

Dragonstorm by Graham Edwards



Archan led them up through a blur of spirals and chambers until they were quite disorientated. Even Smoke, whose sense of direction was almost impossible to deceive, found herself growing uneasy as they took turn after turn, moving ever higher, flying up through the wide and shining vessels of the citadel towards the topmost corridors where once the basilisks had prowled. As they ascended the glossy interior became more and more filled with light until none of the basilisks' painstaking etchings and details could be discerned. The charm which permeated the entire structure grew more concentrated and Smoke felt the pain in her head grow more intense; she thought that soon she would be able to bear it no longer.

Just when she was beginning to despair, the ascending ramp over which they flew levelled out and they entered an expansive chamber filled with a blue, hazy glow: daylight, at last.

'We are near the very top of the citadel now,' proclaimed Archan. 'There to the side is the chamber I really want to show you - the chamber where some of your questions may be answered - but before you see that, I fancy you might enjoy the spectacle which the east window has to offer. Come.'

Obedient, for it seemed that they had no choice but to comply, the dragons followed Archan across the enormous, glowing space towards the source of the watery light. Here the air was filled with the scent and touch of spray and with the roar of the waterfall. To breathe was to drink a fine

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mist, a vapour soft and enriching and overflowing with magic. All was magic here, here at the citadel's crest.

The window formed itself from the blank wall before them like a dragon unfolding its wings. The magical, oval opening thus formed created a stunning effect, for it was as though the citadel itself had been peeled open to admit them on to its very threshold. The light swelled then retreated, leaving their eyes moist and tired, but they did not remain tired for long, so astonishing was the sight which met them as the clouds of vapour dropped away into the torrent, far, far below.

They were lined along the lip of a great, arching window cut into the side of a mighty tower of stone. But, impressive though it was, it was not this tower which captured their attentions - it was the view. Across a sea of mist, the whole upper battlements of the basilisk citadel were visible to them. This was a sight they had missed when first they had approached the fortress, for these high towers had been shrouded in the same clouds which had now fallen away; now it was laid out for them, and it was wondrous.

The towers - there were thirteen - leaped from the transparent fog as though striving to touch the sky itself, reaching up into the heavens like young dragons eager for their first flight. Each was exquisite as an icicle, sharp as a claw, sculpted and moulded into a filigree of light and beauty and sparkling with sunlight and magic. But that was not all, for beyond even the perfect, physical splendour of their marvellous forms, the towers danced.

Their motion was a constant rhythm, like the rush of the waves upon the shore or the stroke of a dragon's wing in flight. They grew and stretched, and sank and melted, constantly reforming, ever-changing, their shapes fickle and indeterminate as the power of some mighty charm moved them through the space which filled the air above the churning waterfall. Now tall and slight, now bunched and ready to surge skywards again, they clutched at the sky with gentle strength, every breath a new creation, every pulse witness to a unique and fragile structure, soon to be no more, never to be repeated.

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Long they had performed, the dancing towers, and the span of those aeons the dragons sensed now as they watched with open-mouthed wonder the marvel of their ceaseless motion, and of them all, it was Smoke who first realised the true direction of their movements.

'They are dancing through time,' she gasped. She turned to Archan. 'Aren't they? I'm right, aren't I?'

'Yes, dragon,' came the silky reply.<

And indeed Smoke was right, for the basilisks' skill was such that they had built these upper towers with a solidity which existed only in the physical world. Rigid in three dimensions, their structures were fluid in the realm of time so that to watch their dance was to see that apparent rigidity flowing endlessly back and forth to different parts of different histories of this restless world. It was not that they grew - they simply journeyed back to a time when they had been larger; they did not really become small and slender but merely travelled to an age when such would be their nature. Simply, merely: such concepts the creator basilisks might have used when conceiving and constructing this, their most artful of whims, but there was nothing simple or mere about the dancing towers to the watching dragons. They were nothing short of miraculous.

Velvet could not draw her eyes away from the sight. Each time one of the towers shrank down towards the mist she felt compelled to watch for just a little longer, so compulsive was the metre of their dance, to see what form it would take next. And when that compulsion was multiplied by thirteen the effect was akin to hypnotism. She fancied she saw bodies twisting in the writhing shapes of the towers, scales cut in the engraved patterns, dragon faces peering out from their crystalline flesh, and the anticipation that something might appear that she would actually recognise was overwhelming. She was entranced. As were they all.

But slowly the mists returned, cloaking the towers once more in their sleepy embrace and concealing their endless dance through time. A soft groan of infinite sadness floated out from where the dragons stood rapt, a groan which came as much from their souls as from their mouths, for this

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was a moment they might never again recapture. The loss was an ache the power of which none of them could have anticipated, and it was with strong and private griefs that they all turned away from the east window to see where Archan would lead them next.

The next chamber beckoned them with a rich, warm glow of its own, but somehow they all knew - even Thaw, who saw little now beyond the thrall of Archan herself - that compared to the dance it would seem squalid and uninteresting. It was in this way that they entered the Chamber of the World.

The space was round and domed and unsupported across its entire, prodigious span by any kind of column. The lower part, where curved wall rose vertically from intricately tiled floor, was encrusted with an elaborate mosaic of shimmering crystal; as the walls rose they merged into a ceiling which was quite black and decked with stars which might, for all the still-awestruck dragons knew, have been real. It seemed that here was another of the basilisks' many museums, and at its centre was a single exhibit: a massive, circular platform, half the height of an average dragon yet as wide as a small lake. And on it was the world.

Had he been there, Fortune - who had once perceived the world in a similar way - might have made sense of it more quickly than his friends, for here was the world peeled open and laid out like the skin of a fruit. Of them all it was Thaw, a dragon with a mind for mapping, who first realised what it was, and the realisation sent him leaping into the air, darting back and forth over the enormous, flower-like chart as he began slowly to make sense of its contours. Slowly the function of the thing dawned upon his companions and they too took tentatively to the air, hovering over the map and staring in wonder at the myriad shapes and continents laid out in miniature beneath them.

'It's like being a night dragon,' exclaimed Velvet, her voice swallowed without echo into the massive vault as she looked down upon mountains and forests and rivers like scratches in the soil. 'Like flying higher than a dragon could ever fly.'

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'Indeed,' agreed Archan. 'It is splendid, is it not?'

'It's fantastic!' enthused Thaw. 'And ... by my wings, it's moving!'

This secondary revelation was less surprising than it might have been, given the recent and still-vivid sight of the dancing towers, but it was an astonishing discovery nonetheless. The map was alive: as they watched the dragons saw weather patterns crawl over its flattened surface, saw storms collide far away in the Western Ocean, saw lightning crackle seemingly a thousand trees beneath them. And more, they saw the land itself moving.

The continents were bucking like restless beasts, trying to throw off skin which had held them trapped for aeons. What the dragons had suspected they now saw revealed as truth: the world was turning still, and in the process all the geography they had known was changing to something utterly new. Lands reformed themselves before their incredulous eyes, seas emptied, others filled, mountains burst through from deep underground. The world, reborn.

'Hard to find the place for which one searches, when all is changing,' mused Archan, and suddenly all their attentions were on her.

We were brought here so that we might complete our quest! thought Velvet ecstatically. We can trust her - she is going to show us the way!

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