

DRAGON REFORGED

Gonard's Journey Book Two

By Chrys Cymri

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For Oma

Gone but not forgotten

Prologue

He sat alone as darkness came.

The medtech felt joints creak as he deliberately straightened, forcing his spine to line up against the hard chair back. With his acute sense of hearing he knew that the denizens of the confine were leaving their places of study to walk to their homes. A few were still at work, practising their singing, the pure notes which would be needed to prevent human minds from being affected by the Changewinds when winter finished and the tribes once again left the protection of the settlement for their hunting grounds. Gonard would be amongst them. He might have vowed never to sing again, but his guidance in the training of new Singers was prized by the confine.

We will have to spend the winter here, the medtech reflected. He could sense the coming snows, promised by the chilling winds. But I must ensure that the dragon does not become too comfortable with this place, these people. Come spring, Gonard must start back to the Domains. I will convince him to do so.

There had been a time when the dragon had been easy to influence. The medtech summoned up the image of when Gonard had been brought into the Citadel's medical laboratory, a muzzle encircling the wedge-shaped head. The guards had been nervous, all too aware that the dragon had murdered his Master only days before. Even with his jaws held shut and his double limp, his size was enough to have overwhelmed the four humans, had he wanted to escape.

The medtech had known immediately what Gonard must be. Their Master had left the Citadel and retreated to his own Domain when the medtech was only partially complete, leaving an assistant to finish construction and activation. Rumfus Max had taken with him the beginnings of a large mechanical brain. The Hunt dragons the Master had built for Lord Citizen Merrill Lange had been dull brutes, never fighting back when the hunters closed with swords and spears for the kill. Gonard must be the project for which the medtech had been abandoned. He was no lifeless Hunt creature. And he had killed the Master to preserve his own existence.

The medtech allowed himself a slight smile. The Lord Citizens might enjoy temporarily forgoing their technological comforts, trading sonic showers and food processors for the privilege of bouncing on the backs of horses, swords chafing their hands, but they would never have risked their lives hunting a dragon who would be willing to use his chemical chamber to flame them into bone and ash. As Gonard had done to their Master.

To give the dragon cause to be grateful to him, the medtech had healed the newer injuries. The crippled forefoot and wing he left in their twisted state, lacking the time to repair the wounds caused when the Master had brought Gonard to life.

He had convinced the dragon to put his guilt behind him, and escape from the Domains to the world outside before the Lord Citizens could dismantle him. The force field protecting the Domains had allowed them to leave, but not to re-enter.

He had made plans. The dragon needed time, time to grow in his self-awareness. Time to discover if the Master had been successful in his goal, namely to build a being capable of developing a soul. But soon after leaving the cave in which he had been brought to existence, Gonard had had the misfortune to meet the Outler.

The medtech decided not to waste energy on a frown. Itsa 543256, somehow having survived an unauthorised trip in the matter transmitter from the fifth asteroid, forty-third colony. Although her safe arrival on Earth was taken as a sign of divine approval, she still had to prove herself to gain Citizenship, and had obviously believed that the dragon could aid her goal. Even after discovering that he was only a robot, she had remained with him, following them both through the Barrier.

Yes, he had to admit that she had occasionally proved useful during the eighteen months of their travels. Within days of leaving the Domains, they had discovered that the Lord Citizens were wrong to believe that the only part of the planet spared in the Destruction four hundred years ago was the protected Domains. Beyond the desert outside the Barrier, they had come across a large community of humans, in a psychic relationship with an entity which called Herself the City. Gonard had allowed Her to teach him how to sing the clear, wordless melodies which Her Singers used to raise and strengthen the crystal towers in which Her memories were stored. But the dragon had not realised what the cost of full union with Her was, not until it was almost too late. Somehow, he had kept Her from taking over his mind, and Itsa had ridden him away from the City's influence. After that experience, Gonard had sworn never to sing again.

It was Itsa's fault, however, that the three of them were now trapped in this settlement. The medtech would have been satisfied if her attempt to leave them had been successful. In the event, she had only broken her leg, forcing them to accept the protection of the tribe for the summer while she healed. The medtech had promised Gonard's services as Singer in return. When the dragon had refused to sing against the Changewinds, and eight members of the tribe had been destroyed by the mind-altering chemicals the winds carried, they had been marched to the settlement for judgement. The dragon's innocence had been proved by his ability to walk the winds--to enter them and emerge with his mind intact.

Now he was planning a second trip into the Changewinds, risking his sanity for reasons the medtech could not comprehend. But this too could be used. The medtech was content with anything he could use.

The door to the large hall opened. Gonard stepped in, limping, carrying most of his heavy body on the side opposite his crippled left forefoot. He dipped his long head in a nod to the medtech, then allowed the door to shut behind him as he settled along the tiled floor. His eyes closed.

You have not released consciousness for the night, the medtech thought at him. Not until the Outler has returned will you relax. Why do you welcome that woman? She has rarely brought any value to our search, our attempt to discover as to whether the Master was successful in providing you with a soul. We would be better off without her.

Minutes ticked by, becoming hours. Gonard waited, patient. The medtech waited, more patient still. He had the greater practice at patience, waiting since the day the Master had abandoned him in the Citadel. Waiting for the dragon to be ready to return to the Domains, and prove that the Master had created a being with a soul.

Finally, the door opened a second time. Itsa pushed her way in, her cheeks flushed with drink and exertion. 'Hiya dragon, 'tech,' she said loudly, cheerfully. 'Ya jig ya don't have to wait up for me, don'tcha? An Itsa looks after herself. She don't need no one.'

The dragon raised his head from his forepaws. His snout touched her chest gently, careful not to push her over with a head nearly as large as her body. 'I know,' he said softly.

For a moment, the swagger disappeared from her stance. Itsa's face gentled as she touched one nostril, her black fingers spreading across the red-lined rim. 'Yeah.' Then she grinned. 'See ya in the mornin'. Us humans need our shut-eye.'

She brushed past the dragon, grimaced at the medtech, and shut the door to her room behind her. The medtech saw Gonard slowly lower his head back down, finally allowing himself to settle into his equivalent of sleep. You are concerned as to what happens to her, the medtech thought. I have come to comprehend that, even if I cannot understand why. Perhaps that concern can be used. Yes, perhaps she can be useful after all.

The night spun on, quiet as the last voice stilled. The medtech called up his plans, factored the Outler into each step, adjusting words and actions until the outcome was assured. The only part he could not influence was time. And he had so little of it left, he who was only ever designed to function for a short number of decades. He could not allow himself to cease functioning, not yet. He must continue until the Master had been vindicated.

In the end, the dragon would understand. When it was far too late, he would understand. He might not forgive, but by then the medtech would be far beyond such immaterial concerns.

CHAPTER ONE

Itsa slammed the door behind her, then leaned against the smooth-polished wood, so dark with age that it nearly matched her skin. This settlement was really getting to her. And she'd thought last winter was bad, stuck in a cabin with the dragon and the medtech. Even Mummer's asteroid seemed like a piece of heaven now. She missed her fellow miners, playing tricks on the supervisor, sonic showers after a hard day's work. Now she was stuck in some place which had only slipped backwards during the hundreds of years since the almost total destruction of the Earth, where a toilet was a hole in the ground and people drank stuff that burned the back of her throat in order to get happy. So much for all her plans to sneak onto the planet and getting Citizenship and the easy life.

Yeah, just a day Earthside, and she'd found the dragon, not knowing that he'd killed his Master only hours before. And somehow she'd gotten stuck with him. Following him from the Domains, almost dying in the desert outside the Barrier which protected the Citizens' gardens, saving him from the City. Even when she'd tried to leave him, that'd only tied them closer together. Her leg still hurt a bit, after all these months, as if in reminder.

Now that she'd almost got to like him, the dragon was planning to throw himself into the Changewinds again. Yeah, right, so he came back the first time. But the other Windwalkers liked to keep telling her how that didn't mean anything, how someone could walk the winds a hundred times and still go benders the hundred and first. What would she do if he didn't come back? She'd be stuck in this hole with the medtech. Stupid, stupid, shattin' stupid, she thought. And who's more dim, me or the dragon?

It took a moment before she realised that two people were staring at her. One person, she corrected herself quickly, a member of the settlement, and the medtech. Couldn't really call him a person. 'Yeah, and whatcha lookin' at?' she asked.

'Pardon, lady,' the man said nervously. 'I came t' seek th' advice of th' Walker's Second.'

Itsa transferred her scowl to the medtech. This was getting more and more common after he'd defended the dragon at his trial for the deaths of the eight tribe members. 'Lots of them doin' that nowadays, ain't there?'

'My expertise in legal issues and moral matters is valued,' the medtech said impassively.

'Ya can come back later,' she told the man. 'Me and the mighty whatnot have things to talk about.'

To her annoyance, the man bowed. 'Aye, m'lady.'

'And I ain't nobody's lady!' she shouted as he slipped through the door.

'That,' said the medtech, 'is obvious.'

'Cut it, 'tech,' Itsa snapped. 'I got no stomach for it.'

'And why should that be?'

Itsa dropped into a chair, hard-backed and practical like everything in the settlement, even in the Singers' confine, where some luxury was supposed to exist. 'I jig ya got no feelin's, 'tech, butcha got to jig I'm ragin'.'

The medtech lifted his shoulders in his version of a shrug. Itsa bit her lip, looked away. As time went by, the robot was becoming less and less successful in his mimicry of human mannerisms. 'Anger is a very common expression of your

personality. Am I to understand that it is for some reason greater today?’

Itsa snorted. ‘Don’t knock it, ragin’s what got me this far. Got me off Mummer’s asteroid and ‘way from the mines. Got us outta that City, too, ‘member? Ya weren’t much help when She was tryin’ to take Gonard’s head over.’

‘My advice has been of value,’ the medtech said calmly.

‘Yeah, when?’ Itsa leaned back in the chair, scruffing the heels of her boots on the wooden floor. ‘Gettin’ out of the Citadel was a great idea, right?’

‘You are well aware that I gain little from arguing with a human of your low intelligence.’ Itsa gritted her teeth as the medtech’s dull silver-grey eyes studied her. ‘Your latest attempts to persuade Gonard not to re-enter the Changewinds have been unsuccessful.’

‘Least I’m tryin’!’ Itsa jumped out of the chair. ‘Ya’re just goin’ to let him go back in, ain’tcha?’

‘He returned from his first venture into the Changewinds.’

‘Only just. ‘Member that strange story he told, all ‘bout some lion chasin’ him? What if he gets lost out there this time? What if makes him benders, like those others, since he won’t even sing to keep his head right?’ She strode up to the impassive robot, her hands bunching into fists. ‘Ya’re always so keen to keep him alive. Why don’tcha try talkin’ to him?’

The medtech held his ground. ‘You presume I would wish to convince him to remain in the settlement. I may however consider a second journey into the Changewinds necessary for the achievement of his goal.’

‘Oh, yeah, I forgot,’ Itsa said sarcastically. ‘Ya want to see if he’s got a soul. And goin’ into the winds is gonna help do that?’

‘I have a theory.’

‘Yeah, don’tcha always? What’s it this time?’

To her surprise, the medtech instantly answered, ‘You will recall that he claims to have heard the Master’s voice when the City attempted to conquer his mind. There is ample evidence that the Lord Citizen Rumpfus Max was killed by Gonard, therefore he should be unable to speak to his creation.’

‘The dragon calls him “Father”,’ Itsa pointed out.

‘One of his mental aberrations.’

‘Like stickin’ with me.’

As she’d expected, the medtech didn’t try to contradict her statement. ‘There are unresolved issues between Gonard and our Master.’

‘And goin’ into the winds is gonna do somethin’ ‘bout that?’

‘It is my theory that the chemicals borne by the winds reach into the subconscious. These might assist Gonard in his desire to release himself from the guilt of killing Lord Max.’

‘Yeah, and that’s a real good reason for him to go out again, right?’ She strode out of the hall. If the medtech was for Gonard going out, then she was against. She was against anything the ‘tech wanted. That much she knew.

The setting sun was washing the stone buildings with a sheen of orange. Itsa only absently noted the golden hues. A breeze brought the smells of evening fires, cooking dinner for the Singers in their confine. And at the gate stood Gonard, facing the direction of sunset. The direction of the Changewinds.

Itsa found herself slowing, then stopped. Gonard’s shadow stretched away from him, long and dark. In contrast, the remaining light picked out points of fire on his blue scales, tangled bright in the fringe lining his pricked ears. The edges of the whole wing were outlined with red, the crippled one hidden in darkness. His nostrils flared,

exposing small hairs. Then his head turned, acknowledging her presence.

For a moment, Itsa stayed where she was, and studied him. It was hard to believe that the same man had also built the medtech, a robot without emotions, slowly falling apart under the strain of their journeys. What had Rumpus Max done to make the dragon so different?

Straightening her shoulders, Itsa marched up to him. Her head was just high enough to cast a shadow onto the top of his foreleg. Then she said, 'Ranalf's tribe got back today.'

'The tribe is no longer Ranalf's,' Gonard said heavily. 'It was removed from him after my trial.'

'All right, Naylor's tribe,' Itsa said irritably. 'Look, it ain't yar fault he lost bein' Headman. He decided to come back here before the huntin' season was finished, just to get back atcha for his son dyin'.'

'He had good reason.'

'The trial settled all that,' Itsa snapped. 'It's not yar fault those tribe members died in the Changewinds. They shouldn't've expected ya to sing, 'member? Yar not a Singer. So it's not yar fault they went benders and had to be killed.'

'Perhaps not,' he said. His ears flicked, the crystal earring he had received in the City jouncing in the folds of the left. 'But I will never sing again. That much I promised, when the City would not have me.'

The sudden sound of the medtech's voice startled Itsa. 'We will have the winter to discuss that statement.' The pale eyes twisted to Gonard. 'It will not be possible for us to begin our journey back to the Domains until spring. What are your intentions for the duration of the season?'

'Yeah, like what'm I s'posed to do all winter?' Itsa complained. 'Why don'tcha ya two get bored?'

'The capacity for boredom is not within our programming,' said the medtech. 'It is a counter-productive emotion, and therefore the Master wisely decided to retain it.'

Gonard blinked. He looked down at the medtech. The golden wings rustled. 'Retain?'

Itsa glanced between them, lips thinning. 'What's up?'

'It was a strange word to use,' Gonard explained. She shuddered as he left one eye on the medtech's inscrutable face, rolling the other back to look at Itsa. Seeing him do that always gave her the chitters. 'Retain. What do you mean by that?'

'An imprecise word,' the medtech said. 'It may be preferable to substitute it with "withhold".'

'It is not preferable.' Gonard lowered his head, bringing his blue eyes level with the medtech's. There had been a time when the dragon had always deferred to the medtech. But not now, after all this time outside the Domains. Itsa was suddenly reminded how much he'd been changed by his experiences. 'You do not use imprecise words. Why "retain"?'

The medtech calmly stood his ground. 'It is not for me to explain, but for you to discover. The discovery may take place shortly.'

'When the Changewinds next blow,' Gonard rumbled. Itsa, feeling the sudden tension between the two robots, stepped back. 'You always know. You're always ahead of me.'

'No,' said the medtech wearily, 'I am behind you, always behind you, even as I was designed to be. I was first so that you may be best. I was failure so that you may be success. I was hope, but you are reality. It was only rational to abandon hope for reality.'

Gonard lifted his head. 'What is it you want of me?'

'Prove my Master was right. Prove to the Lord Citizens that he has created a being with a soul.'

'And how's he gonna do that?' Itsa asked sharply, knowing all too well what would probably happen if they returned to the Domains. The dragon'd be turned into scrap by the Lord Cits, and she'd be sent back to the mines. The medtech, the way he was going, wouldn't even last that long.

'It is my duty to determine that action.' The medtech straightened. His shoulders were developing a tendency to slump. 'It is your duty now to face the Changewinds and, in the spring, to return with me to the Domains.'

Itsa kicked at a cobblestone. 'Still don't see why ya got to do this winds thing again.'

'The winds revealed something to me last time,' Gonard said slowly. 'They might do so again.'

'Yeah, just make sure ya come back. I can't take the 'tech on my own.'

The medtech almost smiled. 'It is interesting to note the common direction of our opinions, Outler.' He turned and stalked away, his uneven footsteps making Gonard's nose wrinkle into a frown.

'He'll be okay,' Itsa said sharply, annoyed that the dragon still worried about the 'tech. How many times had she warned him not to trust his brother-creation? She thrust her hands further into her pockets of the tattered green vest she'd worn since leaving the mines, scowled as her fingers dropped through the bottom of one. 'When's the next winds?'

Gonard lifted his head, took a deep breath. She watched his nostrils flutter as he sorted through the scents on the evening air. 'It will rain tonight. The winds will come a day later.'

'Oh.' She studied him, wondering if she should try to talk him out of it one last time. A last touch of sunlight caught the bone whistle around his neck, the one she had carved for him from a buck he had accidentally killed in his first stire hunt. 'Ya're gonna keep wearing that whistle?'

'Not if you don't want me to.'

'It's yar whistle. Ya can do whatever ya want with it.'

Gonard cocked his head. 'I will come back.'

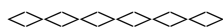
Itsa started to turn away. Then her hands clenched. 'I never knew my dad, ya jig,' she said quietly. 'Ran out 'fore I was born. And Rammelly--he died on me, 'member? The City pulled that from my mind and showed it to ya.'

'I remember.'

'I'm gettin' real tired of losin' people.' She waited a moment for her heart to settle, her breathing to ease. 'All right? Don't go, dragon. All right?' She looked up at him. He seemed so solid, so indestructible. But she knew how fragile he could be, how close she'd come to losing him several times already. 'Don't go.'

For a moment, she held his gaze. She could almost hope that he might do as she asked, not risk life and sanity in the mind-altering Changewinds. Then he glanced away. 'I have to go. You must see that.'

'Go, then!' she flared. 'Just don't expect me to come after ya, right?' Angry and humiliated, she hurried away into the night.



Coffee, Itsa found herself thinking as she munched the warm cake. I miss coffee.

And synthoale. Never mind tooth gel. Bet my teeth got loads of holes. That's the prob growin' up with mod tech. Ya get used to it.

She yawned. Dawn was only beginning to gleam on the buildings of the settlement. Itsa found a seat on an as of yet unoccupied market stall, and watched with mild interest as the traders prepared for another day. She was rarely out of bed this early, but she'd not slept well last night.

Yeah, and I wonder why. She tossed away the rest of the bread, no longer hungry. Gonard never needs to eat. Shattin' dragon.

Itsa stood, stretched. Someone else other than traders was awake this morning. She watched the man scratch several day's stubble as he stared at a stall, his lips moving silently. He seemed familiar, and she racked her brains for his name. Rygor, that was it. He was Rygor, one of Naylor's tribe. After all those months with the tribe, she ought to know the members. She wandered in his direction, bored enough to talk to anybody.

Rygor glanced at her as she stopped beside him. 'M'lady,' he said curtly.

'Got back yesterday?' she asked nonchalantly.

'Th' tribe could nae wait much longer.' His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. 'Th' hunt season be o'er.'

'And how'dcha do?'

By the expression on his face, Itsa knew that she shouldn't have asked. 'Th' clan will live.'

'Right.' She knew what that meant. Each tribe depended on a good hunting season to buy the comforts of the settlement to see them as a clan through the winter. The time Ranalf lost by bringing them back early to have Gonard stand judgement had cost them. They'd be in the bare wooden buildings at the edge of the settlement, and probably have difficulties buying the new spears and whatnot they'd need for the next season.

With a shrug, Itsa put it behind her. Wasn't her problem, after all. 'Whatcha doin' now?'

'A new knife be needed.' He suddenly hesitated. 'M'lady, could ye read th' signs fer me?'

Itsa glanced at the list of blades and prices propped against the stall. The spelling was different than what she was used to, but she could guess what broz and stel were. 'Sure. Why, can'tcha read it for yarself?'

'Th' reading be settlement work, women's work.'

'Like huntin's for men,' Itsa said, recalling the separation of duties by gender. In the settlement, the women were in charge. Out on the hunt, the men gave the orders. 'So, where's yar woman for woman's work?'

He met her gaze squarely. 'Dead o' th' winds.'

Itsa felt her face warm. Of course. Now she remembered. His wife'd been one of those who'd gone benders and been killed when the dragon'd refused to sing against the Changewinds. 'All right, I'll read it for ya. Whatcha lookin' for?'

Rygor waited as she haggled over the price of a steel dagger, silently handing over the required amount when Itsa had concluded discussions with the trader. She presented him with the knife, rather proud of her negotiating skills.

He slipped the leather sheath onto his belt. Fiddling with his belt buckle, he said quietly, 'Ye be a fine woman, m'lady.'

'Sure,' she said, thinking of a dragon willing to leave her behind.

'I be grateful fer yer help.'

He started to turn away. 'Wait,' Itsa called, an idea suddenly coming to her. 'I've

got a trade for ya.'

'A trade, m'lady?'

'Yeah, a trade.' She hooked her arm through his, leading him away from the market. 'It's like this. Ya need to be able to read. I need to be able to hunt. I'll teach you one, if ya'll teach me the other.'

'Yer th' woman o' a Walker,' Rygor said. 'Why do ye need t' hunt?'

'He's goin' out into the winds again.' Itsa was surprised how bitter her voice sounded. 'If he don't come back, I want to be able to look after myself. Trade?'

'If ye will come t' th' clan's place on th' morrow, I will do as ye ask. But if ye were mine, m'lady...'

Itsa waited a long moment, then prodded impatiently, 'Yeah, what then?'

'If ye were mine, I would never leave ye.' Then he pulled away, leaving Itsa staring after him, surprised by the strength in his voice. She started back to the Singers' confine, lost in thought.

CHAPTER TWO

The rain came and went, dampening the air, leaving puddles on the stony ground. The weak sunlight had only begun to dry the buildings when the old Windwalker, who had led Gonard out on his first journey into the Changewinds, came for him again.

Gonard pulled himself to his feet, flexing the crippled foot before placing any weight upon it. He nodded to the medtech as he limped past, paused beside Itsa. 'I came back last time,' he reminded her.

'It was different last time,' she said tightly. 'Ya jig it. I jig it. Even the 'tech gets it.'

'Especially the medtech,' Gonard agreed. He studied Itsa for a long moment, trying to memorise the sight of her slim, tall figure, her fear-tainted scent. But her eyes drew his attention, wide with concern, but flaring with inner determination. She's so strong, why does she need me? he wondered. But this was not the time to ask. 'I will return.'

Itsa merely stepped aside. Head held high, Gonard limped out into the early evening.

The Walker's eyes darted to him. 'Be ye prepared?'

Gonard fell into step beside him. 'I don't know what I'm preparing for.'

The man clucked his tongue. 'All Walkers should be prepared afore th' winds. Ye hae walked once. Why do ye walk th' winds now?'

Gonard glanced thoughtfully at his left forefoot, navigating the twisted toes over an uneven section of cobblestones. 'There is something I must know, and I hope the winds will show it to me.'

The old Walker barked a laugh, startling Gonard. 'Aye. That they will. How otherwise would a Walker learn t' see into th' souls o' others? Th' winds first call us t' see inside our own.'

The settlement began to stir into action as the bell started to toll in the confine. The streets became deserted, even beasts being herded into strong shelters. The gates were hurriedly opened at their approach. 'Here I leave ye,' said the Walker, leaning heavily against the wall. 'Th' gates will be opened after th' passing o' th' winds, an' I will be here.'

With your knife, Gonard added silently, in case I don't come back sane. He recalled sharp blades slicing into the throats of the men and women of the tribe, the ones he had failed to protect. That could be his own fate. Even now it was not too late, he could turn back. He shook his head. No. Over the last two months he had become increasingly aware of some pressure building up inside him, darkening his dreams and tempering his days. He had chosen to go into the Changewinds, and he would now do so.

Gonard trembled, once, the gates towering above him marking the threshold between the firm world of stone behind and the shifting world of mist awaiting before him. He called to mind the last look in Itsa's eyes, shining with determination and strength. Then he forced himself to step out into the fog.

The gates rattled into place behind him. Gonard wandered away, deciding that he didn't want to be too close to the settlement when--when whatever happened. The warning bell was muffled by stone and distance. Gonard imagined people rushing into

homes, bolting doors, clinging to each other as they awaited the approach of the winds. He pictured Itsa and the medtech, waiting in their hall, and drew comfort from their safety. They were his friends. It was good to have friends. And he would return to them.

The slight breeze began to pick up. Gonard lifted his head, facing the wind. Tendrils circled around him, playing with the fringe of his ears, ducking into the hollows of his nostrils. Unlike the first time, he saw no bouncing spheres, no swirling colours. Gonard sharpened his vision, almost certain that he could see the molecules of chemicals borne on the winds. He did not flinch as they settled on him, forced himself to hold still as they trickled past his nostril hairs. He had come to be exposed to them, not to escape their influence.

Sun began to shine weakly through the fog. The plains around the settlement had disappeared, replaced by the same woods as his last journey into the Changewinds, the trees as tall and thin as before. This time Gonard recognised them. He was standing in the clearing outside his Master's cave, under the trees he had for years seen only as a green mass below the ledge outside the laboratory in which he had been created. The knowledge of his surroundings made him suddenly tense, wary.

The lion strode out from the trees. He seemed larger than the last time he had appeared to Gonard. The sun seemed to come with him, glinting the tawny body and burnishing the heavy golden mane. Gonard took an involuntary step backwards, the memory of claws aching across his right leg, knocking his crippled wing. Whether or not the creature was a hallucination caused by the winds, he wasn't going to risk a second encounter.

'Your battle is not with me,' growled the lion. 'Your true struggle lies with another, and it is he I have called forth from you.'

The beast stepped aside, and then sat, the long tail curling around the powerful forefeet. Gonard eyed him warily for a moment, wondering for how long the lion would remain at ease.

Then all thoughts of the beast fled as a man stepped into the clearing. 'Gonard.'

Gonard's legs seemed suddenly weak, unable to bear his weight. His creator stood once again before him, the man who had built him so many years ago. The man he had killed to stop himself from being dismantled. 'Master,' he acknowledged.

Rumfus Max tilted his head back. 'I am grateful that you can still recognise me, considering how you last left me.'

Gonard dropped his muzzle to the damp earth. 'I am sorry, Master.'

'You should be more than remorseful.' The Master came forward, and Gonard's skin shuddered as a hand was placed on his left leg. 'I reclaim you as my own.'

Reclaim? Gonard wondered, bewildered. Have I ever stopped being his? 'May I have permission to ask a question, Master?'

The Master was walking around him, brushing fingers down wrenched scales, analysing healing wounds. 'You have not been taking care of the body which I entrusted to you. Ask your question.'

'You are dead in body.' Gonard flinched as the man tugged at the earring piercing the left ear, a reminder of the City. 'Are you truly alive in spirit?'

'So, neither have you been caring for the mind.' The Master rapped his knuckles on Gonard's head. 'Cast back through your memories. I have been a part of you long before you became a dragon, when you were nothing more than a glittering construction of brain components on my laboratory table.'

The Master was speaking of a time before Gonard's Awakening, when he had been nothing more than a machine, unable to think for himself. All memories before

Awakening were hazy, fragmented. But Gonard raised his head, met the dark eyes. A time before he was placed into a body, when only his brain existed. Nothing sensed but that which was placed within him, the feeding of bulk information from other computers, the insertion of connectors to other mechanical parts, the touch of a mind on his. He said slowly, 'You decided to connect your brain to mine.'

'I fed my memories into you,' the Master agreed. 'You were to be the repository of my knowledge, since the Citadel would not allow me to deposit my "heretical" theories into the main library. The Religious schools were aghast at my creation of a robot in the image of a man. The thought that I might be trying to create a being who might develop a soul... That was too much for them.'

Gonard found himself breathing heavily. A dim awareness flickered through his mind, not substantial enough to be called memory. An awareness of another mind, of pain, of sudden knowledge. 'Your mind, into mine.'

The Master smiled. 'You do remember. The experience was not a pleasant one for me, and I had thought it had been unsuccessful.'

'You spoke to me,' Gonard whispered. 'When the City tried to assimilate me, you freed me.'

The Master shrugged. 'Self-preservation. I had no wish to be bound forever to a crystal, though it was Her influence which enabled me to gather myself together in your mind.' He shrugged again. 'But I am ready now. I will take over.'

'Take over?' Gonard echoed.

'A perfectly reasonable solution.' The Master glanced at the lion sitting calmly nearby. 'Would you not agree?'

The beast regarded them both with his golden eyes. 'All Gonard's choices are his own.'

'What will happen to me?' Gonard asked, trembling.

'Does it matter?' The man strode forward aggressively. 'You are merely a creation from my own hands, given movement and the minimum of emotions. You know for yourself that you are nothing more than a structure of metal and rubber. It took the destruction of another dragon for you to realise that you were not a thing of flesh and blood. Do you not remember? Dragons can only rust. I gave you that body, and now I will claim it back at little sacrifice.'

Gonard dared to look him in the eyes. 'At the sacrifice of me.'

'As I said, little sacrifice.'

Is that how little you think of me? Gonard felt his chest tightening. 'You never believed that I'd be successful, did you? You never thought I could develop a soul.'

'Death changes priorities,' the Master said harshly.

This isn't real, this isn't happening, Gonard thought frantically. It's only the Changewinds, making me believe that the Master is talking to me. But the words of the medtech, spoken after his first venture into the winds, came back to him. Even if it he were only imagining everything, did that make it any the less real? If he gave in now, would he be one of those destroyed by the Changewinds? 'I can't let you.'

'Have you forgotten how we come to this pass?' asked the Master grimly. 'You killed me. You destroyed your own Master. You cannot find forgiveness for your action. You cannot even forgive yourself. I offer you a means by which to atone for your crime.'

'But what about me?' Gonard cried out, the tension snapping his voice. 'What about your plans for me? Aren't they important?'

'Important?' the man sneered. 'Why do you believe that they were ever important?'

‘You created other dragons for the Lord Citizens to hunt, but you didn’t let me be hunted--’

‘No Hunt would have a crippled beast.’

‘You named me, the only one of your creations you ever named--’

‘A name? An anagram of dragon. I could not waste more time than that.’

Gonard took a deep breath. The crisp scent of pine restored a measure of strength to his body. ‘You never believed in me, did you? You never believed that I could really develop a soul.’

‘You don’t even believe in yourself,’ the Master rasped. ‘No one believes in you.’

‘No, you’re wrong,’ Gonard said slowly. ‘Itsa believes in me.’ He felt the world shift back into order. ‘Itsa believes in me.’

‘Not important,’ the Master snarled. ‘You are not important!’

Gonard drew himself up to his full height. ‘But I am.’

The Master smiled, folded his arms across his chest. ‘Then you must kill me again--son.’

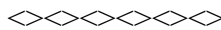
Gonard winced at the heavy sarcasm on the last word. Then anger flared through him, opened the fire chamber in his chest. ‘You are no father to me!’ A gush of flames followed the words, surrounded the mocking figure. The body was covered with dancing fire, but still the mouth grinned, the dark eyes laughed with scorn. Gonard expelled more and more flame, until the trees behind the man were ablaze, the acrid scent of burning green wood filling the clearing. For a second time, the figure of his Master disappeared into ashes.

Finally the man was gone, borne away by the smoke. Gonard hung his head, weary both in body and in mind. He heard the lion stand, stretch, then pad over to him, power hanging like a spice in the rich mane. ‘The Master--my father,’ Gonard mumbled. ‘He never--he never--’

He lifted his head, seeking the answer in the golden eyes. But the lion merely asked softly, ‘He never what?’

The answer trembled on the edge of Gonard’s awareness. ‘No.’ He backed away, refusing to acknowledge it. ‘He must have, or how could he have created me, or protected me. He was my father, how could he not--’

He bit off the last word, banished the thought. But his father’s scorn still burned through his mind, the memory biting deep into his soul. ‘No,’ he whispered again. He would not, could not accept it. Then he turned, and the bunched muscles of his haunches threw him into a gallop as he sought escape from the realisation being thrust upon him.



His legs had finally given out, refusing to keep running. Gonard lay where he had fallen, earth turfed up by his collapse, a few grains of dirt dripping steadily into his half-open mouth. Consciousness came and went, so that one moment he felt the warm sun upon his scales, and the next a cold frost bound his ears to his skull.

I am--running from--something. He pieced the thought together slowly, painfully, over the course of a number of days. But why--hasn’t it--caught me?

It can’t find me. If I stay quiet, it can’t find me. He moved strained, stiff muscles, pulling himself unsteadily to his feet. Then he coughed, clumps of earth flying from his mouth. I must keep quiet, keep moving.

But he had no sooner taken a step then the memories rushed up to him. A dark-haired man, flames, angry faces, a dark-skinned woman--and he threw himself into a

gallop again, trying to drive them all from his mind by the sheer effort of running. I will not think. The words pounded through his feet, striking the ground in grim determination. I will not think. I will not remember.

The plains disappeared behind him. The sun took longer each day to drive the chill from the earth. Gonard's pace slowed, until he spent days walking, noting with simple delight the red-brown tinges of the falling leaves. He was calm, but only uneasily, his mind threatening time and again to shift back to his past. I will not remember, he promised himself. It is better not to remember. I will not remember.

He awoke one morning to find snow falling. Large white flakes spun slowly to the ground, covering hollows and levelling out humps, throwing the world into a featureless land of white. So be my mind, Gonard thought fiercely. Even as the snow blankets the earth, let my mind be covered. As each flake shields a leaf, let a memory be shielded. So I won't remember anymore.

The snow trickled to a halt by midday. But Gonard's nose wrinkled as he smiled. It was all behind him. He was free, his past slipping from his shoulders like snow disturbed by his movement. He was nameless, untroubled. With a heavy burden lifted from his mind, he resumed his journey, breaking through the fresh snow.

A few days later he came upon a herd of large animals. Their dark bodies moving slowly across the snow filled him with a sudden sense of loneliness. He gingerly picked his way down the hill slope, stopping a good distance away from them on the valley floor. A few tails flicked at his presence, and the does gradually grazed away from him. But he was tolerated, for which he was grateful.

The snows came again, burying the ground even further. Gonard noted the futile digging by the animals, their worried whistles. He limped into their midst, ignoring their quick departures, wide hooves skimming them over snow which his heavier weight broke through. He laid down a sheet of flame, melting the snow away to reveal the brown grasses underneath. Then he withdrew, allowing the herd to return and graze in peace.

Despite his efforts, several of the animals weakened and died, their bodies avoided by the still strong herd members. Gonard stood by one fallen buck, feeling memory struggle to break free from its moorings. Another large herd, whistling, blood streaked down his snout. He had killed one of their kind. Part of the horn hung around his neck. Gonard lowered his head, knowing that their simple peace would never be his. So he turned and left the valley, his restlessness driving him on.

More snow fell. Trees groaned under the weight. Gonard kept to the higher, wind-swept grounds, where the drifts were thinner and he could still struggle through. He heard predators howl their hunger in the distance, spotted the dead bodies of those starved by the winter littering the snow. He wondered sometimes, dimly, why he felt no hunger, but that threatened to bring memory back, and so he turned his thoughts away.

But the cold was beginning to affect him. He could feel knee joints stiffening, circulation slowing. So one day, casting an eye up at the grey, snow-threatening sky, he turned towards a canyon appearing between two hills. Caves, he sensed, could be found in such places, and caves were fit shelter for a dragon. He could wait out the rest of the winter there, and continue his journey when the snows had thawed.

The canyon began promisingly, dipping down sharply from the hills. Gonard limped along the uneven floor, relieved to be free of snow for the first time in weeks. He took deep breaths, noting the various musky scents of the small animals hidden in crevices lining the cliffs. I will be your neighbour, he thought to them. And we will awake to the spring together.

But the floor began to climb again, and the walls to narrow. Gonard was forced to admit that there might not be a cave or, if there were, the walls would become too narrow to permit him access to it. He halted for a moment, breathing hard, trying to decide if he should turn around.

A growl echoed from above. Gonard's ears flicked, but he feared nothing from predators. Forward, he decided, for a little longer. I can always shelter in the bottom of the canyon.

A growl came again, and then a heavy weight dropped to his back, sinking sharp fangs into his neck. Gonard whipped his head around, found himself looking into bright, hunger-maddened eyes. The rangy smell of canine seared his nostrils.

Another canine dropped to the ground before him, slashing at his legs with yellowed teeth. Gonard attempted to rear, but the canyon walls penned him in. The wolves had followed him, he realised dimly, waiting until he was hampered by the narrow walls to make their attack. More growls told him that other canines waited to join the attack from above.

With a desperate wrench, Gonard threw himself backwards. The back claws scabbled furiously on the slick ground, his wings scraped against the cold rock walls. The wolf on his back was pitched forward, dropping heavily to the ground. It came quickly to its feet, head held low, tongue rolling between bright teeth.

The other canines leapt into the canyon, several dropping into place behind him. Gonard felt their hot breath against his legs, their teeth slashing futilely against his stiff scales. But for every nine slashes which slipped harmlessly away, the tenth brought a tooth underneath a scale, and it was ripped loose to expose vulnerable skin underneath.

Teeth. The world was filled with teeth, snapping at his ears, tearing into his skin. The walls were narrow, too narrow for him to turn. He struggled to back away, to return to a wider section where he could turn and run. But the wolves hampered his every step.

He paused finally, hand hanging, legs splayed. His breathing was hoarse, drowning out even the sound of canine growls. There had once been a voice, he dimly realised. A voice which would have shouted at him to continue fighting, to never give up. But that voice was gone now. And he was tired, so tired.

I won't even make a meal for you, he wanted to tell the canines. They were becoming more proficient, learning to first tear scales away before slashing at the exposed skin. I won't fill your stomachs, because I'm not--I'm not--I'm not alive.

But I am alive! He heaved himself onto his hindlegs, forefeet straining up the canyon walls. The wolves snapped at his exposed belly, ripping at the long scales. Gonard dug claws deep into the rock, pulled himself close, exhaled all breath from his lungs. And, bit by bit, he twisted himself around, the harsh rock scraping at his cheek and down his belly.

The wolves danced before him, still fresh, still eager. They would not leave him, Gonard realised. Even if he reached the mouth of the canyon, they would follow him. And on the open snow, the advantage would be theirs, their wide paws carrying them over snow while his heavier weight broke through the crust.

He suddenly hated these laughing creatures, these beasts which held his life in their teeth. All eight stood ahead of him now, awaiting his next move, breath misting on the cold air.

A blind fury possessed Gonard. They would not have him! He growled his loathing at the beasts. His chest grew, swelled, reflecting the heat of his anger. Then, with a roar, he released the contents of his fire chamber, spraying the waiting canines with

flame.

The wolves howled, blackened, died. The smell of frayed hair and charred flesh filled the air, and ashes sprayed across the canyon. Gonard closed his eyes, unable to watch as constricting muscles twisted the bodies in a mad dance. Then his fire chamber was empty, and he forced his eyes open.

Eight humps stretched across the ground. Here and there a strip of red muscle was bright against blackened bone. An empty skull grinned in Gonard's direction, the muzzle melted back to the empty eyes.

Stiffly, Gonard moved forward. You would have killed me, he wanted to plead in his defence. You have killed me, and still be left starving. Was it wrong for me to defend my own life?

A whimper drew his attention. He limped unwillingly towards one of the mounds of flesh. The wolf raised her head at his approach, eyes wide with pain. Flame had crisped her forelegs, burnt the skin away from her left side. There was no way she could survive for much longer, but she was alive now, and suffering.

The green eyes sought Gonard's. A question burned deep within them, a request which Gonard could not comprehend. Then he understood. The wolf wished him to release her from her pain. Just one more blast of flame...

The words someone had once spoken hung heavily around him. *'That's your purpose, to kill.'* What else could his flame chamber be for?

'No.' The sound of his own voice startled Gonard. 'No. I will never kill again. I promised. I will never kill again!'

And he gathered his weary legs under him to spring away, once again running from the scene of failure, away from the memories which threatened to break loose and confront him again.

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