



# AGE OF FANTASY

## HUMMING BIRD'S HEART



SHORT STORY

Hetatsa felt himself slipping. The leather bindings of his saddle had been cinched as tight as possible, but somehow his small frame was still thin enough to leave ample wiggle room.

He gripped the saddle hard with his clawed feet, determined not to fall. He had been training all his life for this. This grip would make him stiff for his next few aerial manoeuvres, but he didn't care. He needed to pass.

He flew into a figure eight, throwing his javelin at a target while clutching the saddle for balance. The javelin flew a little too far to the right.

Hetatsa cursed under his breath, pulling on the yellow fabric that connected his wrist to his weapon, retrieving it. He glanced back at the figure on the ground watching him.

It was the only person he needed to impress: the Frog-Mage. Atlahimatxa was his name. He was the only one that stood between Hetatsa and becoming a Dactyl Rider. It was a dream that Hetatsa has had since he was small...or at least *smaller*.

Hetatsa turned from the targets and decided to go for an aerial loop. He sped towards the sky and pitched backwards. He watched the world turn upside-down as time seemed to slow.

He caught a glimpse of the early morning sun over the East Sea; the colours of orange and purple looked like a painting across the sky. From this height, Hetatsa could see the sandy beach below sparkle like stars, and the jungle trees to the west seemed small enough to make him feel like a giant. This was why Hetatsa was born to fly.

Gripping underneath the saddle with his claws, he was able to defy gravity long enough to pull out of the loop safely. He smiled to himself, gaining confidence.

Now high in the air, he turned toward the target again. He gripped the reins in one hand and his javelin in the other. He breathed deep and fell into a nosedive.

Wind rushing in his ears, he poised the javelin to strike. His trajectory would allow him to pull up at the last second, throwing his weapon with the full force of his fall.

He yanked hard on the reins; his scaled skin drooped with the forces as he let his javelin fly. However, he did not see if his shot landed as his left foot slipped from its hold. The grip that allowed an upward momentum did not allow the opposite.

He felt his weight pull violently to the side. His hand, still wrapped in the reins, tipped the Dactyl into a spiral, sending them both tumbling into the coastal strand.

The beast squawked in frustration as they came to a halt. Hetatsa faced the sky, gasping for air. Covered in sand, his wrist already throbbing with pain.

Despite the pain, he didn't bother to get up. He hardly cared if he had broken every bone in his body. To him, nothing could match the pain of a broken dream.

He wasn't ready to face that.

So, he lay there for a long moment, waiting for the Frog-Mage's inevitable decision.

It would not be the first time he was denied this chance.

He had been born to fly; the Gecko Priests had predicted his fate when he was given his name, meaning Hummingbird. Yet, he had proved to be a runt, too small to ride.

He had embraced his fate, dreaming of the skies. Yet, as the years wore on, many had become convinced that the Priests had misread the omens of his birth.

So instead, he joined the ground warriors, practising when he could and hoping for the chance to one day prove himself. A dream that still seems just outside of his reach.

Footsteps in the sand interrupted his thoughts.

"Are you alright?" He heard Atlahimatxa say.

Spitting sand, Hetatsa responded. "Yes. I am fine."

A frog hand appeared in his view. Hetatsa took it and allowed his judge to help him up, and he met his deep wise eyes.

"Tell me. How do you feel about your display?" Atlahimatxa asked, taking a seat to appear more eye-level.

*You saw it; why don't you tell me?* He thought, embarrassed.

He decided to respond more respectfully. "I could have performed better. My balance was off going into the dive."

"Your movements are well practised. Your reflexes are sharp. You did as well as could be expected." Atlahimatxa glanced over at the target. Hetatsa followed his gaze.

Dead centre.

Hetatsa's heart quickened. "Wait, does this mean I passed?"

"No," Atlahimatxa replied, "You know the reason as well as I. The Dactyl is just too large for you to get a good hold as a rider. You should be gripping the sides of the beast, not its saddle."

"But how can you deny me the fate I was born for? I have practised for years and honed every skill; surely that is enough to—" Hetatsa pleaded, holding back emotion.

"Your fate remains as it ever was, Hetatsa. Even a Frog-Mage like myself cannot change it. Your journey is merely a longer one."

"Then tell me, how long will it be? What must I do?"

"Things are not so simple. Fate is not the destination but the journey as well, and I cannot deny you it." Atlahimatxa smiled and stood up. "Your fellows are gathering supplies for patrol. Aid them."

Hetatsa bowed. He was unsurprised by the news. He had heard a few days ago that a host of Deep-Sea Elves were spotted in the nearby ocean. Few doubted that they had come to these distant waters in pursuit of some terrible purpose.

Since then, he had seen many of his friends go out to monitor the waterways to ensure the safety of Tixal.

Atlahimatxa took the reins from him and led the Dactyl to some nearby stables, leaving Hetatsa to dust himself off and meet back up with his group.

Hetatsa hurried, frustrated as he was; he didn't want to be alone with his thoughts. Luckily, he was used to disappointment, and his friends weren't too far off.

The path led to a small clearing with about ten other Geckos, all unloading a large Triceratops of shields, javelins, meat, and other supplies, carried in heavy saddle bags.

A cliffside stands between their current position and the village. The Triceratops could go around the cliff and make it to the village, but taking the supplies straight over on foot was much faster.

He stepped into the clearing, immediately recognising a few of the Geckos.

"Our little hummingbird returns! How did it go? Did you manage to climb up all by yourself this time?" A familiar Gecko greeted Hetatsa as the Triceratops lumbered past.

"Lanaqi, please." Hetatsa replied as he tried to keep his attention on attaching supplies to packs.

"Oh, come on!" Lanaqi said. "Surely if you hit a tree again, we want to know about it!"

A couple of other Geckos looked up, smirking amusedly.

A scared Gecko leaned out from the riding platform above. "Everything ok down here?"

Hetatsa didn't recognise the Gecko, but he looked to be the leader of his band. There were four other Geckos that he didn't know either, which he assumed must be other Dactyl Riders set to leave today.

He was grateful for the interruption, but his heart sank knowing he might have overheard about his last failure.

"Wonderful! In fact, we just got the last of the packs loaded." Lanaqi responded, even though Hetatsa was still struggling with a strap on his.

The scarred Gecko jumped from the Triceratops, glancing at Hetatsa. "Very well, let's go."

The Gecko riders filtered back onto the path in single file, Hetatsa bringing up the rear as he finally affixed the strap and fell in line.

Hetatsa had hoped for a silent journey, but as their trek continued upward and the distance between the two units grew, it seemed to give Lanaqi permission to speak again.

"Ah, looks like the other group is getting ahead of us. You know, we might even be there already if we didn't have Hetatsa slowing us down."

Hetatsa quickened his steps. He had to run in order to keep up with the other Geckos.

He would be sweating if he wasn't cold-blooded.

"Last one back has to clean out the Dactyl pens alone!" Lanaqi called out, already gaining a lead.

"Wait!" Hetatsa called out, heaving as they crested the hill. The sun was now a little higher in the sky. "Wait!"

Hetatsa tried desperately to match their pace, but the pack was way too heavy. The sound of laughter drowned out as they got further and further ahead.

Gasping heavily, he felt like he was drowning in the humid air. He had to stop and catch his breath.

He veered off the path to lean against a tree, slowing his breathing, then hitting the smooth bark out of frustration.

To his left, the edge of the cliff fell into the bay. The vast blue skies seemed to mock his prison. He walked closer to the edge.

The view was incredible from here. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and he could feel the light ocean spray splashing against the rocks below.

Hetatsa paused at the edge and raised his arms, feeling the updraft from the cliffside and pretending in his mind that he was flying over the bay. There is so much freedom up here. It felt so close, and yet, still so far out of reach.

"Squawk!" A noise came from a little way down the cliff. Hetatsa dropped his hands and looked at the direction it came from. He almost missed it through the noise of the wind.

He dropped to his belly and looked over the edge, scanning for the noise.

Then he saw it. Below the ledge was a Dactyl struggling within a mass of roots.

"Squawk!" Hetatsa could hear the desperation this time.

He jumped to his feet and ran down the edge until he stood right above it. Seeing him, the Dactyl's squawking became more frantic, either from panic or sensing it was getting help; Hetatsa couldn't tell. From this viewpoint, though, the Dactyl looked small.

*A Ripjaw breed.* Hetatsa thought, noticing its more slender, agile form. Even for a Ripjawdactyl, though, it appeared.

Leaning in to get a closer look, Hetatsa could see that it was fully grown but smaller than most other Ripjawdactyls; most larger ones would have been able to struggle itself free.

"I guess you're a runt like me..." Hetatsa said, pausing. "Don't worry; I will get you out of this."

Hetatsa looked around briefly for a mother or flock. Seeing nothing, he pulled a javelin from his pack and jammed the tip under a rock and pinned the other side against a tree. He then tied the yellow ribbon to his pack and tugged on it, testing its integrity.

Satisfied, he leaned out backwards over the edge and began to rappel. It was a good thing he wasn't afraid of heights.

Lowering himself down to its eye level, Hetatsa tied off the excess ribbon and searched for handholds to move himself closer.

"Ok, I am coming to help you. You'll need to calm down." Hetatsa said, calmly, holding his hand out reassuringly.

With the Dactyl taking a second to breathe, Hetatsa manoeuvred underneath its clawed feet, which were sticking upwards at an odd angle. He reached out and began pulling at the roots.

Dirt and rocks tumbled loose and fell hundreds of feet to the crashing waves. The jagged rocks below break the surface like hungry teeth.

Feeling the rooted grasp around it loosen, the Dactyl struggled with renewed vigour, talons flailing.

"No, wait, hold on!" Hetatsa said, trying to back up.

Then one of its claws nicked the ribbon.

Hetatsa swore again. He knew he should have left his pack behind. The added weight ripped the rest of the ribbon clean through, giving him a moment of weightlessness.

He kicked off the stone wall, grabbing both Dactyl and roots; his feet swung freely beneath him. The added weight didn't help here either. The roots creaked and snapped.

"Squawk!" The Dactyl bellowed, now out of surprise. Both it and Hetatsa break free of the roots and go into a freefall.

They tumble end over end, struggling to right themselves, Hetatsa desperate to not let go.

With his stomach in his mouth, Hetatsa watched the ocean and rocks rising to meet them. Then, his training took over.

Grabbing the creature's shoulder, he swung himself onto its back and gripped it hard with his legs. He felt for the excess ribbon still attached to his pack and hooked it into the Dactyl's mouth, directing it into a nosedive to straighten out.

Wind rushed in his ears. With the ocean mere feet below, he yanked hard at the makeshift reins, feeling the familiar force of gravity pull at his skin as the Dactyl dutifully spread its wings.

Hetatsa closed his eyes and braced for impact.

After a moment, however, all he heard was the soft spray of the ocean and the soft beat of the Dactyl's wings. He opened his eyes and found themselves soaring just a few feet parallel to the ocean.

"We did it." Hetatsa said. "Ha! We did it!"

"Squawk!" was the response.

Adrenaline rushing through Hetatsa's body, he directed the Dactyl back towards the beach. Landing softly on the sand, he jumped off and pumped his fists into the air.

"That was amazing!" He said, addressing the Dactyl. "Let's get that ribbon out."

He moved to remove it.

"Indeed, you were quite impressive, little Hummingbird."

Hetatsa turned to see the Frog-Mage behind him.

"Atlahimatxa, why are you here?" Hetatsa said, still catching his breath.

"I am merely where I have always been fated to be," the Frog-Mage said with a nod, "It is exactly as I remember it, on the day I told the Priests your name."

Hetatsa stood in stunned silence. He had thought the Priests had merely read omens, that some mistake could have been made. But Atlahimatxa had known all along.

Atlahimatxa nodded, looking at the small Dactyl. "Your new companion is quite fond of you. You will get along well."

Hetatsa looked at the Dactyl. He had pulled the ribbon from its mouth; it should be free to fly off. Instead, it stayed put.

Hetatsa reached out a hand to its horned muzzle. The Dactyl pressed against his hand, accepting the touch.

"A runt. Its flock has abandoned it; they do not share our foresight, it seems." Atlahimatxa continued.

"You think it wants to stay with...me?" Hetatsa said. He couldn't believe it.

Atlahimatxa looked over Hetatsa at the village in the distance. "We have a few more minutes. Perhaps you would like to make another attempt?" He looked back at Hetatsa, his eyes displaying childlike wonder.

"I don't understand..." Hetatsa looked at the Frog-Mage.

"It takes time for a Rider to get to understand his mount; even fate does not spare us the need for practice. Show me what you can do with the creature you were born to ride." Atlahimatxa turned and walked back to the practice area.

Hetatsa stood stunned for a second before shaking it off and jogging to catch up. The Dactyl behind him rose into the air and followed close behind.

Atlahimatxa took his regular position to the side, waiting patiently. Hetatsa pulled off his pack, pulling out the saddle to affix to the Dactyl, and then a shield and javelin to affix to himself. He would have to retrieve the one at the cliff later.

He passed his hand down the leathery neck of the Dactyl, rounding to mount the saddle. It seemed timid but willing.

"Ready when you are." Atlahimatxa said.

Hetatsa nodded, clicked his tongue, and whipped the reins. The Dactyl spread its wings and shot into the air.

Hetatsa attempted some simple passes first: a side bank, a hard stop, and a slow spin. Already, it felt entirely different, as he felt much faster on the smaller steed, yet incredibly more secure. He felt the beast's body beneath him as an extension of his own as they quickly learnt each other's movements.

Daring to go harder, he pushed the Dactyl into a tactical pitch, moving low to the ground, then turning straight up. Turning that into a square loop, they both soared with ease.

Hetatsa couldn't help but laugh with glee. If what he felt before was freedom, this...was much more.

He turned his attention to the target far below him, gripping his javelin to his side.

"Let's do this again." He whispered to the Dactyl and pitched again into a nosedive.

He didn't have to look to know he hit a bullseye.

A soft clap came from Atlahimatxa as Hetatsa landed to meet him.

"Most well done, Hetatsa! You have worked hard to earn the name that I gave you all those years ago. It was a long wait, but your patience has paid off."

"Thank you!" Hetatsa said, resisting giving him a hug. Instead, he embraced his Dactyl.

"Now, it is your turn to bestow a name." Atlahimatxa insisted. "What will you call your companion?"

Hetatsa looked at the Dactyl; he hadn't even thought about it. "I don't... I don't know yet."

"It will come to you. Unfortunately, we are in a bit of a rush." Atlahimatxa walked over to Hetatsa's pack that was left on the ground, picking it up.

He reached in and pulled out a wrapped slab of meat. The Dactyl turned his full attention to it. Atlahimatxa unwrapped it and flung it upwards. The Dactyl happily snapped it out of the air and swallowed it whole.

"Do not concern yourself with the pack. You are needed elsewhere."

Hetatsa turned to the ocean to the south. He had missed it while doing the test. A large group of Dactyl Riders were already disappearing over the horizon.

He turned to Atlahimatxa again. "You mean I should join the Riders? Now?"

"I do not think you need the gift of prophecy to know the answer to that." He said with a smirk, already on the path back to the village.

Hetatsa didn't wait another second. Clicking his tongue, they were back in the air and soaring across the bay.

To his right, he looked back at the cliffs where he had freed his new friend. Just above it he saw a group of Geckos walking back. They were looking up at him.

He recognised Lanaqi in the distance. He would have loved to see the look on his old companion's face. However, never having to see his face again would be an even better reward.

Hetatsa lowered his head and picked up speed.

By the time he arrived, the fight had already begun.

Dozens of Deep-Sea Elves were mounted on War-Sharks in the ocean below, shooting nets or harpoons at the flying Dactyls who got close. In the middle of the small army, a Giant War Turtle swam with a large harpoon launcher affixed to its shell as a drummer beat out an arcane rhythm which caused the Gecko's mind to ache and his vision to blur.

A few javelins seem to have already made their mark on the beast.

Hetatsa spotted a unit of Ripjaw Dactyls in the back and flew over to join them. He watched another unit's Dactyl further up get wrapped in a launched net and plummet into the water.

He had been in fights before, but never on the back of Dactyl. Fortunately, his excitement overwhelmed any fear he had.

The scarred Gecko turned as Hetatsa joined their formation.

"My apologies, but Atlahimatxa sent me to help. I am Hetatsa."

The Rider looked at Hetatsa quizzically, then nodded. "Yixaya. It seems Atlahimatxa's prophecies might turn the tide in this fight."

A few more Dactyls dove after the Giant War Turtle, their javelins poised, but were struck down by harpoon launchers before they could get close enough to throw.

Yixaya addressed the rest of his unit. "We seem to be having trouble getting to the heart of the problem."

He gestured to the War Turtle. "They are grouped too tightly together. If we take out the Turtle, however, they will be forced to regroup. That is when we will gain the upper hand."

Hetatsa watched a Deep-Sea Elf get speared with a javelin and dragged off their shark mount below.

"But I believe that Atlahimatxa may have given us the key to our victory here." Hetatsa looked back up, surprised to see Yixaya gesturing to him.

"Me?" Hetatsa said, the other Riders staring at him, possibly as sceptical as he was.

"Yes, we will use your size to our advantage, Hetatsa. Join me in the front of the formation." He pointed to three other Geckos. "We dive together with Hetatsa between us all. If we are lucky, he will be small enough to avoid their weapons. If any of us make it through as well, then that's a bonus. Understood?"

"Understood!" The united answer rang out, putting aside any reservations.

It was all happening so quickly, but Hetatsa had trained so long for this. He couldn't be more ready. His Dactyl, on the other hand, squawked nervously.

"It's alright, buddy, we got this. Let's show them what we can do." Hetatsa said, just loud enough for only his Dactyl to hear.

"Then on my mark!" Yixaya called. Each of the other Geckos moved around Hetatsa; one in back, one in front, and one on each side. "Dive!"

Each one of them pitched forward, careening to their shelled target below. Each surrounding Gecko opened their Dactyl's wings enough to shield him inside from any oncoming blow.

Hetatsa felt the familiar wind in his ears.

Then, one of the Geckos disappeared from his vision. Hetatsa couldn't see what happened to her. The others angled their fall to fill in the space.

Another one was shot out of formation. Hetatsa heard the twang of a net launcher just before impact. The remaining two repositioned again.

"Ready?" Hetatsa heard Yixaya call out.

Hetatsa didn't have a chance to respond.

"Now!" Yixaya and the last Gecko broke formation, banking towards the turtle's neck and letting their javelins fly.

Hetatsa, however, was aimed straight at the head.

Bullseye.

Yanking on his reins, Hetatsa pulled his Dactyl back up and into a loop, surveying the scene upside down.

The ocean below splashed a large wave as the titan came to an abrupt stop. The Deep-Sea Elves that were posted on top dove into the water before the body began to sink. The War-Shark Riders were already scattering from the sudden impact to their ranks.

Hetatsa pulled on his ribbon to retrieve his javelin, then banked into a figure eight, striking another Elf before the others disappeared beneath the surface.

Cheers rang out as the remaining Dactyl Riders flew down to collect the few swimming Geckos that unfortunately had their mounts shot out from under them.

"Excellent!" Hetatsa said, patting the neck of his own mount. "We did it!"

Hetatsa looked around, still in disbelief that his dream was finally true.

With their mounts exhausted, they all started flying back towards the village. Hetatsa's new unit slowly formed back together. Luckily, they had all survived, save one Dactyl. Two Geckos now riding one.

"Your Dactyl has a courageous heart, despite its small size." Yixaya said, flying in close. "What do you call him?"

Hetatsa looked at his friend, seeing so much of himself in the creature.

"Greatheart," he said with a smile.