

Alorya

By Jon Michael

I
Flight of the Jaadugar

In the distance, she could see two men arguing over something. She knew she had gone too far and could not understand why she went down to the school library in the first place. After coming to her senses, she left the Sorcerer section which was forbidden to students and decided to leave the way she had come. She paced down the corridor quietly and kept herself towards the shadows so no one would see her. Standing in her way were two men, one of which she knew to be the Grand Master of the magical race called the Jaadugar. The other, she did not recognize. He was a tall man with his dark hair pulled back in a pony tail, was wearing dark military fatigues with a yellow dragon emblem on his shoulder. She quietly threw herself against the wall and pressed herself into the shadow being as silent as possible. She silently cursed at the way your breath was always loudest when you were trying to hide. The men were arguing and the tall man seemed to be on the verge of violence. Samajhdaar, the Grand Master, was a small bald man who looked like he could use a few more meals. The war had been hard on him and ten years had shown on his face with fifty years of stress. Both men were completely devoted to their own point of view and it showed in the way they moved their hands and arms threateningly to express whatever point they were making at the time.

Suddenly, a purple mist began to cloud her vision. She thought one of the two men was conjuring a spell, but neither of them bore an enchanted item. She knew Samajhdaar carried a gnarled staff, so it must be the other guy. She pulled herself up against the wall holding her breath, so as not to be heard or seen, but she could hear the two men had stopped arguing. They were coming her way. She heard their feet stomp across the floor like a scorpanoid snapping its' claws when it feels threatened. They were coming around the corner where she had hidden herself until a blinding flash of purple light stunned her, when all of a sudden she awoke to find

herself at the entrance to her dormitory. Faces of confused students and faculty circled her vision with looks of concern and bewilderment. Is she ok? She heard somebody say.

Scarlet had another vision.

It was her gift. Of course, as a witch she had the basic talents that any other witch had, but every so often, five per year maybe, some have a special gift. Hers was the gift of foresight. She sat up and blew a lock of her short black hair out of her eyes. She had shocks of purple dyed in and naturally spiky hair. She was beautiful and yet wanted to add a dangerous edge to her appearance. She dusted herself off and shook off the cobwebs as the crowd went back to their bustle. Castle Verandawhich, the capital of Eldeese, was under siege and every Jaadugar was gathering all their belongings and heading to the auditorium where the professors would use a teleportation spell to get the students and any other refugee out to safety. Over ten years ago, Samajhdaar and the Jaadugar, declared war on the newly formed Alliance between the non-magical (Adami) countries. Through superior technology, the Adami won the war but as of yet had not asked for the surrender of the Jaadugar. The United Liberation Organization, another name for the Alliance, was trying to eliminate the threat of the Jaadugar permanently. The Adami had, until now, been the victims of brutal campaigns since history was recorded. The barbarian races of dwarves and giant men called Hauns, from Bragar started and lost two world wars and the Adami and Jaadugar saw to it that their numbers were permanently dwindled. Four times, Sorcerers led the Jaadugar in world conquest and the Adami had to ally themselves with the maverick Jaadugar and the Hauns to prevail. This war started with the death of a boy who would become a Sorcerer, and smart enough not to repeat their mistakes, the Adami were about to wipe the Jaadugar from the planet of Alorya.

If all went as planned, the refuge Jaadugar would hijack an Alliance ship and flee to the northern-most continent of Bragar. At the north-east corner of Bragar was the mouth of a river, which a city called Ironbranderlings City would become their last hope for refuge.

Ironbranderlings City was far enough north to be out of Alliance territory, but close enough to resources so the Jaadugar could survive and perhaps rebuild. Scarlet was on her way to her dorm when the vision had all but knocked her out. She was slowly heading up the stairs to her floor trying to remember what she saw. She remembered the purple light and she remembered something about men fighting. The rest was lost to her. She was still too young to control her power. Jaadugar, unlike Adami, don't reach adulthood until sometime in their thirties. Their bodies are fully developed along the same schedule as any of the other races, but the ability to control the judu doesn't come until the mind can handle the repercussions. It dawned on her suddenly. They were in the library, those two men. They must have been talking about the escape and arguing about who knows what. Relieved she continued to walk, slowly, to her room. Something wasn't right, though. We can't fight each other, she thought to herself. She has to go stop them from fighting and get them to focus on the true enemy.

"Hey Scarlet, are you coming?" A male voice came from the top of the stair case. "Wake up Scarlet, you're sleep walking again."

Jayson was a short, stocky student from the eighth year. She was only a fifth year and like most of the other girls, the older students were so much more attractive than those in her own year. Training begins when the Jaadugar reaches twenty and generally falls into two categories: Witch and Wizard. They both fell under the Jaadugar umbrella, but were different in a few ways. A wizard has the ability to speak the language of the Creator of Alorya. The strength of a wizard comes when he or she has the ability to enchant a magical item such as a

staff, a ring, an amulet, a fine jewel and other such devices. The magic is a source of life for a wizard and casting spells drain that life. When casting a spell with a magical item, however the judu is drained from the staff or magical item they enchanted instead of the wizard. Powers differ between wizards based on how long they're able to enchant their magical item and the enchantment can only be achieved by either a young wizard in their thirties or a very powerful wizard who took years to master the craft.

A witch is not a naturally magical person. They can not speak the language of the creator, but that does not mean they won't know a few words as time goes by. Often, they understand the language of the creator better than the wizard. With their ability to understand judu best, they're able to improvise sheer magical force with wisdom. It is not uncommon to find witches, who have the ability to conjure demons, conquer minds, see the future, and speak to animals and many other magical abilities. Throughout the history of Alorya, wizards were the conquerors and despots whenever one would come along with enough power. Witches though, have been behind the scenes in powerful governments all over Alorya. The great countries of technology, Vialta and Fiera, as well as the ancient kingdom of the Hauns, Bragar all have had witches to influence the direction of their civilizations. Castle Verandawhich was the capital of Eldeese- a huge sprawling castle as big as some of Alorya's largest cities.

Scarlet was running, with Jayson in tow, towards the University Library. As they bounded up the stairs he caught hold of her arm and turned her around to face him.

"Where are you going?" He asked gasping for breath.

"I think I had a vision, Jayson." She said with her other hand already on the door handle. "I think I'm discovering what my gift is and I just want to make sure. If what I saw is true, then

the Grand Master of the Jaadugar is down here and when he finds out how I knew he was here, I just know I'll make it to the next level of Wicca."

"If you're right-"

"Come on, even if I'm wrong it won't make any difference. They have to transport thousands and it's only after lunchtime."

"If you're right and he sees me, I'm toast." He turned to head back to the dorms. "I'll see you tonight at the auditorium."

Samajhdaar was really starting to feel every bit over one hundred-fifty years old. The braggart wizard in front of him was an Adami only a decade ago and now he was already trying to usurp him. Mercer was the head of B & P Pharmaceuticals and they designed cybernetic implants. He was the first successful cyborg since the Alliance and his company combined on the International Cyborg Project. Samajhdaar was against it from the very beginning, but used its political impact to bring forth the Jaadugar "Fair Play Act" which basically absolved Eldeese from all debt of previous wars, taxes on international trade goods transported via magic and best of all gave any member of the Jaadugar an open passport to all countries. Detractors were completely against the JFPA until Mercer had come in and taken over the planning and initiation of those laws. Adami saw him as one of their own and as he absolved himself of all monetary profit from the project and was inducted into a high ranking military branch of the Alliance, they tended to be at ease with whatever projects he endorsed. Sam knew that Mercer was a Jaadugar at heart though, even though his heart was as Adami as the rest of them. Sure, he humored Mercer and let him take over as spokesman for the Jaadugar, but he also allowed himself to take more of a "behind the scenes" roll in the world of Alorya.

When Samajhdaar first took Mercer to be his apprentice, twelve years ago, he was surprised at how quick he was able to pick up the language of the Creator. By then, Mercer was in his forties, and had chosen to enchant a sword he claimed to have found in Bragar. Mercer surprised everyone in the Jaadugar world when he was able to enchant at a constant rate longer than anyone in the history of the Jaadugar. The longer you can enchant, the more of your own power are you putting into the magical item and the less you draw from your own power when you cast a spell. Mercer seemed to avoid all questions as to where the sword came from after that and became quite belligerent if he was asked repeatedly.

Before today, the last he had seen of Mercer was when he was in Bragar deep within the mountain Thelautlas. It was then that they had journeyed together on a mission to dispel rumors of a Sorcerer living among them. The old Witch of Bragar had told them she wrote the prophecy years ago, and buried it deep in the mountain out of fear. Mercer snuck up on his master to try to view the prophecy as well, but what an experienced Jaadugar knew was that only one can view the prophecy at a time. This was by far the most important prophecy Sam would ever see, but only half a prophecy wasn't enough for him to act on. But, he and Mercer both wanted the same outcome, so he didn't argue when Mercer left him to go find the Sorcerer.

"Oh, c'mon Sam, you wanted him dead too." Mercer said and was clearly annoyed.

"You never told me it was you though." Sam said calmly. "I thought the Alliance military killed two of our own and eventually we declared war."

Mercer was playing both sides of the war and soon he would lead the Jaadugar, but for now he needed to be on the same side as Mercer. Lying came very easily to Mercer and he used it on everyone and anyone to get what he wanted.

"Well, it was me, doing exactly what I said I was going to do." Mercer said smoothly. "The Sorcerer's power was nearly at its peak, I barely escaped with my own life. I need to see those books now, Sam."

"Ah, yes. The books concerning the Great Tree; you know those are restricted to anyone not in the senior level of the order. Tell me why you want to see them and I'll tell you what I know of the Great Tree."

"I killed the sorcerer! I should be a senior member of the -"

Mercer pounded his fist against the wall in a dramatic show of emotion, but everything was going as well as he hoped. Idealistic old fool, he thought to himself.

"When I killed the Sorcerer, in his place grew a great flaming tree. I want to know what this means." Mercer explained.

His half of the prophecy showed that he was intricate in its coming to be. It told him that it was only him who could kill the Sorcerer and unlock the greatest power in the world. Should he say a certain spell that would call the Tree to do his bidding? Was it his new source of power? He didn't feel any stronger. It feels weird to be a Jaadugar, he thought to himself. It was like his whole life he was seeing the world from the perspective of someone who believes, whereas now he is someone who knows.

"The Great Tree is an ominous sign, but it might not mean much at all." Sam said returning with thick scroll as long as his arm. "Tell me exactly what happened."

Mercer let out his ponytail and scratched his head hard and let out a long sigh. His eyes were generally dark, but over the last ten years age had crept into the lines on his face and gave him a hardened look. Even his wrinkles took on the shape of laugh lines around his mouth and worry lines around his eyes.

Sam listened intently as Mercer told of the wizard and the sorcerer and how they nearly wiped out the Alliance's most elite unit. The Jaun Dragon's were the first anti-judu unit armed with devices to blind magic users to their presence. Their armor was resistant to some spells and could reflect magical attacks back on their attacker. They were no match for a real wizard and a sorcerer though. What Mercer left out, Sam knew, was that one of those two Jaadugar was a twelve year old boy. Whether he was the wizard or the sorcerer, neither one was telling. The battle proved to be a great exercise for the Alliance and they were able to master anti-judu warfare. It even led to the creation of their droid army which virtually won the war for them.

"So the Tree wiped out the rest of the Jaun Dragon?" Sam asked.

"Mostly," replied Mercer. "It doesn't matter really. What now?"

Sam was silently perusing the scroll. Mercer just saw an empty page, but he knew magical barriers prevented anyone from reading it unless they were a member of the senior level of the order. Mercer knew his view of the prophecy was only partial, but he didn't know that of those that do not predict future, only one can hear and thus both he and Sam together know the entire prophecy. Sam knew this and kept it to himself.

"It is basically saying that the Sorcerer is not dead. There is something left he wants to do." Sam read.

"What?" Mercer was exasperated. "Sam, give me access and let me read this. Maybe something it says will jog my memory."

"No."

"I've more than earned it, give it to me!" Mercer screamed. His hand was itching to go to his sword. The old man was without his staff and could be easily killed. He moved within striking range.

Suddenly, a brilliant flash of purple lit up the hall. Both of them were stunned and started walking towards its source. Mercer noticed that Sam somehow summoned his staff, or more like it, he conjured it.

It was a young girl. Mercer noticed how petite she was and so unlike any other witch he'd seen. She wasn't just beautiful; she had a look of controlled mayhem. Her hair was short and it made her eyes seem bigger than normal. She had a wild look in her eyes and was surrounded in a purple mist. The young girl crackled with energy.

Suddenly, he saw a vision of himself. That vision was quickly followed by a hand plucking a flaming branch from a tree. Thousands of flashes of images exploded in his mind and he noticed Samajhdaar looking at him curiously. Suddenly, the words "sorcerers' power" crept into his mind. By this time, Sam was on the floor unconscious and the girl was still standing face contorted in horror. It wasn't long before Mercer went down, cracking his skull on the black marble floor. His last conscious vision was of the girl falling to her knees.

II

Sea Charger

The Hollow Tavern was always busy on Fridays. Automatic payrolls filled the accounts of employees from every company the previous night at eleven and getting drunk with the beautiful women around was the perfect way to end a long hard week. Being one of the aforementioned beautiful women, Javin was telling the third man of the night that she was not interested in looking at *all* of his tattoos. As she watched him walk away, she noticed a shiny ring on his finger and laughed at a joke she once heard about fidelity. *How did it go?* She took a rubber band out of her jacket pocket and tied her dark hair back in a pony tail thinking about her own lessons in fidelity, or lack thereof in her boyfriend of six years. Gerardo was a great guy. She loved bringing him out with her friends because he was definitely the life of the party. During those tender moments, the things he had confided in her made her feel both special for being his confidante, and protective of him because life had not smiled on him. His father left him when he was a baby and he was raised by a mother who cared more for her dogs than for him.

Javin sat at her table in the far corner of the Hollow Tavern waiting to speak to Mr. Hughes, the leading authority in the Criminal Syndicate. The government of Myna always sought to replicate the governments of Fiera and Vialta. Those were the richest and most successful countries with as fine a culture as it had an economy. Laws restricted companies from exploiting their workers and taxes were low enough that companies could afford to hire more workers. This generated revenue that propelled the two countries into a competitive, yet friendly, race to develop the best forms of technology. Both countries had machines doing the majority of the tedious manual labor, leaving the citizens to expand their horizons in art, music and literature. The government of Myna however wanted to skip all the hard work it took Fiera and Vialta to achieve the state of efficiency and just copy each law nearly verbatim. Years ago

they abandoned the laws which lowered taxes because government revenue was just not enough to counter its spending. The current state of affairs in Myna was that taxes were high; the labor laws were too strict to make it worth hiring a full-time labor force; and because of those reasons, most of its population was unemployed. Myna was not however a poor country. Organized crime came to the rescue of this country, corrupting the government. Almost twenty years ago, Colt Hughes, a super-rich computer programmer from Vialta, moved to Myna and investing in the local gangs looking for stability. In exchange for his money, he demanded a cut of future profits and an agreement that they would only take new work from him instead of the usual private ventures. It had started out as many fractured gangs and turned in to the Syndicate, which consisted of Hughes at the top distributing jobs to his lieutenants, which were the former gang leaders, while the Syndicate took a cut from the top of the profits.

Hughes used his background in technology to find high-tech ways around the legal systems. The security forces of Myna were all computerized so as to prevent a police officer from showing up at the time of one of the Syndicates “shipments” at Riverhead or to prevent Port Marr Bayside patrol from stumbling on Syndicate Pirates stealing from Vialtan ships. In fact, standard shipping to Myna, Bragar and Eldeese would guarantee a pirate attack though harming the people aboard was secondary to taking its cargo. The only safe shipping methods were by using Syndicate smugglers, of which, Javin was the best. She had the fastest ship in the world and it is rumored to be heavily armed as well.

Patience is what made Javin the best smuggler in the Syndicate. She knew she was being watched and most likely, something at her table was being bugged. So, she kept silent and nursed her mug of ale while fending off drunken dock workers. She also knew how to play her hand well enough to get what she wanted. She always knew when her opponent was bluffing.

She decided it was time to get the check and leave. With one gulp, she downed the rest of her ale and signaled for the check. A bubbly young waitress with short blonde hair dropped the bill on her desk and then quickly went to serve a rowdy bunch of sailors. Looking around to see who might be watching, she reached into her pocket for the five grings she knew her drinks to cost.

Grings were the planetary currency agreed upon by governments of Myna, Eldeese, and Fiera and Vialta ages ago. This was necessary because rogue Jaadugar would conjure gold, spices or precious gems out of nowhere. Grings were judu resistant and could not be conjured. The High Council of the Jaadugar provided the proper formula to create the small metal coins, so no Jaadugar had the ability to just make them wealthy at the merest whim.

“Not a single pair of eyes watching me,” she muttered to herself.

Still eyeing the crowd, she opened the leather book holding her bill and a pair of keys fell down to the table.

Smooth she thought.

The bill was just a sheet of paper telling her to go to the “Employees Only” entrance just passed the bar. Inside, she knew, Mr. Hughes henchmen would be waiting for her. What the key was for she had no idea. Javin grabbed her black denim vest and put it on while she walked around a corral of round tables and brushed passed the groping hands from the patrons at the bar.

Through the door she found a blaster pistol pointing right at her. A blaster pistol belonging to a large young man with the blondest hair she had ever seen. He also appeared to have just enough intelligence to pull the trigger and little room for thought about anything else.

“Take your key out slowly.” said the blaster pistol. As she took out the key and held it out to her side he told her to go try to unlock the door on the other side of the room.

“Here’s how it works, my lovely, if Mr. Hughes wants to see you then the key will turn.” He spoke slowly, as if he memorized this line while she waited at the bar; following her with the barrel of the pistol. “If it doesn’t turn, sweetie, you won’t be around to find out why Mr. Hughes wanted you dead. After all, there is a reason he chose not to ignore you sitting in his bar for the last few hours.

As nervous as she was, she could only think to roll her eyes and mock the threat. She slipped the key into the lock and could feel the lock begin to give way when she stopped.

“Well,” she said. “Here goes...”

A part of her wanted to do something sarcastic like pretend the key wouldn’t turn, but the genius with the gun would probably not understand sarcasm and kill her. She turned the key and the door unlocked. Her forehead began to bead sweat but Javin was all about portraying coolness, so she just shrugged and gave a cute smile.

“Thanks for your lovely welcome tall, blonde and stupid. It looks like Mr. Hughes wants to see me after all.” Sarcasm fell from her full lips. “Now go sit down before you fall down.”

Oaf

As she walked into the room she saw Mr. Hughes talking to two of his men through built-in monitors on his desk. The room was dark but for the bluish glow of the monitors on his face. He was a middle-aged man way too thin and puny to be the leader of organized crime across the country. He was known for his abilities with computers and was a well known programmer in Vialta before taking his billions over to Myna to give direction to the divided crime industry. His dark graying hair had already receded and his glasses showed tiny reflections of the monitors.

“Hi Javin,” he said with only a brief glance towards her. “Sit, sit, sit. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

As she sat, she overheard one of the men tell Mr. Hughes he had to cut short their meeting. He made it known that the new arrival should have waited until the meeting was over.

“Yes, Yes Mercer. I understand. What can I say? She’s a pushy girl, right Javin?” Hughes said and she returned a shy smile. “You go finish your business in Hollis and I’ll see you at the meeting.”

One of the screens went blank. The other screen was out of her sight, but when Hughes mentioned his name was Isa, she knew right away that it was his second in command. Hughes seemed to prefer innovative and smart people to the typical seniority levels that were inherent in organized crime. Loyalty meant nothing to him if you were not progressive enough to offer up ideas and new ways to make the business grow. Generally though, once your great ideas ran out, you either faded to obscurity, or if you were still ambitious, you wound up dead. She knew she could not push her luck with him, but she had been itching to become an independent smuggler and asking her current boss was not getting it done.

“I’d better get going too, Mr. Hughes,” said Isa. “Mercer might be offended by this young ladies intrusion, but the war is over now and the next phase can stand to wait a couple weeks until the meeting.”

“Thank you Isa. Don’t mind Mercer’s impatience. He’s the least popular man in Alorya now.” responded Hughes. “The war is blamed on him and his band of Jaadugar. He’s anxious to get his profits and take over command of Eldeese.”

“He’s a fool. He’ll never live that long. I say, we give it to him and let the Alliance capture and kill him,” Isa responded.

“No, no, no Isa, then ULO would take his cut of the profits. He’s going to have to be killed along with the rest of them. We have to continue to build this business or we’ll be passed by younger, more ambitious hoodlums.” Hughes finished with a chuckle. “We’ll talk more at the meeting.”

He flicked a switch on his wrist computer and the screen went blank. His desk then folded down the computer screen and a blotter returned in its place. He wrote something Javin could not see in the date he and Isa were probably talking about earlier. He then smiled and looked up at her.

“What can I do for you, buddy?” he asked.

“I brought these for you,” Javin handed him a box of cigars.

“Thank you, thank you very much,” he said as he put them in his upper left drawer. The desk was beautiful mahogany, but it was probably more computer than wood. “I hope they aren’t made with Fieran tobacco. You know about my allergies.”

He was allergic to everything. She knew he would probably throw out the cigars, but it was better not to come in empty handed when you’re trying not to leave empty handed.

“I came to ask about going private,” she asked.

“You want to ask about you taking that magnificent boat of yours and becoming a competitor?” Hughes asked while reclining back in his imitation leather chair and folded his hand down low on his lap. “I’m sorry, how is this going to help the Syndicate?”

As long as he’s asking questions, he is willing to negotiate. Javin was going to start off low and work her way up.

“The Syndicate will work out fine because I’ll be doing their private shipments at half my usual rate. Also, I’ll pay a monthly operational fee of one thousand grings.” Javin said as she paused to consider her next thought. “I’ll also fall under your direct supervision.”

“A lieutenant?” he barked. “You’ve only been working for me for two years and you want to be a lieutenant.”

“Not exactly a lieutenant, sir.” She began.

“A lieutenant who operates her own equipment and takes a bigger cut of the profits than anyone else.” Hughes interjected. “I’ve got guys working here for thirty years who don’t make that much.”

“With all do respect, sir...”

“Watch it Javin,” Hughes warned wagging a finger at her.

“Yes sir. But I paid for my boat with all my own money. I do all my own repairs and I’m not even a financial burden in any way. All the other lieutenants also have twenty, thirty guys working for them. I’d be independent; just me and my boat.”

Hughes swiveled his chair and faced the window looking out over the city. He was tempted to tell her his life story in the Syndicate, but knew she probably would not be interested. He kept his lieutenants in line with exorbitant salaries and enough power to keep them from getting ambitious. This one seems, he thought, to like her freedom more than the money or power.

“You just lost your boat Javin.” He said casually. “I’ve got a dozen armed men around it now ready to kill anyone who comes near it.”

She had over stepped her bounds and Javin was getting worried. She knew he had artificial intelligence working closely with him and for all she knew, his desk could be a death dealing robot armed and operational.

“Today is your lucky day, though.” He walked behind her and started massaging her shoulders. She quivered with fear. “I’m going to let you buy it back from me. I accept your offer and for an extra thousand grings a month, I’ll let you gradually pay off your debt owed to me for the boat. In five years, she’s going to be all yours.”

He stopped the massage and walked behind his desk and sat in his chair. They held each others gaze for a moment and then he activated a comm link on his desk.

Javin put her head in her hands and let out a deep breath she seemed to be holding since she walked in. She was going independent, but she’ll be under his command for the next five years. It was his way of giving her what she wanted while he still kept an eye on his best smuggler. She listened to him telling those men guarding her boat to stand down for Javin only.

“I’m going to let my lieutenants know what’s going on and that should be that.” He said with a warm smile. “We’ve got a war to clean up after so the profits should be extraordinary. No one will mind from this level. People down on your level aren’t going to be too happy with you though. Young upstart jumping the line. You better watch your back.”

“Thanks” she said walking towards the door. “I’m heading over to Fiera now to test that theory. How do you think I should handle it?”

“Just keep your mouth shut and smile that pretty smile you have.”

Moments later, as she was walking down the dock, she stopped to look at the Sea Charger. It started out as luxury cruiser fifteen years ago when she bought it. By now, they had many newer and faster models to replace it, but Javin put every dime she had made towards

making the ship fast enough to overcome the magical currents which currently prevent lesser boats from surviving its tumultuous oceans and seas. She also armed the Sea Charger with military grade armor and weaponry. Two years ago, she came onto the smugglings stage like a firecracker and has generally doubled the profits of the next best smuggler. The Syndicate had her smuggle small arms weapons to both sides of the previous war. The Sea Charger was as much a part of her as her clothes or her hair. This was going to be uplifting. For the first time, the boat was no longer hers. But, for the first time, her life was.

III
Scarlet's Luck

The Castle Verandawhich library is a catacomb of little sections of books on many different levels with short stair cases leading to their little out coves. Candles adorned the wall and gave enough light to find what you were looking for, but not enough to sit there and read your book. The librarian loved this setup. In this little out cove where Scarlet lay unconscious, Mercer and Samajhdaar whispered about what they had just seen.

“It was choppy, I didn’t make sense.” said Mercer. “I did see myself at the Great Tree though. I didn’t tell you earlier, but when I cut the Sorcerers throat, I could feel the power surging through me. Then the power left and I’m not sure why.”

Samajhdaar knew that they both could not see the vision at the same time, so the choppy image Mercer saw was the missing part of the vision he saw. He had to coax the information out of Mercer without divulging too much information himself.

“The Great Tree was planted by the Creator when he first made Alorya. He took a part of Aiden and a part of Broma, the Sorcerer of the Land and created the Great Tree. When we united with the Haun and slew the Creator, Aiden went ballistic and slaughtered us by the thousands. He then took the Great Tree with him.” Sam explained. “That Sorcerer you killed had to have been Aiden.”

The library started to rumble as debris fell from the ceiling. The castle was already under siege and there was not much time. Sam knew that Mercer had not killed the Sorcerer, but the mortal vessel through which he arrived. The Great Tree up in Bragar was the Sorcerer Aiden and he was not going to leave until Mercer was dead.

“How old was the Sorcerer you killed?” asked Sam.

“He was about my age.” Mercer lied.

Sam knew this was a lie. Aiden had to have been about twelve. It was the same boy he

had been tracking since word spread of the next Sorcerer being born. Other Grand Master's would take the Sorcerer in and try to stifle their powers. They all failed. Sorcerers had proven to be so deadly and chaotic in the past, that Samajhdaar had always said he would prefer to kill them when they were young and powerless, lest they grow up and become nearly impossible to kill. He was not alone in this belief and he, along with the rest of Alorya were of common mind to the death of the Sorcerers, but the question of when always seemed to spark debate. Do they wait until the crime has been committed first and then punish? Or, are the potential crimes so devastating that a preemptive punishment must be given at a young age when the Sorcerer would be vulnerable.

"Let's get moving, they'll be within these walls within an hour." said Sam as he walked quickly down the stairs.

"What about the girl?" asked Mercer.

"Leave her. She will manage. I have thousands of students to worry about and can't let them die for just one girl," said the distant voice that was Sam.

Mercer soon caught up with Sam just as the library ceiling at the entrance collapsed behind them. It was like stepping into the heart of chaos, as smoke filled the air and the sense of panic was everywhere. The students were scurrying left and right but at the sight of Samajhdaar, they became calm and followed him as he walked away from the library.

"I'm going to the Great Tree," said Mercer walking side by side with Sam, a flock of students in their wake. "I'll go through Myna since Vialta and Fiera have me listed as a war criminal. I'm going to use my resources to get the Syndicate and AI part of the ULO army to join me on a journey to the Tree. I wish I could have seen more of that prophecy, but there is no time."

“Be patient.” Sam urged Mercer as slowed down and faced his former pupil. “It’s important that experience and judgment are paid twice as much attention as prophecies, rumors and tea leaves. The Jaadugar understands that time has brought more answers than prophecy ever has.”

“I understand.” Mercer nodded to Sam and they shook hands at the wrists. “I’ll see you in some time.”

“Good bye.”

In the darkness, Scarlet stirred awake. She had dreamed of a dark, ashy, fiery place crawling with Demons. One of them approached her but disappeared as she began to awaken. She blinked her eyes and it was still dark. She could see the moon, pale blue, where the ceiling once was and could here the rumble of the war machines off in the distance. It was already night and the invasion had begun, probably hours ago. She got up and dusted herself off.

She climbed the rubble and made her way to the outside of the library, but about forty or fifty feet up. The library looked like a giant ball from the outside and from her vantage point; she imagined it looking like a moon in its third quarter. Flames, smoke, support beams and bits of the infrastructure were lining the gaping hole in the library. Slowly, she climbed down only stopping once to look at the battle on the other side of Castle Verandawhich. She could see the magic portal as well as a few defensive spells shot at the attackers, but the majority of the light show was coming from ships hovering above firing lasers down onto the Jaadugar. She did not

think she would be able to make it there in time, so she decided to find her own path and leave from the City of Eldred, just minutes from the castle.

As she crept down the alleyways between different buildings, she heard voices. Some witches had the ability to pour fear into the aura in their location. Powerful witches could keep an entire city in fear for no logical reason. Scarlet did not have any of these sorts of gifts. Sure, she could get the person next to her a little nervous if she tried, which was all you needed to pass your exams, but anything more than that was for those with the gift. She was too young to master or even use her gift with regularity, but she knew what her gifts were. Neither the seer gift, nor the self-projection gift would help her here. Last year, she learned that she could project a part of herself so she would appear in two places at once. Scarlet was stressed and running late to her class and found that when she snuck in and went to sit down, she was already sitting in her chair. As soon as she saw herself, the Scarlet in the chair disappeared, but she liked this gift at the time. Suddenly, she was tapped on the shoulder and saw that it was someone she knew from around the halls.

“You scared me!” she squeaked.

“No time,” the nameless face said. “Loads of people dead. Much escape we need done. Go now.”

She followed him, ignoring his peculiar accent. They past through a small vent leading to the market square, something students at most university’s are familiar with – short-cuts to the local entertainment. Scarlet saw the market square was completely abandoned, except for this small rabble of Jaadugar. She noticed not one teacher was among them. None of them recognized each other; they were all just people in the same situation in the same place and time as the others.

“She alone,” said her guide.

“Did you see any other survivors along your travels?” asked one of the others to Scarlet.

“No” she said.

“Ok, c’mon, let’s go. We’ll sneak through supply depot,” said the apparent leader of this group. “Grab as much food as you can carry from the vendor carts and let’s go.”

The castle was not map able and supplies were conjured from the docks of Eldred to the supply depot. The ULO were concentrating their attack on the publicly known entrance and it would not be long before enough damage was done to the castle that the magic would weaken and the ULO would be able to see the rest of it on their heads up displays as well as with their eyes. The students scrambled and stuffed everything in the packs from healthy meat pies to less healthy fruit chips and soft drinks. Scarlet did not have a pack to stuff anything in, so she just ate as much as she could and wrapped some food in a burlap towel she saw hanging over the counter of one of the stalls.

“Not worry.” said Mikel who guided her to the camp. “Over soon.”

They finished storing their supplies and hugged close to the walls as they made there way around the market square to the supply depot. If a ULO Scout were in the area, they would be able to see a bunch of Jaadugar sneaking around. They stayed hidden in the shadows while they walked and made sure to be extra quiet.

Suddenly a purple mist started floating up everywhere. The magical protection around the castle was giving way as it took more and more damage. Scarlet could not see her feet anymore and the judu started becoming as tangible as steam. They began to quicken the pace and soon they ducked into the supply depot and out of the castle.

The joy of escaping the castle was short lived as it soon became apparent that there was

no plan once they made it out of the castle. Actually, to be more accurate, each of them had their own plan with the exception of Scarlet. By sheer luck, they managed to go unheard as they discussed their differences and decided that the best way to escape this was to disguise themselves as refugees and sneak away with the Adami relocated back to refugee camps in “known Adami countries.” The ULO had warned the Jaadugar High Council that they would destroy Eldeese and everyone on it no matter what, so it was best to surrender. The Jaadugar that did surrender were whisked away to war camps where, who knows, what happened to them. No matter what choices the students made, they had to get out of Eldeese.

Scarlet did not like the idea, as she did not think the ULO would simply take everyone’s word for it that they were indeed Adami. She knew there would be tests and living in the sheltered life the Jaadugar were accustomed, she had no idea what tests to anticipate. They traveled close enough to the path to get to the docks, but far enough away so as not to be seen.

When they were close enough to the docks, they saw the long line of refugees filing along into the ferry station. It was the largest passenger dock in the world, capable of holding fifteen thousand people, and the line of people clumped together could go as far as the eye could see.

“There’s no way the ULO can manage that many refugees. We’ll slip right in,” said one of the newly disguised students, smiling with glee.

“Go now!” exclaimed Mikel.

Scarlet was not happy with just sneaking up to the line. Those barges hauling the refugees back to ULO territories were small enough she could swim out there and grasp on to one of their floating buoys. By the time she scanned the waterfront, for the best way to execute her plan, the others had left without her. They moved quickly and their discipline of stealth and silence was slipping as the gravel crunched under their feet while they ran. Reluctantly, she crept down to

the waterfront and decided to go on alone.

When let herself down into the water from an abandoned dock, she felt how warm the water was. It was her first time in the Mars Sea and it was something she wished she had done sooner. Slowly, she swam out far enough to put herself into the path of one of the barges. She saw a commotion back at the coast and saw her former companions had been caught by the ULO. It was the middle of the night, but the shores near the ferry station were lit up bright and grand. In the back of her mind, she congratulated herself for being so much more cunning than the others. Most of them were older than she was, so it made her feel quite accomplished at this site.

Triumph turned into horror when she watched them lined up against the wall and shot to death. The soldiers went around to each of the bodies afterwards to deliver a final blaster shot to their heads for confirmation that they were dead. Scarlet panicked. She ducked under the water and swam away from the shore as quick as she could. It was dark out in the sea, so under water, she would not be seen. She would only come up for air for a large breath and then return to swimming.

By the time her lungs began to hurt and the panic gave way the realization that her plan of grabbing onto a barge was a good one; as she emerged, she was so far from the shore that the soldiers and refugees were very tiny. Scarlet tread water and watched the ferry station in the black night trying to anticipate the trajectory of the refugee barges. She still had some swimming to do in order to get closer to the path of the boats, but her clothes were already heavy and she was tired. She did a breast stroke and didn't increase her pace when she saw she was going to miss the next passing barge. It didn't matter anymore. She needed her strength to hold on and it made sense to her to study the dimensions of the boat so she would know where to grab

on the next one to pass.

The barges were, she saw, twice as long as the hallway in her dorm. There were ten rooms on either side of the hallway and she guessed they were about ten feet wide including the walls in between each dorm, so it must be close to two hundred feet long. They were nearly half that measurement in width and they moved pretty fast for their size. She also noticed, buoys being dragged along the back of the boat which she might be able to grab onto as it went by.

She waited an eternity, but it was still dark and she was still tired and the next barge was coming her way. Careful not to be seen, she ducked herself under water and used the sounds of the engine to tell her how near the barge was. She'd barely emerge as she took in more air and slowly went under again. The sound of the engine vibrated so much now she could feel it in her chest when she was under water. The time would be near soon.

Adrenaline...

She could feel the beast as she struggled up the rope and dragged herself to the back of the boat.

No air...

Scarlet never realized how difficult it would be to be dragged like this. She never thought the rope would be so slippery. Her plan of hanging onto the back of the boat until she reached the next country clearly required more planning than what it received. Along the back of the barge, she noticed there was a metal grate about two feet wide which she thought was her best hope. She climbed out of the water until she hung directly over it and let herself fall. She hit the metal grate hard and felt a crack in her ankle as she slipped, fell and grabbed onto the grate with her hands. With her feet, she could feel the boats propellers were near and she had to be careful. She pulled herself onto the grate and then lowered her head in sheer exhaustion. After a few moments, she checked her ankle and though screaming with pain, it was not broken.

The next few days were tough. The food she was able to get at the market square, which seemed a million years ago, must have fallen off her in the water. At first, she could not sleep because of the excitement, and after the first morning, she could not sleep because of the chills. After the third day, she passed out from exhaustion and in her sleep, fell off the back of the barge somewhere off the coast of Fiera. It was not the first time she wished she had received a blaster shot to the head like her companions from a few days ago and it would not be her last.