

Dragonflame by Graham Edwards



There was little light in the heart of the storm. Vicious winds pummelled the dragons first this way then that. At first it was all too familiar - as wild and unpredictable as the storm they had ridden the previous day, but soon they realised that this was quite different. Despite the darkness, despite the randomness of the squall, there was a direction: not up, not down, but round.

The spinning was subtle at first, a gradual drawing of the dragons into a deep spiral of air. Then, all too swiftly, the spiral began to tighten. All around them, beneath the sound of the thunder, was an insistent hissing - the voice of the whirlwind. The tighter the spiral the deeper the hiss, until it had become a roar.

They flew entirely on trust. Glimpses of wings and lashing tail gave hope that the group remained together, but there was no real way to be sure. Curiously however, the more the tornado wound itself up the easier it became to keep track of each others' locations; they were literally forced together by the pressure of the air.

Fortune saw with relief that they had lost none of their number. Lighter clouds beckoned high above, and a colossal updraught was pressing them up towards the sanctuary they offered. The darkness had started to fold around them now, turning itself into a vast, open funnel filled with dust and debris. Rocks tumbled past blown like seeds on the wind; every gust pushed them higher; every wingbeat they made strove to force them back down.

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Fortune saw Volley's mouth moving but heard nothing. The big Natural was making better progress than any of them, battling his way down against the updraught. Signalling to the others as best he could Fortune tacked across to where Volley was, ducking into his slipstream and tucking his wings close, halving their surface area. Volley, he saw, was stood almost vertically in the rising air, nose tipped straight down towards the unseen ground so as to present the least resistance to the gale. As he followed suit so did the others, until they had formed a tower of dragons, each stood on the tail of the next. Thus they descended, and whether it was by using some trick of the eddies that Volley succeeded in punching through, or by sheer brute strength, they never knew.

The roar filled their heads as the funnel tightened around them. If anything the air grew slightly clearer and the pressure lowered as they dropped, make the going a little easier. Still, every wingbeat was torture, and the upward rain of dust and rocks was even more lethal than before. A sizeable boulder struck Velvet on the flank and she cried out in pain, a shriek rendered silent by the monstrous voice of the tornado. Cumber bumped clumsily against her as she gritted her teeth and forged ahead once more. Blood stained her side, flecking her tail, but the wound was slight.

The rotation of the funnel was all too apparent here in its throat. Fortune grew dizzy and eventually shut his eyes against the relentless spinning, opening them only occasionally to assess his position relative to Volley, who continued to carve his way heroically through the whirling debris. Closing his eyes brought him a strange peace in which he heard echoes of the prayers which had carried him this far.

A glance back, a brief concession to vision, revealed a brightening in the clouds overhead. The light seemed to be pursuing them into the depths. Ahead, all was black. Yet Fortune knew where they were - he knew exactly.

A shower of pebbles flailed against his breast then, suddenly, the air cleared. Everything else - the spinning, the roaring - continued unabated but suddenly there was no more debris. There was something in the blackness too, far below them: a round dot like a bright pupil in a vast, dark eye. It

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shone blue, staring up at them, challenging them to approach. The funnel gave a lurch to the side as though some mighty paw had swiped it from its path, then it shuddered and settled again, spinning yet faster.

The eye grew wide, its edge a blurred halo of residual dust, trapped between the base of the tornado and the surface over which it now skated. The surface of the fire charm, the shield which until now had protected the Last Circle.

From his vantage point at the rim of the crater Wemp could see everything. He was still astonished that the mirror-dragons obeyed his command, that the close-knit group of which he had once been a tiny part was now turned to him, eager to obey. He felt at once whole and alone, integrated yet possessed of a terrible solitude. Is this how Oster felt? he wondered.

But there was no time for such reflection. Already the whirlwind was biting into the rock scarp to their right, cresting the rim and plunging into the crater itself. At any breath it would strike the shield and then ... but Wemp could not imagine what might happen then.

'The shelter of the Flame!' he cried, his voice hoarse and weak against the roar of the tornado. If he doubted the power of Fortune's words then the rest of the mirror-dragons did not, and it was with an awesome confidence that they struck out as one across the plain of blue fire.

Never before had their formation been held so tight. Wingtips slipped past each other with intricate grace. The steady surge and ebb of each dragon's body through the air was perfectly matched against that of his neighbour so that not a single wing's width of airspace was wasted; no sooner did this dragon's neck coil backwards ready for the next thrust than the vacuum it left was filled by a folding tail, a flattened membrane, an eager limb. Working like a single organism, the mirror-dragons of Ocea cut their way through the turbulence towards the centre of the crater, towards the Flame itself.

Their course took them perilously close to the tornado. At one point Wemp was convinced that they would be pulled apart by the brutal currents

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which lashed about its base. But at the last breath it held back, allowing them to pass safely through a narrow cleft of relatively still air. It fell behind them; now they moved smoothly between cloud and fire, while ahead was the blue-white fountain of the Flame. Positioned at the exact centre of the crater, on a level with the peak of the outer rim, it protruded from the flat sheet of fire like a swollen, infected wound. Here, near its point of origin, the shield was dull and malformed, pulsing with a steady throb which sent random waves of energy across its bloated skin. It looked as though dark shapes were trapped within it, struggling to release themselves.

Fire charm, thought Wemp. He was reminded of the Realm, that distant other-world which had once been the source of all fire charm. The thinnest of membranes had separated this world from the Realm; to see it a charmed dragon had only to know where to look. Yet this is like no charm I ever saw. It has ... evolved.

Indeed, everything about the Flame and its skirt of fire tasted evil, from its livid colour to the hideous lurching of its outer surface. Behind the brilliant light which was its mask, Wemp saw that there was nothing but total, overwhelming darkness.

And this is supposed to be a shelter?

Behind them there was a crash and a thin scratching sound, like a dragon scraping his claws across ice. Afraid that the tornado had turned in pursuit, Wemp looked back.

Far from following them, the tornado had in fact stopped dead. Its upper part still coiled and twisted but its root was now firmly embedded in the fire. Dust and smoke and a weird, insubstantial vapour lashed around the junction between storm and shield. The dark funnel lashed impatiently, trapped.

Energy began to be drawn from the Flame in series of resounding booms. Each pulse was like a thunderclap made visible, a swelling of the fire-shield which raced from the flame towards the tornado, a thumping sound like the footstep of a troll. Wemp realised that the tornado was in

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some way attacking the shield, that the Flame was focusing all its power on beating back the intruder. The plain of fire beneath them was now an ocean in torment, a storm-lashed sea of light and snapping, crackling charm. Yet at its centre the Flame itself seemed relatively calm and untroubled, the eye of the hurricane. The shelter.

As they raced for the clear air above the incandescent Flame, it occurred to Wemp that there might be one other place where the sky was safe enough for dragons to survive. He glanced back once more, this time looking up into the wider part of the tornado's funnel. Where there shapes moving in there, descending where all else was being ripped skywards? He could not be sure.

Good luck to you, Fortune, he mouthed soundlessly. Wherever you may be.

The tornado punched through the fire-shield. A dreadful, wailing rose from the ranks of Scarn's once-dragons. Gossamer saw several of them ripped to pieces by a huge swathe of fire which burst outwards from the point of impact. Their bodies fragmented, spilling dark liquid, then the fragments melted surrounded by a cloud of black, hissing vapour. Neighbouring creatures fled the source of the explosion, their bodies elongating and merging to form two flowing rivers of crimson flesh. The unnatural speed which these monstrous gestalts were able to achieve pulled them clear of the danger area, whereupon they fell apart again into individual entities - if that indeed was what they were and not simply mindless claws on the arm of the Flame.

The creatures which crawled clear of the maelstrom looked even less like dragons now. Their wings were limp and ragged and their eyes glowed a horrible blue. Most of their scales had peeled away to reveal sagging flesh and jutting bones. Claws had fused into horny outcroppings, useless for grasping.

The worst of it for Gossamer was the fact that despite these escalating deformities, most of the creatures still had faces, some of them

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recognisable. Many of them she had known all her life, but the very worst moment all came when one of the monstrosities flailed through the air a mere wing's width from her side. It looked at her with a blank, uncaring gaze. It was Quill, who had once stood next to Fortune on the council dais of Haven, and who had helped lead the rescue of the dragons of Aether's Cross.

'Why did you save them?!' Gossamer shrieked as what was left of Quill swooped past without even acknowledging her presence. 'Why did you bother, if this is what was to become of them all?' Tears came, floods of them, and she buried her head in her wings.

'Save your tears, dragon,' came a warm, comforting voice from immediately behind her. Her first thought, an electrifying one, was that it was her father, so kind and knowing was its tone. But as she turned she heard the metal in it and knew it was not. 'There is much to come which will grieve you more than what you have seen today.'

She turned away from the sight of the tornado's funnel tearing through the sheet of fire. She did not see the line of dragons which descended through the whirling column of air and spread out into the crater. She was quite unaware that Fortune was now with her in the Last Circle.

All she knew, as she looked around, was that her world had filled up with dazzling blue light, and that she was looking directly into the burning gaze of Scarn.

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