

# 1 | The Great Migration

A path of expletives followed a disturbance in the crowd of townsfolk as an unseen figure weaved her way through, ducking under elbows and hopping over tails. “Sorry, coming through, apologies!” chased after each bump and push, fading as quickly as it came, only to be followed up by another smaller intruder moments later.

“Tavra, hold on! I can’t keep up!” a little voice cried, dismayed. Ifri, youngest heir to the Fangrender family name, chased after her older sister, feeling the burn of glares at her back at the rude intrusion through the crowd.

Tavra, however, did not hold on – she continued slipping through the gathered people until she burst through into open air, cresting the hill the town had gathered on. Breathing hard, she turned to watch her sister stumble out of the crowd, nearly tripping over the last few people. The youth trotted the last few steps to her sister’s side before falling to her knees.

Ifri took the apologetically offered hand from her elder sister, pulling herself up to her feet after her breath returned to her. Tavra affectionately rubbed her hand over Ifri’s head, eliciting a squeak of protest from the youth of fourteen frosts.

“Stop! Stop! Why are we in a rush anyway? Father hasn’t even left home and he gives the speech!” the younger complained, batting at her sister’s hands.

Tavra looked excitedly at the dawn sky, glowing in ambers and pinks under the rising sun. “I wanted to be sure we were able to get on the hill’s crest – we will have the best view from up here and oftentimes it is taken by families after the sun has fully risen,” she explained, deciding internally that their position was well enough and settling down on the earth.

Ifri, having just stood up moments ago, wrinkled her nose and decided to look around instead, pacing the ever-tightening circle of space around the sisters.

“I don’t get why you’re so excited about the migration,” she muttered, rubbing sleep from one of her eyes as she continued to pace.

“I–” Tavra began to reply, before pausing and considering her words. “I just wanted to draw it. We have no depictions of the great migration,” she offered, unclipping a heavy leather bound volume from her belt. Ifri huffed, muttering something inaudible before finally sitting back down.

The journal rested heavy in Tavra’s hands, opening with a flourish of yellowed and rough pages of refined scribeweed. Both covers were made of thin pieces of finely-cut wood, protectively wrapped in expertly sculpted leather sleeves made to look like overlapping scales. All was bound together with thick threads looping through each page and the back spine, protectively sealed with a sap-like resin. All Tavra knew was that the finely crafted tome was exceptionally expensive, even for her family. It was her most prized possession.

Truthfully, Tavra wished to observe the migration for her own selfish desire – to see the great forest dragons lift from their hidden dens across the land and carry themselves northward in a

great cloud of wings. She wanted to sketch down every detail she could, immortalize it, so she could return to and relish the experience during darker times.

To her people, the others of the Kingdom of Vandell and, truly, across all Gren realms, the migration signaled the start of summer. It was the day where the horrid beasts of Yggrax, destroyer of the world and bringer of winter, are flushed out from their hiding places by the ancestors of Gren long past, forced to the colder northlands to hide until the snow fell and they could besiege the realms once more. It was a yearly cycle of life and death, good and evil.

Tavra postulated that the dragons migrated purely out of pursuit of their prey. As the world warmed, fresh shoots grew in the northern realms, offering much to feast on for thickettreaders and feral woodstriders. Each year, she would watch as they, too, moved northwards, following the abundance of food. Once the realms emptied of spare striders, the dragons knew to move. Those that stayed made do with the remaining creatures, or fell into strife with the ever-growing kingdoms.

To speak this, though – to spit in the face of her fellows' long-held beliefs, to imply that dragons were simply another beast of the wild – would shame her.

Flashes of memory from nearly a decade prior echoed behind her golden eyes. The glittering sky dragon escorting the wounded forest drake out of danger, avoiding harm to her kin. Its eyes as they stared into her own, echoing deep intelligence.

It ignited a fire in her heart. A passion.

Her parents listened to her clamor about dragons for years after in dismay and horror. She was sent in earnest to the local druids to learn more about the war between Yggrax and Yggorum. How the dragons were the conduits of the destroyer himself, an antithesis to her people, and the root of evil in the land. She could probably recite every story at this point, but nothing can shake the memory of those great orange eyes.

Altruism and compassion, clearly demonstrated in plain sight. Yet, it was ignored, explained away as enemy warriors escaping a lost battle. When she asked if a Vandellan huscarl would go out of their way to assist a lost finfolk in the middle of Suwebh – a different race in a foreign kingdom – she was told she was just ignorant.

It came to a head when she, age twelve, asked if she could study dragons. There were no scripts in the kingdom about them, she had said. Only religious texts, oral stories of pain and destruction, and the occasional guide on how to fight, kill, gut, and piece a slain dragon from the greatest of slayers.

“I can write about how they live!” she had offered, pleading. “How they choose their mates and nest, just like our knowledge about woodstriders. If we understood them, perhaps–”

“You will stop this nonsense at once,” her father had growled, his eyes hard and dark. “These words on your tongue are blasphemy and an insult to everything we stand for. Do not think I will

not hand you to the druids to live the rest of your time serving them just as any other that has fallen to the whispers of Yggrax.”

She shivered. From that day, she kept her passion a secret, although she was still considered tainted. No suitor had ever wanted her hand, not like she particularly cared for them, leaving her to remain at home for twenty-three frosts and counting.

Ifri was a far better daughter than her. Father made sure she knew it. She played with the other children of Airelheim in games of slaying dragons, saving damsels, and being heroes. She was already eager to meet the suitors father had begun to line up for her, each excited for the prospect of wedding into the Fangrender family. Tavra, instead, preferred to read, to write, to draw – to put on her hunting dress and practice her bow in the woods.

At least she was the best at archery in her year. It was the one source of begrudging pride her father let her see. That, and the journal that lay on her lap. Father had never showered Tavra in gifts quite like he had Ifri, but the crafted book cost more than many of her sisters’ gifts combined. She never quite understood why he had given her such a valuable item when he never showed much affection. He claimed it was to give her something to do, writing down her thoughts, instead of bothering him with them. She didn’t know if she believed that entirely.

Throughout the crinkling pages of her journal, Tavra had written every useful tidbit of information she thought may prove valuable to read back on later. Exceptionally warm or cold days and the dates, the size and frequency of woodstrider clutches, and the new births or deaths in Airelheim. Of course, she also wrote the story of her encounter with the dragon as a child, immortalizing it in quill ink and embellished with drawings from memory.

She filled pages with her thoughts on dragons and how they live and breathe. Entire page spreads featured vastly detailed drawings of all the dragon species known – including mythical ones, like the desert fire-breathers finfolk spoke of in hushed tones. Anything that her people would look down at her for, she wrote instead, treating the journal as a friend she could speak to without any limit or fear.

If it were ever read, she would likely be exiled.

Now, on the precipice of the first migration since she was given her journal, she wanted to capture the beauty of the event in charcoal and ink. With Ifri shifting impatiently alongside her, Tavra began sketching the great vista ahead of them, capturing the swooping hills in delicate strokes of black grit. Her sister watched in mild interest, unable to do much else to pass the time and not having anything to talk about.

The sun rose incrementally over the horizon, spilling more golden light over the misty pastures until the fog fully burnt off, revealing the intense hues of plant life. Trees and bushes swelled with leaves, bright green and blue, with some late blooming plants dotted with flowers of all colors.

Every year, villages and towns all across the kingdoms gather to watch the great migration. It was as if the collective populace held its breath, just waiting for the right moment to truly begin

the summer. The migration is easy to anticipate; it always occurs two days after the longest day of the year, without fail, when Rioath glows full in the night sky for the second time. Yet, it never feels like summer has truly begun until the dragons fly.

Tavra's reverie was interrupted by the sudden drop in the volume of chatter, transforming into a collection of murmurs. She looked up from her sketch, following the eyes of Ifri who already spotted the new arrival. Father, wearing his ceremonial garb, strode through a parting crowd to the highest point on the hill's crest, standing above all. A small podium sat at the peak, crafted out of carefully carved stone. Small images of flying dragons are carved into it; Tavra always found the craft rather beautiful. Most other depictions of dragons showed them dead.

Throwing his cloak over his shoulders, Father took to the podium, casting his gaze out upon the crowd. It lingered on his daughters for a moment as the two scrambled to their feet. The sunlight glinting off of his metal adornments was blinding. His horns were fully sheathed in a golden cover, etched with beautiful spiraling patterns. Rings encircled each finger, alternating in gold and silver with flecks of copper and bronze. A shining golden brooch beset with pearls clasped his decorative cloak around his neck, rivaled only by the heavy necklace decorated with real dragon teeth. He claimed each tooth was from a separate kill of his, and while he may not have been lying, Tavra was quite sure a few of them were from juveniles.

In all, his jewelry alone probably cost more than the entire settlement was able to scrape together in a year. In recent years, especially after Ifri's birth, he had found more excuses to wear them than not, flaunting his status as dragonslayer and ealdorman. It was clear, however, that he had not had his cloth fitted in a long time, as his distended belly pressed hard against his otherwise well-crafted shirt, and his cloak kept slipping off his too-thick shoulders.

Father raised his hands to the air, signaling the start of the ceremonial speech, as Airelheim's two druids stepped up to his side. Tavra noted Einel, the elder druid to her father's left, was eyeing his garb with a judgemental eye. The two had not been on good terms in later years and the tensions were starting to be felt.

Nonetheless, the crowd hushed, looking eagerly up to their leaders. Young children stared with eyes wide, grasping tightly to family; more wizened elders squinted into the light. While attendance was not mandatory, still, at least three-quarters of the town stood up on the hillside outside of its walls. It was quite a gathering to behold.

"Welcome, Airelheim, to the annual great migration! A beautiful day to have it, without a single cloud obscuring the skies," he called, to some excited cheers. "We've had some new faces hatched since the last migration, joining us for the first time. To those, and to the youth that have learned words in the past year, I greet you as your ealdorman – Arlek Fangrender."

Some more polite cheers rang out, along with obligatory clapping. Tavra half-listened to her father's speech, it being full of the same self-congratulatory nonsense as all other years. He introduced the new children born over the preceding year and spoke of those that passed, giving the lost a moment of silence to grieve.

“Those that have passed on now join us in spirit, following our great ancestors to continue the fight against the scourge of Yggrax! They purge the beasts from this land, sending them skyward and into the frozen north to suffer for the warm season,” he claimed, raising his fist to the raucous agreement from the more hotblooded youth in the crowd.

“Us that remain in living flesh are tasked with the mission to flush out and rid the land of the rest of these monsters that remain lurking in our shadow, even during our blessed days of growth. Let us pray that no beast touches our home lest they perish beneath the blades of our great men!” A roar of agreement followed this statement, accented with spears and pitchforks thrust into the air.

Tavra felt Ifri shift next to her, drawing her eyes to the younger sibling. She not-so-subtly glanced into the crowd then back at her father, over and over. Following the repeated gaze, Tavra picked out their mother standing in the crowd, frowning slightly. Furrows of concern marked her brow, as if something were on her mind, and her eyes appeared miles away.

It was not completely odd for Lady Fangrender, Irne, to not stand aside her partner on stage. She was never one for attention, and she still held a more prestigious position near the front of the crowd, who all stood an arm’s length away, giving her a respectfully cleared circle to stand within. Yet she still seemed unhappy in a way that was unlike her.

Ifri noticed Tavra joining her gaze and whispered to her, barely audible under the noisy crowd. “Does mother look unwell?”

“Concerned, more like,” Tavra replied, not wanting to worry her. However, she did look rather gaunt, as if she had no rest the previous night. “She may have just not slept well,” she offered to Ifri instead, who simply gave an uncertain ‘hmm’ in response.

Lady Irne offered no indication she noticed either of their stares, her eyes fixed on Arlek, but without seeing him. The sudden roar of the crowd and raised hands from her father quickly broke Tavra’s concentration on her mother, scattering her thoughts.

“And with those words and the blessing of Yggorum behind us, let us await the fleeing of the demons! Einel, Ketil, how long do you say we have?” Father concluded, his speech largely missed by both his children. The two druids by his side exchanged glances, then closed their eyes. A hush fell over the crowd.

The druids dropped softly to their knees, pressing a palm against the earth. The tension and excitement was thick in the air, with even Tavra finding herself holding her breath. Among those given Yggorum’s gift, it was claimed that dark energy exuding off a powerful beast like a forest drake could be felt in proximity. When they gather in a horde for the migration, it can be felt leagues away. Every year, the druids felt for the ‘vile magic’ the dragons shed, becoming more powerful as they grew near.

A moment later, the two druids turned to each other and whispered in hushed tones. Then, together, they turned to the crowd. Einel spoke, as the elder.

“The beasts will come before the sun hits its half peak!” He shouted to the crowd, his voice strong and carrying easily in the morning air despite his age. Applause and cheering underscored this announcement. Tavra turned towards the sun, squinting to peer at its position – it was just over a quarter of the way into the heavens.

Tavra turned to Ifri, who looked moderately frustrated at having to wait longer before leaving. “I’m going to speak to mother. Please do not move,” she pleaded, seeing the impatience. “I won’t be long.”

“Fine,” Ifri sighed, sinking to her knees once more to pluck at the trampled grasses.

Muttering a quick thank you, Tavra slid through the loud gathering towards where she saw Irne. It did not take her long to find her, speaking quietly to one of the druids who must have stepped off the stage. Tavra paused at the edge of the crowd, listening to the hushed conversation.

“It has been... fine, thank you,” Irne could be heard saying, crossing her arms and staring at the druid that Tavra deduced must be Ketil.

“Einell worries about you, Lady,” he insisted, hands folded politely in front of him. “You have grown thin in the latest years, do not think we haven’t noticed; the whispers of Yggorum speak to your ailing.”

Tavra hid her surprise smoothly, having decades of experience pressing down unwanted emotions as the ealdorman’s eldest. Yet, concern for her mother made her heart skip in her chest.

“These past winters have been leaner than most and I prefer to feed my youth than gorge myself, dear Ketil. Please worry not for my health and direct your attention to the youth who need it more than an old lady,” she insisted.

“The ealdorman grows rounder each year, my Lady – I beg your forgiveness for my blunt words, but lean years do not make a man grow larger while his lady starves. Your children are healthy and show no signs of leanness. It is you alone who seems to ail; your energy feels weaker. Please, do not fear coming for our aid if that is what you require.” The druid stepped closer, eyeing those around them for eavesdroppers. Tavra quickly turned herself away, blending into the crowd.

“That is enough, Ketil,” Lady Irne hissed, loud enough to turn a few heads. Ketil, sensing the attention, politely nodded and stepped away.

“I am at your service shall you ever request me, my Lady,” he said, giving a polite bow before stepping away. Irne pressed her fingers against her brows, sighing.

Tavra gave the scene a few moments to clear, and her own heart to calm down. Is mother truly ill? The druids are not usually incorrect in their judgment. Yet, why would Irne deny their aid?

Concerned, but hiding it under a practiced polite mask, Tavra stepped out of her spot in the periphery and stepped up to her mother. “Good day, Mother,” she greeted, dipping her snout politely.

Lady Irne’s frustrated face melted away into a soft smile at her daughter. “Good day, Tavra. Where is Ifri? I thought she left with you this morn.”

“Ah – I left her at the peak, to save my spot. I wanted to, uh, say hello while we await the migration,” she explained, wincing slightly at her poor excuse.

A flash of unreadable emotion crossed Irne’s face, but she gave no indication of catching Tavra’s concern. “I hope Ifri doesn’t get herself into any trouble. You know how that girl can be; she never stays still. Just like her sister!” she sighed, then chuckled softly. The jest brought a grin to Tavra’s face, but it quickly faded.

“Mother, are you well?” she asked, reaching out with a hand. “You look so tired and…”

Irne grasped Tavra’s hand and squeezed it. “Tavra, I am perfectly well. Your father kept me up late into the night rehearsing his usual speeches, even when I told him to shove a sack in it,” she explained, smiling reassuringly.

It still did not ease Tavra’s concern. She searched her mother’s face for any sign of illness, wishing she had the power of the druids to feel what they described.

“Do you promise?” she asked, knowing she sounded like she was still wet from the egg saying it. Yet in the face of her aging mother, seeing the lines around her eyes and mouth, the deep green stripes that were no longer quite as bold as they were before… it put a worry in her heart that could not be quelled with polite speech.

“I promise,” Irne replied, putting a hand on Tavra’s shoulder. “Please, it is a joyous day and we could see the beasts any moment. Go back to Ifri before she leaves her post.”

The dismissal was clear and Tavra nodded, giving a polite curtsy before heading back to Ifri. She made a note to keep an eye on her mother from here on, worry gnawing at her heart.

Ifri shot up once Tavra came into view. “So?” she asked, gesturing towards their mother. Tavra glanced back at her, then offered a helpless shrug.

“I do not know,” she said, sighing. “She claims to have been kept up by Father, but I don’t quite believe her.” She decided to keep the druid’s confrontation to herself. Ifri could barely be trusted to keep a secret in the best of times.

Yet, it still pained her to see her sister’s face fall.

“I hope that’s true,” she muttered, kicking at the ground. Tavra quietly agreed, settling back down on the ground with her journal placed across her lap. Ifri settled next to her, watching her draw in silence.

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“The beasts! They rise!” a voice called from somewhere in the crowd, causing an immediate chain reaction of others snapping to attention.

Tavra, having devolved to doodling repeating patterns in the margins of old entries, quickly turned to look, forgetting Ifri was leaning on her and nearly knocking her over.

One, two, four, five, eight, ten – one could not keep count as the southern sky quickly began to fill with the silhouettes of dragons. Tavra’s heart leapt, beating rapidly as she devoured the scene. The dragons flew in no particular formation, creating a massive cloud of teeth, claws, and wings. They flew so fast and so low that nearly the moment they were visible over the southern cliffs, they swarmed the sky above, painting the ground with their shadows.

A roar drew her attention to the east as a very distant dragon rose from the trees, beating its wings hard to rise from the canopy to join its brethren. It was not close enough to be of concern to Airelheim, but cheers and jests to the beast rang out regardless. A few profanities flew from those that grew a little too rowdy, but they were politely ignored.

The cloud of dragons consisted entirely of great forest dragons, glittering in various shades of green and orange-brown. Stripes, much like her own, broke their hide into patterns and each sported a crest of horns around their heads. Squinting hard enough let one see the larger plates that covered the sensitive undersides of each beast, shadowed by the sun above.

Even Ifri, having complained nearly the whole wait, was spellbound. Staring upwards, Tavra quickly began to sketch outlines of the beasts, jotting down the roughest of lines to capture details that might flee her mind in the moment. A small dragon flying in the shadow of its mother, another with a missing foot, and many with deep scars in their hides. Her peaceful charcoal vista was quickly overtaken by a flood of rough dragons, breaking up the blank sky.

The hard downstroke of each wing combined to cause large gusts on the ground, carrying the petrichor smell of the great dragons down to them. She wondered if they produced the scent themselves or if they simply smelled of the deep woods, shedding it as they flew.

As the crowd cheered, Ifri gaped, and Tavra drew, a deep bellow caught the attention of all in attendance. A massive dragon burst from the woods just outside of the Fangrender’s own estate behind the gathering, beating the air and rising to join the others. Cheers of joy quickly turned into gasps of fear as the reality of a dragon so nearby set in.

Tavra froze, watching the massive dragon soar low over the crowd. She swore she could almost touch it as it coasted effortlessly overhead. A few of her fellows dove to the ground, as if expecting an attack from above. The movement caught the dragon’s eye, a great golden orb that rolled to peer down at the curious gathering of two-leggers beneath it.

It scanned the crowd, gently banking to the left to get a better view. Some commands were called, Arlek himself stiffening and reaching for the ceremonial dagger hanging from his belt. Some young men scrambled, nearly tripping over themselves as they headed for the village’s store of weapons or their homes for their own, whichever was closer. Those that brought their weapons brandished them threateningly, never letting the beast leave their vision. Bronze spear



tips sparkled in the sun. Arrowheads extended past bows, nocked and ready to fly should the dragon even flinch.

As if unaware of the pandemonium it caused, or perhaps not caring, the beast simply coasted in a lazy circle, letting Tavra admire every detail of its form, frozen in both fear and awe.

Despite being huge, her rational mind supplied that it was very likely young, as it lacked the scars of some of the elders flying overhead. Yet, it featured some old wounds still, including a missing horn and an oddly-angled leg, as if once broken and healed wrong. Its eye scanning the crowd brushed over Tavra, much like a mindless dagger-tooth would ignore a beetle.

As quickly as it appeared, the great beast left, finishing its circuit and rising to join the others. It belted out another roar in greeting, deep enough to be felt in Tavra's bones, before melting into the great migration above.

The crowd remained silent for some time after that, even with the returning men carrying their sharpened spears and longbows. Readied weapons followed the dragon's path, unwavering. The last of the dragons crossed the horizons, vanishing and leaving the world in silence with just the lingering scent of wet earth.

For a handful of long, drawn out moments, silence reigned. No one dared speak. Then, only a few at a time, some dared to clap. When the uncomfortable applause threatened to peter out, a loud, overcompensatory clap broke into it, led by Arlek himself.

"What a heart-pounding migration!" he shouted, attempting to raise the crowd's spirits. "Yet we come out on top. Clearly we are too threatening for them to test, even when given the strength of numbers, eh? The beasts are gone and now, it is time for us to feast! Break out the stores of saltmeat and mead; we shall celebrate until dusk, then rise at dawn to a world without the stain of evil!"

A more heartfelt cheer rose at this, spears and bows lifted towards the emptied sky. The druids led the gathering back towards the heart of town, individuals peeling off to gather food for the great feast, including Arlek and a few men Tavra identified to be his huscarls. The Fangrender house itself brings the most expensive of cured meat for celebrations, the only splurge it shares with the town.

As the last few lingering children were ushered off by their mothers towards the square, Tavra stood staring off into the horizon. Ifri chased after their mother, calling a farewell into the wind.

*Why, she begged her mind, thinking back to her oldest memories, why is that dragon so familiar?*