

Stone & Sky by Graham Edwards



The tunnel exit was a microscopic perforation in a wall the size of the world. Like an insect peering out from the highest tower of a mighty palace, Jonah looked down ... and down ... and down.

A sheer grey cliff face dropped away into bottomless mist. Its immensity made it at first seem entirely flat, but as he looked markings became apparent: scratches and grooves; pockmarks and trailing strands of what looked like vegetation. Jonah turned his head slowly to the left, where he saw more of the same: an almost smooth surface extending into ... infinity. A perfectly flat plane inclined ten degrees from the vertical; such a cliff would be scaleable by an experienced mountaineer, that is, if a cliff was what it was.

But it is not a cliff, is it?

Nor was it. Geometrically perfect, marked off into regular blocks, each at least a mile across, it was not a cliff but a wall.

Nowhere in the depths of the abyss could he see any hint of the ground, nor was there any horizon visible behind the haze of the sky; this was all there was - this mighty wall of stone and the sky it bordered upon. Jonah could hear a thin, shrieking sound; the falling wind carried the noise down into the abyss, breaking it apart into meaningless splinters. He realised it was the sound of his own voice, screaming.

His arms and legs trembling with shock, he retreated several feet into the tunnel. Sweat poured from his face and chest, fluid he could well do without losing but he could do nothing about his body's reaction. The

screaming he managed to stop; the shaking proved less easy to control and for long minutes he simply crouched there, bent double with his forehead resting on the hard ground.

Slowly he regained a degree of command over his limbs and tentatively approached the tunnel lip once more. Prepared as he was, he was terrified all over again as he eased himself forward and gazed down into the abyss.

He had never understood the urge that took some men high up seemingly unscalable mountainsides with nothing but ropes and metal spikes and their wits to keep them from dashing themselves on the rocks below. But what lay below here? For all he knew, were he to fall from this ledge he might go on falling forever, accelerating until only the force of the air against his body prevented him from falling any faster, bouncing and careering off the cracks and ridges which marked off the miles in their hundreds, thousands, millions ...

'Stop it, Lightfoot!' he said out loud, his voice hoarse. He repeated the words in a whisper and ran a shaking hand through his sweat-soaked hair and looked again, this time to the right.

The sky was brighter on this side, and behind a thick curtain of cloud there was a circle of white, a glowing sun. Here too the wall ran away into the distance like the very rampart of heaven, except here it was more elaborately marked: a grid of indentations, ledges projecting forwards like huge mantel shelves, their upper surfaces glistening as though wet; several huge, gaping cracks. Further away, flat against the sun, something sprouted from the wall like a bizarre, geometric flower clinging to a cliff. To begin with it seemed a random mass of squares and slopes, but as he squinted into the brightness he began to make out repeating patterns. Its base was an assemblage of thick stanchions rising vertically from the slightly sloping, all-dominating wall. Once these reached an altitude that separated them sufficiently from the wall they fanned out into a series of broad, supporting buttresses. Resting on top of these, cantilevered out over the unimaginable drop, was a castle.

It was the windows that finally locked the scale of the thing into Jonah's mind. While the lower half of the edifice was unadorned and grimy with weathered trails, the upper parts were studded with relief, both in the form of projecting bastions and ports cut deep into its flanks; there were more than he could count, and it slowly dawned on him that the building was truly colossal. Mediaeval battlements graced its uppermost towers, yet one whole corner of the castle seemed more like a palisade from the American West, replete with wooden spikes and sorry-looking flags. In the vee formed where sloping wall met uprising castle was cradled a forest of tall, straight conifers; the red of their bark shone out strikingly.

Here was a long, straight stairway running up one angular side, joining two spear-like towers. Here was a complex mosaic of pipes and gutters, all of which converged at the apex of a long, black stain running down into the supporting buttresses (Jonah decided that the trails of dirt down the foundations were more likely the result of the castle's sewage disposal system than the weather). Near the outer edge, set into a mass of stone poised above a seemingly flimsy wooden substructure, was a concentrated pattern of circular windows. Jonah counted twelve or thirteen small apertures arranged symmetrically around a single, larger opening: a vantage point for some ceremony perhaps, or the sight for some mighty weapon.

Edge-lit and glorious, the castle presented itself to Jonah in the rich, low light of the afternoon sun. That it was the afternoon here came to Jonah suddenly as he observed the sun beginning to slide sideways behind the outermost edge of the castle. Extrapolating on this movement he judged that in no more than an hour it would move entirely behind the line of the great, sloping wall altogether, after which night would fall in this weird, sideways world. Just as the sun he knew followed the track of an invisible arch so it seemed did this new one, the only difference being that the horizon here was not horizontal but vertical, with the path of the guardian star consequently tipped on its side.

So it is not a horizon but a vertex, he mused, gazing avidly at the castle and all its festoon of detail. Parts of his mind - hidden, reptilian parts - were already beginning to balk at the impossibility of recent events. Soon he would begin to doubt his sanity, to believe that all this was the landscape of an epic dream, that somewhere close by his real, earthbound body was slowly drowning in the maelstrom that had sucked it down into the warm, eastern ocean. But for now it was enough just to watch, to look out into the minute detail of this vertiginous world and imagine, for a while at least, that this was really happening to him.

Jonah did not hear the soft pad of footsteps approaching him from behind, but he did hear the clunk of the painting box as it was set down on the lip of the tunnel.

'Annie!' he cried. He rolled on to his back, overjoyed.

She towered over him, the red and green of her uncouth garments aflame in the light of the sun. Her legs were set wide, her arms held away from her sides, her chest expanding visibly as she breathed in the rich, scented air. Her dark hair moved like a pennant in the wind. For an instant the sunlight was reflected from her eyes directly into his, dazzling him. He frowned, feeling curiously uneasy as he tried to locate the direction of her gaze. He could not, and as his clarity of vision returned he saw why.

Annie's pupils had gone. Her eyes were featureless, silver mirrors in which he could clearly see both the hard line of the stone from which the world-wall was made and the linear tapestry of the sky. She smiled a thin, inhuman smile and kicked him over the edge.

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