

AIRYWOMAN

BOOK ONE



ZARA QUENTIN

Airwoman

Zara Quentin

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

For my family,
who is always ready for
an adventure.

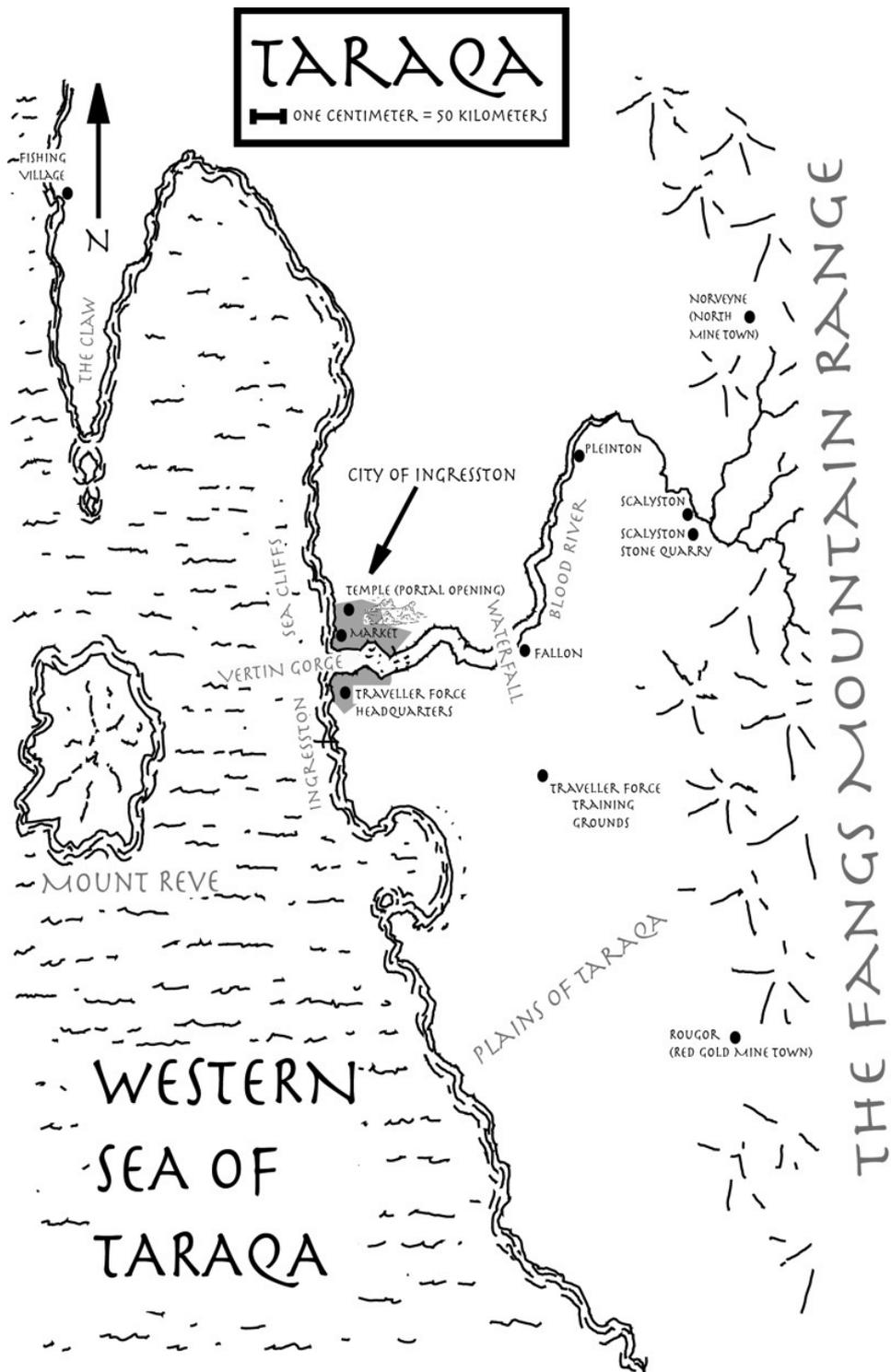
A Note to You

Hi Reader!

I'm so glad you're interested in delving into the world of *Airwoman*. If you haven't yet made up your mind, you can get the first three chapters for free at www.zaraquentin.com/airwomanpreview.

I have really enjoyed bringing my debut novel—*Airwoman*—to you and I hope you enjoy reading it. Remember to stick around when you get to the end because I've got more in store for you....

Happy reading,
Zara Quentin



For a map of Premye, please visit
<http://www.zaraquentin.com/premyemap>

Chapter 1

Jade beat her wings once, twice—powerful strokes that harnessed the wind streaming over her like water—then stretched them wide to circle into a warm updraft. She let out a laugh as the gust of air pushed her upwards. Then she flicked her tail to send her into a roll, making the blue sky and red earth blur and tumble. Righting herself, she spread out her arms and turned her face to the sun, enjoying the warmth of the morning sunlight on her skin.

This was freedom.

It only lasted a moment before she looked down and saw Ingresston, her cliffside-city home. At the sight of it, Jade started sinking, the weight of her heart dragging her down, tethered by her responsibilities in the Taraqan capital.

Jade sighed as she descended. From above, the clifftop Temple was in full view, with the gilded-gold statue of their Dragon-God, Our Lady Taraqa, towering over it. The statue looked out towards Mt. Reve, the volcano that loomed against the horizon of the Western Sea, as though keeping watch. Jade drank in the magnificent view: the statue of Our Lady stood tall on Her hind legs, Her front feet resting on the top tier of the ziggurat Temple. The rising sun outlined Her outstretched wings and Her head like a halo of rose-gold light. As much as Jade longed to see the Dragonverse, she never tired of this early morning view.

She couldn't stay forever, though, and continued her descending spirals towards the markets sprawled between the Temple and the cliff's edge.

A wisp of smoke curled up from Our Lady's nostrils, drifting upward into the churning grey clouds that marked the Portal. The clouds contrasted starkly with the bright blue sky that stretched to the horizon in every direction. Jade gave the Portal airspace a wide berth; not only were the currents unpredictable, but it was against the law to interfere with the passage of Travellers into and out of the Portal. Still, Jade's chest swelled with yearning at the sight of those clouds and, as always, she forced her gaze away, denying the temptation to pass through the Portal and disappear.

Instead, she lowered her eyes and swept her long, slender tail around to angle her effortless glide down towards the colourful tents of the marketplace that stood outside the western entrance of the Temple. The Temple was the conduit for cross-Portal trade, but the marketplace was where Taraqans sourced everyday goods.

Jade's bare feet touched down on the red dirt and she folded her almost translucent wings at her back, the jade-green scales decorating the bone structure

in her wings, glinted in the sunlight. The salty sea breeze rustled a blue sheet of canvas stretched over four poles, sheltering a table of baked goods from the hot Taraqan sun. It was early, but the market bustled with activity.

Jade ran a hand through her short, wavy hair, wincing slightly as her fingers jagged in the knots. Usually she tied it back, but it was only a short flight from her family home in the cliffs, and she planned to spend the rest of the day in the Temple.

Jade walked towards the enormous arched entrance to the Temple, ducking under canvas shading, weaving past rough-hewn tables laden with eggs, cheeses, coloured swatches of woven cloth, dried meats, pickles and plenty of other goods. The air rang with merchants hawking their wares, live chickens squawking, and people haggling over prices. She smelt a strong whiff of fish, as a hand clapped her on the shoulder.

“Jade!”

Jade turned to see a sun-browned fishmonger from The Claw. His eyes twinkled as he greeted her, then flicked to either side of her, looking for someone else.

“Papa’s not here today,” Jade said, taking a moment to remember his name—Davron.

“Given you the keys to the kingdom, has he?” Davron winked and a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

Jade remembered the Porter who had unexpectedly arrived on their landing that morning with an urgent delivery for her father. Papa had opened the small package and turned it over in his hands. To Jade’s surprise, he’d then given her terse instructions for the day. For the first time since she’d started her apprenticeship in the family business, he wouldn’t be accompanying her to the Temple. Instead, he’d disappeared without any explanation.

“He’s got urgent business elsewhere, so I’m taking care of a few things for him. Nothing major.” Jade shrugged her shoulders as though this was commonplace, but the flush that rose to her cheeks exposed the lie and she averted her eyes. Davron knew, as did everyone else in Ingresston, that she was Magnus Gariq’s daughter and unofficial heir to Gariq Industries, the largest cross-Portal acquisitions and trading company on Taraqa. She was being trained to takeover the company, but her apprenticeship was in its infancy and mostly all she seemed to do was accompany her father. This was her first taste of any real responsibility.

“I’m sure you’ll do him proud.” Davron pointed to a large silver blue fish hanging on a hook. “I’ve got this beauty earmarked for him. Fresh and delicious.”

Jade shook her head. “I’m not buying today.”

“Maybe tomorrow, then.” Davron shrugged, then waved her along. “Give my respects to Magnus.”

Jade moved out from under the market’s patchwork of canvas. She squinted up at the Temple towering over her. It’s white stone levels—almost blinding in the morning sunlight—stepped up to the top where the gold statue of Our Lady rested. Above Our Lady, a tiny black-clad figure appeared, a smudge against the grey clouds. Wings spread, the Traveller spiralled downwards, past Our Lady’s head until the walls of the Temple obscured him.

As always, when Jade saw a Traveller moving into or out of the Portal, she closed her hand over the pendants that hung from her neck chain. They were her charms—tokens from other worlds—gifted to her from others who had made the journey and returned. Among her favourites were a sphinx-wing from Deena, a leaf from the carnivorous trees on Linith, and a tailbone of a myr—a sea creature from Merryne. All were reminders of the adventures she dreamed of.

Longing thrummed in her chest as her fingers found a pendant inlaid with a blue-green opal and moulded into the shape of a strange Earthen animal.

Kangaroo... Jade heard the echo of her older brother, Basalt’s words when he’d given it to her. *Supposedly it can’t go backwards.*

Her chest tightened at the thought of him, aching both for the brother who was no longer with her, and for adventures she dreamed of, but could not have.

The edge of the kangaroo pendant dug into the flesh of her palm as another Traveller emerged from the Portal clouds. This time, before he disappeared behind the Temple walls, Jade forced her eyes away, let go of her neck chain and squared her shoulders. Then she marched through the arched entrance to the Temple.

Goosebumps rose along her forearms as Jade stepped through the stone arch. She blinked as her eyes adjusted to the dim light.

She turned to her right as she mentally ran through Papa’s instructions. She’d recited this list over and over since she’d left home, desperate not to forget anything. With every step, Papa’s voice rang through her mind.

First, visit the office of taxation, submit the auction report and pay the taxes.

As she walked, Gold Chips jingled inside the small sack slung across her chest.

Deposit our donation to the Temple.

Jade padded softly along the Outer Ring, the hallway around the outer wall of the Temple.

Visit the Mail Room and collect any messages that have come through the Portal since yesterday.

Jade took a left into a small passage linking through to the Inner Ring, heading towards the Mail Room since that was the most straightforward task. Besides, her latest edition of *Traveller Monthly* magazine might have arrived by now. Jade smiled, then pushed the thought aside to concentrate on Papa's list.

Visit the Office for Trade and deposit the list of acquisitions being submitted to auction, along with our declarations that all items were lawfully acquired and don't violate rules around cross-world significance.

Jade turned into the Inner Ring, trailing her fingers along the wall, the rough stone cool under her fingertips.

Lastly, take the auction list to the Air Marshall.

This last task wasn't required by Taraqan law, but the Lord Protector, Air Marshall Scosse, was one of Papa's old friends from his days in the Traveller Force and the gesture was a sign of respect for their leader. Cultivating such relationships, Papa always said, was one of the reasons Gariq Industries had grown into such a large and well-respected company.

Besides, Scosse's office and private chapel were located on the top floor of the Temple, so it was convenient for Jade to pay him a visit. Still, the thought of it made her stomach tumble over itself. She was not as easy with people as her father and this last task was her least favourite.

She stopped outside the Mail Room, next to the archway to Our Lady's Court, the courtyard that rose up through the middle of the Temple in an open column toward the Portal clouds above.

Jade paused under the arch. The morning sunlight crept down the western wall, but the courtyard was still cast in shade. Several Travellers, clad in black uniforms, circled down before landing on the mosaic-tiled floor. One returning Traveller raised a hand to another Traveller walking into the Court, who slapped it with a grin. The departing Traveller spread her wings and leapt into the air to spiral up towards the Portal. She rose until she passed Our Lady's snout, then pressed a hand to it, as all outgoing Travellers did—for luck and safe return—before making for the Portal.

A figure appeared in front of her. Jade squeezed up against the stone wall of the arch, as a burly Traveller pushed past, the rough material of his uniform like sandpaper against her arm. A scar ran across his right jaw and he was missing part of his ear. A green stripe on his left shirt sleeve denoted him as a Porter, one of an elite group within the Traveller Force, that couriers not only messages and objects, but also non-winged creatures through the dangerous place between worlds: the Betwixt. With the reputation for being brave to the point of fearless, Porters risked death flying through the Betwixt day after day. Regular Travellers spent a week or more off-world before making the return journey.

Remembering the Mail Room was her destination too, Jade fell in behind the Porter as he entered.

Emptying the company mailbox, Jade found a number of routine messages. She also checked the Gariq family's private mailbox, finding a few messages along with her regular magazine. Jade tucked the messages into her bag without looking at them, and stared wistfully at the cover of her magazine. On the cover was a glossy picture of hundreds of floating spheres, tiny Fey bubble-houses, hovering above the steep gorges of Corinth. On the back cover was an advertisement for the new suspension resort built across the spectacular fire-crystal valley on Adillique. She sighed—the magazine would have to wait. She had too many other things to do.

Jade walked briskly toward the Tax Office. Situated on the eastern side of the Temple, next to the Office of Portal Records, Jade passed several government offices along the empty hallway of the Inner Ring. She was about to round the corner, when she heard a familiar voice.

"...serious! The repercussions will be disastrous..."

Jade stopped abruptly, recognising the speaker—Papa. What was he doing here? He'd told her he wasn't coming to the Temple today.

Then she heard another voice, quieter and more muffled: *"...worth...imagine the value...once in a lifetime..."*

Jade couldn't make out who the second voice belonged to. She turned, straining to hear, wondering which office the voices were coming from. She heard Papa's voice again; stern and afraid. *"...I must insist. Lives will be lost over this. Taraqan lives. You must return it..."*

Her curiosity drove her a step closer to the voices behind a slightly ajar door. Then a hand grabbed her shoulder.

Chapter 2

“Hey, dreamer!” Jade jerked as a hand waved in her face. She blinked, seeing her best friend Kyssa standing next to her.

“Are you back with us now?” Kyssa grinned. Her black hair was shaved, like most Travellers wore it, and it accentuated the angles of her cheek bones. “So, are you welcoming me back on-world or running errands for Gariq Industries?”

Jade smiled back. “Actually I’m representing Papa today. He’s busy.”

Kyssa’s eyes widened as she took in Jade’s words. “Wow—cool.”

Jade stood straighter, enjoying the flash of envy she saw in her friend’s eyes. Then Kyssa shifted her silver scaled wings and straightened her black shirt. Jade’s chest tightened at the sight of Traveller garb.

“Where have you been?” Jade heard the longing in her own voice.

“Patrolling the Serysse Portal,” Kyssa said.

“Why?”

“There are signs Serysse is starting to regenerate, so a guard has been permanently posted there. No trading traffic, obviously. It’s a protection watch.” Kyssa looked sideways at her with a wink. “No action this time, though.”

Jade laughed. Knowing how much Kyssa enjoyed active duty, it would have been a chore. “Any other news?”

Kyssa raised an eyebrow. “Are you curious or seeking intel for Magnus?” she asked, as she jabbed a finger into Jade’s ribs, then winked. Jade let out a sound that was halfway between a gasp and a laugh, then instinctively stepped backwards and held her hands up to protect the ticklish spot she’d had since she was a child. Kyssa had loved to tickle her back then and still exploited her weak spot now and again.

“A question from your best friend!” Jade retorted, a broad smile on her face. “Though there could be a Chip in it for you.” Jade jingled the sack slung across her chest. “If you’ve got anything interesting.”

Technically, the Traveller Force reported to the Lord Protector via the Air Vice Marshall, who was the actual head of the military. However, the lines between iconic Taraqan companies, like Gariq Industries, and the military were blurred. Given that all Taraqans served in the Traveller Force for at least two years before either choosing to stay and make a career, or leave and pursue other work, it was no surprise that the leaders of the military, the company and the government were woven together through history, friendship and common interest. Even at the lower levels, many Travellers worked for private companies on the side to supplement their income.

She knew Kyssa would take her offer of a Chip. Whilst little more than pocket money, it would buy her unit a round of drinks at the local tavern. Jade fished around in her coin purse for the Chip and when Kyssa closed her hand around it, she winked again at Jade.

“There’s talk from other units about increased activity in the Betwixt. I’ve seen Yrax each time I’ve been through, lately. Only at a distance, but it was enough to give me the creeps.”

Jade shivered at the mention of the beasts that inhabited the Betwixt, the stuff of children’s nightmares. Taraqan children were warned by their parents to be good or they would be fed to the Yrax.

“Also, the Merrynese are making a formal complaint about the new resort development. They’re threatening trade relations.”

“Aren’t they always?” Jade rolled her eyes. “That won’t be news to Papa.”

Kyssa stiffened, as though Jade had slighted her. Then she casually ran her fingers along the badge sewn above her left breast pocket, which read: *Flying Officer*. As if Jade didn’t already know she’d been recently promoted. It was common knowledge that Kyssa was considered a future leader in the Traveller Force. Jade wondered if it was a subtle jab at Jade for not having served.

Jade pursed her lips. “Is that it?”

Kyssa’s eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms, regarding Jade for a moment.

“There’s been a disturbance on Premye.”

Jade focused. “Premye?” she repeated. “What’s on Premye? It’s an old-world backwater. No civilisation. Nothing to trade.”

Kyssa shrugged. “Beats me. But a few Travellers have been there lately.”

“Maybe someone found something worth trading and the locals are getting upset?” Jade asked, thinking aloud. It wouldn’t be the first time. Taraqan companies like Gariq Industries were always looking for new worlds and new treasures. Still, Jade hadn’t heard of local people on Premye. As far as Jade knew, Premye was virtually uninhabited.

“My thoughts exactly,” Kyssa said, a smug note in her voice. “Make sure Magnus knows where the information came from, all right?”

“Of course,” Jade said. “When there’s an opening, I’ll recommend you for ___”

“Yeah, thanks.” Kyssa cut her off, and her cheeks reddened.

There was a pause and Jade used the silence to listen for Papa, but heard nothing. Kyssa gave her a strange look and Jade cleared her throat. “I’m due at the Tax Office. I’d better go.”

Kyssa fell in beside her. “I’ll come. I still have to sign the Portal Record

anyway.”

“You didn’t do that already? I thought that was the first thing you’re supposed to do?”

“There was a line.” Kyssa gave Jade a sideways glance then laughed at her expression. “Don’t worry. I’ll do it. I’ve got nothing to hide.” She flipped the Chip into the air and caught it. “Then I’ll buy you a drink and tell you some stories that’ll cheer you up.”

Make me jealous rather, Jade thought.

The Inner Ring was a narrow, dark hallway bounded on both sides with offices assigned to civic administration. There were no windows and in the absence of natural light, shadows flickered and bounced from the lit torches spaced along the stone walls. For tradition’s sake, there was no electricity in the Temple, so they made do with more archaic methods of lighting.

Jade wrapped her arms around her chest, absentmindedly rubbing the goosebumps along her arms as she continued along the Inner Ring with Kyssa. As they moved off, Jade looked towards where she’d heard Papa, but saw nothing and heard no one.

A jab at her ribs made her turn to see Kyssa looking pointedly at her.

“Well?” Kyssa asked.

Jade blinked.

“What is going on with you today?” Kyssa sounded exasperated. “What’s the latest?” Kyssa raised her eyebrows, “You know, with Axel?”

“Oh, right.” Jade’s cheeks warmed as she remembered her conversation with Kyssa over a glass of golden ale a couple of weeks ago, when she’d confessed her feelings for Papa’s assistant, Axel. She *knew* she should never have said anything. Kyssa would never let this go, not until she knew everything.

Not that there was much to tell.

Jade shook her head. “Nothing.” She lengthened her stride, turning the corner to see the Tax Office at the end of the hall.

“Oh, it’s nothing now? That’s not what you said at the Inn the other night. Come on, it’s *me!* Spill.”

Jade’s chest tightened as though the air was being squeezed out of her. She darted sideways as Kyssa threatened to poke her in her ticklish spot again.

“He’s pretty cute,” Kyssa said, her face breaking out into a teasing smile. Jade heard the humour in her friend’s voice and her heart gave a little flip. “I mean, *considering*. He must take after his mother.”

Jade frowned at her friend's words. Axel had always been cagey about his family. Did Kyssa know them? Jade opened her mouth to ask, but Kyssa cut her off.

"Do your parents know about your new *boyfriend*?"

"He's not my boyfriend," Jade said, her face was aflame now. "But... I don't know. Axel just *gets* me."

Kyssa laughed. "Yeah, right. You two have nothing in common."

"We do!"

"Whatever." Kyssa rolled her eyes, but there was a teasing smile on her face. "You should make a move on him."

Her stomach twisted. "I don't know..."

"Come on! Someone like him should be grateful for attention from someone like you."

Jade's smile faltered and her mouth felt suddenly dry. She didn't like the sudden turn this conversation had taken.

"He works for Papa," she muttered, staring at a point down the hallway.

"So does half of Taraqa—except me, of course." She didn't even smile this time. "Anyway, slumming it with him would be a bit of fun for you. It's not as if it would ever get serious." Kyssa wiggled her eyebrows and laughed, but something heavy had settled in Jade's stomach.

"He's my friend," Jade said, her voice quiet.

"Right." A strange look came over Kyssa's face.

Jade didn't stop until they came to two offices next to each other. One was the Tax Office and the other was the Office of Portal Records. Jade turned to enter the Tax Office when a booming voice echoed in the hallway.

"Little Jay!"

Jade startled and turned to see Uncle Zorman striding towards her. His wings, mottled with black, white and grey scaling over their struts, framed his handsome face and broad shoulders. He cut a similar picture to Papa in looks, though without the greying hair at his temples that marked Papa's face. Their personalities, though, were very different—Papa was quiet and serious while Zorman was outgoing. Her uncle knew everyone, and they all owed him a favour. Still, for all their differences, both shared the determination that had built Gariq Industries into one of the most successful Taraqan companies.

As usual, Zorman dominated the hall as he swaggered towards her—Jade wasn't sure whether it was because of the force of his extrovert personality or his tall stature.

"Uncle Z!" As Head of Acquisitions at Gariq Industries, Zorman was always off-world and by the look of his dirt-smeared clothing, he'd just come back from

another trip. “Anything interesting?” She pointed to the bulge of the satchel slung across his chest.

Zorman grinned, opening the bag. Then his eyes slid towards Kyssa, who still stood at her shoulder. “Shouldn’t you be reporting to your superiors, Flying Officer?”

Kyssa scowled, and turned abruptly towards the door to the Office of Portal Records. Jade couldn’t suppress a sense of satisfaction at the envy on Kyssa’s face. Kyssa was rarely jealous of her Taraqa-bound life, and it felt good for a change. Zorman watched Kyssa as she disappeared, then he leaned closer to Jade to share a secret.

“Look at this.” Zorman drew a small metal object out of his bag and held it up.

“What is it?” Jade looked at the tiny object with interest. It was some kind of metal stick with wings.

“On Earth, they call it a *dragonfly*. They really exist, but this is a metal replica. Watch.” Zorman held up the dragonfly in one hand, stretching his arms out so they almost touched the hallway walls on either side. His other palm held a small metal cube.

The little dragonfly hummed, its wings fluttering so fast Jade could barely see them. Zorman let go of the insect and it whizzed toward his outstretched hand and came to rest on the cube.

“See? They’re amazing, the Earthens. Inventive.”

“You said they were violent and unpredictable.”

“Sure, they’re always killing each other for some reason or another. Half of them are barely civilised. *But* their technology is very interesting.” Zorman tucked the dragonfly back into his bag. “Imagine what a thoroughly superior race like ours could do, building on their technology. Mark my words, Little Jay; I’m going to do something Taraqans have never managed before.”

“What?”

“Wait and see. It’ll change the Dragonverse, I’m sure of it.”

“What else have you brought back?” Jade asked. Zorman’s bag was too bulky for one tiny item.

Zorman pulled out something larger and held it up. A rectangle of wood carved into a scene. Jade could barely resist the temptation to run her fingers over the finish. So textured and detailed. Clearly a master carver had shaped it.

“It’s exquisite.” She leaned closer to make out the picture in the flickering light. A Dragon-God protecting something aflame.

“Isn’t it beautiful? It’ll fetch a nice price at auction. Maybe a record.”

“Papa will be pleased,” Jade said. “Has he seen it?”

At the mention of her father, Zorman's smile faltered, then he shrugged and nothing was amiss. He slipped the carving back into his bag and, as he opened the satchel, she caught a flash of something else inside. Then Zorman pulled the bag closed.

"That's it. Pretty good haul, if I do say so myself."

Jade was about to point out the other object when she heard footsteps. She turned to see Axel approaching and her breath hitched at the sight of him. His wings curved to tuck in behind his shoulders and the bright bronze scales over his wings accentuated the warm brown of his eyes. The black tattoo on his shoulder was visible at the edge of his shirt sleeve. One thumb hooked into the pocket of the blue pants he always wore. *Jeans*, he'd told her once.

Axel's other hand clasped tightly over the bag slung across his chest and Jade remembered that he had also been off-world, although as Papa's First Assistant he wasn't usually tasked with acquisitions.

Axel approached, deep in thought. Her heart pounded in her chest—so loud she thought Zorman must hear it from where he stood. Then Axel looked up, met her eyes and stopped in his tracks, surprised. His eyes lit up. Jade's chest tightened and a smile spread across her face.

Then his smile faltered and something else flickered across his face. Regret?

Jade swallowed, trying to keep her feelings in check. Axel started walking again, more slowly now, towards her.

"Hi," he said, his eyes fixed on her face. Jade was caught; drawn into them.

"Hi." Jade's heart beat a little faster. She gave Axel a lopsided smile and saw the corner of his mouth turn up in return. Then his eyes flicked to take in Zorman who, Jade suddenly realised, was still standing next to her. The smile fell from Axel's face. He cleared his throat.

"Can I get past?" Axel asked. His hands tightened around his bag.

Jade stepped back, pressing herself against the stone wall, its cold surface a counter to the warmth spreading through her. Zorman didn't move. His eyes narrowed as he looked at Axel, and Jade saw dislike on his face, a contrast to his usual self.

Axel brushed Zorman's shoulder as he passed and Zorman jerked his arm away, grimacing like he'd tasted something disgusting.

"I'm free later this afternoon," Axel said, pausing next to Jade. Her skin tingled where his arm brushed hers. "Want to hang out?"

Jade's mouth went dry. She swallowed, unable to find words to reply.

"Or not," Axel looked down, breaking eye contact. "If you're busy."

"I'm not," Jade said in a rush. Her heart thundered.

Axel's eyes lit up again. "Later, then."

When Jade tore her eyes away from Axel's retreating figure, she saw Zorman regarding her with a strange expression. Suddenly she wanted to get out of her uncle's presence.

"I'd better get going," Jade said, turning towards the Tax Office.

Zorman's head jerked a nod. "Me too." He leaned forward to kiss her cheek. "Give my love to your beautiful mother, Little Jay."

Jade barely registered his words as she threw one last glance over her shoulder to see Axel turn the corner and disappear. Then she let go of her breath in a rush and pushed on the door to the Tax Office.

The afternoon sun filtered through the gnarled trees that defied gravity to grow at all angles out of the steep rocky walls of Vertin Gorge. Carved into the upper cliff walls was Ingresston. Atop the cliffs, the Temple stood, and above that, the Portal.

In the depths of the gorge, wind rustled the leaves, water rushed over rocks, and nesting birds chirruped in the trees. This cool, green sanctuary gave Jade the feeling of being in another world. The cliff walls bowed above her, leaving only a strip of blue sky streaked with wispy clouds. Jade crouched down to dip her hand into Blood River, which carved its route through these rocks to pour into the Western Sea.

Jade was mesmerised by the play of the light on the water as it danced between the speckled shadows cast by the trees. The cold water soon numbed her fingers. She shivered, wiping her hand dry on the light fabric of her loose-fitting pants.

In the corner of her eye Jade saw Axel land effortlessly on a rock, slightly upstream from her. He folded his bronze wings at his back and ran a hand over his short black hair as he cast a look around. She didn't alert him to her presence; she just kept watching him. The clouds above them moved and a shaft of sunlight bathed his figure in light, edging his silhouette in gold.

He was a bronze statue, all perfection and symmetry. He turned and Jade's eye was drawn to the only thing that threw out that balance: the tattoo on his left shoulder—round, with strange shapes marked inside. An abstract pattern, Jade had decided, though she'd never asked him about it.

The light shifted again and his face was cast in shadow. Jade stood, alerting him to her presence. Her breath caught as he smiled at her. He spread his wings and lifted himself over the water to land next to her.

He reached out, as though to pull her towards him. Then, at the last moment,

he dropped his hands to his sides. “Good to see you.”

“You too,” Jade said. “I haven’t seen you in a couple of days.”

“Did you miss me?” Axel raised an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth curved upwards.

Jade averted her eyes, the flush in her cheeks betraying her.

“I missed you.” Axel murmured. When Jade dared to look at him again, he was pulling at a thread in his shirt, bravado gone. Then he cleared his throat, reached underneath his shirt and pulled out a knife. Deftly, he tossed it into the air, and it turned hilt over blade, rising and dropping back until he caught the blade in his fingers. Axel offered the hilt to Jade. “Shall we?”

Jade accepted the knife and their fingers brushed, sparking a momentary glow where their skin touched. As he withdrew his hand, the sensation was replaced by the weight of the knife.

“Do you remember what we talked about last time?” Jade cast her mind back to other afternoons spent in Axel’s company. He’d been teaching her to throw a knife, but most of their time had been spent lazing on the riverbank, talking.

She grinned. “You were making me jealous with your tales of the Dragonverse. I think we were up to the time you tripped backwards over unrefined fire crystals and burned a hole in your trousers.”

Axel’s eyes twinkled. “Luckily I’ve got the reflexes of a sphinx.”

Jade laughed. “Or you’d have some very painful scars.”

“Ouch.” Axel winced in mock pain, then looked pointedly at the knife Jade held in her hand. “I was asking if you remember the throwing action I taught you last time. It just takes practice,” he reminded her. “I know you can do it.”

Jade looked up into his eyes and smiled hesitantly, gripping the hilt of the knife. *You can do it*, his eyes told her. He came to stand next to her, and Jade breathed in his familiar scent—mint and cedarwood. She felt a tingling along her skin where their bodies almost touched.

So close.

“What am I aiming at?” Jade asked.

“Look, there.” He pointed across the river, where something moved. It was a gyenell—a small, squat-nosed rodent scratching around in the dirt, probably looking for the little burrowing insects it fed on. Jade gave an almost imperceptible nod and Axel gave her space. She crouched, moving slowly. Gyenells frightened easily and moved fast. Jade needed to be silent and precise.

She focused, took aim and, with a quick flick of her wrist, threw the knife like Axel had showed her.

“Bullseye!” Axel shouted behind her, his voice bouncing off the cliffs around them, making Jade jump. “That’s talent. It took me ages to throw a knife like

that. You're a natural."

Jade's throat tightened as Axel held her gaze. He stepped towards her and put an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. Jade glowed—hyper-aware of the sparkle of electricity under her skin in the places their bodies touched. She felt his warmth through her shirt where the side of her chest pressed against him and where his arm folded around her shoulders. He was so *close*. Close enough that she could reach up and fold her arms around his neck. Close enough to kiss.

Her heartbeat thundered in her ears as Jade turned her body to face him. Before she knew what she was doing, she found herself tilting her face up towards his. Her eyelids fluttered closed and her lips parted slightly, willing him to meet her in the middle—to close the space with a kiss.

The air hummed with expectation.

A long moment passed.

Then Axel cleared his throat, dropped his arm from around her shoulders and stepped away. Cold air rushed into the void between them. Jade's eyes flew open as she tumbled forward, overbalancing, and spread her wings to catch herself before she went face first into the water. She stared at Axel then quickly averted her eyes, a flush spreading over her face.

She couldn't believe it. She'd tried to kiss Axel. *Kiss* him.

Worse, he'd rejected her.

Jade wanted to crawl under the nearest rock. Why had she done it? Of course, she liked him. *Really* liked him. She'd had a crush on him since the start of her apprenticeship. Over the last few months of shadowing her father, Axel had become one of her closest friends. More and more, Jade felt like Axel was one of the few people who actually understood her.

Silence lengthened between them. Jade tried to remember what they'd been talking about before she'd been so stupid.

Knife skills. Right.

"Not that I'm ever likely to use it," Jade mumbled, wanting to dunk her face in the cold water to wash the redness from her cheeks. "Not stuck here on Taraqa running errands for Papa."

Axel shrugged, avoiding her look. "The Force doesn't value knife throwing anyway. It's all bow and arrow for them—that's the only way to kill a Yrax."

"I would have thought any way to kill a Yrax is the right way." Jade managed a half-smile.

"You and me both. But the fact that I'm better with knives betrays my... *status*." Axel looked down at his hands, the skin around his eyes tightening. He turned away, leapt into the air and flew across the river to retrieve his knife and the dead gyenell. Watching him, Jade wondered why he never spoke about his

family. She knew they were poor and he'd worked his way up from nothing, without the aid of the connections that money brought. Jade admired him for it. She didn't understand why others thought it made him somehow *lesser*. Whatever it was, she knew Axel felt their criticism deeply, even if he pretended not to care.

"And what does it say about me?" Jade asked, when Axel came back, landing further away from her this time.

"That if you ever meet a Yrax, it'll be sorry."

Jade laughed. "Not likely. Not if my parents have anything to do with it." She sighed. "I'd love to see some of the places you've been."

Axel didn't reply. As the silence lengthened, he pushed his hands into his pockets and peered into the distance.

"Where did you come back from today?" Jade asked, partly to erase the silence between them, but mostly because she loved stories from across the Betwixt.

Axel shifted. "Just some errands, you know."

"Papa didn't say anything to me about it. I thought it was a private trip?"

The skin around Axel's eyes tightened again. He didn't reply.

"Did you bring back anything special?"

Axel crossed his arms across his chest. "No. Nothing."

Jade remembered how his hand had curled around the bag he'd carried earlier. "Oh? I thought—"

"I told you, nothing!" Axel snapped. Jade stepped backwards at the force of his tone. He'd never spoken to her that way before. She blinked back tears that prickled suddenly at her eyes.

Jade was about to point out how protective he'd been of his bag earlier, when she forced herself to shut her mouth. Why was she pushing this? He clearly didn't want to talk. She had already alienated Axel enough.

Jade wrapped her fingers around the pendants on her neck chain. She'd done enough damage for one day. She turned to leave, spreading her wings and flicking her tail.

"No, wait," Axel called out, his voice softer now. "I'm sorry, I just..." Jade saw his shoulders sag and he stared at his hands. He seemed to be making a decision. Jade wished she knew what was going through his head right now. "It's just... the business, well, my job and... your father..." Axel sighed. "You. I..." Axel trailed off and looked towards the jagged rock face on the other side of the river.

After a long pause, Jade spoke. "I don't understand."

Axel sighed again, still not looking at her. Then, in a sudden rush of

movement, he spread his wings, bouncing over several rocks to land next to her. He held out his arm to her, his hand curled into a fist, fingers facing down. With his other hand, he took her hand and held it, palm up, under his own. Jade felt the heat of his hand around hers. He opened his fist and dropped something into her hand.

A green stone, carved and polished into a single twisted loop.

“It’s a jade stone. I thought of you when I saw it. The colour matches your eyes and wings.” Jade looked up at Axel and saw he was smiling, though his eyes were sad. Weary. “It’s a Maori pendant. The Maori are an Earthen race from a place called New Zealand. I went there, once.”

Jade held the pendant between her index finger and thumb to examine it. It was beautifully carved. Delicate. Precious.

“It’s called a *pikoura*. It’s a symbol of friendship.”

Jade’s stomach contracted sharply.

Friendship. That was what he thought of her. Was that all he thought of her?

“It’s a sign that two people are destined to always come back together, no matter what happens.”

It was a moment before Jade realised Axel was waiting for her to say something.

“Thank you.” Jade wanted to ask him for clarification. What did he mean? The weight of unspoken words lay over them, unacknowledged. “It’s beautiful.” Jade swallowed. The moment lengthened.

Axel pushed his hands back into his pockets.

In the distance, a bird sang and the wind stirred the trees, sending a couple of stray leaves curling down to meet the water rushing past the rocks.

Jade shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Well,” she said, closing her hand over the *pikoura*, “I guess I’d better go.”

“Wait!” Axel held up a hand, as though he was reaching towards her. “I’ve been meaning to say... ask, I mean.” He took a deep breath. “Look, your father has been very good to me. I wouldn’t want him thinking...” Axel looked towards the horizon then abruptly turned to Jade. “If I asked his permission to... to take you out somewhere? Would that be all right? As a friend, of course.” He added the last line quickly.

Jade’s head tilted over to the side, as though she was trying to understand something. “You want to ask my father’s permission?”

“I know it’s not the usual thing, but I work for him. I couldn’t go behind his back. And...” Axel cleared his throat. “If things were to... well, let’s just say I might need his help with something.”

Jade nodded, though she wasn’t sure she understood. A spark of warmth

ignited in her chest, almost smothered by the thought that her father's opinion was more important than her own. What kind of beginning was that?

"When?" Jade asked.

"Soon. Very soon."

Jade hesitated. Part of her wanted to say yes. But another part of her wondered whether he was just softening his earlier rejection. He didn't want her to complain to her father about him. He didn't want to risk his job.

Jade took a deep breath. "Well, when you've asked him, then I'll decide." She paused, gathered her nerve and added, "he has cleared his schedule for today, you know. By now he's probably back in his office. Nobody else around. Could be the perfect time..." Jade trailed off, then turned away. She didn't want to see how he would take her suggestion. She'd know soon enough, if he was really serious about speaking to Papa.

But when Jade spiralled up towards Ingresston, she threaded the *pikoura* onto her neck chain and held it tightly in her hand.

Chapter 3

Jade circled up until she was well above the greenery of Vertin Gorge and looked out over the flat, red land that stretched out from the cliff tops to the mountains in the distance. Below the line of the cliffs, set into the walls of the gorge, Jade saw her family's home—the entrance perched on a ledge jutting out from the rock-face to ease the transition from the outside to the inside. Jade touched down on the mosaic-tiled landing, faded and worn from generations of use. She stepped through the entrance to her home, its archway adorned with a fresco. The vibrant colours had been retouched to brighten the places where the incessant salty wind had taken its toll.

Out of the wind, Jade heard a shriek and a smile tugged at her lips. A moment later, she was almost bowled off her feet by a flurry of little wings and tails. The squeals of her three-year-old twin brothers echoed as they chased each other, skirting around Jade, then bounced off a wall to disappear down the hall. A crash came from their direction and Jade winced, before a giggle escaped her *lips*.

“Slate! Flint!” Jade heard exasperation in her mother's voice as she spoke. “Be careful!”

A moment later, Mama appeared, and her face broke into a relieved smile on seeing Jade. “You're home. I was beginning to wonder whether either of you would be home for dinner tonight.”

“Papa's not home yet?”

Mama shook her head, gave Jade a kiss, then linked her arm through Jade's to walk into the kitchen and living area at the centre of their home. “Working late again.”

Jade remembered the message Papa received that morning and the argument she'd half-overheard. She wondered what was so urgent as to take his attention for the whole day.

“You haven't seen him?” Mama asked. When she shook her head, Mama frowned, then checked the pot that simmered on the stove.

“I've been at the Temple most of the day. Papa is probably at the office.” She tossed the private messages she'd collected from the Mail Room so they fanned out over the bench-top. For the first time, Jade realised there was a message for her.

She picked it up, seeing the insignia of the Traveller Force in the corner. Her heart jumped and she opened it immediately, but twin bundles of energy and wings catapulted themselves at her before she could read it. Jade was knocked

backwards as Slate landed on her shoulder and Flint attached himself to her right leg.

“Jay-Jay,” Slate yelled, yanking on her ear.

“Ride! Ride!” Flint demanded. He pulled on her wing until she complied. They took turns wrapping their little bodies around Jade’s torso as she flew them around the cavernous living room, hovering a handspan from the floor.

“You’re getting too heavy for this,” Jade said as she lowered Flint to the ground. She saw Mama reading the message she’d left open on the bench. Her lips were pressed together and she slammed the message down. Jade pried Slate’s arms from around her neck as he tried to climb onto her for another ride. “Mama...”

Mama turned her attention back to the stove. “Go to the office and fetch your father for dinner,” Mama said. Her back was turned but her shoulders were rigid. “It’s about time we all had dinner as a family.”

Jade sighed, but nodded her agreement.

“And you can take that with you, while you’re at it.” Mama gestured to the message. “Your father can do something about it.”

Jade’s stomach tightened. “He can’t keep putting it off. I’m going to have to serve eventually. Wouldn’t it be better—”

“You don’t really want to go,” Mama interrupted. “Imagine what you’d miss here. The boys are growing up so fast. Besides, there should be some kind of rule, only one per family.”

“It’s my duty—”

There was another *crash* and Mama threw an exasperated look in that direction. “Duty took Basalt from us. I won’t let you go the same way.”

Jade winced at the mention of her older brother. She saw the lines around her mother’s eyes, the little muscle twitching at her jaw. She wanted to assure Mama that she would be all right, but she knew Mama would hear it for what it was—a hollow platitude.

Of course, Jade couldn’t promise that she’d be all right. She couldn’t promise anything. Service in the Traveller Force was dangerous. Travellers protected the Dragonverse from the Yrax and occasionally intervened in a world’s domestic affairs to ensure its stability. Our Lady Taraqa and the other Dragon-Gods had charged every Taraqan to serve at least two years in the Force. It was a great dishonour to avoid her service.

“How can I run Gariq Industries if I have never served?” Jade asked, though she knew it would do no good. She’d had this conversation with Mama and Papa too many times.

“There’s more to running a business than Travelling.”

“You and Papa served when you were young. I want to as well.”

Mama sighed, deeply. The tension released from her back and her shoulders sagged. Jade held her breath. Would Mama finally relent? If she agreed, Jade knew she could convince Papa too.

They heard another *crash* in the adjacent room and one of the twins started screaming at the top of his lungs. Mama instantly tensed again. “There will be plenty of time for that later,” Mama said, moving towards the crying. As Mama swept out of the room, the disappointment settled over Jade like a heavy blanket. *Later* would never come. Not while Mama opposed it so vehemently.

Jade picked up the message and folded it into her bag. She leaned back against the bench, ran a hand through her hair, and listened to Mama scold the twins. The walls closed in around her and she suddenly had to get out. She shook off her lethargy and ran along the hallway towards the landing, then pitched herself off the edge.

Wind streamed over her silhouette, stinging her eyes and fluttering her hair like a flag. Her stomach lurched as she plunged headfirst into the gorge, weightless as she plummeted towards the greenery below. Then she stretched her wings and caught the air to pull herself out of free-fall. Adrenalin invigorated her as she glided along the currents, letting them take her where they would.

Minutes passed before she remembered she was fetching her father, but those minutes were freedom. Rebellion. Those minutes gave her fresh hope. Her conversation with Mama replayed in her mind. She shouldn’t have approached the subject while the twins were causing havoc. She should have bitten her tongue and waited. She had always thought that if she could persuade Mama, then Papa would agree. Perhaps now she should try convincing Papa, instead.

Jade circled towards the landing for Gariq Industries, set into the cliffs farther west, near where Vertin Gorge opened into the Western Sea. The entry to Gariq Industries was substantially bigger than their personal landing, allowing for the arrival of employees as well as customers. As Jade’s feet touched down, she barely glanced at the pictures of the off-world treasures and resources the company had opened up to the Taraqan economy. She passed through the public reception and into the employee-only hall.

It was late and the offices were empty. Axel’s too, though the messy spread of papers on his desk told her he’d been here recently. As she passed, she wondered if Axel had spoken to Papa.

She pushed the errant thought from her mind as she stepped up to Papa’s office. Through the slightly ajar door, she saw the flicker of torchlight. Papa was a traditional man at heart and, though Gariq Industries had imported and adapted many off-world inventions—including electric lights—in his own space he

preferred to work by old wall-mounted torches.

Her knuckles were white as she gripped the letter from the Traveller Force and marshalled her arguments. She drew a breath, squeezed her eyes shut and pushed open Papa's door.

"Mama wants us home for dinner," Jade said, blurting out her words before Papa could stop her. "But before we go, I want to talk to you about something. I received my call-to-duty letter today. The third one. Before you say anything—I know how Mama feels. I *know* she mourns for Basalt. But it's the right time for me. It's dishonourable to refuse again. I'm almost eighteen years old; most of my friends served two years ago. Kyssa's a Flying Officer now. I *really* want to. Please, help me convince Mama? I promise I'll only serve two years, then I'll finish my apprenticeship. Please...?"

Jade trailed off, squeezing one eye open to peek out at Papa, though her fists were clenched in anticipation of his response. Papa didn't reply. He didn't acknowledge her. Jade blinked, as her eyes adjusted to the torchlight. Papa sat cross-legged on his normal cushion, but was slumped over his low desk, in an uncomfortable sleep. His face was turned away and Jade stepped tentatively closer, afraid to disturb him.

"Papa?"

But Papa did not move.

Chapter 4

Tick.

The only sound was the slow tick of the clock on the wall.

Jade took another step towards Papa. The torch cast a spotlight over his hunched figure. The rest of the room retreated into the shadows, distancing itself from the wrongness of the scene.

Tick.

A message, now forgotten, slipped out of Jade's trembling hand and fluttered to the ground. Jade reached forward to shake Papa, thinking—*hoping*—he must be so tired.

Tick.

Jade grasped Papa's shoulder, expecting him to jerk to consciousness and look up at her, groggy. But he did not move. She pressed harder, but his body was rigid under her touch. He did not wake. He didn't even groan.

Tick.

Papa's head fell forward, from where it had rested on his arm. His forehead connected with the polished wood of the desk with a *thud*. His wings hung limply across his back, their magenta scales dull.

Tick.

Tentatively, Jade smoothed his grey-streaked hair away from his face. She gasped at his eyes; open and staring at his own clenched right hand. She pressed a hand to his forehead.

He was cold, too cold.

Tick.

Jade's hand fell away. A deep fog settled over her, paralysing her. Deafening her. She stared at Papa's body. His lips, blue. His eyes, wide. Lifeless. She stared and saw nothing.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

Dimly, Jade heard herself screaming, calling for help. There was a clatter of footsteps, then a set of hands on her shoulders.

“Shhhh, shhhh,” someone said, and eventually the screaming stopped.

But the clock did not.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

A bright light pushed the darkness aside. Jade blinked, startled, and shrugged off the numbness that had settled over her. A couple of healers in their uniforms—loose white shirts belted over white trousers—strode into the room. The taller one went to Papa, still slumped over the desk, while the shorter one cast a look in her direction.

The pity on his face hit her so hard she almost doubled over.

Jade wrenched her gaze away. She couldn't bear to watch the healers examining Papa. She stared at a chip in the paint on the wall, grateful the healers had silenced the sound of the clock; as though they'd stopped time itself.

A hand on her shoulder made Jade turn. The shorter healer stood next to her, holding out a piece of paper. "Is this yours?" He was holding out her message, stamped with the Traveller Force insignia. Jade's shoulders sagged as she remembered why she'd come. She pushed the thought away; she couldn't think of that now. Something terrible had happened. Something was terribly wrong.

Papa wouldn't wake up.

Tall One bent over Papa, then looked up at the clock and closed Papa's unblinking eyes.

Jade's stomach contracted painfully as Tall One stood in front of her. "I'm sorry," he said.

Jade shook her head. She didn't want to hear this. It couldn't be right.

"Your father is dead."

Jade squeezed her eyes shut, covering her ears. This couldn't be happening. Papa couldn't die. It wasn't possible.

A pair of hands took hold of her by her upper arms. Someone was sobbing, then Jade felt tears streaming down her own cheeks.

Short One pressed a glass of water into her hands. Jade's hands shook so much she needed help drinking it.

Tall One stood in front of her again, explaining what needed to be done. A look of exasperation crossed his face, before Jade understood he was asking her a question.

"I'm sorry, I..." Jade shook her head.

"Is anything missing? Any personal or work effects that might have been on Magnus or in this office?"

Jade forced herself to look at Short One, now bent over Papa's body, examining it closely. "I don't think..." Jade started. A pale stripe on Papa's finger jumped out at her where it lay still on the desk. "Wait..." Jade looked

more closely. “Yes. He wore a ring on this finger. His Gariq family ring.”

Tall One exchanged a look with Short One, who made a note of this information.

“We’ll look into it. He may have just taken it off. It probably doesn’t mean anything,” Tall One said. “Magnus Gariq’s body will be taken to the Healing Centre in the Temple for examination by my superiors. Your mother will be notified when his body is ready for the funeral rites. Also, investigators may examine this room more closely, if its deemed necessary, so it should not be disturbed. Do you understand?”

Jade hoped that would be the end of it. Her head pounded and she wanted to get away. To fly.

But Tall One was still talking to her. He held his hand out, palm up. In it lay a pendant tied to a short length of string. “Do you know what this is?”

Jade blinked, before picking it up to examine it more closely. It was a small pendant that might hang on a necklace or bracelet. Three stones—red, blue and yellow—were set into a circle of red and yellow gold. The metal around the stones was pressed into what looked to be flames. The pendant hung from three threads of different colours—again red, yellow and blue—tied together in a series of knots. Jade ran her fingers along the threads, but there was nothing uniform about the knots. They weren’t evenly spaced, nor the same size. In fact, in some spaces, only the blue and yellow threads were knotted together. The length of the string was about right for some kind of bracelet, obviously handmade, though there was no clasp at the ends to join them together.

“Magnus was holding this. Any idea what it is?”

Jade shook her head. She’d never seen it before.

Tall One shrugged. He took the two items back. “They will be given to the Temple Executor for the finalisation of the Will. It’s just routine.”

“Routine,” Jade echoed. He was wrong.

Nothing about this was routine.

Chapter 5

Jade was walking. Crowded into a space too small for her to fly, or even spread her wings, the darkness suffocated her. Not the complete darkness of night, rather the veil of deep shadows. Jade put one foot in front of the other, knowing she needed to keep going. A prickling sensation ran down her spine and she looked over her shoulder, certain somebody was watching her. She saw no one.

This place smelt of freshly turned soil after rain. The space narrowed and soon she could not move without touching bark, leaves, spiders webs. Vines curled about her ankles and wrists and grabbed at her hair and clothes, trapping her.

Jade swallowed down panic as a vine twisted around her ankle, making her stumble. She pressed into a run, but the trees were too dense and she reeled from one trunk to the next. She fell and rolled, the slick mud coated her skin. When she looked up, she couldn't tell which way she'd been going. Trunks and vines loomed over her, crowding her from every direction. There was no way out.

She spun around, confused. Lost.

She tripped over an exposed tree root and went down on her hands and knees. Mud squelched between her fingers. Vines wound tight around her ankles, holding her fast.

Jade pulled at their tendrils with her hands, but they wouldn't budge.

"Help!" she screamed. Her voice echoed through the trees.

"Jade!" A familiar voice came from somewhere close. She saw Papa, perched on a branch above her, his figure framed in huge leaves. She stretched up to reach him, but he was too far away. He didn't move but his figure was fading.

"Papa!" Jade called out. "Don't leave!"

A thick fog swirled between them, obscuring Papa's face.

She kept her eyes on him—if she even blinked, he might disappear. She kicked at her bindings, desperate to go after him.

Papa called again, faintly but urgently, "Finish what I started. Release me."

"Wait, Papa—don't go!" Jade struggled against the vines, slipping backwards into the moist, spongy ground. "I don't understand!"

Papa's response was a whisper on the wind. "Release me."

She screamed as Papa's face disappeared into the fog.

Jade panted and her eyes darted around in the dark. It took several moments to realise she was in her own room; her own bed. Her damp nightclothes clung to her. When she pushed her hair out of her eyes, strands stuck to her wet cheeks.

Papa's whisper echoed: *Release me*. Jade grasped at the last fragments of her dream, but they slipped away too quickly. She was left with a thrumming heart and a feeling of dread.

The clock beside her bed said it was past midday. She sat bolt upright and rubbed sleep from her eyes, and a streak of bright red on the other side of the room caught her attention. There, her funeral clothes hung, waiting for her to dress.

Her stomach tightened. It was Papa's funeral today. No wonder she'd had such nightmares. Jade hugged her knees to her chest, too awake to go back to sleep, but unwilling to face the day.

Unbidden, the memory of Papa's lifeless eyes came to mind. The Chief Healer had visited yesterday, explaining Papa had died of natural causes. Probably stress, he'd said, before giving the go-ahead for the funeral. Jade pushed the memory aside, reaching for another way to remember her father.

Instead, she flashed back to their time together when she was a child, when they would fly together along the coastline to the north where it curved around into the peninsula called The Claw. They escaped Ingresston and sat on the clifftop, dangling their feet over the edge, looking out to the horizon. Papa had told her stories of strange worlds far, far away.

Jade had looked up at her father, mesmerised by his stories. He'd always been so large and strong. So knowledgeable and wise. Somehow immortal. She'd never imagined one day he'd be gone.

Tears welled in her eyes, like a dam on the verge of breaking, as she thought of all she'd lost. Ever since sitting on those clifftops with Papa, she'd dreamed of following in his footsteps, joining the Traveller Force and seeing the worlds beyond the Portal. Now her dream—her freedom—was further away than ever.

She wrapped her arms around her chest to stop herself from bursting at the seams. Her thoughts drifted to Axel and she imagined him wrapping his arms around her, folding her into his warmth. He would tell her everything would be all right. She squeezed herself tighter. The room seemed suddenly cavernous, and she was so small within it. She wanted to talk to Axel, confide in him—now, more than ever. At least, Axel would be at the funeral. Her stomach flipped at the thought. Jade hadn't seen him since that day in Vertin Gorge—when she'd almost kissed him.

Jade's cheeks burned at the memory. Was that the reason for his absence?

Then she wiped her eyes roughly. How could she be so selfish? Her father had passed and she could only think about herself. Without wasting another moment, Jade grabbed her red shirt and loose trousers.

It was time to release Papa to the Dragon-Gods.

Jade put the last pin in her hair and smoothed a hand over her funeral outfit. Her shirt tied behind her neck and under her first wing-joint and her pants were loose and flowing. Both were made out of a light fabric and both were red—the traditional colour for a Taraqan funeral. She appraised herself in the mirror, but saw only the dark smudges under her eyes.

Crash!

Jade winced at the sound of something breaking in another room. She braced herself for Mama's shouts.

And waited.

She tilted her head to the side, listening. She stepped away from the mirror and brushed aside the hanging cloth that partitioned her room from the rest of the house. Picking her way through the central hallway—now littered with old clothes, shoes and things usually buried away in the backs of cupboards—Jade peeked in Mama's bedroom, in the twins' room, and then in Basalt's old bedroom—still set up, waiting for his return. She checked the large kitchen and living area at the centre of the house.

There wasn't any sign of her.

Mama wouldn't just leave. Not without telling anyone. Would she?

Jade remembered the trance Mama fell into when Basalt had died four years ago. The hours Mama had spent staring at the wall, doing nothing. Sometimes she hadn't even got out of bed. When she hadn't been staring into space, she had been crying.

Jade's wings twitched as she swallowed down a lump of worry. Another *thump*—one of the twins probably knocked something over—but no crying or screaming with it. She kept looking for Mama, moving faster now; she couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. She walked to a small storage room deep in the back of the house.

There, Mama was crouched on the floor, her head buried in a storage cupboard.

"Mama!" Jade breathed a sigh of relief.

Mama didn't turn around. Jade took in the cleaning products and the tatty, old clothes Mama was wearing.

“What are you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Mama’s voice was muffled by the cupboard. “Can’t you see what a mess this place is? I’m cleaning.”

“Now?”

Tension radiated from her mother. Jade put a hand on Mama’s back, noticing how furiously she was scrubbing the floor of the cupboard. She chewed the inside of her mouth, wishing Mama would stop.

“Mama,” Jade said, “You need to get ready. We need to go to the funeral.”

Her mother froze.

“It’s almost time to leave.” Jade waited for her to say something. Do something. But Mama didn’t move. Jade cleared her throat, then heard another *bang*. The twins barrelled through the archway, yelling and laughing. Jade shot them an exasperated look, then realised they weren’t ready either. She sighed.

“Slate! Flint!” There was false cheer in her voice. “Time to get ready!” Mama sat rigidly on the floor while Jade bundled the twins out of the room.

With Flint under one arm and chasing after Slate, the entrance bell rang. She startled. Axel’s face came to mind and Jade’s heart hammered. Had he come to see her? She stood still, watching Slate fly in a circle without really seeing him. When he narrowly missed a vase of flowers, she let out the breath she’d been holding, then poked her head hopefully into the entrance hall.

It wasn’t Axel standing in the doorway. It was her oldest friend, Neve.

Jade’s shoulders sagged with disappointment. Then she saw the concern in Neve’s eyes and scolded herself. She lifted her chin and strode the length of the entrance hall to greet her.

Neve was dressed in red, a long braid of blond hair falling over one shoulder. Long hair was unusual for Travellers—it was annoying in the air as the wind whipped wisps of it into the face and eyes. Jade’s own brown hair was much shorter, cut just above her chin, but even that sometimes felt too long. Most Travellers, like Kyssa, shaved their heads. At her back, Jade’s eyes were drawn to the asymmetry of Neve’s wings; one wing had been injured in an accident years ago and now jutted out at an odd angle, making her look strangely off balance. Jade quickly diverted her eyes from the sight of it, the old guilt added to the tumble of emotions crowding her chest.

Jade forced a smile as she looked into Neve’s pale-blue eyes, brimming with concern. Neve stepped forward to take Jade’s free hand and squeezed it between her own. Tears welled in Jade’s eyes, threatening to spill onto her cheeks. “I just wanted to call by,” Neve said. “I know how busy things will be at the funeral. Is it a bad time?”

Slate yelled from the other room and Flint tried desperately to wriggle away

from Jade. She gave Neve an apologetic shake of her head.

“I’m sorry. I have to get these two ready. Later?”

“Of course.” Neve nodded, but she didn’t let go of Jade’s hand. A strange look passed over her face. “How are you doing?”

This time her tears spilt over. “I... don’t...”

Neve wiped the tears away with her thumb. “I’m so sorry. Is there anywhere we can talk?”

Flint took advantage of Jade’s inattention, squirmed out of her grasp and skirted away. Jade blinked away more tears.

“Sorry, Neve. Later, all right?” She said over her shoulder as she turned to chase her brother.

After a struggle and lots of silent cursing, Jade wrangled the twins into appropriate funeral attire. Her heart sank when she found Mama still slumped against the cupboard, tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, Mama!” She knelt down and put an arm around her. “I miss him too.”

Mama curled up, hugging her knees to her chest. “How will I manage without him? How will I cope with the twins? Or keep up the business? I can’t even keep this place clean. I can’t even get dressed!” Mama rocked back and forth, her face buried in her knees.

Jade’s shoulders sagged too. She stroked Mama’s hair.

“I miss him,” Mama whispered. “How could he leave me like this?”

“It’ll be all right,” Jade said. But she didn’t believe it. A great weight pressed on her: Papa’s burdens, the business, the family—who would take them on now? With her free hand, Jade clasped the neck chain hidden underneath her shirt, and ran her fingers over the charms until she’d found the *kangaroo* Basalt had given her not long before he’d been killed by a Yrax while on duty. A tear slipped down her cheek as she wrapped her fist around it.

Later, her parents had always said. Now it would never come.

The *kangaroo* dug into the soft skin of her hand. We cannot go backwards, Jade remembered, clenching her teeth. She felt a surge of anger that she was left to deal with all this. Abruptly, she stood. Mama looked up, her eyes puffy and red from crying.

“It’s time to get ready, Mama. We have to say goodbye to Papa.”

Jade squinted into the glare of the setting sun. The heat of it warmed her face, but a chill crept in behind it—a reminder that the night was closing in. Jade’s eyes fixed on Mt. Reve looming over the horizon; the evening light bathed it in

pink and outlined it in gold. A crowd of several hundred Taraqans gathered—a sea of red in the now vacated marketplace—but Jade didn't hear a sound. The silence was a mark of respect for Papa, whose body lay on a wooden pallet at the edge of the cliff in front of the gathered crowd.

Jade looked at her father, so peaceful and still. She could barely believe it was him. The man who had laughed and played and taught her, now seemed so *absent*.

Absent.

He would never again tell her stories about travelling, or teach her about Merrynese trade customs, or instruct her in the use of some strange artefact acquired by an employee, or whisper advice at the auction house. Nor would he kiss her forehead, or pull her into a hug that squeezed the breath out of her, or fly over the cliffs with her. Jade's eyes moistened and she blinked furiously, determined to hold herself together.

The sun slipped under the horizon and darkness crept in. The High Priest, wearing the elaborate mask of Our Lady Taraqa, came to stand in front of the crowd. He held aloft a flaming torch and addressed them in a loud voice.

“In the shadow of Mt. Reve, the dreaming place of Our Lady Taraqa, we beseech Her to admit our beloved brethren, Magnus Gariq, to pass into his eternal rest. O mighty Taraqa, Magnus was woven into the fabric of Your dreams, as we all are. One of the best of us, Your faithful Taraqans and Travellers, Magnus was a great man. He excelled at everything he put his mind to. First, a distinguished career in the Traveller Force, then later he built up Gariq Industries to be one of the largest companies in Taraqa. He worked tirelessly to make Taraqa a better world, a richer world, for all of Your people.”

Jade heard murmurs of assent as the Priest spoke. She was proud that her father was remembered in such glowing terms, and so many people came to bid him farewell. Beside her, Mama whimpered and the twins fidgeted. Next to them, Uncle Zorman stared rigidly into the distance. His face didn't betray any emotion. Jade admired his strength, hoping her own demeanour was as composed. Discretely, Jade scanned the other faces in the crowd. There were company employees and senior officers of the Traveller Force. Kyssa stood with a group of Travellers. Neve stood among apprentices to the Healer Guild. The Chief Healer stood close to the front.

In fact, the only face she didn't see was Axel's. She scanned the crowd again, her eyes flitting over every face as her stomach tightened. How could Axel miss this? Everyone in Gariq Industries knew Axel was virtually second-in-command to her father. As Jade scanned the last faces in the crowd, her stomach dropped.

Axel hadn't come.

She hadn't seen him since that day in Vertin Gorge. Of course, she'd been distracted with the funeral preparations, but now it seemed strange. Jade put a hand to her throat, struggling to draw breath. Why had he not visited and shared his condolences? Why had he not bothered to see how she was faring? It was so unlike him. Her mind buzzed and she barely noticed what was happening around her. Why hadn't he come?

She thought of their last meeting and fought the urge to cover her face. She'd tried to *kiss* him and hadn't seen him since. Was *that* the reason? He'd promised to speak to Papa, but was that an excuse to get away from her? Had Axel even *tried* to speak to Papa before he died?

"Now it is time to return Magnus Gariq to his creator. O mighty Taraqa, allow Your servant to pass into the afterlife with You."

The priest's booming voice brought Jade back to the funeral. The light of his flaming torch, held above his head, burned spots into her vision. Jade blinked them away, as the priest arched backward and turned his masked face up to the fading sky. He lowered the flames of the torch toward the mouth of his dragon mask. Then he snapped himself upright again, spraying a tongue of flames in a semi-circle. The crowd gasped with Jade as the pallet holding Papa's body caught alight. It was only a moment before Jade couldn't see Papa's body for the flames that danced over it. Goosebumps rose along Jade's arms, despite the warmth of the salty evening breeze.

There was a tap on her shoulder and Jade drew her eyes from the flames to see Uncle Zorman signalling to her. Jade held her breath as she walked towards the burning pallet, an almost unbearable heat enveloping her as she bent down to pick up one end of the rope lying on the ground.

Uncle Zorman took up the rope on the other side of the flaming pallet. At his nod, they leapt, synchronised, into the air. The rope strained against Jade's grip, as the slack gave out and the pallet rose from the ground. Jade gritted her teeth, her arms and shoulders strained with the effort of carrying the heavy load. Smoke streamed off the pallet and she stifled a cough.

The rope stung her hands, but Jade only tightened her grip. She wouldn't disgrace her father by dropping him now. As they left the shoreline behind, a headwind pushed back at her and she had to beat her wings strongly to make progress. The wind whipped at her loose-fitting clothing, the fine fabric providing little comfort against the chill in the air. Jade fixed her eyes on Mt. Reve. The fire blazed hot between them and she didn't want Papa's body falling into the sea before they'd reached his resting place.

Zorman picked up his pace and she forced herself to match it. Mt. Reve loomed ahead, drawing ever closer. A billow of smoke curled upward from its

crater, as though Our Lady Taraqa welcomed Magnus' arrival. The blisters on Jade's hands screamed at her. Every muscle on her arms, shoulders and wings protested.

Not much farther, Jade thought, gritting her teeth.

The most dangerous part of the journey was here. An active volcano, Mt. Reve could erupt without warning. When Jade and Zorman flew over Mt. Reve, it could drench them in burning rock and ash and make it their resting place as well. Jade swallowed her fear, watching the ascending plume of smoke—a smudge against the deep purple of the fading sky. She hoped Our Lady would accept Pappa without incident.

Zorman raised an eyebrow at her. *Now?* Jade nodded, eager to get it over with.

Her arms trembled as they approached the gaping mouth of the volcano. She held her breath as they passed over. Zorman was the first to drop the rope and Jade felt the sharp tug as the weight of the pallet fell. She uncurled her stiff fingers from the rope and watched as Papa, now all ash and flames, fell into Mt. Reve where Our Lady Taraqa was waiting for him.

She hovered for the briefest moment, as Papa disappeared, before banking sharply and beating her wings to propel her out of danger. As she pulled away, Mt. Reve belched a cloud of ash and smoke, the rush of air buffeting her and making it difficult to fly. Jade dropped down to the ground, where the Western Sea met a rocky beach around the base of Mt. Reve. In the gloom, Uncle Zorman was now just a speck as he flew back towards Ingresston.

Alone now, tears welled in her eyes and cascaded down her cheeks. The force of her grief pushed her to the ground, where the smooth bumps and sharp edges of the pebbles dug into her knees.

“Papa, Papa,” she said the words aloud in the darkness. “Our Lady, how could you take him away?”

But no one answered her.

Jade's shoulders heaved and hot tears streamed down her cheeks until she was limp and exhausted. Then she sat quietly, staring at the little white caps gently caressing the shoreline, thinking of Papa.

She remembered the first time she'd flown beyond the ravine below Ingresston. She'd been wide-eyed and nervous, but Papa had reassured her. He'd coaxed her gently out of the ravine and over the waters of the Western Sea. She'd seen the twinkle in his eye when she shrieked with laughter as the offshore winds tossed them around. He'd smiled as she'd gasped at the glorious sight of the Ingresston Temple, the statue of Our Lady Taraqa towering over it. When she'd grown exhausted, he'd taken her to a secluded sandy beach along the

coastline to paddle their feet in the lapping waves. She'd been just a child, a couple of years older than the twins were now. They'll never have that experience with Papa, Jade realised.

Jade mulled over life without him. She remembered Mama, sobbing on the floor. She thought of Papa's endless hours of work growing Gariq Industries, all the Taraqans he had employed who would now rely on her to take the reins. Under the night sky, the weight of Papa's death pressed on her.

She drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. Grief and fear settled over her like a blanket, the night's chill seeping into her bones. She shivered, but worry and lethargy anchored her to the ground. She could not rouse herself to leave.

Finally, as the first signs of the rising sun crept over the horizon, Jade stretched her stiff muscles and looked up towards Mt. Reve's crater.

"I will miss you, Papa," she said. Hopelessness weighed on her as she rose up from the shore of Mt. Reve and flew towards Ingresston.

Chapter 6

Jade's eyes ran along a fine crack in the mortar that glued the grey-blue stones together, tracing it from the top corner of the wall, above the door, to where it disappeared above the Temple Executor's head. She shifted uncomfortably as she sat cross-legged on a flat cushion in one of the administrative offices along the Temple's Inner Ring. Next to her, Mama stared at the floor, her eyes wet. Next to Mama, Zorman sat, straight-backed, his gaze fixed on the Executor.

The Executor was a plump woman, with short, mousy brown curls and pink scaled wings folded at her back. She'd barely looked at them since she'd arrived fifteen minutes ago, introduced herself as Rose and started summarising the laws relating to inheritance in a brisk, upbeat tone.

Jade suppressed a yawn, wriggling her toes to stop her legs from going to sleep. Since Papa's Will wasn't contested, as far as she knew, Jade didn't understand why it was taking so long. Rose gave her an annoyed glare as she rustled the papers in front of her.

"Now we're all in a place of understanding the laws," Rose said. A candle lamp stood on the table next to her, and other torches were lit along the walls, providing a flickering, shifting light. Out of the corner of her eye, Jade saw Zorman put a hand over where Mama's hands were clasped in her lap. "Now we may move on to Magnus Gariq's final Will." Rose's wings twitched, before settling back into place. "The personal assets of Magnus Gariq will go to his wife, Esme Gariq." Rose peered at Mama. "I presume this is you?" Mama nodded. "Very good. Yes, personal assets to Esme Gariq for the care of their two dependent children, Slate Gariq and Flint Gariq."

Jade heard Mama take a sharp breath, as she closed her eyes, then nodded with a jerk. Jade could tell by the twitch of her jaw how much effort it took her to hold it together. Zorman patted her hand, but his eyes didn't leave Rose's face. His expression was tense and serious. Fleeting, Jade wondered what he was thinking.

"Gariq Industries, all its lands, assets and its seat on the Council of Advisors to the Lord Protector will be transferred to his named heir. That is..." Jade held her breath, as Rose rustled her papers again. In that brief moment, Jade wondered whether Papa had named someone else. Perhaps he'd thought she was too young, too inexperienced. Perhaps...

"Ah, yes," Rose continued. "The heir is Jade Gariq." A lump solidified in her throat. She clutched her hands together to stop them from shaking. Rose was still

talking, "...as long as she is of age and faculty. If the heir has not yet reached majority, Magnus' brother, Zorman Gariq will run the company in her stead until she reaches majority." Rose peered at Jade. "How old are you?"

"Seventeen," Jade managed to answer, knowing this clause wouldn't be invoked. At sixteen, when Taraqans finished school to serve two years in the Traveller Force, Taraqans were considered adults.

Rose looked back down at her papers. "Very good. We can avoid the complications of two separate transfers. Therefore, Miss Gariq, once you have paid the necessary taxes and imposts to the Temple for the transfer of ownership, Gariq Industries is yours. All the paperwork can be done in the Transfers Office. Obviously, you won't need to do anything, Esme, as transfer of possession of personal effects is automatic."

Rose looked down at her notes and frowned. "I almost forgot—there was one item where the inheritance was unclear. This was found in the office, but I thought it looked like a personal item." She held out something and looked from Mama to Jade. "It wasn't specifically mentioned in the Will. Do either of you recognise it?"

Jade saw the red, blue and yellow stone pendant Papa had been holding in his hand when he died, the threads still tied to it. Mama peered at it but there was no spark of recognition on her face.

"It was a company item," Jade said, then quickly leaned forward to snatch the pendant out of Rose's hand. Mama just shrugged and Jade swallowed down the lump that formed in her throat as she tied it around her wrist like a bracelet. She had no idea what it was, but was comforted to know Papa held it when he'd breathed his last breath. As though this little object carried around a piece of him.

Rose smiled. "All settled then. Congratulations Jade, you are now the owner of Gariq Industries! I hope you will be as successful with it as your father was." She bundled out of the room without another word and Jade breathed deeply to steady herself.

Rose's words echoed in her ears. *You are now the owner of Gariq Industries.* Her stomach lurched. Did she really want this?

Beside her, Mama sobbed as the wooden door shut behind Rose's departing figure. Jade rubbed Mama's back and murmured words of comfort. Uncle Zorman stared at the place where Rose had sat. His expression had not changed and he was deep in thought. Jade wondered whether he had expected anything out of his brother's Will.

Mama sniffed and turned to Jade with a small smile. "One good thing to come out of this," she said. "I won't lose you. You can't go into the Force now,

not as the President of Gariq Industries.” Mama cupped Jade’s cheek in her hand. Jade forced a smile, though she felt like she’d swallowed lead. “You don’t need to stay with me. I’m all right. Go and do the paperwork so that we can make this official.”

Jade let her mother push her towards the door.

In the corridor and out of Mama’s sight, Jade’s shoulders sagged. She should be proud to be Papa’s heir. Of course, the honour usually went to the first born, but since Basalt had died, she’d unofficially taken up the title of ‘heir’. Now Papa’s Will made it official, or would, once Jade completed the paperwork. It could, in rare circumstances, be bestowed on someone else—if a child was incompetent, ill or somehow unsuitable. Basalt would have made an excellent heir. Would she make her father proud? Did she want to? As Mama said, now she was heir, she couldn’t go into the Force and travel the Dragonverse. She would be stuck in Taraqa, letting others seek treasure and make trades that would keep Gariq Industries profitable.

Later would really never come. Not now.

There was a bitter taste in Jade’s mouth as she made her way slowly through the corridors. She knew she should do the transfer paperwork and be proud of the honour her father had bestowed. But in her heart, this was a prison sentence—for life.

Jade wished she could confide in someone. Growing up, she’d always shared her problems with Neve and Kyssa but since they’d all finished school, they’d drifted their separate ways. Neither of them would understand. Neve would listen but offer no advice. She never wanted to leave Taraqa, so she’d never understand Jade’s yearning. Kyssa? No, Kyssa had always been jealous of her family’s business and the status it provided. She wouldn’t understand how it made Jade feel trapped.

For the first time, Jade realised how much she had come to appreciate Axel’s friendship. Since meeting on the first day Jade walked into the Gariq Industries offices as Papa’s apprentice, their relationship had taken a turn from work acquaintances to close friends. Axel was an outsider; he didn’t mix in the same circles as her family and friends. She’d heard rumours of his shady past and knew he was different to the other people she knew. Perhaps this was what she liked about him: he listened and understood her.

But she hadn’t seen Axel since their afternoon together in Vertin Gorge. If only she could ask him what to do. He knew Gariq Industries and her desire to travel. He felt strongly about honour and duty, like Papa had. He wouldn’t be flippant or judgmental. Jade ran a hand through her hair, coming to a stop. The walls of the Inner Ring pressed in on her. Axel wasn’t here to offer advice and,

after she signed the transfer papers, her future would be fixed. No amount of wishing would make it otherwise.

Where was Axel? Why hadn't she seen him since Papa's death?

Perhaps he didn't care. The rogue thought flitted through Jade's mind, but she couldn't dismiss it.

Jade straightened her shoulders and continued towards the Transfers Office. It was no good wishing things were different. They were not. She inherited Gariq Industries and that was that.

The Transfers Office was located in the Inner Ring, near the Office of Portal Records. On her way, Jade paused in the archway to Our Lady's Court, squinting her eyes against the glare of the sunlight gleaming off the opposite wall. When her eyes adjusted, she watched a few Travellers milling around—one touched down on the mosaic floor before another leapt into the air. With a few strokes of her powerful wings, the Traveller was lost into the mass of Portal clouds.

I will never make that journey now, Jade thought.

She wrenched her eyes away, stepping back into the shadows. In her haste, Jade bumped into someone. Kyssa was dressed in her uniform. Jade assumed she must be leaving and the unfairness of it soured her mouth. She looked away.

"Hey," Kyssa said, looking taken aback. "Nice to see you, too."

"Sorry," Jade sighed. "It's not you. It's just..." How could she explain to Kyssa that she'd just inherited something others dream of, but it would cost her *her* dream. Kyssa would never understand. Without family connections, her childhood friend had worked for everything she'd ever had. Jade knew, though she'd never acknowledged it, Kyssa was jealous of her status and wealth. Growing up, Kyssa's desire to prove herself had fed into a fierce competition between the two. Secretly Jade wished she was as free as Kyssa to choose her own path and Travel as she wanted. She knew Kyssa would give anything to work for Gariq Industries.

"Don't worry, I know." Kyssa flashed her a pitying smile before Jade could finish. "Your dad and everything." She paused, then added, "And Axel, of course."

Jade stared at her. *Axel?*

Kyssa shrugged. "Not exactly perfect timing for him to be flitting off-world when your dad... you know... passed..." Kyssa cleared her throat, looking uncomfortable. "You could probably use a shoulder to cry on. Especially *that* shoulder. Right?"

Jade couldn't help but nod. "I was thinking the same thing myself." Jade paused. "I didn't know Axel went off-world."

"I was on duty in the Office of Portal Records when Axel signed out. The same night your papa passed."

Jade didn't respond. Her father had died a couple of days ago and Axel had been gone the whole time. Travellers sometimes spent weeks off-world before returning. When would he come back? Even if she tried to reach him via Porter, there was no guarantee the message would get to him before he returned.

Kyssa squeezed Jade's arm. "Don't stress about Axel. He's not worth it."

Jade looked back at the courtyard with mixed feelings. Perhaps he hadn't been escaping her after all? Maybe he had to run a work errand? Maybe he didn't even know Papa had died? She looked wistfully at the open-air column rising towards the Portal. She wished she could get his advice. He'd know what to do. But if Axel didn't get back within the next few minutes, the deed would already be done. Still, it was what her father wanted, otherwise he wouldn't have put it in his Will.

Jade looked towards the air-column again but Axel didn't appear. She let her eyes drop away and stood aside to let Kyssa past.

"Where are you off to this time?" Jade couldn't help asking.

"Me?" Kyssa made a face. "Nowhere. I've got an on-world posting as the supervising officer for the Office of Portal Records for a month. It's a break from active duty. I told them I didn't need respite, but *apparently* everyone has to take a turn. By the end of the month, I'll be poking myself in the eye with a stick for a bit of fun."

Kyssa sighed and moved away. Jade cast her eyes into the air again, searching for Axel.

He didn't appear. Jade turned to the heavy door marked with the Temple's insignia—Our Lady Taraqa curled in sleep. It was a symbol all Taraqans knew from children's stories. Our Lady Taraqa, their Dragon-God who slept at the centre of their world, whose dreams created everything around Her like a cocoon. The carving rendered Our Lady in fine detail and Jade reached out her fingers to run over the ridges of the scales that ran down Her back.

She took a deep breath and leaned her weight against the door.

"Little Jay!"

Uncle Zorman was striding towards her, frowning. Fleeting, Jade wondered why, since Papa hadn't left him anything in his Will.

"I'm glad I caught you," Zorman said as he approached.

Jade stepped back from the door, relieved to delay the inevitable.

"Let's walk a little," he suggested and Jade agreed, following Zorman as he

wove around the corridors and out of the Temple through the smaller eastern archway. Jade stood next to Zorman, the Temple behind her. The red dirt of the plain stretched out in all directions and a heat shimmer blurred her view of The Fangs—the mountain range in the distance. Outside the Temple, the near-midday sun beat down on her and Jade held up a hand to shield her eyes from its glare.

Zorman stood silently, which struck Jade as strange, since her uncle was never short of the right thing to say.

“Everything all right, Uncle Z?”

Zorman’s expression was serious as he turned towards her. “I should be asking you that question. You looked less than happy at being named President of Gariq Industries.”

Jade dropped her eyes, shame flushing over her skin. She fixed her eyes on a jagged peak of The Fangs, searching for the right thing to say. But the words wouldn’t come.

There was another silent pause before Zorman spoke again. This time his voice was gentle. “Do you want to know what I think?”

Jade’s throat tightened.

“I think this isn’t how you imagined your life would turn out. When you think about your future, I bet you don’t see yourself running Gariq Industries.”

Jade’s vision blurred with tears. She tried to hold herself together, unable to say anything without the tears spilling over.

“You know how I know this? Because I’ve been through the same thing. Living a life I didn’t imagine for myself. I don’t want the same thing for you.”

“What can I do about it? Papa’s Will—”

“Magnus left Gariq Industries to you. But is it what you really want? I thought you had different dreams?”

Jade clenched her jaw, holding in her emotions. The floodgates were almost bursting, threatening to let out all the grief, fear and despair she was barricading inside.

“You were a little girl with big dreams of travelling the Dragonverse, wearing a black uniform and serving Our Lady. You’re too young to give up on your dreams.”

“Papa’s Will was clear,” Jade said. “There’s nothing I can do.”

Zorman looked out to the horizon. “I can think of one thing. There was another option in the Will, after all. Magnus made provision for me to take on the business until you reached a majority.”

“I’m already seventeen.”

“You haven’t served in the Force, though. You should have, by now.”

Jade thought of the conversation she'd hoped to have with Papa that night. "Papa sought a delay, twice. Mama wanted him to delay it again."

"You don't want to serve?"

"I do. But Mama worries... because of Basalt..."

Zorman nodded. "Esme is afraid. She doesn't want to lose her only daughter. Still, it's the duty of every Taraqan to serve in the Force. Our Lady created us for it. Could you look your employees in the eyes if you shirk such obligation?"

"I never wanted to shirk it," Jade said, defensively, although she'd thought the same thing herself.

Zorman held up his hands. "I know that. But will *they*? Look—"

"Would it be a betrayal of Papa, though?" Jade blurted out, cutting him off. "He wanted me to have Gariq Industries. If I just give it away—"

"You won't be giving it away," Zorman said, cutting her off this time. "I'm only proposing a caretaker situation, while you serve your time, that's all. It will give you time to prepare yourself for the burden of running such a large company. Nobody would object to that."

"Mama would." Jade heard her sullen tone and wished she didn't sound like a petulant child.

"Let me take care of Esme," Zorman said, looking Jade in the eyes before reaching out to put a hand on her shoulder. "Don't live a life of regrets. I speak from experience—you don't want to wish you'd lived your life differently."

Jade felt a kernel of hope flare in her chest. "You'll run Gariq Industries then? Just for a couple of years, while I serve my time in the Force?"

Zorman drew her into a hug. "Of course, Little Jay. I'd be happy to."

Jade let him hold her, enjoying the protective feeling of his arms around her. It made her think back to the time after Basalt died, when her parents were so immersed in their own grief they forgot she existed. Mama had fallen into a depression that confined her to bed and Papa immersed himself in work and was never home. She'd barely seen either of them. It was Uncle Zorman who visited every day, made sure she was eating, and took her flying to get her out of the house. In the depths of her grief, he had held her in his arms while she sobbed. Jade hadn't seen as much of him in recent years, since he spent so much time off-world, but he had a habit of showing up when she needed him. Of course, she should have talked to Uncle Zorman from the beginning.

For the first time since Papa had died, she felt the lightness of someone who carried no burdens.

Jade sat cross-legged on the plush, embroidered cushions in the living room of their home. Normally, she reclined comfortably, but now she sat rigid and tense.

Nothing had changed since Papa had died. The same brightly coloured tapestries covered the walls and delicately woven mats lined the floors. An array of cushions surrounded a squat table where the steam from a pot of tea swirled into the air, hanging thick among the tension of the room. All around, reminders of the family business—paintings, carvings and statues gathered from the many and strange cultures with whom Gariq Industries traded—now stared down at her accusingly.

No, nothing had changed since Papa died, yet everything was different. His absence tilted the world off its axis and everything was skewed. For one thing, the house was eerily quiet, as Zorman had taken the twins out to give Jade time to break the news to Mama.

Opposite Jade, Mama sat on a cushion embroidered in a tight red and gold geometric pattern. She clasped her hands together in her lap, knuckles white, as she stared across the room, her mouth set in a thin line. She hadn't said a word—hadn't moved, hadn't even looked at Jade—since Jade had shared her decision.

Jade picked at a thread in the embroidered cushion next to her, watching Mama's every move. She wished Mama would say something. Anything. Jade feared her mother would disappear into a slump like when Basalt died. It was only when she fell pregnant with the twins that Mama had come back to herself.

"Mama," Jade said, gently breaking the silence. "I'll be back. I'll take over the business, just like Papa intended. It's all going to work out, I promise."

Mama blinked, her head snapped around and her hard, narrow eyes fixed on Jade. She leaned forward. "Tell them no."

Jade swallowed. It took all her effort to shake her head.

"No—"

"*Yes!*" Mama slammed a fist onto the table, startling Jade. "Your father is dead. You have responsibilities here. Nobody would judge you."

Jade looked down at the thread she had pulled from the cushion—a twist of gold escaping its stitch; breaking the symmetry of the geometric pattern set starkly against the black fabric. Her chest and throat were tight and it was difficult to breathe. She shook her head.

"Look at me!" Mama sat straight-backed across the low table that separated them. Her hands gripped the edge of it, and the lines of her frown exaggerated the angles of her face.

Jade's throat threatened to close over. With effort, Jade lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. "I *need* to do this. Please understand."

Mama's eyes narrowed further. "You *need* to put yourself in danger? You *need* to get yourself killed? Did you think about how this would affect me and the twins? How much heartbreak do we have to suffer?"

Jade reeled backwards as Mama's words lashed at her. It took a moment to recover her voice. "Mama—"

Mama leaned over the table and pointed a finger at Jade. Red spots darkened her cheeks. "Don't patronise me! Don't try to lull me into accepting this. You're making a mistake." Mama spat the words through clenched teeth. Tears blurred Jade's vision.

"Esme."

Jade was surprised to see Zorman standing in the doorway. A *thump* in another room told her the twins had returned.

"Jade's grown up. She needs to live her life, like we lived ours. She should do this. When she's ready, she will come back."

"Not always." Mama spat the words out, as though they tasted bitter. She sat back on her haunches, her shoulders rounded and her eyes filled with tears. She turned her face away from both of them. "They don't always come back."

"Mama—" Jade reached out to take Mama's hand in hers, wanting to close the yawning chasm that had opened between them.

Mama snatched her hand away and stood up. She turned a dark stare at Jade. "If you do this, you do it without my permission. If you go, leave this house and don't come back until you're back for good."

Jade's mouth fell open. The ground shifted and tilted around her, throwing the world off-balance again. She had not expected this. Mama turned her back on both of them and marched out of the room.

Jade didn't move until long after Mama's figure disappeared into the depths of their home. Her throat was tight and she had to remind herself to breathe. She covered her face with her hands as Mama's words echoed in her ears. She was being so selfish, she knew. Mama needed her and she was leaving.

But to stay meant giving up everything she'd ever wanted.

Jade realised how much she'd wanted Mama's blessing for this adventure. The hope she'd felt when Zorman proposed this scheme had vanished. Jade's shoulders slumped.

Zorman knelt on the cushion with the loose thread and pulled Jade's hands away from her face so she could look at him. His hand on her shoulder was heavy, anchoring her in place. A sob escaped Jade's lips and tears streamed down her cheeks. She looked up at Zorman, his face blurred by her tears.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll look after things here. Your mother will be all right. I'll make sure of it. Your brothers, too."

Jade gulped down the lump in her throat. “Maybe I shouldn’t go,” Jade whispered. The words caused an ache in her chest.

Zorman studied her. “It must be your decision. Be sure, though, that you stand at a crossroad. If you do not take this opportunity, it may not come again.” His words rang in Jade’s ears. Her breath caught in her throat. When she said nothing, Zorman continued, “If you want my advice, go now and enlist. The sooner you go, the sooner you’ll be back. In the meantime, I will make sure our family and our company are doing well when you return.”

Jade exhaled and felt a weight lifting from her shoulders. She relaxed, leaning into him. Zorman enfolded her into a hug, and his strong arms were the only thing holding her together.

“Thank you, Uncle Z,” Jade whispered into his shirt. “You always know what to do. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Zorman wiped the tears from her cheeks with his thumb. Then he pressed a kiss onto the top of her head. “It’s all going to work out just the way it’s supposed to,” he whispered.

Chapter 7

Directly overhead, the sun lit up the blue and gold mosaic design set into the floor of Our Lady's Court. In the black uniform of a Traveller, Jade stood shoulder-to-shoulder with seven others in her training unit, arranged in a semi-circle around the mosaic design of the sleeping Dragon-God. Jade's stomach twisted. She wasn't sure whether she was excited or nervous.

At last, *at last*, she was where she'd always dreamed of being.

She imagined Axel's warm eyes, full of pride as he watched her from the shadows along the edges of the Temple's central courtyard. Jade held her breath, searching for him; wishing he would appear to give her a few words of encouragement before she entered the Traveller Force's training program. When she didn't see him, she looked upwards, hoping to see his figure spiralling downwards. Her chest was about to explode. Axel didn't appear in the sky or the courtyard. Her shoulders rounded as she accepted Axel wouldn't be making an appearance today, just like he hadn't come any other day since Papa's death.

Jade looked around at the other trainees waiting for the welcome ceremony to begin. The others were younger, about sixteen and right out of school. A couple of them greeted as friends. Would she have been so nervous if she had trained in the same unit as Kyssa or Neve? Jade pushed the thought aside without dwelling on the answer. The past was past. This was the training unit she was assigned to and she had to make the best of it.

Jade met the eyes of a girl with light hair, shaved in the style of Travellers, who stood on the other side of the circle. The girl reminded her of Kyssa and Jade shot her a small smile—the first tentative offer of friendship.

The girl sized Jade up. Then she crossed her arms over her chest and hissed, "I know you—you went to my school, a couple of years ahead of me. Why are you training now?"

The smile fell from Jade's face.

"Maybe she failed the first time," one of the boys joked.

"No—" Jade shook her head.

"Maybe she's a spy, planted to rat on us when the officers aren't here," another boy suggested, glaring at Jade.

"No—" Jade said, but she was cut-off again.

"I know who she is," the first girl's eyes widened. "She's the Gariq girl. Her father pulled strings to get her out of service. Twice. Now he's dead, so she had to enlist."

Someone around the circle sniggered.

“It wasn’t like that,” Jade said.

“I heard she was so scared she begged to be overlooked.” The joker grinned. A couple of the others laughed and Jade’s cheeks burned. She was about to protest again, but the group silenced as three officers entered the courtyard.

Jade recognised Air Marshall Scosse leading the group. To his right was Air Vice Marshall Wallen, Chief of the Traveller Force. Jade knew these two men through her father. Scosse—the Lord Protector, leader of the Taraqan government and titular head of the Traveller Force—was a longtime friend of Papa’s. While he’d been alive, Papa had sat on his Council of Advisors, and had often met with Scosse to brief him about conditions for trade and business news off-world. Jade had recently accompanied him to some of these meetings, and had only recently represented Papa on an errand to Scosse.

Wallen had been one of Papa’s close personal friends. They served together in their younger days and Wallen had been a regular visitor to their home. Jade remembered a conversation when Papa had praised Wallen’s promotion to Air Vice Marshall as embodying the honour of the Traveller Force. Papa had held them both in high esteem. Jade wondered if either of them would recognise her in her black uniform.

Slightly behind, at Scosse’s left was a mid-ranking officer. The insignia across his left breast pocket marked him as a Squadron Leader. She didn’t recognise him.

The three officers completed the circle. The Squadron Leader led the group in saluting Scosse. Jade rushed to copy but her salute was clumsy and slow.

“Welcome.” Scosse looked at every member of the training unit in turn. “I am pleased to see you all here at the very start of your service to Our Lady Taraqa and the Dragonverse. This is the highest calling for any Taraqan and its fulfilment is the sacred duty of us all. Some of you will spend two years with us, and then go back to your lives. You will be able to hold your head high among us. Others will find your true calling here and will choose to spend your life as a Traveller.” Scosse spoke briskly, and his words were rehearsed. Jade didn’t doubt he had said these words to new training groups many times before. He barely looked at her as he scanned the group.

“I welcome you and wish you well as you undertake your training. I hope you follow the path of your Taraqan ancestors and make us all proud.”

The Squadron Leader led them in another salute, which seemed to mark the end of Scosse’s speech. Then Wallen cleared his throat and all attention shifted to him.

“I also welcome you all to the Traveller Force.” Wallen smiled warmly at the group, his manner entirely different to Scosse’s. “I come to welcome each new

training unit. I want to know each and every one of you because I know you are special. You are the future of the Traveller Force.” Wallen’s eyes fell on Jade and there was recognition in them. “We Travellers are charged with a duty—an important and sacred duty—to protect the Dragonverse from the beasts that would consume us all,” he continued. “To you, they may have been only a child’s fairytale—nightmares even—until now. I assure you, the Yrax are real and they are deadly. Those of us who Travel the Betwixt risk our lives. Every. Single. Time. If we did not, the Dragonverse, and all its worlds and peoples—even our Dragon-Gods—would be consumed and destroyed. We Travellers, and that group now includes each and every one of you, are all that stands between the Yrax and the Dragonverse.”

In contrast to Scosse, Wallen was an engaging speaker and he looked into the eyes of every trainee, talking directly to each of them. Jade stood taller as Wallen’s eyes rested on her again. She doubted she was the only one moved by the passion of his speech.

“The ability to Travel is a blessing afforded to no other peoples in the Dragonverse. Such a blessing is power. With power comes great responsibility. Travellers are respected throughout the worlds, and that level of respect must be maintained. It is upon us, therefore, to act with great honour. To hold ourselves to the highest of standards and act with the best of motives. It is incumbent on each and every one of you to remember that as Travellers you must be servants, not rulers; that you must embody the honour that has always been, and must continue to be at the core of the Traveller Force.”

Jade’s chest swelled under her black uniform. She had never felt so proud to be part of something as she did at this moment. She looked from Wallen to Scosse, and was surprised to see Scosse giving him a stern look. Then, just as quickly, Scosse’s impassive expression returned and he shifted his eyes away from Wallen, staring at a spot on the wall beyond them all. Jade was surprised at his reaction, but her attention returned to Wallen, as he continued to speak.

“Now, I will introduce you to Squadron Leader Leuven, who will be your commanding officer for the duration of the next six weeks of your training.”

Wallen nodded at the Squadron Leader before he and Scosse withdrew. Leuven led the group in saluting the two officers as they left, before turning his attention back to them.

“Well, Airmen and Airwomen. You’ve just had the honour of listening to two of the most respected men in the Dragonverse. Enjoy it?” Leuven looked around and Jade nodded enthusiastically, as did most of the others. “Well, the time for pretty words is over. I’m going to wipe the smiles off your faces. I’ve only got six weeks to make you pack of nothings into something that those two

men can be proud of. What are you waiting for? Get moving!”

Jade stood, barefoot in the red dirt. They were a few hours flight south of Ingresston, at a Force training site. The bright red targets and makeshift tents they'd brought with them were the only things that distinguished this site from the rocks and salt scrub of the flat plain stretching out in every direction. They'd camped here for three nights. They trained all day, caught and prepared their own food and were allowed a few hours of sleep at night.

Red mud caked her hair and feet, and a line of red dirt was trapped under her fingernails. Her skin was streaked with it. She itched for a shower. She rolled her shoulders to ease the muscles aching in her arms, shoulders and back. She would have given anything for a comfortable bed.

Her stomach rumbled. She'd been issued with a knife, intended for skinning the animals she caught with her bow and arrow—which, so far, had been none. She hadn't dared use the knife to try to hit one of the gyenells that scuttled over the rocks, lest she mark herself as an outcast. Or, as more of an outcast than she was already. Instead, she'd gone hungry. According to Leuven, it built character.

It was Jade's turn again. She squared up to the target. The sun beat down on her. The ground and target shimmered in the distance. Her throat was dry and she felt dizzy from heat or hunger—or both.

She lifted the bow out and pulled back on the string, her arm screaming with the effort.

“Breathe in. Let go on the out.” Leuven stood at her shoulder, too close, barking instructions. The skin on her neck prickled as Jade imagined his eyes boring into the back of her head. A bead of sweat dribbled down the side of her face. She fought the urge to tip her head to the side and wipe it on her shoulder, knowing it would throw off her aim. Instead, she squinted to focus on the red circles in the distance.

She took a breath. Then let go of the arrow.

“What do you call that, Gariq?” Leuven's voice made her jump. “That went so far wide I don't even know where it went! You are a disgrace to the Force. Thank Our Lady that your father is no longer alive to see the dishonour you have brought upon yourself today.”

A flush spread across Jade's chest and crawled up her neck. At the mention of Papa, tears prickled her eyes. She fought them back and pushed thoughts of Papa aside. There were a few titters and one outright laugh from the other trainees who were standing to the side watching her miss and miss again.

She was the only one still out here. The rest of them had already satisfied Leuven's expectations for standing archery. Next, and more important—according to Leuven—they would train in aerial archery. Infinitely more difficult, Leuven had said.

Jade couldn't hit a target when neither she nor it were moving. How would she do it while flying?

"Again, Gariq! Nobody is going anywhere until you hit that target. We will not eat or sleep until you succeed. Got it?" That silenced the crowd, though it wouldn't endear her to her unit. Jade stared at the ground, avoiding their stares.

"Yes, sir," Jade fetched another arrow before returning to her own footprints in the dirt.

She squinted, focusing on the target. Her eyes stung from the glare of the relentless sun, a never-ending spotlight. She hadn't thought becoming a Traveller would be so hard. So gruelling. She wasn't sure she had it in her.

"Let's try this again, shall we Gariq?" Leuven barked. He bent over her—his chin almost resting on her shoulder. Jade held her breath, fighting the urge to step away. "And just so we're clear, Gariq, I want you to aim at that big red circle out there. Not the scrub to the left or right. Got it?"

Another titter from the sidelines. She tensed, berating herself silently. Of course it wasn't easy. She just had to get through training. She'd wanted to be a Traveller since she started to fly. She just hoped training wouldn't kill her before she got to the good part.

"Yes, sir."

"Based on your other attempts, I wasn't sure I'd made that clear," Leuven took a step back, but Jade still felt crowded by his presence. She took some deep breaths, steadying herself. Getting into the zone.

"Anytime you're ready, Gariq!" Leuven barked. "Do you think you'll have this long when a Yrax is coming at you?"

Jade raised her bow with stiff arms and aimed. She would hit it with a knife in one try, but she couldn't admit that to Leuven. He'd laugh her out of the Force.

Every Traveller knew throwing knives was barbaric and uncivilised. Something to which Taraqans never resorted. The bow and arrow was a honourable weapon that every Traveller had to master.

So Jade had to master it, too.

As Jade focused on the target, she remembered training with Axel in Vertin Gorge. It had been a completely different experience. For starters, the gorge had been cool and shaded. Axel's guidance had been light, gentle. Her skin tingled, remembering the way the curve of her body had fit against his when he'd stood

behind her—so *close*—and corrected her stance and grip.

The target blurred as hot tears welled at Jade's eyes. Where was Axel? Had he returned to Taraqa? Would he seek her out?

She blinked frantically to dispel her tears before Leuven noticed.

“Gariq!” Leuven yelled, sighing theatrically. “If you move any slower you’ll fossilise where you’re standing. Hit that target so we can all move on!”

Jade pushed Axel's warm eyes from her mind and took several steadying breaths. The muscles in her shoulders screamed as she fixed her eyes on the target.

She breathed in and pulled back on the string of her bow.

Chapter 8

A crackling sound distracted her and Jade let go of her arrow unexpectedly. She winced, expecting a barrage of criticism from Leuven, as her arrow buried itself in the scrub to the left of the target. Leuven remained silent and Jade saw he was listening intently to his radio. Everyone stared at their commander for a moment, before he clipped the radio back onto his belt and spun around.

“Lucky you, Gariq,” Leuven said. “The Lord Protector called us in. All units must attend an urgent briefing. You are excused from humiliating yourself any further. *For now.*” He let the threat linger, then addressed the unit. “We’ll have to get moving if we are to make it back to Force HQ in time.” His expression hardened. “And I don’t intend to be late, so get moving! Break camp—be ready to depart in five minutes.”

Jade hurried to obey, disassembling her tent and packing up her things. There was no more in her bag than there was when they flew out, but as she attached it to the harness around her torso, it felt heavier. Fatigue dragged on her as she waited for Leuven’s order to depart.

She didn’t have to wait long. Jade leapt into the air and fell into the tail-end of a V-formation. They flew due north, the dry, red land spreading out before them. Jade let her eyes wander, mesmerised by the sameness of it. For leagues and leagues, there was nothing but red dirt and scrub. As they approached Blood River, the unit turned west to follow its meandering flow from The Fangs in the east to the Western Sea. Its waters, tainted a deep red from the seams of red gold buried in the mountains, were a vein running through the landscape.

At this height, Jade saw a barge travelling downstream towards Ingresston, carrying a load from the mountains. She couldn’t tell what it was from the air; possibly red gold ore from Norveyne Mine or stone from Scayliston Quarry. Either way, the cargo would be unloaded and refined at Fallon, the last place barges could moor before Blood River became a series of waterfalls and rapids, flowing into Vertin Gorge underneath Ingresston. From Fallon, the only way to transport anything was by land or air.

In the air, the unit easily outstripped the barge below. In time, they flew over Fallon, and Jade drank in the beautiful sight of the waterfalls and the seam of greenery that became Vertin Gorge. Then Jade saw the curved back of Our Lady towering over the Temple and the grey Portal clouds churning above.

Her wings beat steadily as her eyes scanned the skies, searching for Axel. Their return to Force HQ would be a short interlude from the isolation of training, but maybe—*maybe*—she’d have the chance to see Axel before her unit

left Ingresston again. Her breath quickened at the possibility.

Axel wasn't in the air and, as the unit angled towards Force HQ, she reluctantly stayed in formation.

Force HQ was virtually invisible. From a distance, there didn't appear to be any other structure along the cliffs except for the magnificent Temple. A moment later, a shimmer of light caught Jade's attention. She focused on what looked like a large lake sitting just across the ravine from the Temple. It sparkled, reflecting the bright blue sky and grey clouds above.

When the lake came into view, the unit descended towards it and as they passed directly overhead the surface moved, sliding aside to reveal the cavernous space underneath.

Force HQ was underground; a network of tunnels leading off an open-air column where Travellers moved through the levels. Camouflaged by a retractable mirror designed to look like a lake, it was all but invisible to those who didn't know how to access it. Impenetrable except by the single entry and exit point guarded by Travellers, Force HQ was an underground fortress for those who protected the Dragonverse.

Leuven led them downwards, descending steeply, plunging through the levels of Force HQ in tight spirals. Faint marks in the metal sides of the column revealed sliding doors and retractable platforms, fitted with sensors designed to open and extend when a Traveller approached. The technology allowed easy landing and entrance to the different levels, retaining maximum room to manoeuvre within the central column. Entering Force HQ reminded Jade of the Taraqan nature to discover and co-opt technology from the far corners of the Dragonverse. Papa always said that Taraqans didn't invent much but were quick to adapt whatever they discovered. Force HQ was as modern as the Temple was ancient.

Numbers spaced at regular intervals marked the levels, increasing in value as they descended into the ground. Each level held a network of tunnels and rooms. The upper levels were used for security, and concealed the armoury, the mess and recreation halls, administration offices and dormitories. As they plunged lower, they passed the training halls, the gymnasium, and the healing quarters. Towards the bottom, was the library, study halls, and lecture theatres.

The movement of Travellers between the levels was always constant, but today the movement was all in one direction. Down.

The landing on Level 13 was a bottleneck as every on-world Traveller wanted to enter at the same time. Jade's unit hovered mid-air, as Travellers landed in groups of threes and fours. While she waited, Jade looked down into the space below.

Below Level 13 was off-limits. That was where Special Traveller Air Regiment Command—STAR Command—oversaw off-world Traveller operations in secret rooms. She'd also heard about classified laboratories and weapons caches, but wasn't sure how much of it was rumour and exaggeration. What was clear, though, was that Force HQ extended much deeper than the thirteen levels to which she had access.

When it was Jade's turn, she entered a cavernous amphitheatre, big enough to hold the entire Traveller Force. A reinforced bunker, both water and fireproof—it was one of a few safe places where Travellers could seek refuge in an emergency.

The enormous room was packed with Travellers and had standing room only by the time she got there. The din was incredible; thousands of Travellers talking at the same time.

“My unit is taking bets about the reason for the briefing.” Jade turned to see Kyssa had slipped in to stand beside her. “Shortest odds are on a Yrax assault on one of the Portals.”

Jade's eyes widened. “Really?”

Kyssa shrugged. “I can't find anyone who knows what this is about and that's rare. Must be something big. Scosse never gathers everyone together like this.” Kyssa looked over Jade and gave her a pitying smile. “How's training?”

Jade winced. Kyssa burst out laughing. “You'll survive. We all did.” Kyssa nudged Jade on the shoulder. “When you graduate, we might patrol together—wouldn't that be great?”

Jade shot her friend a sideways look. “Wouldn't that make you my superior, *Flying Officer*?”

Kyssa grinned. “What's wrong with that?”

Jade rolled her eyes, but she smiled too. She'd dreamed of travelling with Kyssa since they were children and all the more with every one of Kyssa's stories. Of course, she thought they'd fly as teammates, but now that Kyssa had been promoted into the Officer ranks, it wouldn't be possible. Not unless Jade made it that far too. She thought of her training so far and the glow inside her was dampened—promotion would be a ways off. Then the smile slipped from her face. “Do you know if Axel has returned yet?”

Kyssa raised an eyebrow but before she could reply, the lights dimmed. Scosse stepped into a spotlight, flanked by another officer. Jade noticed another figure lurking outside the spotlight, but the darkness cloaked his features.

The din became silence as all attention turned to the front. Jade was too far back to see Scosse clearly, but the spotlight gave his skin a pale, almost sickly pallor.

“I have called you here today to give you some grave and disturbing news,” Scosse said. “At times like this, rumour and gossip run wild—it is best to be armed with the cold, hard facts on which we must base our decisions. It is my duty, therefore, to inform you all of this terrible news: three of our fellow Travellers have been killed.” Scosse paused. “Murdered.”

Jade covered her mouth as she processed Scosse’s words. A shock wave of chatter rippled around the amphitheatre. Scosse raised his hands to call for silence but it was a moment before he got the crowd’s attention again.

Silence fell, but a tension radiated around the room like a physical force. Jade was holding her breath, waiting for Scosse to continue.

“At this time, we have too few facts about how or why three of our bravest have been murdered, except that it occurred on a little known world called Premye.”

Jade exhaled sharply and glanced at Kyssa, who frowned. The mutterings around the large hall took on the hard edge of anger. Jade’s stomach twisted as anger brewed inside her too. Who were these Premyans and how dare they do something like this?

A raised voice in the crowd called for an attack on Premye. Others joined the chorus, wanting revenge. Scosse held up a hand, appealing for calm.

“I am angry.” Scosse’s voice boomed through the room. “I am *furious*. *We* protect the Dragonverse so their peoples can live free of the Yrax. *We* serve the Dragonverse by keeping it safe. To murder those who serve and protect is an insult of the worst kind.” Scosse paused, as the room hummed with anger.

Jade clenched her fists as his words settled over her.

“We must not let our anger colour our decisions. We must allow reason to win the day,” he continued. “Therefore, we will send a small unit to Premye to meet with their leaders. This unit will be charged, primarily, with discovering the cause of these murders, and secondly, with keeping the peace. The information the unit brings back will inform any future action.”

An outburst of chatter went on for several minutes before Scosse waved the room silent again.

“This mission will be under the control of STAR Command. In two days, selections will be announced. One day after that, Operation Grave Insult will depart for Premye. Your commanders will be updated with any news.” Scosse cleared his throat. “I have another important announcement. Unfortunately, Air Vice Marshall Wallen has resigned for personal reasons.” Scosse motioned to the man standing next to him. “Air Commodore Denger will be promoted to Air Vice Marshall and Chief of the Traveller Force as of today. Other promotions arising from this change will be notified in due course. That is all. You are

dismissed.”

Scosse strode from the spotlight and the room erupted into chatter and the crowd started to push towards the exit. Jade was caught up in the departing mass.

“I wonder who died?” Kyssa ran a hand over her short hair, then leaned closer to Jade. “I wonder how they’re going to do selections,” she whispered as they were pushed forward.

Jade shrugged. Her fists were clenched tight and she consciously uncurled her fingers. She wouldn’t be selected.

“I bet they’ll be taking Special Protective Ops only.” There was a hard edge to Kyssa’s voice. “I’m so close to getting into Special Protective Ops Division, I know it. If I could get onto this mission, I bet I’d be a front-runner next time they do a selection round.”

Jade heard the wish in Kyssa’s voice and squeezed her friend’s hand. Kyssa would find a way—her determination was legendary and she usually managed to do what she put her mind to.

Instead, Jade found herself wondering why Wallen had resigned. Three days ago he hadn’t shown any signs of whatever forced his resignation. Papa always said Wallen was so committed to the Traveller Force that he bled black. Jade remembered the look on Scosse’s face as Wallen spoke at their welcome ceremony. Perhaps he’d known Wallen’s decision then? She understood why Scosse would be upset at the loss of someone like Wallen. He was one of the anchors of the Traveller Force. It wouldn’t be the same without him.

A hand on her arm pulled her from her thoughts.

“I wonder who I could speak with to get onto this mission?” Kyssa asked. She was pressed against Jade’s shoulder, moving with the jostle of the pack pushing towards the exit. Pressed from every side, Jade felt an elbow in her ribs. Kyssa leaned closer to Jade and squeezed her arm again. “I hear Zorman is old friends with Scosse...”

Jade only half-listened to her friend as she glanced around. She couldn’t see anyone from her unit and the knot in her stomach loosened a little. Everyone had been separated in the exodus from Level 13.

As Jade shuffled to the front of the platform that extended into the air column, she decided to use the time away from her fellow trainees to practice her archery. Maybe with some extra work, she wouldn’t endure Leuven’s humiliation again.

“You’ll speak to him for me, right?” Kyssa was still talking as they stepped out onto the platform. They leapt into the central column at the same time. “I’d be an asset on this mission. I’m sure if Zorman put in a good word for me...”

Jade nodded, although she barely heard Kyssa. She beat her wings to lift her

feet off the platform and drew into the clockwise spiral of Travellers ascending from Level 13.

“Jade?” Kyssa melded into the spiral beside her. Jade racked her brain to remember what Kyssa had said, but didn’t pause in case Leuven saw her.

“Yeah, sure—see you later, all right?” Jade glanced over her shoulder to see Kyssa beaming. She wondered at Kyssa’s expression as she pulled away, heading towards the middle of the spiral where the faster Travellers ascended. It was only when she’d been subsumed into the throng of Travellers that Jade realised she hadn’t received an answer about Axel.

Jade rose quickly to Level 9 and hovered alongside the notch in the metal side of the column. A small platform extended smoothly and Jade’s toes touched down on the rough, grooved surface designed to avoid slippage. She tucked her wings behind her and stepped through the entrance as automatic lights blinked on. Several doorways lead into small training rooms, where Travellers could practice one-on-one combat or swordplay. At the end of the hall, through another sliding door, a much larger room housed an archery range. It was empty now, but wouldn’t remain that way for long.

Jade walked down the hall when her name was called. Her shoulders drooped, guessing someone from her unit had spotted her, but when she turned around, there was a friendly face flying towards her.

“Neve?” Jade couldn’t help but notice how hard Neve had to work to make the ascent Jade found so easy. She tried not to stare at the lopsided way Neve flew, one wing noticeably weaker and smaller than the other. She averted her eyes, pushing the accident out of her mind. She couldn’t think about it now. “What are you doing here?”

Neve wore the simple white robes of a healer apprentice. Usually healers spent their days in the Temple healing centre and library. “I volunteered for a roster in the healing quarters here,” Neve explained. “I wanted to see you and there wasn’t time at the funeral. But Kyssa said you were training on the southern plains—I was worried I wouldn’t see you.”

Jade remembered Neve calling at the house, before the funeral.

“Can we go somewhere to talk?”

“Sure.” Jade turned into the first small room. It was pitch black, but when Jade stepped inside a light blinked on overhead. “What do you want to talk about?”

When the door closed she turned to Neve. She had to stop herself from

tapping her fingers on the side of her legs. Every moment here, was a moment lost in her attempt to avoid further humiliation from Leuven.

“I’ve been wanting to speak to you for days. Almost since your father died. I’m so sorry, by the way. Please pass on my condolences to your mama, too.”

Jade thought of Mama banishing her from home and a lump formed in her throat. She opened her mouth to explain to her friend, then decided she didn’t want to talk about it. Instead, she voiced the question rattling around her head, refusing to be forgotten. “Have you seen Axel?”

“What?” Neve shook her head. “No, I—”

“I haven’t seen him since before Papa died. He didn’t come to the funeral and I just wanted...” Jade trailed off, her cheeks warming.

“I’m sorry,” Neve said. “But I rarely see him so maybe...” Neve hesitated, then changed the subject. “Look, the reason I wanted to talk to you is, well... did you know I assisted the Chief Healer with the examination of your father’s body when it was found?”

Jade swallowed, but the lump stuck in her throat. Tears threatened to break her composure and she cast around for a way to change the subject again.

“You didn’t hear anything about it?” Neve asked.

“It’s all right.” Jade said. “The Chief Healer already told Mama that Papa died of natural causes,” Jade turned to the exit, hoping Neve would take the hint. “Look, I was actually—”

Neve cut her off, “I wish I didn’t have to be the one...” She looked at her hands and Jade noticed they were trembling. “Magnus’ death was really strange, don’t you think?”

Jade blinked slowly, feeling a frown spread creases across her forehead.

“Strange?”

“He was fit and healthy. There wasn’t a mark on him. Then he just dropped dead?”

Neve’s words sent Jade’s mind into a spin, a contrast with the stillness of her body. It took Jade several moments to understand what Neve had said. “Are you saying it *wasn’t* natural causes?” Jade was certain she must have misunderstood.

Neve fidgeted. “Don’t tell anyone I told you this.”

“Told me what? What’s going on?” Jade wrapped her arms around her chest.

“When we were doing the examination, the Chief Healer pointed out all sorts of anomalies. His windpipe was crushed, causing prolonged blockage of his airway, but there were no external marks on his neck, no bruising or cuts.”

Jade shivered as Neve’s description brought back the image of Papa slouched across his desk. Papa’s death had been a shock, but it had never even occurred to her to question *how* it had happened. She’d taken the Chief Healer’s words for

granted. She shook her head, trying to push away the memory. “So...?”

“His internal injuries were severe and consistent with strangulation, but there were no marks on his neck. No other cause of death was found. He didn’t have a heart attack or stroke or anything like that. His windpipe was crushed. With such severe internal injuries, there should have been some bruising or marks on his neck. He was strangled, but it is as though no one did it.”

Jade’s stomach lurched. “He strangled himself?” She stammered, her tongue twisting around the words.

“No—that’s not what I meant,” Neve took a breath. “He was strangled, but without being touched.”

Tears brimmed in Jade’s eyes again and she blinked them away. “No... I don’t... How...?”

“I know you’ll have a hard time believing this but... it’s as though your father was killed by magic.”

Magic.

The word echoed and Jade froze. Her hands were balled into fists where they gripped the side seams of her black shirt. Her heart skipped a beat, then raced ahead at a gallop. “Is this a joke?”

“No!” Neve’s eyes widened and she reached a hand out but Jade twisted away from her, putting space between them.

Jade’s eyes narrowed, certain this was a practical joke. Her lip curled in disgust. Playing a prank on her so soon after Papa’s death? She wouldn’t have believed Neve was capable of such cruelty if she hadn’t heard it herself. She turned her back to Neve and walked towards the door.

“Jade, wait...”

“There’s no such thing as magic.” Jade spat the words through gritted teeth.

“Please hear me out.” Neve rushed forwards to put a hand on her shoulder. Jade spun around, jerking away from Neve’s grip.

“Is this your way of getting back at me? Of finally getting even?”

Neve’s eyes widened. “What? No! Jade, listen—”

“THERE’S NO SUCH THING AS MAGIC!”

Neve swallowed and lifted her chin. This time it was her turn to cross her arms across her chest. “The Dragon-Gods do magic,” she said.

Jade opened and closed her mouth. Was this really the time for religious instruction? “Are you suggesting the Dragon-Gods killed Papa? Was it Our Lady’s doing?” Jade could hear the sarcasm dripping from her voice.

“That’s not what I meant.” Neve uncrossed her arms. “I’m not the only one to come to this conclusion. The Chief Healer said during the examination that he couldn’t find any cause of death and could only conclude magic had been used.”

Jade wanted to press her hands over her ears. This was completely absurd. “Why did he tell Mama it was natural causes then?”

Neve shook her head, looking genuinely confused. “He reported it to Scosse, which is normal procedure. After that, he wrote up the report saying it was natural causes. When I asked him about it, the Chief said he’d considered all the facts and formed his conclusion. He said stress was probably the cause.” Neve looked carefully at Jade. “Was he?”

“What?”

“Stressed.”

Jade shrugged. No more or less than usual. “I suppose. Maybe.”

“The Chief Healer warned me not to say anything about this. He said it would ruin my career.”

“Maybe because it’s preposterous.” Jade glared at Neve. “People will think you’re crazy. In fact, you might actually *be* crazy.”

Neve sighed and her shoulders drooped. “I... just thought you should know.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Jade asked. She saw no malice in Neve’s face and couldn’t imagine Neve would hurt her on purpose. But the whole thing was completely ridiculous. Only Neve would believe something like this. Maybe that was the truth of it. Neve had such faith in the Dragon-Gods that when the Chief Healer had made an off-hand comment about magic, she’d taken it to heart.

Neve lifted her chin again. “Think I’m crazy, if you want. All I know is that someone used magic to kill your father. I don’t know how or why. I just thought you should know.” Neve reached over and this time Jade let her squeeze her hand. There was a renewed ache in her chest as she took in Neve’s sad smile. “I am really sorry about your father. He was a great man.”

Jade blinked back tears. She hadn’t cried since that night on the beach, but now grief welled up inside again. In truth, Jade was so exhausted, hungry and sore that she was barely holding things together. She wrapped her arms around her chest again, battling herself. Neve took another step forwards and pulled Jade into a hug. Tears trickled down her cheeks, the dam spilling over. Jade held her breath, desperately trying to keep herself together. She didn’t want to lose it here or she might not be able to pull herself together again.

After a moment, Jade stepped away from her friend and requested time alone. Neve gave her hand another squeeze, then Jade heard the door close behind her. Even alone, Jade could not quiet the storm of thoughts and emotions that assaulted her.

Her father was killed? By magic? It was absurd.

Everyone knew only the Dragon-Gods could do magic. Jade wasn’t sure she even believed the stories of Dragon-Gods; creation and magic were just myths.

How could this be true? Neve might believe it, but she'd always been faithful.

The light blinked off and Jade stood in the dark. She remembered she'd been going to the archery range, but she couldn't make herself move.

Something niggled at her. She might not believe in magic, but now that Neve had brought it up, something about her father's death didn't seem right. Jade remembered the way Papa had looked, slumped over his desk. Neve said he didn't just die, he was *strangled without a mark on him*. Out of nowhere, Jade remembered the argument she had overheard earlier that day, and the fear in her father's voice. *Lives will be lost over this*.

A terrible storm raged in the pit of her stomach.

Something wasn't right.

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