

Stormrise

The first droplets of rain began to land against the aging roof, creating a gentle clatter that echoed through the old fort. It was accompanied by the far less gentle howling of wind whipping through holes in the structure. The wind gave new direction to the rain, practically guiding it into the one spot where the roof had collapsed so that it could strike the marble floors inside and splatter into little bits that misted the structure's great room.

Shardaron stirred a little, pulled into a groggy wakefulness by the drop in temperature that accompanied the rain. The change didn't bother him thanks to his thick scales, but that didn't mean it was welcomed, particularly when it pulled him from the comfort of a pleasant dream.

He yawned and blinked a few times, the familiar view of the great room coming into focus. Its former glory had been burned away by the dragon years prior but the smooth floors and stone privacy were cozy to a dragon. The only real flaw was where the roof had collapsed as it allowed some of the elements access to the most comfortable room, though the tradeoff was that it offered an easy path to the outside world for anyone that could jump high enough or was graced with the gift of flight.

The black dragon stood and stretched, a few joints cracking pleasantly in the process. He yawned and looked around once more, debating whether to stay in the great room or move to one of the smaller side chambers. A sparkling where the opening in the roof was caught his attention and he realized the raindrops were glistening in the moonlight. Their pace was light but steady, and he made his way to the opening to peek out. Sometimes on a night like that, he could look out over the horizon to see the storm rolling over the plains.

For just a moment, the blue markings across his scales glistened in the moonlight, but then it disappeared, plunging him mostly into darkness yet again. He grumbled, then leaped up through the opening. The jump was enough to carry him up onto a corner of the roof and his claws dug in instinctively, locking him in place to avoid sliding.

As if on the cue, wind and a curtain of heavy rain slapped him the face. It was chilling and little droplets dotted across his scales in an instant in the same fashion they did on a window. His wings jerked from the force and he even slid a half inch, leaving a little claw scratch in his wake. The Weyan pendant dangling from his horn rocked and bumped his neck, making a faint crackling sound.

Shardaron tilted his head up to check the sky, the moon was close to the horizon and within moments the dark storm clouds circled him and blocked it from view.

"Just my luck. Missed the view," he grumbled, shaking water from his body and carefully twisting to return to his hole. At least it would be comfortable back inside where he could sleep in relative comfort until the storm passed.

He reached the edge and peeked down, judging the distance before he leapt. It was almost completely dark inside, but dragons had keen sight and he could faintly make out the flooring. He lowered himself onto his hands and his hind legs tensed to leap, but a booming roar froze him in place.

Was that a dragon? he thought, holding in place. A flash of distant lightning flickered behind him, lighting up the night for an instant. It was immediately followed by the crash of thunder.

“Just thunder,” he said, preparing to jump once more, though he couldn’t help but hesitate. The lightning seemed proof that both were thunder, but what if that first sound wasn’t? He hadn’t seen any lightning before it, though he hadn’t been watching for it either.

He gave in to curiosity and turned back toward the direction of the storm. It had come from the base of mountains on the other side of the valley. They were called the Frozen Peaks, named such for the way their tops had frozen over from their impressive altitude. The peaks were a revered site among some other species, but he’d never taken the time to visit them.

The mountainsides were fading in and out of view from the rain and the peaks themselves were completely out of sight, blocked by the wall of low clouds rolling toward him like an oncoming ocean wave. It was a wall of darkness, the type of storm that common sense told you to hunker down and avoid at whatever cost. If it caught you out in the open, it might swallow you up and that’d be the end.

A glint of color partway up the mountain stood out against the black. It was an orange-red glow, and it seemed to twinkle and spread before shrinking and vanishing entirely. The black dragon raised a wing to shield his eyes from the rain, peering toward the mountain. His mind went back to the potential roar and he thought about what he’d do if he were trapped in a storm like that without shelter. A shiver racked his body at the thought, even now the cold rain was seeping between scales and dropping his core temperature.

Fire. The realization hit him with the suddenness of a blaze itself. He’d try to start a fire to warm himself. Any dragon would.

And in a storm like that, even the strongest fire breath would be extinguished just as quick.

Before his mind caught up, Shardaron leapt off the roof toward the mountain range. He found an updraft and it raised him up, only for the next current to change directions and threaten to toss him back against the roof. It took a serious effort of flapping his wings to not let it do so.

His eyes remained locked on the spot where the light had been. Raindrops struck loudly off his body, the downpour gaining such strength that he had to squint just to bear the onslaught. It didn’t even deter him for a moment though. There was no question over what he had to do. If someone was lost out there, he had to help.

The storm seemed to approve of his resolve and the currents shifted once more, giving him a downward tailwind to propel him forward. It wasn't a perfect wind since it threatened to smash him against the ground if he didn't keep altitude, but it was far preferable to fighting for every foot and his speed picked up. Soon, the lowest storm clouds were upon him and his vision was washed with only the colors of black and gray.

Lightning flickered high above, dancing from cloud to cloud and giving them a brief white glow before vanishing. When he blinked, he still saw the lightning before him for a few seconds while his vision cleared.

The tailwind carried him against the rain to the halfway point between his home and the mountains, the Frozen River. There, as he met the true force of the storm for the first time, it decided to change its mind. The current flipped perfectly, moving up instead of down and back instead of forward. The force of the change threatened to flip him over, but he was an experienced flyer and managed to readjust his wings just in time to avoid that. The wind raised him up and he flapped hard to keep moving forward. Rain droplets stung his muzzle as they were propelled with more force against him.

Still his eyes focused on that one spot of the mountain where he'd seen the fire. This whole time, he hadn't let his vision shift from it, knowing that if he did, he'd likely lose the spot and he'd never find whoever was lost out there.

Knowing time was running short, the black dragon flew faster, his breath growing heavy. More lightning flashed above him, the apex of which was a lone blue bolt that arched down and struck the lower side of the mountain. This close, he saw a burst of fire follow it, expanding as it found trees before quickly fading again under the downpour.

Shardaron tensed at the sight, realization dawning on him. The pattern was identical to what he'd seen earlier. There was never another dragon. It had been a stray bolt of lightning all along. He'd desperately pursued a lost cause.

The thunder that followed boomed not above him, but all around him. He jerked his wings in reaction and before he could correct, the wind tipped him over into a downward tumble.

A mere dragon's length before striking ground, he caught himself and managed to aim upward, regaining altitude as the rain and wind battered him, tossing him from side to side and threatening to upturn him at any moment.

Once he'd gained some air he tried to hover, but it only bought him enough time to glance back toward home and realize he was well past the river at this point. As if sensing he might try to go that way, the wind shifted to push him toward the mountain, then back once more, jostling him in place. He knew immediately that he'd have to fight it either way, but he wondered now if he even had the strength to do so. The heart of the storm was upon him and there was nothing he could do.

Panic flooded his veins and he turned toward home. The wind picked up, fighting him harder for every foot. He struggled against it, gaining ground, but then in the one moment he slowed to breathe it pushed him back enough to render his efforts useless. His pendant shook in the movement and slapped the back of his jaw.

His eyes wild, he looked around in alarm. Could he go down? No, there was no cover there in the valley. Up? The lightning would only get worse and he'd be just as exposed, he needed to find shelter. He couldn't keep fighting the wind like this. He'd never make it either direction.

Panic gave way to hopelessness and his wing movements slowed, allowing the wind to toss him around more. He'd intended to do something for the good of dragonkind, but he'd made a mistake. A mistake that had wasted time and doomed him. If only he'd just gone back to sleep instead of coming out.

Shardaron turned his gaze back toward the direction of the Frozen Peaks. Their tops were obstructed from view, but in between flashes he could clearly make out their sides. He looked back up, wondering what they were like up there. If it was really as special as others had said.

Another blue bolt of lightning streaked through the clouds, crashing into the upper section of the nearest mountain right where his line of sight ended. He thought of how it was that very lightning that had lured him out here, and once more wondered about what it would be like up at the top.

A tale he had heard of suddenly popped into his mind, the Stormrise. Suddenly, he longed to be there, even if it was his last act.

Then go. The thought slid into his mind unbidden, and with it a deeper longing filled him. He didn't want to die here, he wanted to see more of the world. He wanted to see the peaks...but they were so far and the storm too strong. He'd never make it with so much in the way.

His flailing caught an updraft and for a moment he was pushed up in the direction he was looking.

Try. The thought felt almost foreign in his mind even though he knew it was his own. Shardaron hissed at it. There was no way.

But the updraft raised him higher and the thought echoed. *Try.*

The repetition solidified his urge, and he gave a nod. He would try, even if he didn't make it, he'd give it his all for that last opportunity.

New strength flowed into his muscles, spurred by adrenaline and sheer determination. He was a mighty dragon, and he would not go gently into this night.

Shardaron spread his wings wide, letting the membrane catch the updraft. It kept strong, guiding him upward for a few minutes before returning to its usual chaotic self. He tightened his spread and returned to flapping right as it shifted, not losing even a scale's worth of ground. He was focused now, his eyes locked on a spot in the clouds that he imagined blocked his view of the peaks. This might be the end, but it was going to be his choice how it ended. He would either reach the top or be tossed down trying.

The higher he rose; the greater the temperature of the rain fell. His scales were thoroughly soaked by now and the water had seeped down, chilling his entire body. At times, joints in his legs tensed or cramped from the cold and he'd nearly off-balance himself shaking them to get the blood flowing again. All around him the clouds seemed to grow darker as he drew deeper, to the point that he couldn't see more than a wingbeat ahead when the lightning flashed. The nearest mountain vanished from sight, and he could only hope he was aiming toward it still.

The muscles in his wings began to ache from the constant exertion, so when the next favorable shift came, he immediately fell into a glide. This wind carried him closer to where he thought the mountain was, but at a slight downward angle. It gave him more forward progress than it lost, and most importantly, much needed rest.

The black dragon had only about a minute of rest before the next bolt of light lit up the sky and showed him the mountain. He realized right away he'd misjudged his placement. The mountain should have been several minutes' flight away, but now he saw he would be upon it in mere seconds.

New panic welled up in his chest and he tried to flap his wings, finding them unwilling to move from their glide and aching in fresh pain. He looked over and yelped in horror to find the arms coated in ice and holding his joints in place.

He glanced to the mountain and back. At this speed, he couldn't hope to stick a landing on such a sharp angle. That sense of doomed returned, but in a desperate effort he pushed it aside and spat fire onto each wing. He aimed just in front of the joints to let the wind carry it onto them, assuming the rain didn't instantly extinguish it.

Shardaron felt a burning pain in both and threw all of the strength he had left into bending them, hoping the pain meant he'd burned through the ice rather than only scorching himself.

Nothing happened. The wings remained locked in place. The mountain grew closer.

He tried again. This time there was a loud cracking sound and he felt more pain but also a bend.

He tried once more. There was another *crack* and his wings came loose, shattered ice rolling over his membrane.

The flapping that followed was the hardest he'd ever managed in his life. His wings were a blur in his peripherals as the mountain filled the rest, and he was constantly panting.

His angle shifted rapidly, and he went from flying straight forward to almost straight up, just in time to keep from crashing. His tucked legs even grazed the edge, the rocky surface leaving scratches across the scales there as a souvenir of their meeting.

Up he flew, sprinting in the sky without a single downward glance. His vision was blurred from being stung by the rain and everything ached.

He still didn't see any sign of a break ahead and he knew it was the end. His body was exhausted, and he couldn't go anymore. There was an updraft, but it wasn't strong enough to carry him by itself.

Not wanting to give up, he threw the last of his strength into one final push of only flaps.

The first passed and his body screamed to stop, his limits well surpassed. The second went by, and in his mind he saw the end and felt the sensation of freefalling.

The third came and he fell still, riding that last bit of upward movement and savoring it. With a growl, he felt it ebb and then the world filled with blinding light.

His body crashed through the last of the storm clouds, and he found himself in a new world as the wind and rain disappeared. Darkness was replaced with light and his defeat became victory.

Before him, were towering mountains coated in ice and sparkling from the warm orange-yellow light of the partially risen sun on the horizon. Despite feeling too tired to go on, he managed two, quick half-flaps followed by a hobbling glide to alight on the nearest peak, practically collapsing onto its side with a landing that a hatchling would be embarrassed of.

Shardaron didn't care about that though. His eyes were locked on the view in front of him. He had made it after all. He'd flown right through the worst of the storm and now he was here. He was on the Frozen Peaks.

He'd heard many descriptions, but not a single one described how beautiful the Stormrise was with his own eyes. The way the ocean of clouds rolled along and broke across the peaks. How the sun glistened off the snowy peaks and sparkled with a rainbow of colors. The rays of sunlight streaking through the sky. The sight had to have been the most beautiful one he'd ever witnessed.

As he watched, a ray of light settled upon him for a moment. A gentle breeze rocked the pendant and it tapped his cheek gently. He wiped away a tear before it could freeze.

With a happy sigh, the black dragon breathed his fire along the section of the peak he was on to melt some of its ice and press his underbelly to it for warmth. His claws dug in for extra

support and at last he allowed himself to relax. He'd gone through what might have been the hardest flight of his life to earn it.

He couldn't contain a smile and a low purr rose in his throat as he basked in the sun's warmth and nature's beauty.