

Nomad Void

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Sawellwell

With Reignited Flames

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SAVEHAVEN: WITH REIGNITED FLAMES
NOMAD VOID

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Originally published at savehaven.net in 2024.

Fonts: High Tower Text (cover), Old English Text (titles), Equity (body)

Understanding

‘Did something happen between them?’ Aeri frowns as these words ring in her head.

‘Then how do you know she was the one who attacked first?’ Her fists clench.

‘There could have been a misunderstanding.’ She starts gritting her teeth.

‘...misunderstanding...’ This word keeps echoing as her teeth feel more pressure and nails start sinking into the skin of her palm.

AERI

Misunderstanding my ass!

Her fist slams the desk with a thud that resounds throughout the room. It takes her a moment to notice that everyone’s eyes have been drawn to her.

Before she can make an apology, a remark comes her way.

WOMAN’S VOICE

Aeri, ...

She’s addressed by a woman wearing a white-edged black jacket and a skirt. With a black board behind, her short light-rose hair shines as a bright spot. She sighs and continues.

WOMAN’S VOICE

...we understand you are going through a difficult time. But, please, address your emotional problem. There are people you can talk to if you need help.

AERI

I’m sorry, teacher. You’re right...

The teacher exhales in a relief as she brings up a book and is about to continue the reading when Aeri stands up and starts marching towards classroom door.

AERI

I *do* need to talk to someone to address this problem.

TEACHER

That's not—

Her words bounce off the door, reaching it the moment it shuts.

TEACHER

...I didn't mean right now.

She sighs yet again.

TEACHER

What a troublesome girl.

Orena takes a sip from a mildly warm cup of tea, sitting alone under a shaded bar desk. A bartender with long bowing moustache and a beard is carefully polishing a glass in his hands. He briefly looks at Orena, noticing a drop of sweat appear on her forehead.

BARTENDER

You've been coming here in hot weather ever since I opened the spot last year, young lady. I have always wondered why you favour tea over cold drinks, unlike most other people, even more so as a sorceress. If I may ask, of course.

ORENA

Ah... yes. Naturally, as a sorceress, I can freely control the flow of air to cool myself. That is what my peers usually do. But they often catch cold because of that, so I deal with the heat the usual way. And I find herbal tea much more refreshing than any cool drink.

BARTENDER

I see. You are very clever for your young age.

He shows a cheerful smile, which catches Orena off-guard along with the compliment, leaving her a little confused as she thinks how to respond.

BARTENDER

My apologies. I didn't mean to embarrass you.

ORENA

No, it's fine.

Though she says that, being engaged in conversation all of a sudden leaves her in an awkward spot. She doesn't know whether to say something or to end it right there. Thankfully the academy bells provide an easy way out, signalling there is only ten minutes left of the afternoon break.

ORENA

I must excuse myself. Thank you, as always.

A cup lands on a plate with a ring as she stands up from a seat and gently bows before taking a leave.

She waits for a tram to pass by, shaking the ground under her feet, and then crosses the street. Just as she reaches the opposite side, she is hit by a feeling as if she's being watched. Orena looks all around but finds no gaze directed at her and continues her way.

As she is about to enter an alley, the same feeling hits her again, yet this time there is even no one around.

Through the alley she enters into a yard enclosed within houses two-storeys tall, walking down a trail paved with stone. With every step taken she feels the uneasiness grow. The feeling climaxes as she comes close to an alley on the opposite side of the yard. Orena instinctively turns around, extending her hand.

Her guts hasn't deceived her: on the other side of the trail near the entrance stands her unwanted acquaintance, Aeri.

For a few seconds Aeri stays silent and motionless, yet when she opens her mouth, her speech reaches Orena as a distorted, indiscernible echo. Seeing no response from Orena, she becomes visibly angrier, saying something again, now in a scream.

Something about her seems to be off. Though looking hostile, her stance doesn't imply she intends to attack. Even her weapon freely hangs behind her back.

Cautiously, Orena lowers her hand, observing what her opponent will do. With no action following, she finally speaks.

ORENA

What do you want?

First comes a little confusion, succeeded by an angry response.

AERI

Are you mocking me? Was anything I have said not clear?

ORENA

I couldn't hear you because of the barrier.

AERI

Why did you assault my friend?

ORENA

What are you playing here? It was you who assaulted me.

AERI

I am not talking about us three. Harin. Short girl, orange hair, blue eyes, same uniform.

It takes her some time to piece a puzzle together. She cannot recall anyone like that, but hearing Aeri mention 'assault' helps her mind in restoring a picture. The events that transpired that day have been a blur, but it starts coming back now.

AERI

Well?

ORENA

The answer is the same: she attacked me.

AERI

Liar!

Aeri sees this outburst causing Orena to tense, but finds it in her to overcome the surge of emotions. She's come here for answers, not for a fight.

AERI

Harin would never attack unprovoked. And there is no thing that can provoke her.

ORENA

She might have been upset over me destroying her arcane contraption.

AERI

What? What nonsense are you spewing? She doesn't wield anything besides Chimera. And how exactly would you destroy it?

ORENA

Not her own contraption. Something that supposedly belonged to her family. It exploded when I attempted to dismantle it.

AERI

Her family? What are you even talking about? How would you even have it?

ORENA

I found it.

AERI

Found it? You want me to believe you just found an arcane contraption lying around?

Orena falls silent. What she's about to say might trigger Aeri, but it is already too late to turn away from this conversation.

ORENA

I overheard a conversation between two students of your academy. They were discussing something about legacy works. They had... they didn't know where it was exactly, only some pointers. But I recognized the place by description. So I followed and found a contraption there before they found the place.

AERI

Before they found the place? So you actually met them there?

ORENA

Yes.

AERI

And they just let you go even though you supposedly had a piece of heritage work.

ORENA

They did.

Aeri's eyes narrow and her brows form a crease, making her face a display of a doubt.

AERI

Suppose it is what you say. What does this story have to do with Harin?

ORENA

She approached me a day after and asked if I had found a contraption. She said it belonged to her family. I told her that it was destroyed and that must have provoked her.

AERI

This is horseshite. She would never attack anyone over such a trivial thing. Not Harin. The dead will rise before she attacks anyone.

A blurry image of the girl emerges in Orena's mind. Harin did appear that way. But even with her memory being riddled with blanks, there are a few clear pictures, and one of them shows Harin attacking her.

ORENA

That was what I thought and let my guard down.

AERI

Well, maybe your memory isn't that good.

ORENA

Or maybe you don't know your friend as well as you think.

Aeri's face becomes one expression of anger. Even more hateful than the day she clashed with Orena. It feels as if she will explode any second.

Orena slowly raises her arm, then the right hand reaches for the opposite wrist as if she were preparing for confrontation, but instead she unbuttons a sleeve and then pulls it up, showing her bare arm to Aeri.

Aeri's anger gets displaced by confusion as she sees a red line cross the arm. There is a pink area around it, which looks like a trace of badly burnt skin. There can be no mistake: this is a mark left behind by Harin's invocation.

ORENA

Do I need to show the rest?

Though her confusion doesn't last long. She frowns again, getting more and more angry with each passing moment. Orena responds assuming a stance, her defence ready. Yet when it reaches a stage where Aeri seems to erupt, she just walks away, leaving confusion to her opponent.

AERI

She lied.

In her usual manner, Aeri appears before the Magister, storming inside in a fury and slamming onto his desk.

THE MAGISTER

Uh? What? Who lied?

AERI

That Sorceress witch. She lied.

Every word uttered seems to be forcefully squeezed through her teeth.

THE MAGISTER

Lied about what?

AERI

She said that Harin attacked her.

The Magister tries to piece together what little information he's just received. The obvious conclusion that she has talked to Orena collides with how Aeri behaved before that. Though something has changed: she does not sound confident and it looks like she tries to conceal it with anger.

THE MAGISTER

Wait, you actually talked to her?

AERI

Yes. Isn't it what you wanted me to do?

THE MAGISTER

But of course! Glad you figured it out.

He quickly wipes his face clear of the puzzled expression, but his attempt to make it look like his plan is thwarted by Hane's chuckle.

AERI

You did not?

THE MAGISTER

Well, it was inevitable to resolve the conflict, but I certainly did not expect it to happen so soon. Anyway, back to the topic. I assume you firmly believe Harin did not attack her.

AERI

No. I *know* that. She would not ever attack anyone.

THE MAGISTER

Correct. I understand she is your friend. But let's for a moment—

AERI

This has nothing to do with us being friends. Go out there and ask anyone about Harin. You know what they will say? 'Oh, that weirdo.' She is always out there offering help and giving advice to other students.

The Magister falls silent for a second.

THE MAGISTER

You'll have to forgive me, but I fail to understand what's so weird about that.

AERI

Oh, you don't know where you've ended up, do you? This is Vanguard Academy. Words like 'friendship', 'help', and 'cooperation' exist only within a kol.

THE MAGISTER

Assuming this to be true, let's assume she, I mean Orena, did attack first. How do you imagine this could have unfolded?

AERI

You've seen it already. She must have used that eldritch invocation...

She looks away, her mind trying to imagine the scene.

AERI

So... she must have initiated the invocation, but then Harin triggered an invocation in response... it wouldn't have taken her much physical effort to pull the trigger, even exhausted. Yes, this is what must have happened.

THE MAGISTER

So Harin did...

Conscious of Aeri's defensive position over Harin, the Magister chooses his next words with caution. As it stands at the moment, the relation between them is that of a fish and a fisher: a careless move might undo all the progress.

THE MAGISTER

...respond offensively.

AERI

As much as I hate to admit it, there is no other explanation for the scars on her body.

THE MAGISTER

Right. Now let's take a step back. What could have led to this?

AERI

She said Harin had approached her because she had found a contraption that belonged to Harin's family...

Her hand on the chin, Aeri now starts measuring floor in front of the Magister's desk with her feet.

AERI

She must have become aggressive over keeping the contraption and...

In the process of reconstructing the scene, she revisits the memories of her clash with Orena and the recent encounter. In both cases she would instantly go into defence, not fighting back despite all the pressure, only responding when she would be hit.

AERI

No, the only possible scenario... she must have used a simpler non-lethal invocation to scare Harin away, after which Harin triggered hers, and then...

Even this does not seem convincing. Harin wouldn't retaliate unless her life was in danger, and Orena, though Aeri hates to admit it, does not seem the type to provoke other people, much less attack.

Aeri frowns as if admitting defeat.

AERI

Fine! It doesn't make any sense. I cannot imagine any scenario in which either of them would start it. So what are you suggesting?

THE MAGISTER

I am not suggesting anything. I cannot, unfortunately. Not with the information I have. At this point, all we can do is rule out certain possibilities.

The Magister takes his turn, diving into the well of his thoughts. As his eyes fall onto a weapon hanging behind Aeri's back, comes up a theory.

THE MAGISTER

What if... is it possible that Harin fired accidentally?

AERI

What? Na-uh. This is an impossible thing next to Harin assaulting anyone. Her machina is twice bigger than my contraption, and Harin, she is tiny. Well, except for one part.

The last comment has almost been whispered, as if she has voiced her thoughts accidentally.

THE MAGISTER

What?

AERI

N-no, nothing. The point is: to compensate for it, she has to use super light alloys, due to which her machina requires regular maintenance. I don't clean my room as often as she performs maintenance.

Aeri's fist lands onto her palm with a clap.

AERI

Yes, that must be it. That must be why her machina activated yesterday. It must have been damaged in the fight.

THE MAGISTER

I am sorry. Machina?

AERI

Oh, arcane machina. Think of it as a more sophisticated arcane contraption.

THE MAGISTER

Arcane contraption? Ah, you mean that weapon of yours.

AERI

Yes. Among the others, obviously.

THE MAGISTER

Thank you for clarifying. I didn't know you use specific term for it. Right, so—

AERI

Wait, wait. Hold on a second. What do you mean you didn't know? If you don't know even that, what *do* you know about the specifics of the Vanguard coven?

THE MAGISTER

Unfortunately, I am not aware of coven specifics. I only possess common knowledge about witchcraft.

AERI

Common knowledge? Such as?

Aeri's arms fold. She looks at the Magister with a mixture of doubt and curiosity.

THE MAGISTER

There are five elements of nature used in witchcraft...

The Magister makes a pause seeing Aeri raising a brow.

THE MAGISTER

And each coven can use only one of them and adjacent sub-elements...

Aeri's brow drops back in an instant as her eye begins twitching, making the Magister hesitant to share the rest.

THE MAGISTER

And each element serves a specific purpose: defence, offense, healing, enhancement, and curses.

Her face becomes unstably symmetric as the other eye starts twitching as well.

THE MAGISTER

And each element of nature counters the other, like lightning is strong against water and—

AERI

Stop it! I can't take it anymore!

Aeri covers her ears, vigorously shaking her head.

AERI

Are you making this up?

THE MAGISTER

Um, no. Is it that much wrong though?

AERI

Everything you said is wrong! How is that even supposed to work? Is one coven supposed to be completely defenceless against another with this 'countering'? I feel awkward and embarrassed just hearing this. Just how are you a Magister? What do they teach you at the academy?

THE MAGISTER

Subjects such as economy, negotiations, psychology, history, bureaucracy—

AERI

Fine, fine, I get it. A lot of stuff. But seriously, I thought they would at least educate you on basic concepts of witchcraft. I know the Oath is strict, but you run the academy after all.

THE MAGISTER

Magistern don't need to know the concepts of witchcraft to perform their duties, as a rule. When we do, they can be explained to us on the 'need to know' basis.

AERI

I guess I can tell you something then, but there's also...

She turns to look at Hane, who is going through folders in a book case the opposite side of the room from her desk.

HANE

Don't mind me. I'm under the Oath.

Though conscious of what is going on in the room, she remains focused on her object of search, replying without interrupting her motions.

AERI

Oh. I didn't know they require female workers to take the Oath.

THE MAGISTER

They don't as far as I know. Hane, you're not a witch, are you?

HANE

I am not.

THE MAGISTER

Which means...

HANE

That I am a drop-out.

The Magister looks at Aeri, seeing no strong reaction coming from her.

THE MAGISTER

You don't seem surprised.

AERI

Why should I be? You don't even imagine what it is like to study at Vanguard. No wonder she didn't make it. Our academy ranks first by the number of failed students.

HANE

I didn't fail. I quit.

Though this response does not seem to be shocking, it does make Aeri a little surprised.

AERI

What? Why?

HANE

Disappointment in the world of witchcraft.

AERI

Disappointment? Sorry, but I cannot imagine what kind of disappointment would lead someone to trade witchcraft for papers.

HANE

Papers, huh?

Hane stops browsing through the contents of the folder she holds. She closes it and turns to Aeri with a look that sends chills down her spine.

HANE

Of course. Because doing paperwork isn't as fun as wielding fire and lightning to cause destruction. Who would want that, right?

Her every word is followed by a step as she steadily approaches Aeri. In response, Aeri nervously starts walking backwards.

HANE

Oh, and I can't even express how much value your tools of destruction bring to society compared to 'papers' that keep institutions like yours running.

She eventually pushes Aeri into a corner between another book case and a wall.

AERI

I'm... I'm... sorry.

This is the first time the Magister witnesses the opposite spectrum of Aeri's emotional state: fear. It looks as if she will cry if Hane pushes her just a bit further. Before the Magister can intervene to alleviate the situation, Hane walks back to the bookcase and resumes her work without a word.

Exhaling with a relief, Aeri returns to the Magister.

AERI

Sheesh. That is one scary lady. Are you sure she is not a coven witch in disguise?

As she whispers, her eyes are fixed on Hane, ready to make another apology in case any of it reaches her ears.

THE MAGISTER

No. The coven witches are much scarier. Terrifying even.

Talking to himself, the Magister recalls his meeting with Yumi. Even though her threats crashed against his unyielding stance, the threat felt real nevertheless.

AERI

What? You've already met them?

THE MAGISTER

Uh? Oh. No, it's just what I've heard. Anyway, back to the topic. You were saying something about arcane...

AERI

Machina.

Aeri sighs, as if she were a teacher about to explain how to combine two and two to a first-grader.

She lifts the belt holding her weapon bringing it closer to the Magister's face as it hangs from her hand.

AERI

This is called an arcane contraption. It's a highly sophisticated mechanism that we use to perform extraction invocations. It has its drawbacks compared to other types of invocations, among which is bigger size required for more complex invocations. I am a contraptionist: I rely on an array of arcane contraptions in addition to this one. Harin is the opposite. She is... well...

THE MAGISTER

Just say how it is.

AERI

She bestowed the title of an omniscionist on herself. Though technically she is an arcenist. She focuses on developing invocations by transposing aspects of different elements. And she uses what is called an arcane machina. It is even more sophisticated and bigger and heavier than my Arc Emitter as a result. She wouldn't be able to lift it if it wasn't for special alloys. It isn't fragile, but still

requires regular maintenance. So, no, an accidental invocation is out of the question.

With this theory being dismissed, another comes as he considers Aeri's comment about how academy students treat each other outside their kols.

THE MAGISTER

Could someone have damaged it?

AERI

Damaged? You mean on purpose, like sabotaging? No. Firstly, a witch either carries her arcane contraption with her or leaves it behind so many locks and traps that it would be easier and safer to try and take it from her hands. Besides, what's the point? An arcane contraption is a product of a witch's own skills and knowledge, so any damage can be repaired.

The Magister tilts his head forward, rubbing his forehead. Despite his best efforts, nothing he tried to come up with has brought the issue closer to resolution.

THE MAGISTER

Let's start from the very beginning. Why did Harin approach her, again?

AERI

She said that she found an arcane contraption that belonged to Harin's family.

THE MAGISTER

Arcane contraption that belonged to Harin's family? Like some kind of a relic?

AERI

I don't know. Harin comes from a family of inventors. Her mother is not a witch though, so she is not a hereditary witch, and she never mentioned anyone among her ancestors being a witch.

THE MAGISTER

And how did she find it?

AERI

Well, not exactly found. She told me that she had overheard two Vanguard students discussing a heritage work and she had known where it had been.

Aeri notices confused expression on the Magisters face.

AERI

It's a term we use to describe any work of witchcraft of the past. Before covens. The arcane contraption she 'found' appears to be one of those.

THE MAGISTER

Is that common? I mean finding heritage works.

AERI

Ho, no! Do you think covens wouldn't search every nook and cranny of the habitable land? Whatever was lying there has already been found. And whatever is still out there is nigh impossible to find.

THE MAGISTER

But she didn't find it. You said she had overheard Vanguard students discussing it.

AERI

And I find it hard to swallow. To stumble upon a heritage work, I could attribute it to luck. But to know where to search? No, she definitely lied. She must have wanted to avoid more trouble. And I fell for that.

THE MAGISTER

Something doesn't add up.

AERI

That is exactly what I was saying.

THE MAGISTER

No. I mean, why craft such an elaborate lie? She could have just told you it was a lucky find, and it would be more convincing. And on top of it, she didn't mention just any students, but students of your academy. If she wanted to hide something, that would be the worst option.

AERI

Haven't I already mentioned how fellowship is not a thing here?

THE MAGISTER

But does she know that? *I* didn't know that.

A corner of Aeri's mouth shows a glimpse of her teeth, an indication of her reluctantly admitting his point.

THE MAGISTER

How did Harin find out Orena had the contraption?

AERI

I don't know. I didn't have a chance to ask: there was too much for me to process at the moment. But the fact that Harin did not tell me, Sumi, or Minali could only mean that it happened in our absence.

The Magister takes a moment following the chain of events from one end to the other, trying to add one more link, but eventually ends up hanging on a loose end.

THE MAGISTER

It looks like we've hit a dead end.

Aeri feels disappointed, but the feeling is quickly succeeded by understanding that she might have expected too much of this conversation, too much of him.

AERI

Well, you've helped—

THE MAGISTER

I am going to speak to Orena.

AERI

What?

THE MAGISTER

There are just too many unknowns. Everything that you have described points to too many coincidences: her overhearing a conversation, the conversation

being related to something incredibly rare, her knowing the location, Harin finding out about this, and... the only thing that falls out of the picture is their clash. We must be missing something.

AERI

Yes... everything seems oddly convenient.

Her mind tries to replay the named chain of events, which eventually brings her to the point of conflict. She still fails to imagine Harin attacking Orena, but this scene triggers a recall of the dorm accident the other day.

AERI

And now that I think about it... how could Harin's machina release an invocation even if it was damaged. It does not incorporate infused cores. A mere touch would not trigger an invocation without an infusion. It's almost as if someone—

A bright flash fills her vision and as it subsides, a scene appears before her.

Orena is walking mid-day down a lively street. Her mind seems to be preoccupied as indicated by her eyes fixed in their sockets rather than on something around her.

As she approaches her destination, unfamiliar voices take her out of thoughts. Two girls sit by an outdoor bar Orena was heading to. There are a couple of seats that are not occupied, but she is reluctant to take one of them as these aren't just any girls but aspiring witches, and their black-edged grey uniforms are that of the students of the Vanguard Academy. One of them is drawing attention with her peculiar hair: it is poorly cut, making wavy locks of her shoulder-length hair stick here and there, and it is just as poorly dyed in brown, resulting in a shiny bronze colour with just a few locks she had missed, revealing her natural colour of golden. It is quite the opposite of the girl to her left, whose greenish light-grey hair is orderly done in a long braid.

Just as Orena is about to take a walk back, one word compels her to eavesdrop.

BRAIDED GIRL

Heritage work? Leads? Somebody must have played a joke on you.

SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

Aye, aye. I just wanted to run it by you. Just in case, you know.

BRAIDED GIRL

It might have been worth a shot, but a mansion in the Heruson forest? Not only is it located on the outskirts of Inakray, you know the size of it? Definitely somebody wanted you to spend a few days there wandering around.

As if illuminated by something they've mentioned, Orena chances in face, which vanishes with another flash taking Aeri to a clearing in a thick forest.

Orena makes her way to a façade of an old mansion, walking between two overgrown rectangular indentations. Three columns down the middle of each were supposed to fill them with water, which has been coming from rain clouds instead.

The right side of the mansion's front doors is open just enough for her to squeeze through. The fibres of wood crack under her feet with each step, screaming of years, if not decades, of decay.

Clouds in the sky give way to the sun, which illuminates the interior through the holes in the roof while barely piercing the layers of dirt covering glass of a few intact windows. As the light lands on the floor, it reveals two sets of footprints. Somebody's been here, and not long ago.

She follows the traces around the place, which eventually brings her to the point of entry. Their density tells her that the visitors have been thorough enough, and if anything was here it must have been found.

One more lap through each hallway and room yields no discoveries: all doors have been opened, every composite object dismantled, and any fragile thing shattered to pieces.

She looks disappointed, though just a little: she must not have expected to make any findings, just like the two girls she overheard.

At the entrance, ready to leave, she hears wood crack—but not from under her feet. It has come from a passage to which a staircase leads from the lobby.

She ascends looking around. Given the degraded state of the building, it could have originated from anywhere.

As her gaze drops from the ceiling to the floor, she notices something about one of balusters in railings. It has a crack from which something shines reflecting the light. With a closer look she sees metallic surface inside.

Grabbing it at the top, she gives it a push. Her hand returns a sensation telling her the baluster is not firmly stuck. Taking the bottom with her right hand, she makes it come off with a pull, leaving torn holes in the rotten-through wood of the railings.

The moss formed along edges reveals a line running down the middle, splitting it into two vertical parts held together by metal rings on both ends. Despite the rust and the swelling, the rings come off without much effort, just like the two wooden halves easily come apart.

Inside she finds a long cylinder with two pincer-like elements placed in a cross on one side and a smaller cylinder protruding on the opposite side. Whatever it is, her subtle smile indicates she must have found something of interest.

On her way out, she encounters familiar faces, the faces she was not given an opportunity to look at before: two girls in grey uniforms.

Both she and the girls freeze on the spot. The gaze of the girl with a weird haircut falls onto the artefact Orena is holding. She then looks at the girl by her side. As they exchange glances, the braided girl opens her mouth but only exclaims as her friend gives her a whack.

SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

Here's your 'joke'. Told you we should have come here right away. Hurry, there still might be something we can find.

The girl hastily enters the place as she passes Orena, as if ignoring her presence.

Once inside, both girls wait for Orena to leave.

SHORT-HAIRED GIRL

Doesn't look like she's noticed.

While the short-haired girl cautiously peeks through the gap in the doors, her friend appears at ease as she leans against a closed partition, her arms folded.

BRAIDED GIRL

We've taken too many precautions. She needs to be a genius or a detective to spot something. I was more concerned that she wouldn't notice the baluster.

A flash hits Aeri again, taking her to the Vanguard Academy's walls.

Harin is walking there when a shout comes from behind. She takes a look over her shoulder, not slowing her pace. A stop comes abruptly after her machina hits something.

BRAIDED GIRL

Ouch!

A girl on the ground in front of Harin is rubbing her forehead. The same girl with long braid that appeared along with the short-haired girl before.

HARIN

Aaaah! Sorry, sorry, sorry, I wasn't looking ahead. I'm so sorry!

She pushes a button on her machina's handle, forcing the belt to be pulled inside. With the machina placed on the ground, Harin gets down closer to the injured girl, rummaging inside her small bag.

HARIN

I'm sorry, sorry, sorry. There must be something cold.

A purple-eyed girl in the same grey uniform approaches Harin from behind. Her white hair hangs just a few centimetres above the ground as she kneels. While Harin is distracted, the girl makes a few subtle touches, applying small pieces of paper to Harin's machina. Upon contact with surface, they instantly burn, leaving behind marks of specific patterns: two smaller ones on the button to the side of the handle and on a grip trigger and one larger to the side of the

machina's body. The marks are distinct yet barely visible unless given a close-up inspection.

HARIN

Sorry, sorry, sorry. I can't find anything cold. Ah! Here, use this.

Harin lifts her machina, offering it to the girl on her stretched hands.

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

You are overreacting.

She speaks evenly, her voice is calm, so much it almost blends with environment.

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

It is nothing serious. Right, Eunah?

EUNAH

Yes, I'm fine. Don't worry.

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

You are quite strong for someone your size.

Harin gets a little confused, trying to figure out what she's referring to, until she looks back at the girl before her and her machina between them.

HARIN

Ah, no, no. It's actually not that heavy. I used super light alloys for the most part. I would have also used wood, but my machina combines the effects of combustion and electric discharges. Also, the cataclytic cores are stored inside without rigid containers—

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

Are you sure you want to tell all these details to rival witches?

HARIN

Rival? We are students of the same academy, are we not?

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

We are, but—

HARIN

Aye, aye, I know. Aeri always nags at me for doing this, but it's not like I'm showing you the schematics. Besides, even if you were to replicate my machina, what of it? It'll just motivate me to whip something else. It's not a problem for an omniscionist like me. So I see no problem giving ideas to my fellow aspiring witches.

The brows above purple eyes come together. Not that much to show strong emotions, but enough to indicate that something about that statement has made her displeased.

HARIN

Hm? Did I say something wrong?

PURPLE-EYED GIRL

No, it's just that—

EUNAH

Say, is this your kol's emblem?

The braided girl's finger points to an engraving on the grip of the machina, which depicts a drop with a gear-shaped hole inside and two wrenches placed in a cross in the background.

HARIN

Oh, this? It's my family emblem.

EUNAH

Are you... a hereditary?

HARIN

Ah, no, no. We are inventors. There were no witches in my family. Not that we know of.

EUNAH

I swear I saw it on another contraption... Oh, right, it was that Sorceress student.

HARIN

Sorceress student?

EUNAH

Yes. We encountered her the other day when we were going to search for a heritage work in an abandoned mansion, but she beat us to it. Though it looked more like a big cataclytic core than a contraption. It definitely had the same engraving on it.

Harin gets overcome with extreme agitation, grabbing the girl by the shoulders, so much that she has forgotten that she has injured her just a moment ago.

HARIN

Who was it?! Where?! I must have a look at it!

EUNAH

Sorry, I have no idea.

HARIN

What did she look like?!

EUNAH

Like any other Sorceress student. Sorry, I only remember her being around my height and having short grey-greenish hair with braids and green-tinted grey eyes.

Harin jumps into an upward stance, picking her machina and pulling the belt over her shoulder as she runs into the distance.

HARIN

Thank you very muuuuuch!

As another flash happens, Harin appears again. In a hurry, barely catching her breath, she's running along a park road, trying to catch to Orena.

HARIN

Miss Sorceress, Miss Sorceress!

Seeing how there are no people this could be addressed to, Orena brings her measured stroll to a halt. Harin stops just a few meters away, bending over and taking deep breaths.

ORENA

Are you talking to me?

HARIN

Yes. Sorry, I know that sounds... I was told... Did you happen to stumble upon an arcane contraption recently, by any chance?

ORENA

Arcane contraption?

HARIN

A device like this one.

Harin taps her fingers on the metal surface of her arcane machina.

HARIN

Well, maybe not like this one. But something similar. Maybe not that much.

ORENA

Why do you ask?

HARIN

Um, if what I was told is true, it might have been created by someone from my family. I know this... if I could just take a look at it, if you don't mind?

ORENA

Sorry, but it was destroyed when I attempted to dismantle it.

Harin becomes upset in an instant, so much she looks like a child with big watery eyes who is about to cry, which makes guilt manifest on Orena's face.

HARIN

Ueheeeee. This must be fate's cruel joke. Oh! By any chance—

It looks as if something disturbs her as she starts rubbing left shoulder that her machina's belt is tossed over. She then pushes a button to the side of the handle

and starts moving it down, but her motion is interrupted the moment the coils in front of the machina start to spin.

HARIN

What in the—

Before she could finish the sentence, not to mention react, the machina fires. A yellow lightning appears, hitting and piercing Orena's arm. An explosion that follows throws her a few meters away, leaving smouldering edges around a hole in her dress.

As Harin is about to approach her, Orena gets to her feet, anger taking her over, eyes showing familiar patters. Harin instantly drops her machina in response, showing her hands.

HARIN

I'm sorry! I don't know how that happened!

As Orena stretches her hand, an object appears near Harin: two hollow cylinders, one inside other, rotating in opposite directions. A grid of different uniquely shaped slits reveals a bright orange light at its core.

Harin drops on a knee and starts breathing heavily.

HARIN

I'm... really sorry... I honestly don't know... how this happened...

As an energy ball forms next to her palm, Orena's eyes start to flicker, and her face changes expression jumping between anger and struggle as if she is trying to get a hold of herself. But just as her eyes turn to normal, she gets hit in the arm by an electric discharge, which comes from behind the trees. Her arm drops as if getting numb, releasing the energy ball.

The last thing that Aeri beholds is Harin's frightened expression as she sees the ball coming her way, illuminating her face with blinding light as the scene disappears in a flash.

THE MAGISTER

Aeri! Aeri!

She comes back to reality with the Magister holding her by the shoulders.

AERI

Hm?

THE MAGISTER

You zoned out for several seconds. What happened?

AERI

Datastratum.

THE MAGISTER

What?

AERI

My Brand.

She answers reflexively as her mind is processing the events she has witnessed.

THE MAGISTER

I don't understand.

AERI

I'm sorry, Magister. Some urgent matters have just come up that I need to take care of...

As she finally comes to her senses, her brows come together and creases form all around her eyes, which the Magister can swear have flashed for split second.

AERI

...very urgently!

Only her lips have moved to render these words through clenched teeth.

With every step she takes marching towards the room's doors, the Magister feels her anger resounding through the floor, making him wonder what could have caused such a drastic mood change.