

Ash, The Crippled
Grey Dragonling
by
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“Can we have the story of Ash, the crippled baby dragon?”

Over the tome in which Albinon the White had recorded, in story form, the wonderful events of her childhood, Esmé smiled at her daughter Ahlita, sitting up in bed with eager expectancy. Esmé reflected, not for the first time, that Ahlita’s choice of favourite story was decidedly odd for a girl of her tender years. But she didn’t say so. After all, Ahlita was a well-adjusted child, fully capable of dealing with the story’s emotional demands—if in a rather strange way.

Obligingly, although she no longer needed the written words, the young Queen of Lazaronia bent her head to the open book ...

Flame the Tame’s heart sank when the last dragonling needed help leaving its shell—something she knew meant it wouldn’t survive. The little grey creature, which she named Ash, was also smaller than his sister Ebony and his brother Platinum. Flame’s spirits dropped further when she realised Ash had a weak wing. But the Piksenfolk Healers could surely do something about both problems, she comforted herself. Their skills had

grown apace since her own birth.

In this way Flame fed her determination to successfully rear all her offspring—the first dragons born since she and Flare the Fearless had climbed from their own shells some sixteen years before.

Only Flame's maternal devotion and unceasing vigilance saw Ash over a dragonling's first hurdle—the time soon after birth when, pitting its strength in mock battles with its siblings, it sought the privilege of leader. For these sometimes rough battles, though never harming a healthy hatchling, usually worsened any weakness in a less healthy one.

However, Flame soon knew that for these dragonlings there would be other, more horrifying battles to fight. For the wizard Ignarius—the vilest enemy the dragons of Lazaronia had ever faced—was about to return. Last seen dangling beneath a set of wings fashioned by the bats from their living bodies, he had evaded being taken to the place of eternal sleep awaiting him by sending his spirit out on the wind. And though the Goddess Lazaria had turned the wind into an intergalactic storm, sweeping the spirit to the farthest corner of the farthest galaxy, all knew

reunion of spirit and body was but a matter of time.

Flame and Flare had already heard of one feat of considerable power demonstrated by the wizard's shade. In trying to kill two unicorns it had felled one of the Silver Forest's largest trees—an ancient silver beech said to embody the sleeping powers of Argentsiana, the lost Silver Goddess, herself.

So Ash, soon to be known throughout Lazaronia as one of the land's greatest heroes, couldn't have been born into a harsher world ...

The full effect of Ash's infirmity didn't strike him until the day Flame took them out on Geheimberg's shoulders for their first flying lessons and he had even more trouble than the others. It was there the wizard, succeeding in breaching the mountain's concealment spell, blasted Platinum off the mountainside with his purple lightning. But for managing in time to get the hang of flight, Platinum claimed, he would certainly have been killed. And if he hadn't fallen, the new cave with the ominous-looking pit at its back wouldn't have been rediscovered.

However, since Flame was too big to enter the narrow tunnel leading into this cave, the earthling Mark Willoughby agreed to guard the baby dragons. Mark, known by everyone as the One Marked by Willow, had returned as soon as Ignarius became a serious threat again.

Flame left him with gifts from the Goddess Lazaria: a torch that wouldn't burn down, a sleeping bag and a magic basket that would provide food and drink. She also promised to return to feed the dragonlings and give them flying lessons.

On the first night in the cave, Ash's world started to fall apart as the Piksenfolk, who lived beneath the pit, lured Platinum into its depths.

When Flame managed to get Ebony to fly, the little grey dragon, knowing what was about to happen, was too upset to sleep that night. And when he saw his sister disappear down the shaft he couldn't stop his distressed whimpers, which woke Mark up. The whimpers turned to wails of grief as the boy tried to comfort him, stroking his nose with gentle, soothing hands.

"I know how you feel," Mark said, and Ash was sure his eyes were moist.

“My mother and father and my big brother Adam are ... well, I suppose they’re millions of miles away—in another world, way out in space.”

Ash stared at him in surprise, his own grief fleetingly forgotten. “But you’re the Prince of Lazaronia; your home is everywhere in Lazaronia.” And when Mark shook his head, Ash reached up in renewed grief and softly touched Mark’s nose with his own. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

Then, comforted by being able to share his grief, he curled up against Mark with a great quivering sigh and went to sleep. He didn’t know what woke him—but when he opened his eyes he was alone. However, noises from outside told him Mark was still around. Ash scrambled sleepily to his feet. The idea of staying by himself anywhere near the pit was suddenly unbearable.

He had just reached the tunnel’s outer mouth when Mark’s shadow fell over him.

“*Get back!*” Mark yelled.

Ash whirled in alarm. But in his panic he blundered against the wall. Pain ripped through his side, making him scream. Purple lightning flashed

above him. Trying to ignore his pain, Ash made a supreme effort. And next moment he was inside, where Mark hustled him over to the pit and bent down to examine his wounds.

“You won’t get away!” a voice boomed—a voice Ash knew could only belong to the wizard Ignarius. Moments later there was another flash of purple lightning, an unbelievably loud explosion.

Ash tried to hide—but when he saw the wizard loom through the dust from the explosion he could see only one way to escape. Spreading his wings, he launched himself into the pit. But it was no good: he couldn’t fly. With a despairing scream he hurtled downwards.

It was a long drop. Ash made one desperate attempt after another to fly. But his left wing wouldn’t work. He’d often tried to imagine Platinum’s terror in falling down the mountainside. Well, now he knew, he told himself bitterly. All that remained was to wait for the landing that would kill him. And hope it was quick.

But when it came no one was more surprised than Ash, who found himself bouncing in a huge net. Immediately the little people of Piksenville

crowded around and carried him away. One, addressed by most of the little people as Lord Blaëwen, put something on his wounds that instantly banished all the pain before taking him to see Ebony and Platinum. Minutes later Mark and Esmé joined them in the only place in Piksenville where humans could fit—the Piksenvolk's shrine to the Goddess Lazaria.

"It was Princess Esmé who really saved you and Prince Mark," Chief Piksenlord Albinon the White told Ash. "She warned us of the danger you and Mark were in. You see, it's been so long since we needed to stretch a net across the bottom of the pit that the one we had began to rot, so we destroyed it. But for all of our netmakers—and Esmé—working all night, the net wouldn't have been ready in time."

Over the next few weeks, Lord Malva the Mauve, the Piksenvolk's Second Healer, gave the dragonlings flying lessons, and Lord Blaëwen the Blue, the Chief Healer, gave them a special dietary supplement to strengthen their wing muscles. To Ash's delight this eventually enabled him to fly, in spite of Blaëwen's pronouncement that one wing was deformed. However, he also had to work very hard.

Ash's new-found skill quickly produced personality changes, his self-confidence growing so much he soon wanted to explore Piksenville's network of caves. Since Lord Garrion the Grey, his appointed guardian, was busy, Mark accompanied him. But Ash, finding a human companion too slow, soon left Mark behind. Besides, he wanted a good look at the chimney he and Mark had fallen down, though he couldn't have explained why he was so curious.. And without levitation skills Mark couldn't follow.

Ash found flying up the shaft an immense struggle, but discovered several suitable resting places. He could just see the top, a distant sphere of grey light, when he realised Mark was calling from the bottom. Well, there was no point in answering: his voice was too small for Mark to hear; and he certainly wasn't going back. With one more tremendous effort he landed on the lip of the pit.

The cave was almost unrecognisable. Ignarius's explosion had destroyed the tunnel to the mountainside, creating a great open mouth that let in streams of sunlight. Broken pieces of limestone lay everywhere.

Only the area around the pit had escaped damage. Ash moved amongst the rubble, looking around in astonishment. However had Ignarius managed to breach Geheimberg's protective spell and do all this damage in one fell swoop?

That was when he saw the patch of green. Grass? Grass couldn't grow in limestone caves. And anyway the green was too pale for grass. So what could it be?

Gingerly, in case he was walking into a trap rigged by Ignarius to snare curious dragonlings, Ash approached the area of green. It certainly wasn't grass. And neither was it a trap. At least surely it couldn't be ...?

"Ash, where are you?"

Ash, about to touch his find, started at the sudden loudness of Mark's voice. So the Piksenfolk had made sure he wouldn't be left alone by lending Mark levitation skills. But by now Ash was quite sure his discovery was genuine.

"Here!" he squeaked. "Quick! Come and look at this!" A few moments later Mark stood at his side staring in apparent puzzlement at what Ash

had found: a clutch of eggs, much larger than those from which Ebony, Platinum and Ash had hatched. There were six of them. Since they were enclosed by two piles of sand, Ash guessed they were from two batches. “Piksendragon eggs!” he explained in a whisper. “They must have been buried here for hundreds of years!”

He stared down at them. How sad that with no Piksendragon to encourage them they probably wouldn’t hatch. Especially as it looked as though the creatures within were fully developed. For Ash knew that Piksendragon eggshells remained soft—but unbreakable—enabling the shell to grow with the hatchling until the creature within was near maturity. Only then did the shell become hard and brittle in readiness for hatching. He nosed the eggs. Yes, they were definitely ready.

Would Piksendragons, he wondered, respond to the song that had birthed him? Well, trying couldn’t do any harm. And he started making the odd crooning he remembered hearing from inside his own egg. Moments later he jumped back when one of the eggs moved. Then the shell began to crack. Within seconds a scaly green head emerged.

Another egg started to crack. Then a third. Ash could hardly believe what was happening.

“This means Piksendragons aren’t extinct after all!” He was nearly crying for joy.

There was a noise behind them. At the same time the stream of daylight was cut off. A grating, alien-sounding voice spoke. “They soon will be.” It was as though a huge rusty hinge spoke.

Ash and Mark spun round. A massive winged creature stood in the entrance. It could have been a black dragon, like Flame the Tame. But Ash saw almost immediately that it had none of Flame’s beauty: its scales were dull and lifeless; its neck was thick and graceless; its head was broad and heavy.

“A *wyvern*!” Ash’s voice was a high squeal of terror.

The wyvern placed its stretched-out claws on the ground, moving one pace forward. Then it raised the other foot and opened its mouth to show all its yellow-brown teeth. Saliva dripped from its tongue. When the spittle hit the floor it sizzled like acid, leaving great dents in the limestone.

“I’ll wait till they’re all hatched. It’ll be more fun,” the wyvern said in its rusty, grinding voice.

The first Piksendragon kicked its way clear of its egg. As Ash and Mark watched helplessly, the second and third Piksendragons appeared. All were different shades of green, their scales still soft and damp. But almost as soon as the air touched them they dried and began to harden. Within seconds their toughened scales made the hatchlings look larger.

By the time the sixth Piksendragon had struggled free of its shell the scales of the other five were fully hardened. His heart racing in terror, Ash joined them as they lined up in front of Mark and faced their archenemy. All spurted still rather small tongues of fire from their mouths and nostrils. But the wyvern, although it hated fire as much as any wyvern, simply laughed at their feeble threats. There was little six Piksendragons and a dragonling could do against one mature wyvern.

It addressed them again in its grating voice. “Many centuries ago Ignarius created us to wipe out feeblings like you. It seems we didn’t entirely succeed. Until now.”

“And you won’t succeed now!”

Ash and his dazed cousins whirled at the sound of Princess Esmé’s voice, coming from the pit. After that everything happened too fast for Ash to follow. Anyway, with Piksenvolk brandishing daggers and knives all over the place, and with the magnificent sword Esmé handed Mark flashing fire into his eyes, he couldn’t see too clearly. Long moments of tumult later, Ash saw Mark pierce the wyvern’s exposed breast with the sword and nearly tumble down the mountainside after it when he couldn’t withdraw the weapon. But just in time Esmé leapt forward to help him. The sword came out in a rush and Mark fell backwards on top of the Princess. Then, to Ash’s intense relief—for a wounded wyvern, even a mortally injured one, could still be deadly—the creature tumbled backwards through the hole by which it had entered.

When its bellows and the noise of its fall down the mountain stopped, Ash found himself thinking if only they could return to Piksenville telling of the heroism of one dragonling and six Piksendragons. But he knew it wasn’t possible for even seven creatures his size to overpower one huge wyvern.

And besides, his crippled wing made him unfit to be a hero ...

The Piksenfolk put on a celebratory banquet in the Goddess's shrine, where the highlight was Mark's naming of the six Piksendragons. He called the three females Chartreuse—who was to be the queen—Olive and Seafoam. Chartreuse's mate was named Koru, and the two other males Pinus and Verdant. And when Mark had finished christening the Piksendragons he made sure Ash got full credit for the discovery of their eggs. For after all, the little fellow had hatched them as successfully as any good parent and had stood bravely beside them as they faced their enemy. Didn't that make him as much of a hero as those who had attacked the wyvern?

The trouble was, Ash didn't feel like a hero in spite of all the fuss being made of him ...

Piksenville, a somewhat sleepy miniature town, became a busy, agitated place shortly after Ash's discovery. For the Goddess Lazaria had

summoned Mark and Esmé, the Piksenlord warriors and the Healers to her war against Ignarius. The wizard, finally reuniting his spirit with his body, had resurrected hundreds of thousands of Earth's dead warriors, forcing them to help his invasion of Lazaronia's moon. All the dragons, except Ash, were going as steeds.

Ash's guardian, Garrion the Grey, guessed how disappointed and left-out the crippled dragonling felt as they watched Mark and Esmé, Ebony and Platinum, the six Piksenlords and the six Piksendragons disappear behind the waterfall into the caverns leading onto the mountainside. It was, Garrion knew, even more distressing for Ash inasmuch as, without a dragon for her to ride, one of the Healers had to stay behind. Perhaps, Garrion told himself, his story of frustrated ambition might comfort Ash.

"When I earned my seat on the Council of Lords I expected to be a warrior like my male colleagues, Helvus the Yellow, Ruberon the Red, Verdurus the Green and Brunon the Brown. But my physical strength was judged to be inadequate. As if that wasn't bad enough, I soon discovered that, although I have the perfect temperament for a healer, I don't have

the talents. Right now I feel totally useless. Even Blaëwen and Malva's healing talents will at least help the war effort."

"But what about your wonderful governing skills?" Ash cried in surprise. "Surely they're as important as being able to fight or heal? And Lord Albinon obviously thinks very highly of you. Being so busy interpreting the prophecies of Oracles—not to mention his own writing—means he must leave most of the governing to you. Whatever would he do without you?"

Garrion chuckled in amused delight. "Astute little fellow, aren't you? Yes, I suppose you're right. And I'm also named as Albinon's successor should anything happen to him."

Ash darted him a quick, bright-eyed look that would remain with Garrion for the rest of his life before returning his gaze in undisguised yearning to the darkness behind the waterfall. "Well, what more could you want? You can't have everything, you know."

Garrion chuckled again. "But right now more than anything else you'd like to watch all the dragons take off with their riders, wouldn't you? Well, what harm can it do?"

Almost before Garrion finished speaking Ash was scuttling up the path behind the falls. Smiling indulgently, Garrion followed.

By the time they emerged onto the mountainside, Flame and Flare had arrived, and Mark and Esmé were climbing between their enormous wings. None of them noticed the suspicious-looking speck in the distance, flying towards them.

The Piksendragons and the two dragonlings, with their own riders aboard, launched themselves into the air first. Ash and Garrion dodged behind an outcrop of rocks as Flame and Flare followed.. Even from their hiding place the two spectators could feel the force of the wind created by the dragons' wings. Engrossed by the sight, they watched Flame and Flare soar above the other dragons. Then both dragons lowered themselves back to the smaller dragons' level, enabling them to use the lift of the larger dragons' slipstream.

It was Ash who noticed the dark speck, moving swifter now. And it was no longer just a speck. He could see it was a wyvern, even larger than the one Esmé and Mark had killed. It was undoubtedly the queen wyvern

out for revenge. Making straight for the Piksendragons.

And Ash knew the Piksendragons were unaware of their danger.

He gave a warning shriek fit to blast Garrion's eardrums. But it was obvious the dragons couldn't hear above the noise of their wings.

However, the wyvern heard. And with the powers of the wizard behind her, Geheimberg's spell was unable to conceal from her the two figures on the mountainside. She saw how helpless Ash was with but one small, unarmed guardian and remembered a terrible prophecy about a crippled grey dragonling. The prophecy couldn't be allowed to come to pass, she resolved, for it hinted at the downfall of her species. The main body of dragons would have to wait. She could easily outfly them.

She sped straight for Ash.

Then it seemed to Garrion that everything happened at once. Ash launched himself clumsily into the air. The little fellow, apparently unheeding of the certainty that he was outmatched, started to fly unsteadily towards the wyvern.

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Even before he was within striking distance, Ash was aware of the wyvern queen's contempt. Her scream was one of triumph, as though the battle was already hers. As soon as Ash was within reach she aimed a spray of acid saliva into his face. With perfect timing, Ash used the full force of his lungs in a spurt of fire.

The resulting flame surprised both the wyvern and Ash himself. Acid and fire met. And the power of the explosion of Ash's breath sent both fire and sizzling acid into the wyvern's face. The creature screamed in pain and fury as the acid burnt its eyes. Blindly it reached out to Ash with its talons. Ash, now battling with the wind from the wyvern's huge wings, began to lose height. But to his dismay the wyvern could pinpoint his position without seeing him. One lunge had its talons fastened over Ash's wings. Ash barely managed to thrash himself free. But he was now unable to fly at all. His good wing had been broken in the struggle. That meant he was doomed ...

The pain of the broken wing intensified Ash's fury. Upside down now, he spurted fire at the wyvern's belly just as its claws caught him again.

This time the flames touched the underside of the wyvern's wings as well. Its scream of rage nearly deafened Ash. But he knew it would soon realise that, with singed wings and its sense of direction destroyed, its only hope was to drop its burden. And Ash knew he mustn't let that happen.

The wyvern opened its claws. But too late. Ash had already brought his own front ones up and now clung to the scythe-like talons with all his might. Twisting his head, he watched the trees clothing Geheimberg's side draw nearer and nearer. If he could but hold on a few seconds more ...

From above, Garrion watched in numbing shock as, still trying to shake the little grey dragonling free, the wyvern plummeted earthwards.

As wyvern and dragonling smashed through the tree-canopy at Geheimberg's feet, the Grey Lord fixed his gaze on the spot where the enmeshed dragons had crashed. Bitterly he berated himself that his guardianship was ended before it had even begun. The only service he would be performing for Ash would be to retrieve the little fellow's broken

body and make sure he received a hero's funeral.

But first he needed to make sure Ash was indeed dead.

Remembering the way the dragons had fallen, he wondered if there would be anything left of Ash—and felt suddenly sick. And what if the wyvern was still alive? Garrion took a deep breath, steeling himself against this possibility. As quickly as caution allowed, he levitated himself off the mountainside down to the area of damaged trees.

The first thing he saw on passing through the forest canopy was the sprawled body of the wyvern. The creature stared straight at him with sightless yellow eyes already dulling in death. It twitched as it heard Garrion arrive. Garrion froze, staring in horror. But the wyvern was too near death to do any harm: even as Garrion stood there, life left the massive body.

Garrion glanced around but could see no sign of Ash. He was about to accept the heartbreaking certainty that Ash lay beneath the wyvern's monstrous carcass when a stray glimmer of light on something small and grey a short distance away caught his attention. It was Ash—a pitiful

bundle of broken bones. He was dead. The once-bright ruby eyes stared at Garrion like dull pieces of the mineral from Earth called plastic that he'd studied in his youth. Garrion suddenly found his own eyes so filmed by tears he could hardly see. He turned away, trying to draw consolation from the fact that at least the wyvern had dropped its burden on crashing through the trees.

As he levitated himself back up the mountainside to seek help in retrieving Ash, he further consoled himself with the knowledge of what would certainly have happened if he and Ash hadn't come out to farewell those going off to war.

And when the dragons and their riders returned victorious it was comforting to know that, although the crippled dragonling had made the ultimate sacrifice, at least he hadn't died in vain.

Quietly Queen Esmé closed the big book.

“Ash didn't stay dead you know, Mummy,” Ahlita said softly. “He's outside right now.”

Esmé looked at the window—and sure enough between the still-undrawn drapes hovered the form of a young, full-grown dragon—the only grey one from Flame’s second clutch. Ash Number Two, sensing when story time was over, always came to say goodnight to the little Princess of Lazaronia.

But tonight, before speaking to Ahlita, he addressed the Queen, using mind-speech. “Stranger things have happened, Esmé. It is possible that Ignarius isn’t the only one able to reincarnate himself.”

Esmé smiled. “Goodnight, Ash,” was her only reply, also in mind-speech, as she rose to close the drapes.

“Goodnight, Ash!” Ahlita cried, raising her voice in case the dragon couldn’t hear through the glass.

“Goodnight, my Princess,” Ash replied, every bit as loudly.

And he shut one ruby eye cheekily at the Queen, who returned the wink just before bringing the drapes together.