain of events? Because it doesn't sound absurd enough.

AERI

I know that sounds tall, and had anyone told me this a week ago, I would have reacted the same, but you can see that I am a Vanguard student. I don't think they make these here.

Aeri adjusts her contraption to bring it into the man's field of view.

AERI

I wouldn't have come here just to fool around. I don't know what else I can —
Oh! There's the Magister's bag.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

The Magister's bag?

AERI

Yes. It was left there after we were attacked.

His open palm makes the bag in her hands gravitate towards him. After getting a hold of it, he inspects the bag's contents, helping his eyes by moving and tilting the items inside. He notices a small rectangular object next to a book and takes it out, letting the daylight bring contrast to the card's paper surface.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

This is indeed a Magister's identification card.

His focus then shifts back to inside the bag, locking on a thin brown book, which swiftly replaces the card in his hand.

As he opens the book and starts skimming through it, one of his brows rises with each turn of a page, until both of his brows come together when he closes it before even reaching the end.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

This might look like a legitimate Magister's identification card, but this...

He lifts the book, holding it with just a few fingers, as if to show how lightweight it is.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

...is just a souvenir given to Magisters after a graduation. And this...

Letting go of the book in his hand, he takes another one from a drawer, placing it vertically on the desk with its thick spine facing the girls.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

...is a Magistern Code of Conduct. Unless it holds some sentimental value, I don't know why he would carry it over an actual code.

AERI

But...

ACADEMY MAGISTER

You said it was a sorceress who attacked you, and you don't even know who it was. Logically, I can assume it was a member of a coven. Not sure why you would think it was a sorceress—though given we know little to nothing about inter-coven politics, it might very well be—the only logical conclusion is that he is not a real Magister, and that the fact was uncovered.

AERI

But... no, it can't be. There must be— the seals! They have to mean something.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

The seals?

AERI

Yes. The seals of the covens. His code has them. That means that his code is legitimate and a code without them is not.

He puts one book onto the desk and returns to inspecting the other, reaching the end of it in a matter of seconds. His eyes squint, then a brow rises.

Still holding the opened book in his hand, he shifts the weight of his body. Metal rails of a drawer silently screech as he takes out an identical book, opening it, and placing it next to the other.

After his eyes jump back and forth a few times, they return back to the girls.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Yes. It does prove it's a legitimate item, but it does not prove it was originally his. They don't bear Magisters' names on them. I don't know what gave you the idea—though I have a feeling I do—but the validity of one document does not invalidate the other, unless one of them explicitly states so.

AERI

It was the Magister. He said that without the seals of the covens it's not legitimate or something. I don't remember the exact words.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

And why would you discuss such matters? What other ideas did he plant into your head?

AERI

It wasn't me. It was the other Magister. He said this during Orena's trial. It was why he got into an argument with him.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Another Magister? You mean he openly brought this up as an argument during a hearing with other Magisters present?

AERI

Yes.

He blankly stares at Aeri for a few seconds, not even blinking, after the logical chains in his mind start to crumble.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Fine. Let's hear it. All of it. From the very beginning. And don't miss a detail.

AERI

Do you need to hear about the students of my academy manipulating Orena to clash with Harin, my kol-mate?

In response, the man just lowers his head to burrow his face under his hands, and then looks at Aeri from under his forehead.

AERI

Right. It started with four students of my academy conspiring to create a conflict between Orena and my kol's hat, Harin, to get her expelled. Apparently she has been working on an arcane contraption similar to their kol's hat's, so she saw her as a competition.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

What is an arcane contraption?

ORENA

An artificial invocation device.

Before she continues, Aeri looks at Orena with a raised brow.

AERI

So they led Orena to what she believed was a heritage work, something that might hold secrets of witches of the old. And at the same time, they told Harin they saw Orena find it and that it might belong to her family. They rigged Harin's machina, her arcane contraption, to make it activate on its own when they were talking, which caused Orena to lose control and... perform this weird invocation.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Wouldn't it be better if you told this?

ORENA

I don't remember what happened. It's only when I talked to Aeri I could recall something.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

So I assume I can consider this a testimony of your kol-mate.

AERI

No. Harin is still unconscious. I saw what happened, with the help of witchcraft.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

It doesn't seem to be directly related to your incident, so I will assume this to be true for the moment. Continue.

AERI

I overheard a Magister of my academy discussing the incident when he mentioned that a Sorceress student was involved, and since Harin was taken to the Sorceress recovery ward, I found out that another student was taken there

at the same time, and that led me to Orena. I then ambushed her on her way home. She lost control again.

ORENA

I invoked Energy Syphon on instinct, but I didn't want to use it. I thought I almost had it under control, but then the Magister appeared and I got distracted. That was when I lost control of the invocation.

AERI

That checks. I avoided the hit, because my friend pushed me, but she and Sumi, who were with me, got hit, and are now unconscious, just like Harin. Then a hearing happened the next day. As Orena said, her Magister wasn't present, and that's why Magister Rensin objected when another Magister—I am not sure which academy he represented—wanted to make a verdict. They got into a fight over it, arguing about the differences in their codes. I wasn't in the right mood back then and didn't pay attention, so I only remember he mentioned the seals and that they made his code the legitimate one. It became heated very quick, so a Magister— no, the aide interrupted it and the hearing was postponed. Several days after, I met the Magister on the way home. Well, not exactly home. There was something on my mind that I wanted to discuss with him, so I walked with him. We then switched to discussing a major incident at the academy the other day and that was when we were attacked. When I—

ACADEMY MAGISTER

A major incident?

AERI

Oh, right. I don't think it is related to the case, but there was an incident at the academy with a Sorceress student involved. She used some invocation— probably a ritual—to make some of Vanguard students appear as reanimated dead. This caused chaos. From what the Magister told me, she had done this to sneak into— to steal a Vanguard's secret in short.

The man stands up and walks to a book shelf in a corner of the room.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Continue.

AERI

Well, that's all of it, I think. When I woke up, I visited the Vanguard academy's Administrator, but all he said he could do is file a report to a constable. And that's what brought me here. The attacker used air invocations to knock me out, so I turned to the only Sorceress student I knew hoping to find any leads.

He returns with a stack of folders in his hands, which then lands onto the desk surface. A few touches take the top one, open it, turn around, and push it to the end of the desk.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Is this her?

Aeri takes a few steps forward so that she can see the photo of a student with poorly trimmed, long, fluffy ash-white hair with locks spiking all around it.

AERI

No. I mean, yes, that's the one I apprehended.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

You apprehended?

This question seems to be devoid of interest, more of simple clarification to fill the conversation whilst he looks through the other three folders.

AERI

Yes. I was there during the commotion.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

What did your assailant look like?

AERI

I didn't see her face. She was around my height, blonde, neck-length hair, wore a shirt and trousers.

With another folder shown to her, held in a stretched hand, her eyes inspect a painted photo of a green-eyed blonde girl.

AERI

That looks like it should be her. Only the hair is a little shorter.

The man takes the folder away from her eyes and starts running through it with his own, his face darkening the longer he dives into it.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

She is wanted for murder.

As if dazzled by a bright flash, the girls go silent, their eyes widened.

Looking at them apologetically, he feels bad for what he is about to tell them.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Her name is Rada. She and three of her kol-mates have disappeared around half a year ago along with Magister Tepan. It doesn't mention the circumstances, but apparently they murdered another Magister. To make things worse, the murdered Magister belonged to the Vanguard academy.

AERI

Why?

ACADEMY MAGISTER

I don't know. I'll need to look up in the respective case.

He pauses, his eyes slowly sinking as they follow the lines of a record, making a jump to an older one after reaching an end, repeating these motions until he puts together a picture.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Looking at her record, it looks like she was a troublesome student on the brink of expulsion. I surmise Magister Tepan took matters into his own hands in order to prevent that by... assigning her and three other students to a kol? That's interesting. First time hearing of such a case. Regardless, it seems it didn't go well.

AERI

But... to murder someone...

ACADEMY MAGISTER

I know. I can't imagine it myself and I would have dismissed such allegations, but it can't be a coincidence that it was she who attacked you, neither that it was her kol's hat who trespassed your academy, and especially taking into account that they are accused of murdering a Magister of your academy.

AERI

What? Her kol's hat? There must be something going on... there must be... something...

His concern shifts from the students on papers to the student before him, whose mental struggle manifests through wrinkles as each word takes more effort to squeeze through the teeth.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Is everything all right?

AERI

No, it's not! My damn Brand just won't kick in. I've learned enough already. I don't know what else it needs me to do.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Sorry, I don't understand what you are talking about.

AERI

Witchcraft. Forget it. I shouldn't have relied on it in the first place. Is there anything else that can give me a clue?

He hesitates for a moment, being partly perplexed by the confidence with which Aeri expects a Magister of another academy to disclose sensitive information.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

No. Sorry. There is not much of anything that stands out. Nothing that would warrant a clue.

The folder closes, cutting the thread of hope Aeri clings to as if its folds were blades of sharp scissors.

AERI

But—

Not knowing what else to cling to, she just hopelessly watches him put it aside and open the next folder, which he stacks onto the previous one after running his eyes through its contents.

ORENA

Wha—

LELYA

Shhh.

Lelya stops the flow of the air from Orena's mouth by pressing a finger against her friend's lips as she observes the man repeat the same action again. With the fourth folder checked, he subtly sighs and puts it on top of the rest.

A pen in one hand and a notepad in another, he then returns to the book shelves and starts looking for something, his head slowly moving from one end of a shelf to another. After locating a folder, he looks inside, puts it back, and writes something down, repeating this sequence just one more time before walking back to his desk.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Here.

A torn-off sheet of paper lands in her hand, and Aeri inquisitively looks at the man.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

These are the names of the former kol-mates of Yiya and Ma'aya, the other two kol-mates of Rada. You can start with them. Vira is currently under guard in the fourth self-reflection room, so present this at the entrance.

A pen follows a curved path on a piece of paper procured from a drawer. Instead of being torn from a notepad, this one is taken from a carefully placed stack, its

yellowish surface decorated with an intertwining yellow pattern along the edges. After affixing it with a seal, he hands it to her.

AERI

Thank you.

As they leave, Lelya briefly turns back with a saddened expression, reflecting that of the man.

With the door silently clanking and the girls behind them, he exhales. As his body begins to descend into a chair, his eyes briefly fall on the bookcase, sending a signal down the spine to his legs, which tense and make him spring back into the upwards position.

Fuelled by curiosity, he is led to search through student profiles which ends with him taking out one with Orena's name.

ACADEMY MAGISTER

Just what is going on at Vanguard?