

TENDRILS OF BLUE STATIC POPPED and snapped around Lieutenant Erynn Yager's fingers as she tapped the keypad. Black numbers and symbols streamed across the white screen of her monitor. She glanced up, checking the equation on the large overhead at the front of the cramped classroom and smiled, her answer correct.

Delicate blue currents reached out and wrapped around her hands with a faint tingling sensation. In a breath Erynn whispered, "*Com avlash.*" She brushed at dappled shadows that danced across the pool of sunlight at the edge of her desk, amused by the wispy blue filaments tracing her movements. They flowed like a lazy stream, trailing the path her fingertips traveled before the energy faded. As the static disappeared, she glanced around to make sure no one noticed.

No one ever had.

The buzz of winged *centinents* drifted in on a warm breeze through the open window next to her. She sighed and fingered the neck of her white uniform shirt, the stiff collar tight and irritating in the rising temperature.

From the front of the classroom the instructor, Major Kendal, his tan uniform meticulous, asked, "Does anyone need more time?" He scanned faces in the room. No one responded and he continued, "I trust you took into account gravitational pull, divided by trajectory angles, while factoring in speed given mass and friction before multiplying . . ."

Erynn tried to listen, but his incessant droning soon matched the hum from outside.

Static crackled, and the air thickened with a sinking heaviness. The temperature plunged to an icy cold, chilling her moist skin. A sweet, spicy aroma

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replaced the electronic scent of computers and sour sweat of bodies pressed into a tight space for too long. She glanced out the window and frowned. *What—*

Broad yellow, orange, and red leaves trembled in the breeze. Brown stone buildings melded with the blue sky and manicured green lawns. The colors ran, blurred, and morphed into dark oily shapes with faint outlines of long arms and legs. She stiffened and squeezed her eyes shut. Images played in her mind like a silent *vid* in fast-forward.

*Flash—*a brilliant jeweled city nestled in a deep green forest. *Flash—* majestic spires of trees surrounding a clearing, the woods tossed in a violent windstorm. *Flash—* mountain peaks covered by snow and ice.

More impressions swirled and sped by, eclipsing her thoughts, taking control.

Bright pinpoints of red and orange exploded, swarming under her closed lids. The high-pitched sound of a hundred musical instruments in discord screamed in her mind. The syrupy aroma intensified. She caught two words through the cacophony—a plea, and a warning.

*"Cadjoo. Mabraith."*

Her chest constricted, unable to expand.

*Help. Death.*

The meaning of these two words, in a language she'd made up as a child, took her breath. She pushed recognition away, refusing the insistent vision that pried at the corners of her mind seeking purchase.

*Prophecy.*

The word slithered across her nerves like a dry whisper.

Heart thudding, her lids flew open. At the periphery of her vision, the sparkling colors blinked out, and the heavy atmosphere in the room lifted. Erynn's ears popped and the shrieking voices died, sudden quiet making her believe the shrill proclamation left her deaf. She jumped up, chair legs screeching backward on polished tile as the desk banged into the seat in front of her. "No!" Her shout rang out in the small, quiet room. Floor heaving like rolling waves, she leaned against the desk on unsteady legs. Startled students in her weapons-and-tactics class stared at her, most of them shaking their heads and smirking. Ridicule and resentment came as a barrage of stinging barbs digging under

her skin. Concentrated emotions of pity, anger, concern, scorn, disgust and envy bombarded against her attempt to focus, to gain control.