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Paper Butterflies

Cali Dorszynski
Western Washington University

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Paper Butterflies

By Cali Dorszynski

I

Mr. Ortega was not particularly experienced with fighting dragons. But he'd had a fair bit of practice running away from them. It all came down to the counting. Typically, dragons are capable of breathing a fire blast every ten seconds. That means ten seconds to run as far and as fast as possible before finding new cover to shelter behind. Luckily, the ruins of the old stone castle he was running through offered plentiful cover. Unluckily, this particular dragon was only a few years old, which meant two things: smaller fire blasts and more frequent fire blasts, about every seven seconds. The dragon was also small, capable of following Mr. Ortega through the halls and corridors of the ruined castle.

"One, two, three," he counted out loud to himself, bolting from the doorway he'd been sheltering in and digging through his coat pocket for his compass.

"Four, five," He opened the compass, glancing down at it and making a sharp right turn down a hallway.

"Six," He ducked into another doorway, pressing his back against the cold, damp stone as he heard the dragon skittering through the halls in pursuit.

"Seven." A flash of orange light illuminated the walls and a wave of dry heat washed over him. The dragon was close, but not close enough, flames falling short of reaching Mr. Ortega through the twisting halls.

"One," he bolted from the doorway, racing down the hall, following the point of the compass.

"Two, three," He rushed past a row of rooms, heavy wooden doors decaying on their hinges. He turned a corner and started up a steep, winding flight of stairs. *Of course*, he thought, looking up the spiral to the landing far above. *Of course they had to put the gateway I need in the tallest tower.*

"Four, five," He heard the dragon roar from somewhere below, a screeching bellow that echoed through the halls, reverberating off the old stone. The hair on the back of his neck stood up. There was no cover in this stairway. If the dragon found him here, he would be toast.

“Six, seven,” He counted, hazarding a glance down the stairway below him. The bottom few stairs glowed with the light of a fire blast. The dragon was close, too close for comfort.

He immediately started a new count, legs burning as he pushed to climb the stairs faster. “One, two,” He was almost to the top.

“Three four,” The last few stairs. The dragon burst into the stairway, roaring furiously as it caught sight of Mr. Ortega for the first time since the chase began.

“Five.” He reached the landing, glancing over the edge as the dragon began charging up the tower, using long claws to climb the walls instead of using the stairs.

“Six.” He kicked at the remains of the wooden door, bursting into the room at the top of the tower. The room was small and round, with an empty fireplace on one side and three narrow alcoves beneath stone arches, and a few ruined furniture remains.

“Seven.” He said, ducking to the ground against the stone wall to the side of the doorway.

A jet of flame blasted up the tower and through the doorway into the room, the splintered remains of the wooden door spraying out like shrapnel. The wet stone sizzled and steamed as the heat filled the room. Mr. Ortega shielded his head with a fold of his coat, curling further into the wall to protect his body from the heat. After a moment the jet of flame subsided. Burning wooden fragments littered the room, and Mr. Ortega immediately jumped to his feet.

The dragon was still charging up the tower walls, and when it finally cornered Mr. Ortega in the inescapable room, it would savor the opportunity to roast him alive before reclaiming the treasure he had stolen.

“One.” Mr. Ortega reached into his shirt and grasped for the necklace he wore, a round emerald stone with a small hole in the center, suspended on a length of black cord; a gatekey.

“Two, three.” He lifted the stone to his eye, peering around the room through the hole in the center. The alcove on the far side of the room glowed the same green as the stone, signaling the presence of a gateway.

“Four.” He checked his compass one more time, satisfied that the needle pointed unwaveringly at the glowing alcove.

“Five.” He bolted across the room.

“Six.” He yanked the emerald stone from around his neck, snapping the silver clasp, and pressed it against the side of the stone arch.

“Seven.” The emerald glowed dimly to life, and he threw himself into the opened gateway just as the dragon burst into the room, flames already clawing after him.

He almost escaped unscathed. Unfortunately his right hand, the hand that held the gatekey against the stone arch, had not yet passed through the gateway as the dragon entered the room, and the back of his hand was fiercely burned by the dragon’s flames.

~*~

Mr. Ortega tumbled haphazardly through the gateway and fell to the ground, which had turned from hard stone to soft grass in an instant. He laid there, chest heaving, breathing in the smell of the earth. A clear blue sky peaked through the trees above him. Sunlight filtered through the branches, and wildflowers dotted the grass around him as bees buzzed here and there. He hoped desperately that his journey was over.

As he reached reflexively for his compass, he caught sight of the scorched red mark on his hand and frowned. Red lines patterned the back of his hand like a forking bolt of lightning. Now that he had noticed it, searing pain lanced through his hand, previously unnoticeable but now inescapable. He winced, tucking the hand carefully into his pocket as he tried to ignore the pain.

He pulled the compass out of his coat pocket, praying his harrowing adventure had come to an end. The dial spun lazily in a circle, needle undecided, pointing at everything and nothing at once. He breathed a sigh of relief, laying back in the grass as a smile sprung to his face and hearty laughter bubbled up in his chest. He had finally made it home.