

Nomad Void

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Savellawell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

Cover art by Sasazuka Shinon

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Pursuit

In the academy's hall, Aeri was measuring its width with her steps. The dark marks on the floor indicated that she had been here for quite some time.

Anxious, whenever she would find herself biting a thumb nail, she would pull it away from her mouth to have some sense of control, keep stress from accumulating.

She bounced from one wall to the other, casting a glance into the depth of the hall with each turn, repeating this until two figures emerged heading in her direction.

Seeing how Administrator Chusuran and aide Eraban were taking their time traversing the space, she moved towards them with accelerated pace.

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

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

“The Magister has been kidnapped!”

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

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

“Rensin?”

“Yes! Yes. That one.”

“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 lifted 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.

“Does this look like a joke to you?”

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

“Please, young lady, refrain from such inappropriate actions.”

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

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

“‘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.”

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

Not giving Aeri a chance to object, Chusuran walked past her, increasing his pace only to a symbolic degree. As if the distance between them and the doors to his office had been precisely measured, they entered the office right before she was going to burst.

As the doors opened, the light of the morning sun flooded the hall. Aeri was dazzled as she stepped into the office, but not by contrast of light, but the contrast of the interior. After her visits to the offices of Magisters in the past, she had a certain impression, expecting to see light pale-blue walls, functional white furniture, and just a few extra items that would stand out. Instead she beheld 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 differed both in quantity and quality, such as a wall shelf behind a desk with miniature bottles of liquors. Her mind needed a moment to process it.

“Eraban—”

“I’ll brew coffee.”

“Yes.”

As the aide walked to a corner, Chusuran took a seat by his desk, placed one hand on top of the other, and looked at Aeri.

“Let us start from the beginning. What exactly happened?”

“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.”

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

“Because I saw him being assaulted by the same person.”

“Didn’t you say you passed out?”

“I didn’t pass out immediately.”

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

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

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

“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?”

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

“To constables?”

“Yes... That’s where you file reports on missing persons.”

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

“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 followed, both Chusuran and Aeri turned to look at him.

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

“Eraban?”

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

As Eraban started explaining, he took the mug and returned to a table with a brewing machine.

“...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.”

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

“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 reached a boiling point, forcing her to storm out of the room like a cork on a bottle, expressing her frustration and anger in a scream that filled Chusuran’s office.

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

“Ouch! Hey!”

The call failed to catch up to Aeri as her emotions drove her to her next destination.

“Hane!”

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

“Have you not been taught manners? Do you always—”

“They’ve kidnapped him!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Somebody kidnapped the Magister.”

“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 expression gave Hane the needed confirmation, showing more colours of distress through her eyes as she got up and came closer to her.

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

“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.”

“Who attacked you? Do you know her?”

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

“How do you know?”

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

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

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

“There must be something more we can do. I will consult the office of the Academy of Administration, but...”

With whatever insignificant glimmer of hope Hane had sparked, Aeri already knew that this ‘but’ was going to douse it.

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

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

“Aeri—”

The room windows slammed, pulled by the negative air pressure, when Aeri left the Magister's office, her anger channelled into the force with which she forcefully closed the doors.

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

She let go of the handle and walked away, slowly, the control over her body giving her a sense of control over her mental state.

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 clanked in the corridor, and a gentle breeze blew over Aeri: a student at the end of the hall had opened a window.

Aeri approached it and stared into the distance. The vast cityscape of Inakray was all blurred. Only one object had clear outlines: a towering block of buildings with spires, their pristine white walls and silver bells in towers shining bright in the rays of the morning sun.

She lingered there for a little while and walked away.

As the tower bells rang, Orena swiftly closed a book and placed her belongings into a bag.

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

She would respond subtly to this attention by breaking eye contact and looking straight ahead, just going her way. Her face would not give away any emotion.

After stepping outside into the sunlight, she exhaled and skimmed over the area.

Some of the students were taking refuge from the heat in the shade under the protrusions of the U-shaped central building of the academy. Others chose a cosier place, resting under the trees or inside the pavilions of the surrounding park space.

Orena focused on the space to the right side, which was less populated, and located a vacant bench.

She made just five steps when a loud shout drew her attention and that of a few students around her.

“You there!”

Orena's hand twitched, instinctively reaching to assume a defensive stance, as she saw Aeri approaching her, but stopped midway as her consciousness took the place of her instincts.

“What is the deal with you and your wretched coven?”

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

Orena attempted to walk away from her unwanted acquaintance, but was forced to turn back feeling a hand tightly grabbing her arm.

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

Orena yanked her hand, breaking free from the grasp. Anger manifested on her face whilst her eyes started to darken.

“I don’t know what you are talking about!”

“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 dissolved in an instant, replaced by shock and frustration.

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

“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.”

“I—”

Orena looked to the side, where a bunch of students stood silent, observing the two.

“What are you looking at? Mind your own business!”

As if hit by the energy of Aeri’s emotions, the students around staggered a little and started moving away.

Aeri abruptly turned to the other side with a similar effect. Only two students seemed unaffected, one of them unsure what to do as she looked at her friend, who locked her eyes with Aeri.

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

The girl unwillingly turned away and followed the suit of the others.

“So?”

“They want my grimoire burned. Maybe even me gone.”

As she spoke, Orena changed in face. Her darkened expression emanated negative energy that spread to Aeri, her anger now doused.

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

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

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

“What in the world is ‘the revenant’?”

“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.”

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

“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 could tell that the more she explained the more confusing it got.

“I *am* her, Devaura reborn.”

The thing that should have set things straight seemed to have the opposite effect, making Aeri loose speech and raise a brow.

“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?”

“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.”

“He’s *not* gone. Not until I see it with my own eyes.”

“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.”

“What really happened?”

“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.”

“She?”

“Devaura.”

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

“I don’t know.”

“Then how do you even know you are the revenant?”

Although her lips remained sealed, Orena’s face gave the same answer, or rather its absence.

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

“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.”

“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?”

“Yes.”

“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.”

“What—”

As if she had been waiting for it, Aeri stopped just as Orena started speaking, having barely made a few steps after turning her back to her.

“What are you planning to do?”

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

“Do you think they will let him go?”

“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.”

“But how are you going to search for him?”

“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!”

“Your Brand? You mean you know how to make one’s Brand manifest?”

“No. I have a Brand. I just don’t know how it works.”

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

“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 struggled to come up with anything useful, Aeri just broke the conversation, when someone else grabbed her attention.

“You have some nerve coming here after what you’ve done.”

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

Aeri inspected the girl with her eyes squinted. It took a few moments to recognise a face she only had seen once for a brief moment, one she wouldn’t have recognised if it hadn’t been for the girl’s knight attire.

“Oh, it’s you. I don’t have time to deal with you.”

Aeri’s attempt to leave was denied as Tayra closed the distance, her hand wrapped around Aeri’s wrist firmly locking her in place.

“You’re not going anywhere!”

In response, Aeri helped Tayra get even closer, pulling her to the point of another physical contact, where her fist met Tayra’s face.

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

She made a step forward and seemingly attempted to grab Aeri by the fabric of her uniform, but pulled her hand off immediately the moment Aeri threw another punch at her. Slightly twisting her torso, she shifted her weight to the left, making 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.

“Ack!”

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

As if to cement her superiority, Tayra made a quick circular move with her head to throw her long green ponytail that had got in front of her body back to where it belonged.

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

With her guard down, Aeri grabbed Tayra’s ankles and pulled towards her. Her armour and swords clanked loudly as her back hit the ground.

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

“You! Were! Saying! I! Can’t! Hear you!”

Whilst the two were engaged on the ground, a girl with dark brown-red eyes and lush blonde hair clad in a standard blue uniform casually walked to Orena. A circular knitted pendant with an intricate pattern hanging around her neck on a gold-blue string jumped lightly on her chest with each step.

“Hi, Orena. What’s up?”

“Oh, Lelya. Hi.”

“Didn’t know you fancied brawling.”

Both calmly observed Aeri and Tayra as they talked, as if those had been cats fighting.

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

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

“She is... an acquaintance of mine.”

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

“Well, you see—”

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

One hand grabbing her collar and the other pulled back, Aeri covered her head, preparing to take a hit, when...

“Tayra! What is this behaviour?”

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

“Huh, Tenka?”

The distraction gave Aeri an opportunity to strike back at Tayra. A head-butt followed by a punch made her roll to the side.

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

“She was the one to attack me!”

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

“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.”

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

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

“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 snorted and looked away in an unwilling acknowledgement, after which Tenka's eyes fell on Aeri.

“Can you, please, explain what exactly has happened?”

“That's not your business.”

Tenka looked at Aeri with utmost disapproval. Before her prolonged silence started oppressing everyone present, she sighed and closed her eyes for a few seconds.

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

Her question was instead directed at Orena and Lelya, who in response rapidly shook their heads. The three then directed their gazes at Aeri. Their faces, painted with just a bit of inquisitive tint, made Aeri feel patronised, as if they had been adults expecting a child to explain her behaviour.

“We had a disagreement about my options.”

“Your options?”

“Regarding my freedom.”

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

“She just asked her to wait.”

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

“Maybe she should have—”

“Tayra! This isn't the first time your communication methods cause conflicts.”

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

“Fine, maybe I could have handled it better.”

The two then exchanged non-verbal messages: Tayra frowned a little, to which Tenka responded by slightly squinting her eyes and folding her arms. This prompted Tayra's face to morph a few times, as if an internal conflict was boiling under her skin, building pressure that escaped in an exhale. She then turned to Aeri with a brand new expression, not that much friendly, but at least cleansed of anger.

“I apologise for my earlier behaviour. I acted impulsively and was out of line. We are investigating the 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 kept her emotions under control, yet the persistency of her neutral expression showed how much efforts it took her to keep it that way.

Though the apology and polite tone were hardly honest, she did make some steps to alleviate the animosity, earning the acknowledgement of the three other observers. Not respecting it would make Aeri frowned upon, so she had no other choice but to accept this as a challenge from Tayra.

In the same manner, Aeri exhaled and added a smile.

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

Lelya covered her mouth to hide the same smile, though the chuckle that got stuck in her throat betrayed her.

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

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

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

Tayra's neutral face broke, brows coming together, eyelids closing, but ever so slightly.

“Why would you want to know that?”

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

“Not as much as I would like to know.”

“If it's—”

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

Whatever Tenka wanted to say stayed unsaid.

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

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

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

Tayra got up from the ground, brushing the dust from her clothes. Whilst leaving in silence, she cast just one frowning glance at Aeri, who mirrored the look.

After she was gone, Aeri stood up and started tidying up. She lifted the bottom of her coat in order to tuck the undershirt into her skirt, touching her abdomen and letting out a barely audible painful moan in the process.

“She hit you hard, didn't she?”

“Tayra...”

Tenka's lightened mood did not last for long, making Lelya look angrily at her.

“Chill, will you?”

“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.”

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

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

“Aren't you the leader?”

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

“Oh, I see...”

“No, you don't.”

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

“Faction?”

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

“Yes, we do. It's called a kol.”

“Something other than being friends?”

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

“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.”

“Nobody beat me.”

“Somebody did.”

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

Taking this as Orena's hint at the Sorceress academy, Tenka tilted her head forward and covered her eyes, staying silent for a few seconds.

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

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

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

“She was attacked by a coven witch.”

“The Sorceress League?”

Orena nodded in response.

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

“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.”

“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.”

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

“Hey, hey, now. It’s all right. No need to be so stressed.”

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

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

“*The* Magister?”

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

Orena’s face darkened. Her eyes dropped to the ground.

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

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

“Yes.”

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

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

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

“You... are not?”

“But you do hold some resentment.”

Aeri made eye contact with Orena again for a moment, whose brows sank after seeing the confirmation in Aeri’s eyes.

“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.”

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

“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.”

“You don’t say.”

Everyone looked at Aeri in eager anticipation of more explanation.

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

“They?”

“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.”

“Wow, you weren’t lying about your academy.”

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

“*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.”

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

“I wish I did.”

“Then how do you know?”

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

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

“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.”

“Something? Like something specific?”

“Anything. I don't know.”

“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.”

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

“Are you sure it was a coven witch though?”

“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.”

“Her appearance?”

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

Lelya's face expressed concern, after which she looked around, first at Orena, then at Tenka.

“What's wrong?”

“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.”

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

“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.”

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

“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?”

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

“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.”

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

“Yes.”

“Yes. She must be the one. That’s exactly how she looked.”

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

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

“That’s fine. I know a person who can help us.”

“In this case, good luck.”

“Let’s go.”

After they parted their ways, Lelya took the lead as the three of them entered the building.

Most students couldn’t help but stare at an unusual guest. Even those that would have previously gossiped over Orena stopped talking as they noticed Aeri.

They arrived at a red-wood door decorated with silver in a few subtle curls and lines. After a knock, an unbothered male voice invited Lelya in. As a handle went down, the corners of her mouth went up to form a smug smile.

A brunet man by a desk was busy scratching something in a journal before him. His other hand tucked a lock of his curly hair, which created a hazy silhouette around the head as the light shone through it, behind his ear.

The air entered his lungs as he opened the mouth, about to say something, when Lelya got ahead of him with a cheerful tone.

“Hi hiii, Magister!”

The air inside his respiratory tracts became static, his writing hand froze, and his free hand covered his eyes. For a few seconds, there was only silence.

“What do you want, little fiend?”

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

“Just get to the point.”

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

“Sorry, but student profiles are for Magisters’ eyes only. Just because you—”

Before his tongue spat what was on the tip of it, his eyes gave his mind a signal to stop after they had made a slight move to focus on two other girls.

“You get what I mean.”

“Oh, but it’s not for me. It’s for her.”

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

“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.”

“Even if she is a drop-out?”

“Why would you need information about drop-outs?”

“She can explain it better.”

“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.”

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

“We believe it has something to do with Orena’s case.”

“What case?”

“Where I... injured Vanguard students. Lethally.”

“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.”

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

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

“No one.”

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

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

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

“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.”

“*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 the 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.”

“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.

“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.”

“The Magister’s bag?”

“Yes. It was left there after we were attacked.”

His open palm made the bag in her hands gravitate towards him. After getting a hold of it, he inspected its contents, helping his eyes by moving and tilting the items inside. Noticing a small rectangular object next to a book, he took it out into the light.

“This is indeed a Magister’s identification card.”

His focus then shifted back to inside the bag, locking on a thin brown book, which swiftly replaced the card in his hands.

As he opened the book and skimmed through its pages, one of his brows rose with each flip, until both of his brows came together when he closed it before even reaching the end.

“This might look like a legitimate Magister’s identification card, but this...”

He lifted the book, holding it with just three fingers, as if to show how lightweight it was.

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

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

“...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.”

“But...”

“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.”

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

“The seals?”

“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 put one book onto the desk and returned to inspecting the other, reaching the end of it in a matter of seconds. His eyes squinted, then a brow rose.

Still holding the opened book in his hand, he shifted the weight of his body to the left. Metal rails of a drawer silently screeched as he took out an identical book, opening it, and placing the books next to each other.

After his eyes jumped back and forth a few times, they returned back to the girls.

“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.”

“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.”

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

“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.”

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

“Yes.”

He blankly stared at Aeri for a few seconds, not even blinking, after the logical chains in his mind started crumbling.

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

“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 lowered his head to burrow his face under his hands, and then looked at Aeri from under his forehead.

Aeri started retelling the events that transpired during the last week. When she reached the events of yesterday, mentioning an incident at the academy, the man stood up and walked to a book shelf in a corner of the room.

“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 returned with a stack of folders in his hands, which then landed onto his desk. With a few touches, got opened the top one, turned it around, and pushed it to the end of the desk.

“Is this her?”

Aeri took a few steps forward so that she could see the painted photo of a student with poorly trimmed, long, fluffy ash-white hair, locks of which were spiking along its whole length.

“No. I mean, yes, that’s the one I apprehended.”

“You apprehended?”

This question seemed to be devoid of interest, more of simple clarification to fill the conversation whilst he was looking through the other folders.

“Yes. I was there during the commotion.”

“What did your assailant look like?”

“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 inspected another photo.

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

The man took the folder away from her eyes and started running through it with his own, his face darkening the longer he dived into it.

“She is wanted for murder.”

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

Looking at them apologetically, he felt bad for what he was about to tell.

“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.”

“Why?”

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

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

“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.”

“But... to murder someone...”

“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.”

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

His concern shifted from the students on papers to the student before him, whose mental struggle manifested through the wrinkles appearing as each word took more effort to squeeze through the teeth.

“Is everything all right?”

“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.”

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

“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 hesitated for a moment, being partly perplexed by the confidence with which Aeri expected a Magister of another academy to disclose sensitive information.

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

Her eyes fixated on the folder, her hope went down along with the object that was supposed to give it as it landed back onto the desk.

“But—”

Not knowing what to cling to, she just hopelessly watched him open another folder, which he stacked onto the previous one after running his eyes through its contents.

“Wha—”

“Shhh.”

Lelya stopped the flow of the air from Orena's mouth by pressing a finger against her friend's lips as she observed the man repeat the same action again. After he finished checking the contents of the fourth folder, he subtly sighed and put it on top of the rest.

With a pen and a notepad taken from a drawer, he returned to the book shelves and started looking for something, his head slowly moving from one end of a shelf to the other. When he located a folder he was looking for, he inspected it,

put it back, and wrote something down, repeating this sequence one more time before walking back to his desk.

“Here.”

A torn-off sheet of paper landed in Aeri's hand, and she inquisitively looked at the man.

“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 followed a curved path on a piece of paper procured from a drawer. Instead of being torn from a notepad, this one was 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 handed it to Aeri.

“Thank you.”

As they were leaving, Lelya briefly turned back. Her saddened expression reflected that of the man.

With the door silently clanking and the girls behind them, the man exhaled. His body began to descend into a chair when his eyes briefly fell on the bookcase, sending a signal down the spine to his legs, which tensed and made him spring back into the upwards position.

Fuelled by curiosity, he was led to inspect student profiles once more, taking out the one with Orena's name.

“Just what is going on at Vanguard?”