

Fly

v.1.1.0, Journeys #3

by Thomas B. Dair

Looking down was scary. Especially since Vuorruuzuu had never flown before. Calling it “flying” was maybe a little bit of a stretch. Drakes could actually only glide using their webbed, leathery wings, but to Vuorruuzuu it felt like so much more.

The cool winds of autumn caressed the topaz yellow scales covering her entire toned body, from her snout and long neck over her arms and torso, as well as her strong legs and finned tail. But the chill was counteracted by the slight warmth that the shining suns provided. The day was clear and beautiful, and, while scary, Vuorruuzuu could see all of the world below. So much she had never explored; from the still-green cedar trees directly beneath her, far over the oceans and new lands, across the tallest mountains all trying their best to reach her as she sailed atop the winds.

Had it always been this easy? It was over 50 years ago that Vuorruuzuu’s clutch mates had learned to utilise their wings, and yet her own had always been loose and useless. But now? Now nothing could hold the young adult Dragon back. She simply stretched her lean arms and legs, and the wings in between flexed instinctively. Same for the fins on her tail, making steering just about the smallest problem in the world.

The freedom up here in the sky was almost magical. And Vuorruuzuu couldn’t wait to write down all of her findings in her journal. She looked to her belt and made sure that it, and her trusty ink bottle, was fastly secured.

SCREEECH!

The strange noise abruptly pulled Vuorruuzuu back from her dreaming. It was late evening, but she hadn’t been sleeping. Instead, the Broodcarer was in the middle of adjusting the heat of one of her incubation kilns when the mind had started to wander. It was a good thing that the strange noise came when it did, because she had raised the heat a little too much which could have had catastrophic results.

‘Let us get you turned around, Fridyaethuu,’ Vuorruuzuu said as she rolled the Wyyrm egg out of the kiln. She extended the grey claws on all of her eight fingers and carefully turned the scaled egg in an attempt to distribute the heat a little better. ‘Or Fridyaethiim.’

Wyyrms were much, much harder to hatch than Drakes, but Vuorruuzuu had a good feeling with this one, even if she was a fairly new Broodcarer. And she secretly hoped the whelping would be female.

SCREEECH! SCREEECH!

There it was again. Vuorruuzuu immediately looked to the sill of her two large windows in the Broodcarer cavern of melted stone. That turned out to be a mistake, however, as she somehow burned her fingers on the mighty hot, scaly egg she was turning.

‘Ouch!’ she exclaimed loudly. Vuorruuzuu had never been the best at handling the fire, nor the winds for that matter, so her heavily bandaged fingers often suffered burns. But the feeling that she held with the eggs was unmatched. And on top of that, she had been the fastest of her peers to learn how to work the kilns. The result was that the Topaz Queen Mother had selected her for Broodcarer anyway, in spite of her obvious shortcomings with

the elements. Vuorruuzuu had often speculated that maybe her old Learner had a hand in that decision. She and her old Learner shared a strong bond, and Vuorruuzuu knew all too well how very persuasive she could be.

The Broodcarer made sure that the heat of the kiln was set exactly right, pushed the egg back into the flames, and walked over to where the source of the weird noise was coming from; her makeshift terrarium. The glass case was standing next to the big windows, currently enjoying the heat of the kilns winning the battle against the cool breeze of the late autumn evening.

‘CL-CL-CL-CLACK!’

As Vuorruuzuu peered into the glass cage, a demanding flit gecko was impatiently staring back at her. It hadn’t even been thirty downing suns since her sister had brought the three lizard eggs. How such a large Dragon like Illiqazii had accomplished to bring her such small eggs, without harming them, was a feat that Vuorruuzuu still pondered over from time to time. And up until earlier today, they had all been lying comfortably in the terrarium’s warm dirt. Now there were only two eggs next to a cracked shell, and what looked to be an almost fully developed lizard.

‘You are a quick one, are you not? Well, besides the fact that you missed your season...’ Vuorruuzuu inquired as she gently lifted up the gecko to get a better look. This wasn’t the first time that the Broodcarer had hatched flit geckos but this particular one was much larger than a normal hatchling. ‘How did you grow up so fast? Fascinating...’

As it sat there in the Dragon’s hand, the flit gecko first grabbed its left wing, using its corresponding front foot toes, and extended the webbed skin from its stomach. And then it did the same with the right one.

‘Ooh, big stretch!’ Vuorruuzuu said with the cuteness that always surfaced when she was talking to an animal. She could feel herself getting excited at the prospect of having a bunch of flit geckos running around again soon. ‘I shall name you “Flit”!’

The gecko looked at her and turned its head sideways making its strange, feathery head appendages wobble a bit.

‘What? Do you not like it?’ Vuorruuzuu asked the small creature with the even smaller cloudy scales. ‘I will grant you that it may not be my most creative work, but I think it fits. Look, your siblings are still lying all cozy in their eggs.’

Vuorruuzuu looked down into the terrarium and back at the gecko in her hands. Flit moved its head with hers into the small, made up forest floor and back again. Then it sneezed.

‘Oh, I wish you well!’ Vuorruuzuu answered.

The little flit gecko nodded at her as if saying a wordless *thank you*, turned around, leapt on to the window sill, and went straight out of the nearest big window.

It all went quite fast and a sudden panic came rushing over Vuorruuzuu as she clumsily, and without success, tried to catch the quick lizard before it was out of reach.

‘FLIT!’ she shouted and leaned as far out of the window as possible, only to see the flit gecko grabbing and spreading its wings, and expertly starting its descent into the dimly lit evening.

‘Oh, I do wish you well...’ the Dragon said to no one but herself. Vuorruuzuu felt a tinge of sadness, and a little bit of disappointment, as she scouted for the small, winged being who was all but gone now. She could only eye one of the three enormous iron chains that kept Wingrest, and by extension the other Dragon Roosts, from floating away.

Vuorruuzuu made a small jump when she remembered that she needed to write it all down. Quickly fetching an ornate candle holder, resembling three Wyyrm tails twirling around

each other and holding a close-to-burned out candle, Vuorruuzuu lit the wick with a fireblossom and placed the holder on the window sill. She then skillfully detached her newest notebook and ink pot from her belt, placed them next to the candlelight, and opened the book onto the first blank page.

She stared at the unwritten pages while dipping an extended claw in ink. Getting started was always the hardest part but Vuorruuzuu also knew that once she got going, it was difficult to stop. Her bookcase filled to the brim with used notebooks was a testament to that.

Pondering over where to begin, the yellow scaled Dragon leaned on her elbows while picking her sharp teeth with her claw now intended for writing. The sharp teeth got a little smudged with ink but Vuorruuzuu didn't give it much thought. When she stared into the nascent night, she couldn't help but feel that familiar longing. While she wasn't sure what exactly it was that she longed for, Vuorruuzuu just knew it was something *more*. Something more than what was on the Dragon Roosts that she had already explored so many times. Something more than Wingrest in particular, which was by far the largest floating island of the five.

It wasn't that the other islands weren't interesting either; Skyreach was the second largest and had the most, and tallest, mountains, and Vuorruuzuu always loved to go climbing there when the Diamond Dragonkin allowed her. But scaling the peaks could be a perilous activity, especially for someone whose wings didn't work. But Vuorruuzuu had successfully developed quick reflexes and she had yet to make a fall that she couldn't recover from when things got dangerous.

Of the remaining Dragon Roosts, Cloudlake housed the biggest reservoir of water as its name suggested. It was best to visit the island in the summer, though, when the lake wasn't as cold. And Freelanding had so much history.

Vuorruuzuu followed the magnificent chain from Wingrest up to Highroost, quietly floating above. It had been years since she last visited the Emerald Kin. Highroost might be the smallest of the Dragon Roosts but its altitude meant the flora and fauna was one of a kind. And it would be nice once again to see some other flowers besides the still-dominating, orange fireblossoms, even if the cooler autumn temperatures had reduced their numbers. She could probably go there after the final phase of her current clutch. There would be enough time before the next Broodcarer call.

But Vuorruuzuu was certain that the world beneath the islands had so much more to offer. In fact, she knew it did from all the different written accounts of Dragons much more daring than her. She used to love sitting in the hot, humming baths, reading about trees as large as mountains, Elf-like horse beings that could bring lightning on demand, stout Dwarves with the ability to form iron and steel like no one else, and so much more. Back when she was a young Drake, Vuorruuzuu often dreamt of the things that she herself would discover and catalogue, and bring back to the Roosts one day.

Nevertheless, things were different now. Vuorruuzuu had been nominated for Broodcaring by her old Learner and a call as prestigious as that was not something to be turned down. The Queen Mothers, the only ones capable of carrying on the lines of Dragons, trusted only Broodcarers with their precious, glass-like and scaly eggs, and the task of igniting the flames of life. Even if Broodcarers collectively failed the difficult process to procure living Drake- and Wyyrm whelpings most of the time, their call was still highly regarded. Vuorruuzuu's feeling for the eggs was exceptional, though. She had already brought more whelpings to the world than what anyone could expect, or hope, from one as

new as her. The Topaz Kin definitely needed her and so she couldn't just walk away even if she wanted to.

With all that said, however, Vuorruuzuu did find the lands beneath endlessly fascinating. The first time she visited The Settler, she had almost decided to stay in the valley where the enormous chains anchored The Dragon Roosts to the landscape. And right there in the middle was the bizarre stone. A large and cold stone that looked so out of place. In fact, The Settler wasn't the only thing to look out of place, so did the valley with its always snow and freezing cold. A sharp contrast to the otherwise hot and humid summers and mild winters around. During that first visit, Vuorruuzuu was sure that she heard a faint murmur when pressing her earholes against The Settler. That is, until one of the many Topaz Queen's Guards dragged her away and scolded her, and yelled how she couldn't touch the large stone. She was only a whelping at the time after all.

It was probably a good thing that she didn't stay. The forests in and around The Settler valley were known to house Elves, and Elves were a black stain on the history of Dragons, particularly before the Kins found the Roosts. Vuorruuzuu couldn't imagine any Elves feeling kinder towards her and her kind after how they broke free if the history books are accurate.

'Still...', Vuorruuzuu continued to herself. 'I would not mind having just a tiny bit of your audacity, little one.' She looked to the disappearing chain as if the flit gecko would somehow still be there. 'Or have the ability to,' the Drake said while looking at her own always relaxed, webbed wings. Vuorruuzuu let out a sigh. Sometimes it seemed like she always ended up here on purpose in this exact spot by the windows.

The pages laid yet unwritten in front of her.

'AAH!' Vuorruuzuu screamed as three large claws suddenly grabbed onto one of the windows. The force from the claws was enough to scrape chunks off of the melted stone side, more than what had already been done. Then a large but kind Dragon's head, so big that it couldn't fit through the windows, appeared.

'ILLI! By the Queen Mother and all life, what are you doing here? Should you not be back in your cavern?'

'But me not like it there,' the Wyyrm answered rather shyly, like a whelping caught doing something they weren't supposed to. 'And me wanted to see you.'

'You are lucky that we are clutchmates, Illiqazii of Topaz, because other Dragons might not take too kindly to our Kin's prime Wyyrm hanging onto the undercliffs of Wingrest at this hour...'

'No one see me, me make sure,' the great Dragon responded.

'I think you will find that no one dared to say anything to you. Stealth is not exactly your strong suit, is it now?' Vuorruuzuu were half mocking, half scolding Illiqazii's perception of her own size, or lack thereof.

The Broodcarer could see the expression of her clutch sister dishearten so she quickly followed up to change the subject.

'You spent time with that crazy new Learner, did you not?'

Illiqazii nodded and bared her similar big, strong, and blade-sharp teeth in a smile that was somehow both innocent and terrifying at the same time.

'I have already told you that you need to stop seeing that Drake. He puts all the wrong ideas into that big head of yours!'

'But me like it,' Illiqazii said, dismissing her sister's claim. 'Me like to read and me learn much. Only him want me to learn and read and say words.'

Vuorruuzuu couldn't make an argument there. Whereas Wyyrms normally expressed themselves through roars and snarls and breaking of things, her sister had a solid vocabulary. A vocabulary that had quickly developed ever since she started sneaking off to that seemingly headstrong Learner.

'But that is not your lot, is it?' Vuorruuzuu asked in a tone much more berating than what she intended. And yet, she continued; 'Reading is for Drakes, for Learners and member's of the Queen's Council with a purpose of forwarding all of the Dragonkins. Wyyrms are for what?'

'...'

'You are training for what?'

Illiqazii still didn't answer.

'War, Illi. You are training for war. War and protection.'

'Me no like it, me no want that training!' Illiqazii exclaimed, turning her head away but still holding on to the window.

'That is not for you to decide. You were hatched as a Wyyrm to make the Topaz' position at Wingrest safe and to deter the other Kins from engaging in a new Dragon Fight. We have never known peace for as long as we have now, and I would like for us to keep it that way!'

'But me no like it,' the behemoth outside the windows repeated. 'When me read, me forget about those bad things!'

Vuorruuzuu felt terrible. On the outside, her clutch sister might be the finest Wyyrm specimen since The Magnificent Muuozsoavvazz of Ruby. Muuozsoavvazz was the biggest Wyyrm to ever live and had almost single handedly conquered Wingrest for her Kin. And on top of that, The Magnificent Muuozsoavvazz was the reason why the Ruby Kin had held the island across multiple Dragon Fights. But on the inside, in her own mind, Illiqazii was as far from the terrible beasts of war as one could come. Thinking back, Vuorruuzuu had seldomly seen Illiqazii as happy as when she had started to sneak out to that young Learner of hers.

A long silence followed with the two Dragon sisters only sharing a few awkward glances.

'What... what did you read about?' Vuorruuzuu finally garnered enough courage to ask.

Illiqazii quickly turned her head back towards her sister and reaffirmed her strong grip on the window's side, breaking off a few more stone slabs.

'Me read from fav... favo...'

'Favourite,' Vuorruuzuu gently helped.

'Fa-fa... Fa-vou-rite book,' the eager Wyyrm managed to spell out. 'Me read story about Dragon, Dragon who use fire and wind AND the earth AND stop Elves from being bad!' Dragons no do that ever! But Dragons no know name so Dragons call Dragon Sa... Sav...'

'The Savant.' Vuorruuzuu clearly remembered the first time she had read about the mysterious Dragon. She probably looked as excited as her sister did just now. 'Did you also know that it was The Savant who led us to The Settler and the Dragon Roosts? Freelanding was the first Roost that The Savant and all six Dragon Kin made home.'

No words came in response. Instead Illiqazii's maw was wide open, showing all of the terrifying and spiky teeth in astonishment.

'I guess not. I am sorry for ruining that for you.'

'No, it okay. Me have question?'

'Go on, I promise that I will try not to spoil another book for you,' Vuorruuzuu smiled and gently patted one of her sister's nostrils.

'All Dragon live together? No fight?'

'That is right. From what we know, The Savant wanted all Dragons to live together, and protect each other, after such a long time in Elven serfdom.'

'Ser... serfdom?' Illiqazii often repeated words that she didn't know or hadn't heard before.

'Slavery.'

'Oh... why it stop?' the Wyyrm followed up.

Vuorruuzuu could see why her sister's "secret" Learner wanted to spend so much time with her. She was much more engaged than most whelpings being taught this piece of history.

'The slavery?'

'No, why Dragon stop live together? Why start fight?'

'Ah... I am afraid we do not know exactly. We only know that the very first Dragon Fight erupted shortly after The Savant died. Learners think it was because-'

Three loud knocks interrupted the sisters' moment of history. In a sudden slight of panic, Vuorruuzuu looked towards the wooden door in the crude stone frame, and then quickly back to her Wyyrm sister.

'You must go, Illi, no one can find you here! They can not ignore you being out of your cavern if your big snout is caught sticking in through my windows. And who knows what they will do to me!'

'Okay,' Illiqazii responded. She was a little saddened that their exciting conversation had come to an end so soon, but she also knew where a Wyyrm was supposed to be at this hour. 'Good night, Vuvu,' the gentle beast said as she let go of the window. In contrast to her own pet name, Illiqazii had never really learned to say her sister's full name, though it wasn't for a lack of trying.

'Good night, Illi,' Vuorruuzuu answered back with a thinly veiled frantic tone.

'Me love you!'

The door found itself on the receiving end of another barrage of knocks.

'I love you too,' Vuorruuzuu responded with a strange mix of yell and whisper towards Illiqazii. The Wyyrm had started to flap her mighty wings, slowly flying away from the Broodcarer's windows.

I hope no one heard that, Vuorruuzuu thought as she hurried over to the door.

She opened the wooden door in the middle of yet another set of hard knocks. The result was an awkward and slightly confused look of an older Drake, whose only arm almost fell through the air where the door had been. He was clad in the characteristic armour of the Topaz Queen's Guard; gold-plates over a tabard woven of small iron rings.

'Oh Nooi- I mean... Suddyinehm. Good evening.' Vuorruuzuu greeted the stern looking guard standing in the corridor. 'What brings you here at this unusual hour?'

'New eggs,' the Queen's Guard snarled back, dismissing Vuorruuzuu's greeting. 'These need to go in the hatchery right away, Queen's orders.' He attempted to wheel in an egg barrow with great difficulty given his lack of one arm and most of its corresponding wing.

The bewildered Broodcarer shook her head slightly. She tried to make sense of this unprecedented request, firmly stopping the Queen's Guard in the doorway. There was a loud discontent from Suddyinehm as he took a step back but lost his balance, scraping the door with his black horns as he almost toppled the egg barrow. Luckily, he saved it at the very last second.

'That is... that is highly unusual, much more than you knocking on my door so late, Suddiynehm. I have never heard of us placing new eggs in a hatchery already in the process of incubation. In fact, I do not think that I have the room for more. You will need to wait until another Broodcarer begins the process with a new clutch.'

'Her Queen's Consort, the highly esteemed Famroieh, has specifically made this request and-'

'I know who Queen's Consort Famroieh is,' the Broodcarer sneered back, returning the tone of the aggravating guard. As if she would forget the name of one of her Queen's Consorts, and the only Onyx one still living in Wingrest at that, maybe even one of the last few remaining.

'And, as I was saying,' Suddiynehm continued, baring his teeth to show his displeasement. 'Consort Famroieh requests that these eggs take priority over any currently in incubation.'

'Did he also request a new Broodcarer to relieve me then? When those of my current clutch start to hatch? Or does our Queen's Consort expect me to sit in this room for another ninety downing suns?'

'What do I care?' the older Queen's Guard snapped, clearly unhappy with all the questions posed. 'Take these eggs and start the incubation or-'

But Vuorruuzuu wasn't done. Not by a longshot. Not when she was the Broodcarer in her own hatchery.

'And why is a Queen's Consort making decisions about eggs? That usually befalls to our life giving Queen herself, in correspondence with her Council. Only they decide when and what to hatch, not some glorified lover-'

'Mind your tongue, Broodcarer!'

The Queen's Guard was right. Speaking ill of the Consorts could have some serious repercussions, so Vuorruuzuu had to calm herself down. She thought of her fragile sister and took a deep breath. A hushed whistle from the windows briefly distracted the Broodcarer. There was nothing to see except for the candle on the sill having gone out, and so had the ones by her table and bookshelves leaving the nook covered in shadow. *Must have been the wind.*

'My apologies,' she said and turned back to the problem before her.

'Consort Famroieh's orders are not to be negotiated, not even by a Broodcarer such as yourself!' Suddiynehm's snarl seemed to be turning more and more towards anger. 'The Consort wants these eggs incubated right away, and all should be hatched as Wyyrms!'

'FINE! Give me those eggs and I will start the incubation process, but do not think even for a second that I will not take this to the Queen's Council or the Queen Mother herself on the first chance I get, and-' The Broodcarer stopped her loud disapproval as the Queen's Guard had already walked away, turning a corner of the melted corridor and out of her sight.

Ending her tirade prematurely with a heavy groan, Vuorruuzuu grabbed the egg barrow and wheeled it into her hatchery. It was strangely light, and looking into the small wagon, she noticed how few eggs there actually were.

'One, two, three...' Vuorruuzuu counted, 'four. How come there are only four of you little ones?' Dragon eggs were usually stored and sent to the hatcheries in clutches of around ten, sometimes more but oftentimes a little less depending on the circumstances. Four eggs were an exceedingly low number. And the odd timing of the new arrivals meant that Vuorruuzuu now had to keep two separate time tables, of two different hatching stages.

As if already having a surplus of Wyyrm eggs to hatch isn't difficult enough, the Broodcarer thought. She let out another heavy groan as there wasn't really much she could do about it until the next morning.

Vuorruuzuu sat the egg carrier down and looked to her kilns only to see what she already knew; there were ten incubation kilns in her hatchery and the eggs, her current clutch was a smaller one of seven, were all fairly near their crucial, final hatching phase. But with four new ones arriving, simple math was working against her.

Everyone knew that hatching Dragon eggs was a long and arduous process, but only the Broodcarers knew the details and difficulty of the constant care for ninety downing suns. If anything went wrong during any of the phases, notably for the delicate hatching of Wyyrm eggs, the whelpings inside never got their flame of life ignited. And even with the efforts of the most expert Broodcarers, hatching extinguished whelpings were sadly the reality far too often. But Vuorruuzuu had a good feeling with this clutch. So how could they force her to decide which life to essentially end so close to igniting?

Vuorruuzuu thought about Queen's Consort Famroieh's strange request as she picked up one of the eggs from the wooden barrow.

'More Wyyrms, huh?' she said to herself and looked to her kilns again. The Queen Mother and her Council had assigned Vuorruuzuu's current clutch with the intention of more of the great warbeasts. Rumours of intelligence saying that a new Dragon Fight was imminent had gone on for a long time. Whether that was true or not, Vuorruuzuu did not know, but for a while now, the Wingrest hatcheries had been ordered to deliver more Wyyrms than usual. Vuorruuzuu had four Wyyrm eggs incubating in the hopes that at least two would ignite their flame of life. Her track record suggested that it was possible to accommodate the orders but Vuorruuzuu was still sceptical. Living Wyyrm whelpings would still need almost twenty years of training before they were ready for any type of fight. And on top of that came the intense resources required to sustain each Wyyrm. But in times of need it was better to get started immediately, she guessed. And so it was in fact not such a strange request for these four newcomers.

Vuorruuzuu looked at the egg with her washed out pink eyes, uniquely speckled by touches of honey. But the colours had to make way for the expanding, normally vertical, slit pupils as a sudden realisation dawned upon the Dragon; the crystal-like scales were not of the usual amber colour that embellished the eggs of the Topaz Kin. The egg in her arms was black like the night outside starting to settle. And likewise were the scales of the three eggs still in the barrow.

The Broodcarer, albeit young, had never seen eggs of a Topaz clutch in a different colour than those of her own scales. Queen Consort Famroieh was of the Onyx, though, so maybe it was just an anomaly? Maybe the scales would, for all Vuorruuzuu knew, even change into the yellow shades of the Topaz Queen Mother as they received the immense heat. So, without thinking much more of it, she went to work putting the new arrivals into their respective kilns.

Just like the final phase of incubation, the beginning required patience and a delicate touch. The kilns looked simple enough from the outside, but handling them efficiently and precisely required intense training and intricate ventilation knowledge of the hot furnaces. Especially for Wyyrms: if heat was too high, or the egg was in a slightly wrong position when the Broodcarers worked the winds to feed the flames, the eggs could shatter. And if the heat wasn't high enough, the whelping could end up a Drake, that is if the eggs ignited with life at all. The chances of the latter happening was always far too great.

Vuorruuzuu flicked a fireblossom to ignite the three remaining kilns but just before sending the flames to their destination, she attempted the Dance of Fire. It was a juvenile exercise, but having never really been great with the element, she always wanted to see how long she could keep the dance going. Those few seconds before the flames died out were never very impressive, though. So, the Broodcarer found more fireblossoms and flicked new flames in each of the cold kilns before walking around to work the winds.

She was better at the winds than fire, but still not amazing. All of the failures to ever create more than a light breeze with her wings, when some of her clutch mates had achieved storm-like gusts in their first year of wind learning, had always been a little bit of a sore spot for Vuorruuzuu. And while it might take her a little longer than fellow Broodcarers to get the airflow going, she could now work the incubation kilns better than anyone.

After successfully starting the fires of the hatchery's three last kilns, Vuorruuzuu took a tour of the rest, to check and adjust either their heat or egg positions as she found was needed. And as the concentrated, dry smell of new, burning walnut logs filled the Broodcarer's cavern, the heat began to rise accordingly in the already hot room. But Vuorruuzuu didn't mind. She was a Dragon, after all.

While the newly started kilns attained their desired almost stone-melting temperatures, Vuorruuzuu gently put an Onyx egg into her special Broodcarer's tabard. It was made with leather and a thick layer of hemp fabric, and the front, including the egg pouch and its fastening straps, was covered with old Topaz scales of both Wyyrm and Drake origin. The design made sure that Broodcarers could carry scorching hot eggs without hurting themselves, should the need arise. Or simply have the hands free, while the Broodcarer prepared an incubation kiln for the egg.

As she carefully placed the third of Consort Famroieh's eggs into its respective kiln, Vuorruuzuu couldn't help but think how much different the world of the Dragon Roosts would be if all Wyyrms were like her sister. Maybe all of the great beasts would have the intellect of Drakes. But then again, if that happened all Wyyrms would be like the Queen Mothers and the Queen Daughters. It was a bit of a preposterous thought, as if the only thing setting the Lifegivers apart was their upbringing and training, besides the ability to produce eggs of course.

Still, Vuorruuzuu couldn't help but think, *it would be nice*.

Maybe the two of them could leave Wingrest one day. She could ride Illiqazii's neck like the Wyyrm Riders did, and they could travel the world together. Vuorruuzuu liked the idea of all the new animals and plants and what-not that she could catalogue, and for Illi they could find a bunch of new and exciting books. Surely they could learn the languages of others if needed.

Such silly thoughts. The Broodcarer shook her head as she walked back to the egg carrier for the last Onyx one. She couldn't just leave like that. There was a great need for her here. Both of them, if the rumours of an imminent Dragon Fight were true.

Now Vuorruuzuu came to the part she had been dreading, and why she had taken so long with the first three Onyx eggs. One of the eggs of her current clutch needed to be replaced. The orders were "more Wyyrms," so it had to be one of the three Drakes incubating. But how could anyone expect her to make such a decision? Broodcarers were supposed to nurture the flame of life, not extinguish it. Vuorruuzuu suddenly felt that she finally understood her sister.

The Broodcarer looked long and hard at the egg she was holding, while trying to find a way out of the terrible situation. It was a good egg; the right size, fairly heavy, and the

scales looked to be perfectly shaped. They had the important crystal-like shine to their black Onyx colour and yet they somehow looked... old?

Another quick expansion turned the Broodcarer's slit pupils into almost perfectly round spheres, once again suppressing the washed pink colour and honeyed specks. A sudden realisation from her training had dawned on her: Dragon eggs *always* had the colour of their Queen Mother's Kin. A young Vuorruuzuu had asked her beloved Learner about exceptions, to which she had confidently answered "no."

So where do You come from? Vuorruuzuu studied the eggs for anything resembling a mix of yellow and black, of Topaz and Onyx, to prove her old mentor wrong. But the Drake couldn't find anything, the scales of the egg were as black as the night holding up both the moon and stars now.

Vuorruuzuu knew that something didn't feel right and that she should report it as soon as possible but could also feel the curiosity rise within her. Why did Queen Consort Famroieh have eggs from another Queen Mother here at Wingrest? Who brought them here? And how? The questions multiplied as Vuorruuzuu led her thoughts down that path. Putting the Onyx egg into her Broodcarer's pouch, she went to fetch her notebook and ink pot still on the window sill. This was too important not to write down.

'Would you kindly place the last egg in a kiln?' Even though the voice was calm, it still made Vuorruuzuu jump so high that the egg almost escaped her tabard's pouch.

'Who- who is there?' Vuorruuzuu nervously asked and scoured her hatchery where she, until just now, was sure that she had been completely alone. No one answered. Was it just her imagination?

A dark figure then quietly stepped out by Vuorruuzuu's bookshelf and past her only table and chair.

'I asked you, would you kindly place that egg in a kiln?' It was a black scaled Drake that emerged from the shadows. *Another Onyx?* Vuorruuzuu's surprise of meeting one of the Onyx Dragon Kin, who wasn't Famroieh, battled her fear of the intruding stranger. She wasn't sure which one won, but the result was the same; the Topaz Dragon stood frozen in place.

The Onyx Drake coming towards her was male, but smaller than Vuorruuzuu, clad in a simple and short leather tabard with black scales sewn in and around the chest, sides, and shoulders. The scales also embedded a hood that gave him a strange head shape. Almost as if the stranger didn't have any horns. Speaking of strange, as the Drake stepped out of the shadows his own scales turned to a more dark and matte grey, with a slight reddish hue, paling in comparison to the deep black and glossy egg in the tabard pouch. His scale colour made Vuorruuzuu question whether he even was of Onyx Kin or not. The speculation didn't loosen up Vuorruuzuu's body at all, however. Something that didn't go unnoticed.

'It is actually quite simple,' the intruder continued as he lowered the scale-embedded hood, revealing two black stubs where his horns were supposed to be. Vuorruuzuu herself didn't sport anything grand when it came to her own grey horns, but having none looked eerie and wrong. The stubs were rough and coarse, and the more Vuorruuzuu looked at them, the more they looked to be crudely sawed off. Getting closer, the intruding Drake began toying with large steel claws on his left hand. Attached like a fitted glove with hooked blades for three of his four fingers, they extended much further than a Drake's already deadly claws normally would. Those same innate claws were nevertheless nowhere to be seen. 'You take the egg, yes, that Onyx one there in your pouch, over to one of your hot kilns. Then you take whatever egg is already occupying a kiln, put it to the side, and correctly place the new one in its stead. And then I want you to start the incubation process, just like

you always do. It is actually that simple. So, I ask you again, and there will not be another time: Would you kindly place the egg of my Kin in a kiln?’

So he was indeed of Onyx. And his tone was more angry now, where the first two requests had been calm, albeit sinister.

Vuurruuzuu was unable to do much else than stare at the Dragon egg in her pouch. Her mouth was open but no words manifested. She wished that she hadn’t sent Illi away. The clutch sister might not like fighting but she was still trained for it and would know what to do. Vuurruuzuu didn’t have many other thoughts than her sister.

‘And could you kindly hurry up? The heat in here is unbearable.’

‘What- what will happen if I... If I re-refuse?’

The Onyx Drake was close enough now that Vuurruuzuu could see his face clearly. A crooked and wicked smile spread over the sharp snout. His left eye was closed and a big, scale-less scar spread across it. The right one was pink and Vuurruuzuu had never seen eye colour so deep, almost like a vibrant nerium flower in full bloom.

‘I admire your loyalty,’ the intruder said. ‘But it will also be your last act of support for your Kin. Or your last act for anyone else. If you instead choose to cooperate, I will let you live and you can leave once your job is done. But we would be happy to have you if you should desire to stay come that time.’

The Onyx Drake was calm again but his tone was sinister, telling Vuurruuzuu that she didn’t actually have much of a choice. Not now or in the proposed future.

The Broodcarer complied after some deliberation. She took a deep breath to get some life into her still frozen limbs, after which she turned and walked towards the kilns. Standing in the middle of the crescent shape, formed by the hot incubation kilns at the end of the Broodcarer’s cavern, she stared at each one. Each one containing their own yellow scaled egg. Topaz eggs so close to the final phase of hatching. The choice was not easier now than before with the intruder having revealed himself.

‘You are taking your time?’ was said with a certain impatience slight hidden.

‘It is... difficult,’ the Broodcarer responded with the grace of her station. ‘I can not decide which of them does not deserve their chance at the flame of life. Some would suggest that it is not fair. That no one should ask a Broodcarer this. That it is not our lot.’

‘Nevertheless,’ the Onyx drake continued, studying the blades of his steel claws, ‘that is what I am asking. And quickly, time is of the essence.’

Choosing not to respond, the Broodcarer gently lifted the Onyx egg out of her pouch and placed it on one of the shelves of the middle kilns. She opened the kiln’s hatch to roll the Topaz egg out on its support, accidentally burning her already bandaged fingers again in doing so. The Broodcarer grimaced but didn’t make a sound and continued to tenderly lift the scorching hot Topaz egg out using just her now extended, grey claws. The Broodcarer immediately started to feel the warmth spread as she secured the egg in the tabard’s pouch, even through the heat resistant design.

‘It will be alright, Fridyae,’ Vuurruuzuu gently whispered to the egg nestling safely in the tabard.

‘What was that?’ the Onyx intruder asked.

‘Nothing, I was just...’

‘Have you already decided on names? It was my understanding that Broodcarers did not do so until a whelping lives?’

Vuurruuzuu did not answer the intruder’s questions.

‘What did you name it?’

‘...Fridyaethuu,’ Vuorruuzuu answered quietly this time. ‘Or Fridyaethiim if the whelping would have turned out to be male.’ The Broodcarer turned her back on the Onyx Drake and began the new incubation process with the last of his black egg.

“Freedom.” That is a beautiful name.’

Once again, Vuorruuzuu didn’t say anything right away.

‘Another Wyyrm was the request?’ the Broodcarer asked as she found more wood to feed the kiln.

‘You know, there is still a chance that your precious little, yellow whelping can hatch and experience their freedom.’

Silence followed.

‘All you have to do is renounce your treacherous scales. Agree to serve us Onyx, and you can continue as Broodcarer and watch all of your whelpings grow to become mighty warriors destined for great battles or intellectual Learners forwarding all the Dragonkins. We need talented Broodcarers like you.’

‘How do you know that I am any good?’

‘I would not think for a Broodcarer to name any of their eggs before they hatch without having a good feeling about their calling. It would be much too painful when they hatched without the flame of life.’

‘How can I trust a Drake of which I do not know the name?’ The Broodcarer changed the subject to stall for time. She had decided to make her escape and needed a plan. So far luck had eluded her.

‘I guess you are right,’ the dark grey scaled Drake answered with another wicked smile that Vuorruuzuu guessed was a signature of his. ‘Xuneaaden of Onyx. Pleased to make your acquaintance.’

“Ambition”,’ Vuorruuzuu repeated with an attempt at the same sinister manner that her counterpart talked.

‘Is there a problem with my name?’

‘No... it seems rather... fitting.’

The following silence was broken only by the slight sounds of grinding metal as Xuneaaden moved his steel bladed fingers. That is, until he spoke.

‘May I ask your age?’

Vuorruuzuu was a little struck by surprise, but even if not, the Broodcarer wouldn’t have answered such a tactless question.

‘Have you ever experienced a Dragon Fight? Or life outside the safety of Wingrest?’ he continued.

Vuorruuzuu had a bad feeling about where Xuneaaden was going but also felt that she needed to respond.

‘I have been on plenty of visits to the other Roosts plenty of times. I have even been to The Settler on multiple occasions-’

‘I said *safety* of Wingrest. And I’m guessing you have not experienced any Dragon Fights either?’

‘No,’ Vuorruuzuu answered, still not revealing her age.

‘I thought as much. You look young for a Broodcarer, I would not guess more than sixty summers.’

Good guess... Vuorruuzuu was annoyed but she wasn’t going to give the Onyx Dragon the satisfaction. Instead she kept quiet while he kept going.

‘I bet you and all of the others of the mighty Topaz Kin does not know the slightest thing about the last time the Dragons fought-’

'Quite the opposite,' the Broodcarer interjected. 'We know everything about The Great Fight because it is necessary for us to keep the peace and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Having all of the Dragonkins fight in a bloody war is only good for our old enemies. No, it is much more preferable to have a lasting peace even if it means having one dominant Kin for the last few hundred years.'

'I will kindly ask you to stop right there, Broodcarer. Firstly, there was nothing *great* about the last Fight,' Xuneaaden sneered but without moving closer to Vuorruuzuu and the incubation kilns.

'Of course not "Great" in terms of something "good" but because of the spectacle. A bloody, terrible spectacle, yes, but a Dragon Fight had never been seen with all six Kins engaged before, so-'

'I must kindly ask you to stop once again!' The Onyx intruder's volume was much louder than a sneer this time. 'You do not find it curious how your Topaz Kin achieved to seize the great Wingrest, with all of its power, within a single fight just by swooping down from little Highroost?'

Vuorruuzuu couldn't help but put on a puzzled face.

'I, uh... it- is that what this is about? It is not uncommon for Dragonkins to take advantage of a Fight breaking out and seize a bigger Roost. The Diamond Kin did so as a result of the fight we now know as The Ruby Stand, where they gained control over Cloudlake. And the Sapphire Kin took advantage of The Ruby Fall and laid their claim to Skyreach, when your scales attacked the Ruby Kin at Wingrest, and-'

'Is that what Your Learners teach? "The Ruby Fall"? When the Ruby Dragonkin usurped Wingrest from us, it was called "The Ruby Rise"... so why not "The Onyx Rise" or "The Onyx Reclaim" when we took back what was rightfully ours?' Xuneaaden protested.

Vuorruuzuu didn't have an answer but continued where she left off.

'But the Roosts have almost always been the targets for our Fights. The only times when that wasn't the case were Your Onyx Offensives twenty years after The Ruby Fall or The Dry Wars of Cloudlake in the years 286-288 AS, and-'

'The Onyx Offensives were a necessary evil to defend Wingrest when we finally regained it. It was not any different than what You Topaz have been doing.'

'*You* deemed it necessary. We have been keeping the peace through diplomacy.' Xuneaaden scoffed at the Broodcarer.

'We have avoided starting any wars since we fought the Emeralds for Skyreach during The Twin Fights of 229 AS,' she continued. 'In fact, after The Savant died, the longest time of peace was the mere thirty-nine years amid The Twin Fights and The Ruby Stand. And we Dragons have now lived in agreement for almost two hundred years since The Great Fight with the Topaz Kin at Wingrest!'

'Kindly stop your golden scaled history lesson,' Xuneaaden interrupted again. This time he moved closer to Vuorruuzuu, more agitated now. 'I agree that the conquering and relinquishing of Dragon Roosts is to be expected during Fights but there has not been *an agreement* from all of the Dragonkins since your "Great Fight".'

'Y-you do not look like someone who has experienced a Dragon Fight either,' Vuorruuzuu said in an attempt to change the subject. She still wasn't quite sure why but a terrible feeling, of where the conversation was headed, lingered. Maybe it was just the menacing demeanor of Onyx Drake and his hook bladed hand.

'No, I have not. About that you are quite right, my golden Broodcarer. I was born Roostless in the Ever Green Forests below. And I have never known the safety of being chained in the sky,' Xuneaaden responded. His mannerism was now calm again while

seemingly studying his claw blades. 'What I have experienced, on the other hand, is fighting off greedy Elves who see our eggs, and the scales on my body, as something that belongs to them!' The intruder clenched his bladed fist and looked directly at Vuorruuzuu with his one open eye.

Vuorruuzuu was caught in the gaze before putting on her best Broodcaring manners.

'Of course the fate of the Onyx Dragonkin was unfortunate-'

'There was NOTHING unfortunate about our fate!' Xuneaaden practically yelled, slicing the air beside him to the sound of a faint whisper.

'I am not sure that I follow?' the Broodcarer asked, trying to calm the situation.

'Then let me spell it out for you, my golden Broodcarer.' Vuorruuzuu did not like the Onyx Dragon's newfound nickname for her. 'How many times have you visited the other Dragon Roosts?' he proceeded to ask.

'I do not see how that is related to what we are-'

'And would you kindly tell me how many times you or any other Topaz Dragon have visited us that lived down below the Roosts?'

'That is different, we all thought...'

This time Vuorruuzuu stopped herself. 'You all thought we were gone?' Xuneaaden asked with his wicked smile as if prey had been caught in his trap.

Vuorruuzuu did not want to entertain the notions of the intruder. Instead of answering, she looked to the glistening, yellow egg laying safely in her tabard. Placing her hands on the scales sewn onto the pouch, Vuorruuzuu could feel the warmth of the still excruciatingly hot egg. For a second, a faint heartbeat felt noticeable but the Broodcarer also knew that it was much too soon.

'No, our "fate" was outlined without say from any Onyx,' Xuneaaden proclaimed, ignoring the hesitating Topaz Dragon. 'My point being; how exactly does a Kin such as yours manage to seize a Roost as great as Wingrest? Of course you Topaz had not engaged in a Dragon Fight for almost seventy years before your "Great Fight" but I doubt any significant enough Wyyrm force could have amounted on Highroost during that time. The difference in numbers of incubation kilns alone would make sure of that. And if you then add the landmasses required to support one such army, Highroost seems all the more unrealistic.'

'It was of my understanding that we had already gone over this. My Kin took advantage of a terrible situation, much like it was done during other terrible times.'

'Yes, you did say that. And I agree. But then again, it is easy to take advantage of a Dragon Fight one has orchestrated themselves.' Xuneaaden's smile turned to snarl.

The slit pupils of Vuorruuzuu both grew to spheres again as she processed what was being said.

'You are not saying...', Vuorruuzuu could hardly muster the words. 'Dragon Fights are, besides horrible and violent, extremely resource demanding... let me understand this correctly... are you saying that the biggest and bloodiest Fight of our history was planned down to the last detail? By us? That is simply preposterous and far fetched!'

'You are right,' Xuneaaden agreed, 'little evil compares to orchestrating the biggest war ever known to Dragons...' He held a small break as if he had rehearsed and recited what he was about to say hundreds of times. 'Except maybe planning the genocide of another Dragonkin?'

The Broodcarer, appalled by the insinuations, regained some composure to defend her scales.

'And what proof does a sneaking Drake have of such allegations?'

'Once again, you are right. This sneaking Drake does not have proof. However, do you not find it awfully convenient how it was a Topaz Consort, a supposedly *apolitical* Topaz Queen's Consort, who killed the very last Onyx Queen Mother? A misdeed that ignited Your "Great Fight" when we claimed our justice?'

Before the Broodcarer could respond, the Onyx Drake continued. 'Consorts are not supposed to take sides, their job is to forward the lineage of all Dragons, is it not, oh golden one, master of diplomacy? And killing a Queen's Consort is almost a crime as terrible as Queen Matricide, is it not? *Almost* as terrible...'

Now Vuorruuzuu didn't have anything to say.

'Is it not also *awfully* convenient,' Xuneaaden went on, his temper rising, 'how our Queen Daughter *also* died during the war, before she could even think about her Queen duties? And no one knows how it happened?'

'It was open war...' the Broodcarer objected. 'Casualties were to be expected on every side, not even those at the very top could be completely safe.' Vuorruuzuu knew it was a feeble excuse at best. A lifegiving Queen Mother and her progeny were not ones to merely kill, even during a Dragon Fight. They were simply far too important.

The Topaz Drake was hardly done making her flimsy argument when Xuneaaden came at her with a new flurry of accusations. His fiery temper now almost surpassed the fires of the incubation kilns, those fires that he seemed to despise so much.

'And do you know what was even more curious, my golden Broodcarer?' Xuneaaden loudly asked, not wanting an answer in return. 'When we tried to seek shelter and begin our new life amongst the trees below, it was *devastatingly* unlucky how *all* of the Roostless incubation kilns were *DESTROYED* during your "Great Fight." The Onyx Drake spoke almost as if he had experienced that horrible Dragon Fight himself, his breath so heavy that one could mistake him for fighting in it at this very moment. 'And remind me again, *WHO ATTACKED* the Emeralds in the forests when the fighting broke out higher up?'

Silence fell over the hatchery. Vuorruuzuu could almost feel Xuneaaden's anger. She decided it was best to not escalate further as she still needed more time to come up with an escape plan. To come up with anything, really. The only escape she could think of so far was out the windows, and that was only if Vuorruuzuu could somehow get rid of her intruder and miraculously learned how to use her wings. If she succeeded in doing both of those things, she could alert the large force of the Topaz Queen's Guard positioned at The Settler. Hopefully they would know what to do.

'I, uh... I- when...' Vuorruuzuu scrambled for words in order to ask the furious Onyx Drake something, anything. 'How... how did your Kin survive for nearly two hundred years with no Queen Mother, no Queen Daughter, and no incubation kilns?' the Broodcarer came up with in the end.

'I acknowledge that the plan from You golden scales was almost perfect,' Xuneaaden said as if answering a different question. His fury seemed to have been extinguished almost instantaneously as he paused to think. 'You nearly succeeded, and Duoossoodix, the last Wyyrm of the Onyx Kin, died when I was still a whelping. He survived The Topaz Treachery but death caught up to him in time, before we were ready to regain any semblance of our former glory.'

'But how does that answer my question?' the Broodcarer inquired.

'We of course had to adapt, and quickly at that. What would you think if I told you that my mother was neither a Queen MOTHER nor a Queen's Daughter?'

'Then who carried your egg?'

A new wicked smile spread across Xuneaaden's pale-onyx and slightly-red scaled face but he didn't say anything.

'You are either mad or delusional... or both!' the Broodcarer answered, rejecting Xuneaaden's facial expression and what it implied. 'Everyone knows that only the Queen Mothers are the lifegivers and able to produce eggs.'

'So what am I then? When I tell you that my mother is in fact also a Drake? A Drake just like you and I...'

Vuorruuzuu had trouble believing what was being said. She had to take a step backwards, unable to maintain her stoic Broodcarer's facade. *If what he is telling is true*, she thought. *No, it can not possibly be... can it?*

'But of course, without incubation kilns we also had to adapt in other ways. The Onyx is now a Kin without Wyrms, so our ways of war are too quite... different.' Xuneaaden had lifted his hook bladed claws and looked at Vuorruuzuu between the shining steel. He was clearly very pleased with her reaction to everything. 'And we had to get up to Wingrest somehow...'

'Is it these newfound ways of war that has prompted Famroieh to conspire against his Topaz Queen Mother?' the Broodcarer blurted out. 'When he should have stayed neutral as is required of a Queen's Consort?'

'I think it only to be fair; a Queen Mother for a Queen Mother,' Xuneaaden answered and followed with one of his wicked smiles.

'That was not what I was referring to-' Vuorruuzuu abruptly stopped her accusations as she realised what the Onyx Drake in front of her was saying. Suddenly fear took over her mind and body again.

Xuneaaden liked what he saw, his smile turning even wider.

'It looks like fortune is changing,' he calmly proclaimed.

Vuorruuzuu's first thoughts went to her sister, as the intruder essentially just declared that a new Dragon Fight was upon them. Sure, this was what Illi had trained for, and in combat she would most definitely do much better than Vuorruuzuu herself. But if the Topaz didn't win, no one would accept a Wyrm not wanting to fight. Maybe, if they're fast enough, and if Vuorruuzuu somehow got out of her current trouble, she and her could take this chance to leave the Dragon Roosts. Together. Vuorruuzuu liked the sound of that, and the thought calmed her fears a little. Suddenly she was filled with determination.

'Why are you telling me all of this?'

'I gave you the choice to stay as Broodcarer and you have yet to answer, so can I conclude that you refuse?' the countering question came after another silent pause. Xuneaaden's smile was gone.

Vuorruuzuu was silent. Her heart was pounding and her mind was racing around in a mix of everything Xuneaaden had told her and anticipation of what he would do next. She caressed the egg through her tabard's pouch. That seemed to calm her a little more. The heat hadn't left it yet, not even a little bit.

'I thought so,' Xuneaaden said. 'Your loyalty for your own kin is unwavering. I like that. I respect that.'

'But?'

'But as much as us Onyx needs good Broodcarers to help us along...' Xuneaaden hesitated his speak almost as for dramatic effect, 'we simply cannot have Dragons with questionable allegiances in our midst. And most certainly not one in such a valuable and critical position.'

‘You still did not say why you are telling me all of this, especially if you or your Kin can not find a use for me?’

‘My dear mother had a saying...’ Xuneaaden answered, pausing again. “*You believe but what you see, you receive but what you give.*” Before you die, I needed you to see. To see what your so highly regarded golden scales have done and what they are capable of. To see, so that you may know what awe and grandeur is coming Your way, and why justice is finally here.’ The dragon lowered his hornless head and leaned forward.

The Broodcarer’s first instinct was to use her grey-white wings to shield the hot egg nestling in her pouch, offering limited protection from her soon-to-be attacker. A small shriek stumbled over her lips.

‘Oh, get yourself together!’ a leaning Xuneaaden exclaimed. ‘You must have known where this was going, and the only defence you could come up with is this? But I am sorry that I have to kill you. Your reaction affirms to me what kind of Broodcarer you are and how invaluable you would have been for us. I already saw it as we spoke. There was a fire burning in your eyes...’

The two Dragons shared a long look as Xuneaaden bent his right knee while slowly sending the other leg slightly backwards. His left arm and steel claw stretched down towards the floor, the right one used for balance. He smiled again with his wickedness. And then he attacked.

It was as if pink, fading winds started to whirl around the intruder in the dry heat of the hatchery, and with a hushed whistle, he was gone. In the blink of an eye, the Onyx assassin appeared in a new pink whirl of winds behind the defenseless Topaz Dragon. His hooked steel claws still low.

Vuorruuzuu’s quick reflexes kicked in just as Xuneaaden’s blades came slicing, allowing her to dodge the deadly blow by essentially falling forward. The hooked steel whispered of death as they cut a small tear towards the edge of one of her webbed wings.

As she landed on the floor, one of the fastening straps on Vuorruuzuu’s tabard got loose. The still hot egg rolled out of her pouch to the clinking sounds of crystal grinding against the melted rock floor. Without thinking, the Broodcarer stumbled onto her strong, clawed toes and attempted to run after her whelping not yet living.

‘Oh, I am not so sure,’ the attacker declared. He leaped to the Topaz at his mercy and slashed into her left shoulder from below, the hooks ripping off the golden scales with ease.

An excruciating pain spread through what felt like Vuorruuzuu’s entire body. The Topaz Drake tumbled back onto the floor that she so desperately had tried to get up from. Fate would have it that her effort was rewarded, though. She had hit the floor right next to her precious egg, even if it was still much too hot to handle directly. But even as she laid there in an expanding pool of her own blood, dripping through the torn tabard, the Broodcarer felt a need to defend her brood. So Vuorruuzuu dragged herself closer, with groans and great difficulty. At least she now had Fridyaethuu close, able to protect her from whatever may come.

Xuneaaden smiled and looked at the deep, dark-red blood on two of the three blades adorning the left hand, his own claws still nowhere to be seen. The Onyx assassin looked almost mesmerised by the red streaks travelling down the steel.

‘You are surprisingly quick for someone who spends her days in this tiny cavern,’ he said. ‘Most other Drakes would already have succumbed by now. Do you by any chance prefer the winds over the fire?’

Vuorruuzuu didn't think she had the strength to answer, not that she wanted to. Instead, she frantically scouted her cavern for any kind of escape but the pain in her shoulder made it hard to focus. If she went for the door, after somehow losing her attacker, she didn't know who or what would greet her on the other side. Chances were that Suddynehm, another intruder, or someone else in league with the Onyx Dragonkin, would be waiting. But the only other way out of her hatchery was through the windows and into the starry night. And without working wings that would spell certain death once she arrived at the ground at incredible speed.

Vuorruuzuu groaned again as much for mental strain as for physical pain. There was really only one choice. She was dead either way. At least if she aimed for The Settler, her lifeless body would alert the Topaz Queen's Guard on the ground. Vuorruuzuu felt some comfort in knowing that she hadn't been completely useless in her final moments. But there was still one immediate problem, and he was slowly walking towards her.

'I have always hated the fires,' Xuneaaden casually stated, still enjoying the sight of his bloodied and hooked steel claws. 'Flames are simply too... burning. And even when my old Learners brought me tools for aid, it was impossible for me to make the fire rise, let alone manipulate it. I always, *a/ways*, ended up getting burned in the most unlikely places! And do you know what I also find amusing? I do not know how to manipulate the winds either. At least not in the ways all the clever Learners wanted. But as you can see, winds have other uses...' Xuneaaden turned his eye to his prey. And smiled. Again.

Amid her heavy breathing, Vuorruuzuu's pupils widened once again, a sudden idea taking shape in her mind. It was risky but doing nothing was to just accept certain death. Her assassin's eye and smile showed no signs of mercy, if they ever had. But would he be arrogant enough? Vuorruuzuu inched closer to her egg, as close as she could without inflicting burns on herself. And then she waited for her chance.

'I want to thank you,' Xuneaaden said and stopped. He leaned forward and assumed the same stance as earlier. 'For moving away from these damn kilns even if only a little. The heat is not as unbearable here, making killing you so much more pleasant now.' He and his wicked smile then disappeared again leaving only the faded pink winds in his wake, and the sound of a hushed whistle.

In another blink of the eye, the Onyx assassin appeared behind his prey just as earlier. The hooked blades stretched low in anticipation of the fatal wounds they were about to inflict.

This was her chance. As soon as the Onyx assassin disappeared, Vuorruuzuu grabbed her burning hot egg, turned around to face her reappearing attacker, and bashed it into his face. She slapped her other hand and claws simultaneously into the opposing side.

Xuneaaden, stunned by the fact that his prey had the nerve to fight back, never saw it coming. And by the time the Onyx Drake realised what was going on, his face was firmly stuck between strong Topaz claws and the unbearably hot egg. And it burned. It burned as if a thousand fires danced across the left side of his face. And it smelled that way too. An aroma of roasted meat over open fire filled the room accompanied by a slight sizzling sound. Xuneaaden could do nothing but scream.

But Vuorruuzuu simply kept on pressing. The screams told her to keep going and ignore the pain of her own hand also getting burned in the process.

In a desperate attempt to stop the searing pain, Xuneaaden tried to pry the Topaz away from his face. His success was minimal, however, as the long steel blades attached to his fingers didn't allow him a good enough hold on either of Vuorruuzuu's hands. Instead, Xuneaaden accidentally cut himself multiple times in his rising panic, wounding Vuorruuzuu

as well. Except, he didn't notice it himself as the pain from the hot egg overwhelmed anything else. Vuorruuzuu maintained her grip undeterred.

At least she did so until the severe burns on her own hand overpowered her determination. Vuorruuzuu let go of the egg and pushed the Onyx attacker towards her kilns. The Topaz egg dropped to the stone floor, clinking as it rolled away. Vuorruuzuu thought she heard a crack. A cracked egg spelled certain doom for an unborn whelping that wasn't ready. But between the stinging pains of her wounded shoulder, various new cuts, a pulsing, burned hand, where the burned bandages had fallen off, and the Onyx Drake by her kilns, Vuorruuzuu didn't have time to properly check the health of her egg. But for some reason she maintained hope for Fridyaethuu.

Xuneaaden still stood screaming, holding his bladed hand to his burned face. He tried to catch the falling, dark-grey scales that just before had taken up residence on his face.

Vuorruuzuu knew that she was still not out of trouble yet. If she jumped out the windows now, her Onyx attacker could simply catch up to her, and finish what he had started, once he regained enough composure. He was definitely fast enough.

The Topaz Drake took a couple of deep breaths in an attempt to focus through all the pain. In the end she filled up her lungs with the dry hatchery air, and with closed eyes extended her arms and flexed her grey-white wings. Then, with all her remaining force and focus, Vuorruuzuu released a heavy breath and pushed her wings together, creating a torrent of air swirling towards her screaming adversary.

Between the burning pain on his face, and the scales that simply would not stop falling off, Xuneaaden caught only a glimpse of Vuorruuzuu before he was seized by the fierce winds that she suddenly threw at him. And it wasn't just a simple push to get him away from his former prey. No, the torrent was continuous and strong enough to press Xuneaaden up against one of the kilns incubating his Kin's Onyx eggs.

The assassin barely had time to think before the blistering hot sensations started to manifest, this time not only on his face but basically his entire body. The steel blades attached to his left hand likewise started to get unbearably hot but Xuneaaden could not take them off. Nor could he move away. The will of the winds did not allow him to. Instead he turned to the only thing he could; he screamed again. He screamed louder as the same smell of roasted flesh slowly filled the hatchery again, only this time much more intense. And the Onyx Drake screamed even louder when his burning hot, dark grey scales started popping off his back and limbs to the sounds of fat-coated corn escaping a bonfire.

Having briefly lost consciousness, Vuorruuzuu found herself on her knees, leaning on her elbows, hardly able to breathe. She wasn't sure how long she was gone but the screams of her attacker had brought her back from the golden meadows of wherever she had been.

The Topaz Drake blinked water away from her eyes and was met by the gruesome sight of her actions. She looked with terror at the pinned Onyx Dragon still screaming from the side of the incubation kiln rapidly cooking him alive. This was her chance. If she waited much longer, the screams would most likely alert others like Xuneaaden if they hadn't already.

Except Vuorruuzuu was barely able to move herself. Her muscles were as sore as if she had climbed all the way to the peak of Skyreach and back down again on the same day. With shaking legs she slowly rose to her strong toes, making use of her large claws for much needed extra grip on the melted cavern floor.

When she finally regained the mental fortitude to focus on other things than simply standing up, Vuorruuzuu couldn't help but have a moment of disbelief of what she had

achieved. From failures past until now, her one truly successful work with the winds had only amounted to working the kilns, and that wasn't until after extensive research and practice. The continuous torrent of air still fixating the poor Onyx Dragon was something she had only ever seen the best Learners do. And her wings...

Vuurruuzuu was snapped back to the dire reality just as she looked to inspect her wings. Someone was rushing down the hallways, maybe having finally realised that the screams were not of Topaz origin.

The Broodcarer moved as quickly as her body allowed over to her egg lying on the floor. She let out a strained groan as she picked it up, still remarkably hot and burning. As Vuurruuzuu continued her hobble towards the windows, she attempted to secure the egg the best she could in the pouch of her now torn Broodcarer tabard.

The door opened up with force as Suddyinehm hastily entered the hatchery. When he saw the source of the screaming, the scales of his usually displeased face turned colour, making him easily mistaken for being of Diamond Kin. But before rushing to help the screaming Xuneaaden, the Queen's Guard caught the eyes of Vuurruuzuu sitting on the windowsill. The Broodcarer could see a hint of shame as she slowly shook her head without letting go of Suddyinehm's grey eyes. And before the Queen's Guard could surmount any protest, Vuurruuzuu tumbled backwards out of the windows and fell into the dead of night.

The great island of Wingrest was floating peacefully in sharp contrast to Vuurruuzuu's mind, as she plunged back-first towards the ground. Fear was once again gnawing at her thoughts making it extra hard to remember the newfound success with the winds and her own webbed wings.

The seconds were long as Vuurruuzuu fell through the night, replaying everything that had happened in her life and how it would all end so soon. She kept thinking of her sister and how she would fare without her when things were over, no matter the outcome of the impending Dragon Fight.

No, she needs me. Thinking of Illiqazii gave Vuurruuzu some clarity but falling backwards was not going to help anyone. Vuurruuzuu managed to turn around in the air with a toss of her body. Now her face would be the first thing to hit the ground. That is, unless her wings would work.

The nightly autumn air was cold enough as is and it was freezing with the speed that Vuurruuzuu had built up. She made sure that her hot egg was tightly secured and tried to remember what had just happened with her wings in the hatchery. She tried to remember *how*.

Here goes nothing, Vuurruuzuu thought and took another couple of deep breaths for focus. She stretched her arms and legs wide like she was told when she was a young whelping. And then she flexed her wings. The amazed Topaz Dragon didn't even have to think about it, her wings just flexed!

And they worked right away. Her fall was abruptly halted, much to Vuurruuzuu's surprise. The descent was suddenly much more workable but she still had to figure out how to maintain a stable glide.

Vuurruuzuu felt a small sting as the tear in her one wing expanded while catching the cold air but it didn't seem to have much impact on her abilities. Nevertheless, the sudden drastic usage had not been without pain and her wings were already sore where they connected to her body, all the way from her wrists to her ankles. But it was a good kind of pain. A pain of freedom that Vuurruuzuu never imagined was gonna be for her. The Topaz Dragon couldn't help but smile as she quickly got her gliding under control and the cool winds of the autumn night caressed her yellow scales.

Has it always been that easy? Vuorruuzuu couldn't help but wonder. Even the fins on her tail were flexed and made it so she could perfectly control her movement through the air, at least it felt that way. *I can't wait to show Illi what I can now do, when all of this is over!*

As she was gliding next to one of the giant chains that held Wingrest in place Vuorruuzuu remembered the direness of the situation. There would be no showing of any new abilities if she failed to alert others of the Topaz Kin sooner rather than later.

No Topaz Dragonriders were patrolling the night so Vuorruuzuu decided to stick to her original plan, aiming for The Settler and the Queen's Guard stationed there. Instinctively adjusting her arms, legs, and tail, Vuorruuzuu sped up her gliding speed towards the ground and did a spin around the giant chain she was following down. Almost crashing into it, though, Vuorruuzuu decided against doing any more stunts until she had done her part and her Kin hopefully had the situation under control.

Deep in thoughts about her next steps, after she had alerted the Queen's Guard, Vuorruuzuu didn't notice what started as a faint glimmer in the night's sky above her but quickly became much more. The Topaz Broodcarer didn't hear the slow, rhythmic wingbeat of the large Diamond scaled Wyyrm and Dragonrider closing in on her. What Vuorruuzuu did notice, however, was the excruciating pain as she was engulfed by the flames.

The tent was getting too cold so Geiioccaan wiped the ink off his claw and got up.

'Not like there is much to report anyway,' the Topaz Drake argued with himself as he threw some charcoal on the center brazier. With a simple gesture, the sleepy embers bursted up and started to eat away at the black once-wood.

Geiioccaan guessed he should be happy about being born during times of peace but life at The Settler could be so dreadfully dull despite the prestige of the station. Not even the Elves attacked anymore, in fact, they had given up long before Geiioccaan even hatched. It was nights like these that the Topaz Drake yearned for a Dragon Fight. Something that wasn't training where he could prove himself. Something where he could earn his right in the stories passed down to many new generations of whelpings. Something like the accolades of The Magnificent Muozsoavvazz but for what a Drake could accomplish. Maybe he could lead an impregnable defence of Wingrest, securing another hundred years of peace and the Topaz as inhabitants of the floating island. Or maybe he could heroically save the Queen Mother or Queen Daughter from an attacking Dragonkin at the cost of his own, young life. *That would certainly be enough for the Learners to have to include me,* Geiioccaan thought as the orange fire reflected in his crimson eyes. It definitely wasn't the first time those heroic deeds had occupied his imagination.

A rising ruckus started to form outside his tent, bringing him back from the visions of glory.

'CAPTAIN! CAPTAIN!' the shouts came from one of his officers. Geiioccaan put on his gold decorated helmet, secured it around his black horns, and hurried out of the tent entrance.

'Biiekkaiid, report!' was the first thing Geiioccaan ordered as he met the Queen's Guard that came running through the snow around The Settler. Biiekkaiid was apparently in such a hurry that he didn't have time to use the laboriously shoveled pathways.

'We do not know yet, Captain!' The answer came promptly from the flustered Drake holding a burning torch. 'There was a flame in the sky around halfway up the northern chain. From how it looked, it must have been from a Wyyrm, Captain. Is it one of ours?'

Geiioccaan had not been informed of any training or other Wyyrm exercises, especially not one taking place at such an unusual time. But the Topaz had been bolstering their forces for a long time amid intelligence of a possible Dragon Fight. Still, as the highest ranked officer stationed at The Settler, he should have been told of such activities from Wingrest, night or day.

As they reached the great, strange rock in the middle of the round valley, a loud *THUNK* accompanied by an almost equally loud cracking came from atop The Settler. It sounded as if someone had dropped and splintered a hollow tree trunk on its metallic, yet rocky surface.

'THE SETTLER! IT IS UNDER ATTACK!' another Queen's Guard yelled.

'Calm yourself, Doolaxeum!' Geiioccaan commanded. 'Let us assess the situation together.'

The Settler's side reflected cold rainbow colours in the moonlight as the Queen's Guard carefully climbed to the top of the awe-inspiring rock. The sight that met them was not a pleasant one; in the snow laid the charred remains of a Drake with only patches of burnt-golden scales remaining and broken bones sticking out of what were once limbs. Smoke rose from the charred corpse and a smell of cooked leather and burnt animal filled the snouts of the soldiers as they approached the body that had fallen from the night. It looked to be clutching something golden in what would have been the arms.

'Biiekkaiid, bring me whatever they are holding,' Geiioccaan ordered and offered to hold his torch.

'Ouch! It is hot!' Biiekkaiid exclaimed. He instead carefully tried to move a crispened arm to get a better look but he accidentally broke it off. The light cracks of charcoal breaking was not a sound that should be coming from any former living being.

The silence that followed was deafening as Geiioccaan and his soldiers examined the body closer. The removed arm had revealed the broken shell of a golden scaled Topaz Dragon egg still in its Broodcarer's pouch.