

DRAGONS CAN ONLY RUST

Gonard's Journey Book One

By Chrys Cymri

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For Patrick

Adnabyddaist ti.

CHAPTER ONE

The sun returned hazily to earth, drawing in its wake a shroud of clouds red and purple, tinged orange at the trailing edges. Gonard stepped closer to her, shifting his large body across the ledge until their wing-leathers rasped together. The last rays of sunlight glittered a rainbow across her eyes, and picked tiny points of light from her red scales. He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the far away scent of pine trees. This was the best part of the day, when he could stand beside her as darkness came.

But he did not feel his usual peace tonight. Something was not right... He twisted his head to meet her eyes, as the air was suddenly filled with the dusty scent of warning. 'Vomer?'

She turned her wedge-shaped head away from him. 'Gonard, the Master is going to unmake me tomorrow.'

Breath hissed between his teeth. His claws dug deep into the rock, his body stilling in horror. Only his tail moved, slamming painfully against the cliff before falling limply to his side. Vomer moved away from him, to stand alone on the ledge.

Without thinking, Gonard whirled, and dove into the Master's cave. The slope down to the laboratory was almost vertical; his claws left deep marks in the rock as he ran-slid down its length. He swept his wings out and back, opening them to break his speed. The long folds brushed against the dark walls as he landed heavily on the polished floor.

'Yes, Gonard?'

The Master's sharp voice brought him to his feet. The man was bent over the long work table, fingers deep in some delicate object. A hand moved suddenly, first to flick an errant strand of brown-grey hair behind an ear, then to lift an instrument from the table. The bright thing growled, and Gonard averted his eyes from its bright beam.

'There must be a reason for your sudden entrance.' The Master did not look up as he spoke. 'Tell me, or I shall dismiss you.'

'Vomer--is she to be unmade tomorrow?'

The Master placed his glowing rod to one side. He finally raised his head. Gonard retreated a step. The bright, sourceless light which filled the cavern sparkled on the greying hairs. The black eyes bore into his. Gonard turned his own head aside, not daring to face such power. 'Yes.'

The question came out before he could stop it. 'Why?' Then Gonard cringed.

But the Master's answer was calm, unangered. 'I need a dragon for a forthcoming Hunt. The Lord Citizen has demanded a green dragon, and she holds materials which I require. You know as well as I that I rarely maintain a spare creature for more than a few months. I've forgotten why I have allowed her to exist for so long.' The deep voice dropped. 'I have also forgotten why I've kept you.'

Gonard lowered his head, puzzled by the Master's thoughtful tone. He shuffled his feet uncomfortably. One of his claws screeched against the floor, and he stopped. 'Sorry,' he rumbled.

'You have never protested before when I've unmade a creature. Why now?'

Don't you understand? Gonard wanted to ask. Don't you see? She hasn't Awakened yet. All her thoughts are slow thoughts, metal thoughts, bubbling up and

bursting and leaving nothing behind. Nothing more. Gonard closed his eyes, words piling up in his throat. He had only recently Awakened himself. ‘We have been together for over two years--’

‘Which can mean nothing to you. You are no more than a dragon, created by my own hands and the tools at my command.’ The Master swept an arm at the many things of power which filled the cavern. ‘It is impossible for you to feel an attachment to anything. Dragons can’t feel. Dragons can only rust.’

Gonard dipped his snout in agreement. The Master knew. He understood things better than a mere dragon. The man went back to his work, dismissing him. Gonard turned carefully, folding his wings onto his back as he limped to the comforting darkness of his burrow.

Vomer came to his side some time later. She lowered herself to her belly, tucking hindlegs underneath. Their eyes reflected the light stretching down the passageway from the laboratory, casting four bright ovals onto the rough walls. Gonard draped his good wing over her, ignoring the small pricks of pain as she shifted and her body spines dug into the leathery flaps.

Vomer closed her eyes. He felt her breathing still as she discontinued consciousness for the night. For a moment he envied her. Since his Awakening, sleep had become a dangerous realm, from which he might not safely emerge. Sleep gave the metal bubble thoughts a chance to re-establish themselves, take over again. Perhaps it would have been better if he had never Awakened...

A shiver started at his nose and trembled its way down to his tail, slapping the flattened end against the ground. No. He could lose himself that way as well.

He was never far from losing himself. He must always guard his thoughts. To be unAwakened was to be nothing more than a complex body, organs thumping and bones clicking. To be Awake was so much more... Would Vomer ever have a chance to realise that?

How could the Hunt claim Vomer? He gazed at her, his eyes following the long curve of her neck to her head, the long muzzle pillowed on her outstretched forelegs. A strange pain settled in his chest. He shifted his position on the floor, but the pain remained, puzzling in its lack of physical cause.

He finally dug his claws into the rough rock and pulled himself to his feet. The passageway was well lit with laboratory light. Head bent, he watched his feet carry him forward, their dark-blue nearly matching the dark rock, the crippled form of his left forefoot a suitable companion to the claw-scarred ground.

The sourceless light of the laboratory seemed brighter than ever, and he blinked as he left the passageway. Instruments driven by the Master’s power flashed and gleamed from their wall panels. A dull, steady throb filled the air. The sound made Gonard’s legs twitch uncomfortably, and he had to fight the sudden urge to curl into a tight ball around his head. The Master was creating the Hunt dragon’s brain.

The Master snapped one sharp, impatient word, and the power dissipated. He tore off his black eye-covering. Gonard cowered at his glare. ‘What are you doing here?’

Gonard stood still for a moment in the room of his creation. How many years had he lived? Nearly ten. Ten years--and Vomer had only had two. ‘Master, let me be the Hunt dragon.’

‘You?’ The man walked around the table, coming towards him in slow, powerful steps. He is not just a man, he is the Master, Gonard reminded himself, backing away. The Master’s head might only reach the height of a dragon’s first knee joint, but the power surrounding him made the man seem too large for even the cavern to contain comfortably. ‘Look at yourself. The Lord Citizen demands a perfect dragon. You

were twisted from your making, and deformed you will always be. What would he say if I offered you to him? He would spit in my face. That is what he would do.'

The pain was hardening in Gonard's chest. 'Then use me to build the Hunt dragon.'

'Gonard. Enough of this.' The mocking tone cut through his protest. Gonard lowered his head until his snout touched the warm floor. 'Listen to me, dragon. You are merely a creation, something brought to existence by my own hands. I can name every item I used to give you movement.' Gonard glanced up. The Master's eyes flashed blue-black, and Gonard's nostrils flared as the heavy smell of angered power dusted them with fire. 'Vomer is equally nothing more than one of my creations. You are both nothing more than extensions of myself. I can make or unmake you at will. Without me, you are nothing. On your own, all you can do is rust.'

'Dragons can only rust,' Gonard repeated.

'And do you comprehend what that means?'

'Without a Master, I will return to the nothing from which I came.'

'Precisely.' The Master's stern expression suddenly softened. He leaned back against the table. 'But you can be useful to your Master. You usually show great interest in my creating, and I have valued your contributions to my designs. Does this Hunt dragon not interest you?'

Gonard paused. The Master was right. In fact, it had been Gonard who had convinced him that a gryphon's wings should spring from the shoulders, not from the back. He enjoyed the exploration of ancient, decaying texts for illustrations of long extinct beasts, suggesting that in the preliminary sketches the Master add a tooth here, remove a claw there. But the Hunt dragon--no, he could not enjoy that. 'You don't need much preparation, Master. You don't have to do much more than alter the dragon drawings you already have. And I'm not allowed to help you design the interior of a creation.'

'I will not force you,' the Master said stiffly. 'You are dismissed.'

Gonard turned, climbed slowly up the slope to the cool night outside. He stretched out long, golden wings. The right wing had slim, straight lines and a proud expanse of leathery skin. The left sagged, skin wrenched apart, twisted. The night breeze pulled at both. One wing billowed, the other swung loosely, like a collection of rags. He wondered what they were for. Sometimes, as now, when the wind blew against them, he almost knew.

His ears twitched at the scrape of claws upon rock. Vomer pulled herself onto the ledge. Gonard shifted to make room for her, surprised at her presence. She should not have returned to consciousness until the morning. 'I tried to change the Master's mind,' he said, 'but he wouldn't listen to me.'

'It is unimportant,' she replied calmly. 'I belong to the Master. He is entitled to do with me as he wishes. Dragons can only rust.'

'I once believed as you do,' Gonard said slowly. 'That was before I Awakened.'

She cocked her head, moonlight trickling down her neck scales. 'I do not understand this "Awakening".'

How could he explain? How could he make her understand? Gonard looked up at the dark sky, saw a cloud silvered by the half moon. 'What is that, by the moon?'

'A cloud.'

'No. Look at it closely. What else is it?'

She studied it a moment longer. 'A visible mass of condensed watery vapour floating high above the ground.'

'No, look again,' he urged. 'What does it remind you of? Think hard.'

‘It reminds me of the cycle of evaporation and precipitation.’

Gonard sighed, defeated. ‘To me, it looks like one of the dogs the Master created for the Lord Citizen. The cloud looks like a dog trying to swallow the moon.’

‘A cloud is a mass of condensed watery vapour,’ Vomer repeated. ‘How can this be regarded as a four-legged carnivorous animal of family akin fox and wolf?’

‘To be Awakened is to be more than a mass of muscle and organs.’ Gonard glanced at the cloud, now more like a cat, claws outstretched. ‘I only Awakened slowly. A few more moments each day when I was more than the inward processes of existence, when I could think on my own. I had hoped that you would also Awaken.’

They stood in silence for a long moment. Then Vomer said, ‘You once explained to me that all things eventually leave their existence. Even beings like our Master. How do they approach this?’

‘They believe that death is only a step to a new beginning.’ The teachings of the books he had been permitted to read came back to him. ‘They have souls--something beyond the body and mind which holds all that is themselves. And it continues to exist even after they die, taking all that is themselves to somewhere else.’

‘So they never cease to exist?’

‘So they believe.’

‘Then, believe the same for me.’

He studied her, the pain in his chest tightening. She had never spoken thoughts like these before. Was she close to Awakening? If only she had more time, if only he could convince the Master... But the Hunt. The Hunt must go on. The vision of a dragon galloping across a green valley, chased by men and women on horseback, filled his mind. It was the Hunt which allowed the Master to continue creating. The Hunt must go on.

He hung his head over the ledge, gazing down to where the ground and cliff embraced, hundreds of meters below. ‘Dragons have no souls,’ he said softly.

‘Why not?’

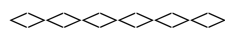
Dragons can only rust. She knew that as well as he did. ‘Souls come from the Ultimate,’ he retorted, ‘Who is as far beyond the Master as the Master is beyond us. It is not within the Master’s power to give us souls.’

Vomer’s sigh made him raise his head. She sat down, her long tail curling around her thin, graceful body. Gonard thought to himself suddenly, She is very beautiful. And he swallowed as she said, ‘I know very little about these things. I do know that your breathing is out of rhythm and you are holding yourself away from me as if I were already gone. I have no concern for myself--I only wish to serve my Master. But you--’ she faltered. ‘I believe it would ease you if you believed that I do have a soul. Believe that I will continue to exist after the Master has used me.’

Gonard nodded, unable to speak.

‘Now, please stand beside me. The night is cold.’

He obeyed, covering her with his right wing. They stood together until dawn, when the Master’s voice called Vomer away.



The morning turned to afternoon, the sun carrying its light over to Gonard’s ledge. He listened to the throb of the Master’s instruments, knowing that they were following the Master’s commands and building the Hunt dragon.

Despite his ache of loss, Gonard found himself wondering exactly how the Master would take Vomer apart. He had seen pictures of human anatomy. Dragons could not

be very different. How would the Master remove the blood, lift out the heart, separate lungs from ribs? Or would he go further in his unmaking, reducing Vomer to the basic stuff of flesh from which she had been made? He wanted to watch--the more of Vomer the Hunt dragon held, the more the hope that some part of her lived on. But he was forbidden to witness the actual building of a creature.

The throb disappeared, replaced by low rumbles. Now he would be allowed to watch. He opened his eyes, saw the Master working over the Hunt dragon. The green body gleamed. He wondered if anything of Vomer remained.

But, he reminded himself, the mist. As the Master had cut into Vomer's body, a thin mist had arisen, dimming red scales and darker skin. Then the harsh sound and bitter smell of the Master's power had forced him to shut his eyes. His head trembled against his forefeet, draped uncomfortably over the edge of the slope. Could that mist have been Vomer's soul?

The Master stepped back from the table. He spoke to his panel of instruments. The table began to glow, a high-pitched hum surrounding the dragon body. Gonard trembled again. As often as he had heard the sound, whether hiding himself in his cave or gazing down from the ledge, he always trembled. The hum became a whistle, high-pitched notes forming the unique birth-song of a new creature. A similar song had brought him into existence. This was the moment of the Master's ultimate power.

The mass on the table twitched. The body firmed, muscles knitting together underneath the thin skin. Then the scales grew into place, hardening under the lights, small ones on head and toes, larger on the body. Two long, black wings fanned open and draped onto the floor.

The Master strode to the head of the Hunt dragon. Gonard saw the large eyes open, blink in the strong light. 'Dragons can only rust,' the Master said into one of the fur-rimmed ears. 'That is the only thing you can do without me.' Then he backed away, and commanded, 'Stand.'

The Hunt dragon's head jerked from the table. The rest of the body followed stiffly, shuddering as the dragon struggled to establish control over the existence which had been suddenly granted to her.

'Move your left forefoot and wing forward,' the Master snapped.

The dragon obeyed. Then her head snapped back. With a screech that shook the cavern, she toppled from the table, her foot and wing twisting and writhing. Gonard found himself straightening with the same scream, as his own foot and wing remembered the pain which had deformed them at his own birth. Sometimes, even the Master's power went wrong.

'Gonard, come!'

The Master's command broke through his memory. Gonard skidded down the slope, halting beside the fallen Hunt dragon. He glanced at the green body. When the power went wrong, the kindest action to take was to remove existence from the creature. This time, the Master had been kind.

'What a nuisance,' the Master muttered. 'Now I must attempt to salvage enough for one healthy dragon from between two. Get on the table.'

Gonard dropped his snout to the floor, then surprised himself by hesitating to obey. One eye watched the man go to his gleaming walls. The other drifted back to the Hunt dragon. The neck had twisted in the fall, breaking the skin open. A thin, white-blue mist swirled over the slit. Something glittered underneath.

Glitter? What could glitter in a dragon's body? Gonard drew back his lips, used his long canines to pull the skin away from the neck. A silvery structure was exposed,

filaments of metal arranged to slide easily past each other. One of the head plates had slipped aside, revealing a mass of intricately laced fibres. The brain of a dragon.

Now he understood. Now he knew why he could rust. Blood and meat and skin--no. Now he saw what a dragon really was, a thing of metal and rubber and plastic, strung together and given the semblance of existence. So convincing that even the machine could begin to believe that it was alive. The mist was followed by a clear liquid, beading on the exposed metal, protecting it from rust.

Vomer was gone. A dragon could not have a soul. And soon he would be gone as well.

The Master turned around. 'I commanded you to get on the table.'

Gonard merely stared at him. A pain was thickening in his chest, behind which something shifted, expanded. 'Why?'

'There is no why,' the Master growled. 'I command. You obey.'

'No. Why--' Gonard shuddered. 'Why did you let us think that we were alive? Why did you create such a lie of existence? Why?'

The Master's eyes narrowed. 'Obey me. Get on that table.'

The ache was building in his chest, his muscles trembling as if something were attempting to move, to grow. Images swirled in his mind. A dog-shaped cloud. Vomer silhouetted against the sunset. A drawing of a human heart. The metal connections of the Hunt dragon's neck crackled under foot as he moved forward. In a corner of the cavern, he could see the red mass which had once been Vomer, now torn apart and discarded. 'She is not alive, and she never was alive.' He fixed his gaze upon the small man before him, and howled, 'Why did you kill her?'

The thing in his chest growled, snapped, exploded. His jaws were forced open as a gush of flame blazed from his throat. Red-yellow fire leapt into one of the Master's instrument panels, the metal bubbling and twisting under the heat.

The Master's face paled. Gonard glanced at the scorched cabinet, then turned his gaze back to the man. 'Now I remember,' the man whispered. 'Now I remember what I created you for.'

'You killed her,' Gonard growled, his mind spinning.

Fear brightened the man's eyes. A long instrument appeared in his hand--the same with which Gonard had seen him remove a hippogryph's leg with one sweep of red light. The man lifted it, aiming the end at Gonard's head. 'She is not important. You are not important.'

The man's words were cut off in a second blaze. The flames surrounded him, burrowing into his coat, dancing along his unruly hair. The black eyes teared, then melted to bone. And then, flesh gone, the bones themselves crisped, until all that was left to slump to the ground were a few bits of gristle and gutted muscles.

The remaining fire blasted into the floor, the hard material smoking and receding from the heat. Finally the chamber in his chest was empty, its deed done. The Master was dead.

CHAPTER TWO

Gonard braced his legs, took a deep breath of the acrid air. He swung his head back to where his Master had stood. You were going to kill me. Why? How could you kill me, when I--

He exhaled. Ash lifted away from the charred pile. I have killed my Master. Gonard closed his eyes. How can I still exist if he is dead? I can do nothing without him.

My existence must end soon. He waited, wondering how destruction would come. A bolt of energy, from one of the Master's power panels? A preset trigger in his brain, discontinuing all further functioning?

But nothing happened. Gonard finally took a deep breath. The laboratory was silent. He had never before stood inside the grey walls without the Master's gleaming instruments humming their wordless tune. He glanced at the one he had damaged, noted the red lights flashing on others. But the sourceless light was as bright as ever, scattering across the shiny floor, hovering harshly over the remains of his Master.

I still exist. 'Master?' Gonard called hopefully. Maybe he was wrong somehow, maybe the Master wasn't dead... But there was no answer from the ashes at his feet. The Master was gone. He had killed him. And now he was alone, in the place of his crime, the light exposing his sin, the Master's treachery.

The *Master's* treachery? Gonard blinked, took a deep breath. The right to end my existence was his, he was my Master. He owed me nothing, I was his. Even if I--

Even if I--what? He felt angered anguish swirl through him again, trembled at the force of an emotion he could not name. '*She is not important. You are not important.*'

The laboratory was suddenly too large, the walls towering and forbidding without the Master's presence. Gonard bolted, charging to the laboratory exit. Beyond was forbidden territory; for a single, terrifying moment, he wondered if the doors would not open to him, and he would be forced to remain forever in the empty cavern. But the wide panels drew apart, and he plunged outside.

He slid to a halt a few strides later, claws screeching across the slick floor. He twisted back just in time to see the doors shut again. Now he had disobeyed the Master for the third time in ten years of existence.

A wide corridor stretched out ahead of him. All this space, once filled by the Master, and now he had removed its purpose for existence. The weight of the mountain above him burdened his shoulders. This had been the Master's place, and he was no longer welcome here.

He hurried down the ivory corridor. Doors to rooms lining the wide passageway slid open as he brushed past. Words and concepts he had not known himself to possess came to him, explaining what he glanced at. A room of computers, still whirring with activity. The Master's library, the ancient tomes standing in cabinets of clear glass.

The door to one small room slid back. The dusty scent of the Master wafted into the corridor. Gonard halted, twisted his neck inside. The room held one chair and a thin bed, nothing more. Clothes and blankets were tangled over and around the bed. The Master slept here. Gonard felt his chest muscles tighten. Of course the Master slept. All living things did. It was he, the dragon, the non-living thing, which did not need sleep.

Or did he? He had spent very few nights of his existence conscious. The Master's planning, he decided, to help create the semblance of life. But why? Why had the Master never allowed him to watch the building of a new creature? Why had he never been permitted to study the internal diagrams of creations? Why let him believe that he was a living thing?

Why waste time on a machine? he asked himself dully. I am no more than a computer with mobility. And the ability to kill.

He hurried away. The scent of burnt flesh seemed to linger in his nostrils, urging him away from the body his flame had defiled. The very walls seemed bright with accusation. He was unwelcome here. He had destroyed the one who had built them.

The corridor began to slope down, spiralling to the right. Gonard followed the passageway down and down and around and around. He had never known that his Master's complex was so large. But finally the air became fresher, lighter. He quickened his pace, sensing that he was near the end of his journey.

The corridor swung down once more, then ended suddenly in a dark panel. A door, Gonard decided. It must be a door. I have never been further outside than the laboratory ledge. Will it let me out?

As if in answer to his thoughts, the panel rumbled to one side. Before either it or he could change their minds, Gonard dived through the opening.

And then he was outside. Outside. His skin twitched as hazy sunlight scattered over him. He had occasionally scented the forest far below the laboratory ledge, the bitter of pine and the clarity of oak reaching up his nostrils. But now he stood within it, and the forest was an alien world.

He whirled and launched himself back at the closed door, screaming for it to open, to allow him back in. The panel buckled under his weight. His claws tore loose long strips of material, the screech of metal upon metal echoing through the trees. Home. He wanted to go home. He belonged in the laboratory, with his Master.

But the Master was dead.

He shuddered to a halt. The gleaming surface of the door reflected his face, broken up by countless marks and scratches deep into the metal. Dark nostrils were flared wide either side of the narrow snout, blue eyes bulged forward. The panel would not open. Not to him. Not to readmit the killer of its Master.

Gonard threw himself away from its mocking surface. Sounds, sights, smells he had never even imagined poured over him, all demanding his attention. He curled desperately into a tight, misshapen ball, protecting his mind from further intrusion.

The thunder of his breathing finally eased. I can't go back to the laboratory, he thought. I must learn to live in this world. I will have to uncurl.

His tail trembled at the thought. Not all at once, he decided quickly. Maybe one small bit at a time. What first? He thought it over carefully. I will risk an ear, he finally decided. I don't mind losing one of those too much--I have two.

The right foot shifted back, releasing the right ear. It pricked upwards, shaking as a breeze ruffled its fringe of fur. Flicking from side to side, it gathered in the sounds of his new world.

Without hesitation, his mind sorted through the sounds gathered. The calm, clear sound was water rippling over smoothed rocks. The whistle from above was the sound of wind circling around the trees. A small whisper brushing past his nose made him open an eye, and he watched a leaf twist away in the breeze.

He unravelled himself. A slight track led into the woods. With one final look back at the door, he limped onto the path. I will leave the Master in peace.

The determination of his first steps disappeared, and he found himself making many detours. A new species of bush would appear, demanding a sniff; an odd sound would break the general buzz, and require investigation. But still the laboratory was becoming farther and farther behind him.

There's nothing wrong with this world, Gonard tried to reassure himself. There's a lot to look at here. More than in the laboratory. He shifted uneasily at the thought. But there was more variety here, and he could feel the breeze lifting the acrid smell of the Master's power from his scales, to be replaced by the high scent of wildflowers and the cool balm of grass.

I am still the Master's, Gonard thought fiercely. I will always be his. Until my existence ends.

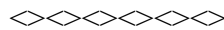
Maybe it would come tonight. He would shut off his consciousness for the night--and not awake in the morning. All he could do without his Master was rust. His hulk would sink into the ground, and the nightly waters would bubble up from the ground to seep under his skin. The metal joints of his body would slowly rust him away until nothing remained.

The day and the tree shadows lengthened. Gonard paused to study his own shadow, stretching away ahead of him, down pathway he had yet to trod. Not today, he thought. Not ever. Tonight, I will shut my eyes, and pass from existence.

He sniffed out a small, flower-lined glen. This was as good a place as any. He carefully lowered his heavy body onto the grass, belly skin twitching as long stalks rubbed against overlapping scales. Very different to lying on stone.

Sunset. Gonard shivered. Soon, now. What should he bring to mind in the last moments of his existence? Vomer, the sunlight catching on her scales. The Master, singing as he sketched the plans for a new creation. And the simpler things--the feeling of sudden lightness when he pulled air deep into his lungs. The warmth of sun on his back. The strength of rock under his feet. The bitter scent of pine trees.

Enough. He had no right to any of these. Shutting off all thoughts of Master and flames, he released consciousness with a sigh.



The sun slowly rose. Skin twitched as rays warmed scales. Machine mind drew together. Chemicals began to swirl, joints creak, wires tingle.

Morning. The thought stabbed, then sank away. The body required raising, before damp ground could penetrate scales and skin. A command sung down a wire. Several chemical compounds were released. The eight leg joints responded, shifting, readjusting, pulling. Command followed command, until the unwieldy body was upright. Eyes were opened, the mind analysing the light waves received through the pupils. Nostrils flared, pulled in the chemicals released by the nearby vegetation.

Miscomprehension. Where was the coolness of cavern? Where were the mixtures of sulphur and hydrochloric acid? How had this come to pass, existence outside the walls of stone?

Nostrils flared again. A familiar chemical compound was nearby. The head twisted, neck wires crossing and uncrossing. There it was. Hydrogen and oxygen. The source might lead the dragon-body back to the place of stone walls.

Foliage blocked the path. Time and again, the body had to be manoeuvred around a cluster of tall trees or sent through a clump of bushes. Small damage was caused to one appendage. The mind dispatched a message to a chemical station located near the rupture. In response, a sealant was quickly manufactured and dispatched to the rip.

The forest finally withdrew, revealing a clear floor lined with moss. The feet sank into the moist greenery as the body limped to the hydrogen and oxygen compound.

A pool. The liquid form of the compound was gathered in a depression hollowing out the ground. The clear, still surface threw up a reflection. A dark blue snout, red-rimmed nostrils, deep-set blue eyes. His reflection.

Gonard blinked. A sudden exhale of breath rippled his face into a scatter of blue. He shuddered off the grip of the machine mind. It had been a long time since he'd been under the control of the metal bubble thoughts. I am Awake once more.

Awake. But he should not have returned to existence at all. He closed his eyes, legs suddenly weak as memories flooded back into him. Vomer, the Master, the flight from the laboratory... Why had his existence not ended in the night? How could he continue another day without his Master? I can't be without a Master. I need a Master.

A twig snapped. He lifted his head, found himself looking into a pair of brown eyes. He blinked, and untelescoped his vision. A woman stood on the other side of the pool, red jumpsuit and green jacket bright against her dark skin. A large branch weighed down her right hand. 'What 'xactly are ya?' she demanded.

She must be a Lord Citizen, perhaps come to visit the Master. 'I am a dragon,' he answered humbly. 'As you must know, my lady.'

"My lady"?' She laughed, quickly and briefly. 'No, I didn't jig. I got no idea what test tube ya crawled from, but if ya take one step to me, there'll be one less "dragon" in the universe.'

Gonard cocked his head, confused. He had never heard a Lord Citizen speak like this before. They knew everything. 'I couldn't come closer anyway,' he said slowly, 'without getting wet.'

'Don'tcha tell me ya're ballsed by a bit of H₂O.' She took a firmer grasp on the branch. 'Ya've been put here to get rid of Outlers like me, right? Well, I've got here, and even a dragon ain't gonna stop me. Got it? So go toddle back to yar master and leave me 'lone.'

He shook his head. 'I can't,' he said apologetically. 'My Master is dead. I killed him yesterday.'

'Don'tcha think I'm next.'

'I didn't want to kill him.' Gonard lowered his head, nostrils nearly touching the water. 'I will never kill again.' He felt solemn as he realised that he had made the first real decision of his existence. 'I promise to never kill again.'

A loud thud followed his words. He glanced at the woman, found her rubbing her hands together, branch gone. 'I go by my guts,' she told him cheerfully. 'My stomach don't trust ya, but my 'testines say ya're beech, and I don't like my stomach too much anyways. Bitches 'bout what I feed it. So I'll believe ya. Where ya headed?'

Gonard simply stared at her for a long moment. The Master's speech had always been slow, deliberate, reasoned. He turned the woman's words over and over in his mind; no matter how much he tried, he could find no logic in them.

'I said, where ya headed?'

'I don't know, Lady Citizen,' he replied, suddenly remembering his place. Speak when spoken to. 'I was merely following the path which leads from the Master's laboratory. I didn't think--I didn't think I would still exist this morning.'

She wrinkled her face at him. A frown, he realised. 'Never mind 'bout that. And don'tcha call me any Lady Citwhat neither. The name's Itsa, and don'tcha bother tellin' me that's like a sneeze, 'cause I've heard it a zillion times. Blame my mum. She named me. Don't s'pose ya've gotta name?'

'I have been named Gonard.'

‘Right. Great meetin’ ya. Hope I don’t see ya ‘round.’ She grinned. ‘Nothin’ personal.’

And with that she disappeared into the forest. Gonard stood looking after her for a long moment. How illogical her speech, how abrupt, how ungrammatical--and she’d not said one word of condemnation to his confession of murder. Was this what Lady Citizens were like?

Lady Citizen--she was a Lady Citizen, a potential Master, and she was leaving him behind. He plunged into the pool, holding his head up and back as cold water splashed up his legs and belly. He must follow her. She was his new Master. That must be why he still existed. He had been meant to be found by her and to serve her. How dared he to question her, to criticise her thought patterns? No wonder she had deserted him.

I must find her. He paused briefly on the bank, shook water from his scales, then struggled through the trees. I will beg her forgiveness. Then she will accept me, and I will have a Master again.

Her strong scent was not difficult to follow. But her thin body could pass through small gaps in the undergrowth, whereas he found it necessary to make many a detour to find passage for his bulk. He must catch up with her. He must.

He pulled himself free of some bushes to find her waiting for him, her legs braced on the path he had been following the day before. ‘Whatcha want from me, dragon?’

‘I have come to serve you.’ He lowered his head. ‘You are my new Master.’

‘I am? Golly gee.’ His ears twitched at the sarcasm which lowered her voice. ‘And what do I do with a dragon? I mean, whatcha for?’

‘I do not have a defined purpose. It is the place of my Master to determine how I might be of use.’ He added hopefully, ‘Your place.’

‘The other Master musta made ya for somethin’.’

Yes, perhaps he had. Strange; he had never asked for what purpose he had been created. ‘I don’t know what.’

‘Things like ya don’t just toddle ‘round a Cit’s domain. I saw ya and I said to myself, “Whoa, there, Itsa child, there’s one of them guards for the domain. So go careful ‘fore he does somethin’ nasty to ya.” Then ya acted real friendly, so I said to myself, “S’kay, just leave him ‘lone to himself.” Then ya come chargin’ up behind me, soundin’ like a digger hittin’ a vein. So I don’t know what to jive now. Ya haven’t been lyin’ to me, have ya, dragon?’

Having been unable to follow most of her speech, Gonard was grateful for a simple question. ‘I don’t lie. I was built by my Master and I served him, but he is gone now, and I must find a new Master to serve. Are you not my new Master?’

‘No, and not yar mummy neither.’ Then a new look swept across her face. ‘What wouldcha do for a Master, if ya had one?’

‘Serve him.’ Gonard hesitated, then asked softly, ‘Where can I find a new Master to serve?’

‘Hmm.’ She circled him, muttering under her breath. He sharpened his hearing, picking out phrases. ‘Big. Must of cost a lot to grow. Worth a bit. Maybe ‘nuff for an Outler...’ She stopped by his tail disk. It curled up nervously under her inspection. ‘Right, dragon, tell ya what. Ya need a new Master. Great. I jig we’re both goin’ to the same place. This path leads to the Citadel. It’s chocked full of Lord Cits, and I’m sure one’ll claim ya. And maybe even me, in the trade. So follow me, and we’ll both get what we want.’

The Citadel. The Master had once mentioned it. The heart of the Domains. Could he find a new Master there? Then it was there that he must go. ‘I will follow you.’

‘Right. This way, then.’ She strode past him and down the path.

Gonard limped into place behind her. She is taller than the Master, he noted. But his attention was drawn to the orderly procession of forest and glades. Ten steps, and grass gave way to leaf-lined avenue. Twenty steps, and the trees drew back to reveal yet another clearing. The pattern brought some logic back to his world. The soft earth soothed his left forefoot, and the toes relaxed slightly from their tight curl. Small insects jumped away as his feet brushed through fallen leaves and green grass. His eyes traced their hops, marvelling at the wonder of life, able to exist in such small bodies.

‘Not a bad place, right, dragon?’ Itsa’s voice brought him back with a start. ‘See that bush over there? Manzanita. Berries grow on those.’

‘And they are edible when green.’ Gonard shook his head, surprised. Why should he know that? My mind is a computer, he reminded himself. I know whatever the Master gave me to know.

‘Good for ya, dragon.’ Itsa began to point out other trees and bushes, giving them their common names. Gonard soon discovered that she paid little attention to his words if he agreed with her, but she strode away angrily if he tried to correct her. He eventually decided that it was preferable to say nothing, merely investigate the samples of leaves and flowers that she brought to him.

‘And this one’s a croan tree.’ Itsa pulled a swollen leaf from a low-lying branch, and held it out on her palm.

An oak tree, crossed with croan and elm, Gonard’s mind corrected. He dutifully sniffed the purple-green blob, careful not to inhale the leaf. Itsa’s salty, sweaty scent also filled his nostrils. He pulled his head back, and they studied each other for a moment, dragon and human.

‘I’m not ballsed by ya, ya know,’ Itsa said suddenly.

But her heart was pounding loudly in her chest, and her sudden, cold sweat dampened his nostrils. ‘Why should you be?’

‘Ya’re the biggest dragon I’ve met.’ She shrugged. ‘‘Kay, ya’re the only dragon I’ve ever met. Big, anyways.’

‘I don’t understand,’ he said slowly. ‘Is size important?’

‘Whatcha think?’

‘My Master was smaller than you are, but he held the power of creation in his hands.’ Gonard thought for a moment. ‘I was always--small--next to him. He was my Master.’

She watched him for a moment. ‘And ya killed him.’

He closed his eyes, the memory searing through his mind. ‘Yes. I will never kill again.’

‘Never’s a long time.’ But her heart rate slowed, dropping to a steady pace. ‘Right, I’ll believe ya.’ She turned suddenly and strode away. ‘Seen a rose yet?’

‘Rose?’ Gonard echoed, once again thrown into confusion.

‘Yeah. A rose. There’s one on Mummer’s. A red one. Slammed into a plastic block just ‘fore it opened so’s to keep it pretty forever.’ Her strides lengthened. ‘The Supervisor kept it in his office. Sometimes, though, he’d bring it out for us low-lifes to see. The only bit of plant on the fardlin’ asteroid. Always wanted one of my own, so’s he could keep his to himself and stop lordin’ it over everybody.’

Gonard halted, baffled. Her tone sounded light, but underneath was a strain of--bitterness, pain, anger, his mind supplied. He didn’t like it. Maybe if he found a rose...

A rose. A flower. He could picture it. Red, many petalled. The smell... He lifted his head, drew in a sample of air. There. To his left.

He whirled from the path, ignoring Itsa's puzzled call. Tall, thick-barked trees blocked his way; he lifted his wings, and squeezed through a narrow opening. A dense growth of bushes was next in his path; he plunged through the branches, snapping them aside.

The bush he sought was small, nearly buried by its neighbours. It seemed to quiver at his approach. He exhaled a warm breath of reassurance onto its green leaves, then studied the red flowers. How fragile they looked. He carefully lowered his snout to them, then yanked back as the bush warned him off with a scrape of thorns.

'Hey! Dragon!' Gonard's ears flicked at Itsa's voice. 'Where are ya? Takin' a leak or somethin'?'

Just beginning to open, she had said. He selected a bud which matched her description. Unsheathing a claw, he extended his right forefoot and sliced the rose's stem. The flower fell into the bush, but the bud was caught by a leafy branch. Ignoring the thorn-pricks, he lowered his head and wrapped his thick tongue around the stem. With the rose in his lips, he withdrew from the bushes and made his way back to Itsa.

She scowled at him. 'Where're ya goin'?' Don'tcha jive ya can get rid of me that easy. I'll warn ya, dragon--what's that ya got?'

He carefully deposited the flower onto her open palms. 'There are thorns-'

But his warning came too late. Her hands had already closed around the stem. A rivulet of blood ran between two fingers, a shade lighter than the petals. Her face held an expression that made him tremble. His tail-disk slapped the ground. 'You are injured.'

She didn't seem to hear him. Her fingers shifted, slowly detaching thorns from skin. Her face was--open. Gonard couldn't think of any other way of describing how she looked. The tightness was gone, wiping the little twists to her mouth, the lines of mockery around her eyes... He was suddenly aware of how small she was, how thin. Even the rose seemed stronger than she was.

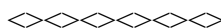
Itsa bent her head. He heard her lungs expand as she breathed in the scent of the rose. He could smell it himself, strong and wild, the richness of earth perfumed with the coolness of grass and the blossoming of the sun.

'Whatcha lookin' at, dragon?' Itsa suddenly demanded, her head jerking upright. 'Kay, so it's nice, right? Real pret. Don't have to go a whole song and dance on it, all right?'

The old lines were struggling to re-establish themselves across her face. He had hoped that the rose would calm her, but she seemed to be angrier than ever. What had he done wrong? 'Sorry,' he mumbled.

'Right. 'Kay. It's gettin' dark.' Gonard followed her gaze to the glimpse of sun permitted by the close-set trees. 'I say we find somewheres to throw our bods for the night.'

As Gonard followed her, he saw her carefully thread the rose stem through a pocket of her jacket.



'C'mon, dragon, wake up!'

Gonard grunted as something thudded into his side. Almost instinctively, his body rolled away from the irritation. His eyes opened just in time to see Itsa, foot outstretched for another kick, lose her balance in surprise. She hit the ground with a thud and a few muffled words. Curses? Gonard wondered. No, obscenities.

‘Right, dragon, s’pose ya thought that’s really funny.’ She stood slowly, rubbing her left thigh ruefully.

‘Funny?’ Gonard repeated, confused.

‘Yeah, ya know, ha ha, guts split and all that shat.’ She stopped brushing bits of grass off her jacket to give him a long look. ‘Didn’tcha get humour mixed into yar ‘tube?’

‘What’s a ‘tube?’

‘Yar test tube. What yar Master mixed ya up in, right?’

I don’t think I was made in a test tube. He got up, and shook himself from snout to tail. I should tell her. But I don’t know for sure, some parts of me could have been grown organically. What should I say?

Itsa pulled something from her pocket and bit into it. The smell of bread came to Gonard’s nostrils. It reminded him of the loaves which had occasionally been brought to his Master, though the piece Itsa was chewing was laced with the dusty scent of mould spores. ‘What do ya eat?’ she asked, her words blurred.

‘I don’t need to eat.’

‘Yeah, ‘course. Ya must get it from the sun. Too big for anythin’ else, ain’tcha?’ She swallowed. Gonard listened, fascinated, as the bread slid its way down her throat. She is so full of life, he thought. Muscle fibres rubbed past one another, tendons flexed and relaxed, the heart throbbed, nerves hummed with messages. He compared these to the metallic squeaks and chemical rumbles within his own body. The Master had never told him that he was alive. But until he had seen the Hunt dragon lying twisted on the laboratory floor, Gonard had just assumed that he was made from flesh and blood. How could he have been so blind?

It is rational, he thought. Only a being of flesh can possess a soul. Not a thing of cold metal and rubbery skin.

Itsa finished the last of the bread, wiped her hands on her bright jumpsuit. Her hair was long, Gonard suddenly noticed, long and dark, with hints of red. She must have had it bound and hidden under her jacket yesterday. ‘Ready to go, dragon?’

His ears twitched. ‘Yes.’

‘Right. Follow me.’ She returned to the path, a breeze playing with a few strands of hair. ‘If we can keep this up, we’ll be to the Citadel by tomorrow. That grab ya?’

She took his silence as affirmation. Gonard limped behind her, wondering at the strange images the very word raised in his mind. He knew somehow that his Master had left the Citadel. Why he had, Gonard did not know. But it was for some dark, shameful reason...

The silence continued, stretching into hours. Gonard found the journey empty without the lectures on plants, as inaccurate as they’d been. He liked the sound of Itsa’s voice. It was not as deep as the Master’s, but far more varied. It could change from one moment to the next, in speed, intensity, emotion. I have talked more to her in two days, he thought, than I did to my Master in two years. He wanted to talk to her now, to discover what other knowledge rested, quiescent until called upon, in his mind. But he was a robot, and should only speak when spoken to. So he listened to his footsteps, crackling leaves and snapping blades of grass.

The path they had been following suddenly curved to the right. Itsa ignored the bend and continued to walk straight on. Gonard limped after her without complaint, though he did wish that she would explain why they were no longer following the trail.

The trees began to crowd together. Gonard found it increasingly difficult to squeeze past the rough trunks, even when he held his wings up from his sides. Then

the small, tall trees withdrew, giving way to wide-trunked but well-spaced giants. Gonard kept his head low, passing underneath their long branches.

‘Ya’re mummer today,’ Itsa remarked. She waved her hand at one of the trees. ‘Oak. Almost lost in the Destruction.’

Gonard said, risking an interpretation of her words, ‘I was quiet because you were.’

Itsa suddenly stopped. Gonard nearly fell over her, only catching himself just in time. ‘Why? Why does me bein’ mummer do the same to ya?’

‘I am not permitted to speak unless I am first spoken to.’

Two rows of white teeth were exposed as she grinned at him. ‘Good thing ya bumped into me, ain’t it?’

‘Is it?’

Her grin flipped into a frown. ‘‘Course it is. I’m gonna tell ya somethin’ important, somethin’ no Lord Cit would.’ She glanced around, then ordered, ‘Come closer.’

Gonard obediently lowered his head. ‘Like this?’

Itsa grabbed his right ear, and whispered into it slowly, ‘Don’t let them screw ya under.’

She released him. He drew his head back and shook it several times, trying to ease the cramp in his ear. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘‘Course not. Gone on for so long ya don’t even see it.’ She took a deep breath. ‘Like where I come from. Bet yar Lord Cit was the same. Tell ya ya’re not so good as them, that only they jig what’s good for ya. Just like I’ve heard all my natural. Do like I did. Stop listenin’ to them. Break it off. Ya do whatcha want to do, and they can all go and fardle themselves.’

He took a step back. Itsa’s face was tinged red under the dark brown, her hands jammed deep into jacket pockets. He could almost feel the tension holding her straight, narrowing her eyes and squeezing her stomach. ‘It might be like that for you,’ he said, picking his words carefully. ‘I was created by humans. I exist to serve a Master.’

‘I was made on a sweaty bed, ya in a ‘tube--what’s the big diff?’ She stepped forward. ‘Well?’

Gonard trembled. He wanted to go back to the cavern. Back to where the only human spoke in logical monotones and he could spend his life sunning on a rock ledge. ‘I don’t have a soul.’

Itsa snorted. ‘Whatever that is. Right. Go ahead. Be fardled. Find yarself a new Master, if that’s whatcha need. I’m my own master, dragon, and nobody else.’

She strode away again. I want a new Master, Gonard thought desperately, hurrying after her. I don’t know about anything else.

‘Listen to me, dragon.’ Itsa’s words pounded out in rhythm with her strides. ‘Ya’ve been told crap. Ya can think for yarself--that’s ‘nuff for anyone. That’s ‘nuff for ya to fight for.’

Branches drew aside to reveal another clearing. Gonard halted, blinking in the sunlight. ‘I don’t fight.’

Itsa turned, her hair swirling like a dark flame. ‘Fardled dragon.’ She glared at him. ‘Right. If that’s how it is, then that’s how it is. I’m not gonna waste any more time on ya.’

She turned to go. Gonard felt his muscles relax. She would leave, and he could resume the quest of finding a new Master without the complications of her conversation.

Then he tensed again. A strange scent had suddenly brushed past his nostrils. Old leaves scattered as he spun around, trying to separate the scent from the dusk of the oaks surrounding them.

‘What’s up now?’

He twisted his head to Itsa. ‘A smell. Like flowers, but not like flowers. Sharper, unnatural.’ He took another sampling of air, and stilled. ‘Humans.’

Itsa planted fists on hips. ‘All right, c’mon out!’

Gonard flipped his ears back, tympana ringing with the strength of her voice. Then he pricked them forward again as two light-skinned men stepped into the clearing. Could one of these be his new Master?

The men, after one quick glance, ignored him, turning to Itsa instead. ‘I am Citizen Philson, of the School of Calvin,’ said the taller one. ‘My associate is the Citizen Bately, of the School of Tai-Chan. What is your name and what School do you follow?’

‘I am Itsa.’ She lifted her chin proudly. ‘And ya know I’m not from any School--yet. I’m an Outler.’

The smaller man whistled, long and low. Philson pulled his lips back in an unpleasant smile. ‘Welcome to dear old Mother Terra. Like the transmat? Going through conscious is quite an experience, I understand.’

‘I got through without goin’ benders,’ Itsa snapped. ‘More’n ya can say. I’ve got the right now to prove my claim.’

‘Yes, I suppose you have.’ Philson sounded bored with the conversation. His eyes flicked to Gonard. ‘Where’d you pick that up? Don’t tell me you smuggled it with you on-planet.’

‘I’ve seen one of them before,’ Bately said. ‘Remember M. L.’s little diversions?’

‘You mean those Hunts?’

Bately nodded. ‘I have seen the vid-tapes. He obtains creatures like that from R. M. Do you think it may have wandered away?’

‘Might have.’

Gonard, trying to be helpful, volunteered, ‘I left my Master’s laboratory two days ago.’

‘Speak when you’re spoken to,’ Philson commanded, then turned back to Bately. ‘Didn’t know R. M. put voice boxes in these things. Could be right valuable, Bately, would you say?’

‘Hey, I found him,’ Itsa broke in angrily. ‘Don’tcha just crowd in.’

‘Found it, did you?’ Philson’s eyes flicked over her in a way which made Gonard’s tail twist uncomfortably. ‘Or did you just maybe wander off with it?’

‘I went on my own--’ Gonard started.

‘Speak when you’re spoken to,’ Philson snapped.

Gonard shut his jaws. How dare he disobey a human twice? These men were like the Master. Their commands were to be followed.

Bately said, ‘Got a grand idea, Philly. Wander up to R. M.’s place, and hand the thing back over. Sure he’d be glad to get it back. Real glad.’

Philson nodded. He glanced at Itsa. ‘You don’t mind, do you, Outler? Seeing as you didn’t walk off with it, did you? And a grateful Lord Citizen can do wonders for getting a claim through Council. Takes more than just sneaking into a transmat chamber, you know.’

‘Right,’ Itsa said sullenly.

‘Then we’ll take you to the Citadel.’ Bately smiled. ‘If the Ultimate enabled you to survive conscious through the matter transmitter, I am certain that you will be justified before the Council.’

‘I said I’ll come. But,’ Itsa added darkly, with a quick look at Gonard, ‘ya might not like whatcha find.’

Philson grinned at her warning. ‘Made a mess, did you?’

‘Not as bad as the one ya call yar face,’ Itsa snarled. ‘Right, dragon, back to yar Master’s place.’

Gonard froze. ‘The laboratory?’

‘That’s the one. Don’tcha want to go back there?’ She smiled. ‘See yar wonderful Lord Cit again.’

His claws dug deep into the damp earth. ‘No.’ He swung his head to her. ‘I don’t want to go.’ The smell of charred flesh biting into his nostrils, floors slippery smooth underfoot, eyes tearing with the heat of dragon-flame... ‘I don’t want to go.’

‘But these men wantcha to.’ Her smile grew, but her eyes were cold, mocking. ‘These nice Citizens, these wonderful Masters ya want to serve. They know what’s best for ya, don’t they? So do what they tell ya to. Don’t that make ya feel good?’

Gonard shuddered. Doesn’t she believe me? Or doesn’t she care? Then another voice, very much like that of his Master, observed, She is an Outler, and she will do whatever is necessary to gain Citizenship.

‘That is enough, Outler.’ Philson clapped his hands together, sharply; the sound jerked Gonard’s attention back to the man. ‘That’s better. R. M. never did give these things the best in equipment--cheap and quick, that’s what M. L.’s said. Just follow us and we’ll get you back home. I’m sure R. M.’s really missing you. Bet that skin comes in real handy when he’s trying to smooth down rock walls.’

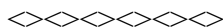
Gonard blinked. The man was not so much talking to him as at him, as if he didn’t think that a dragon could even want to reply. No, not a dragon, he reminded himself dully. A robot. And he turned to limp docilely at the Citizen’s heels.

‘Bit worse for wear,’ Bately said, noting the limp. ‘Have you chanced kicking it, Outler?’

‘Whatcha see is what I got,’ Itsa retorted.

Their voices became no more than murmurs in Gonard’s ears. Every step brought them closer to the laboratory. Every limp marked another stride to the place from which he had fled. Would the smoke have cleared yet? What would the Citizens do when they discovered the ashes of his Master on the floor?

They will probably end my existence. He turned the thought around in his mind, analysing it from all angles. What was to be feared about that? After all, he had not expected to return to consciousness the first morning after his crime. Nor could he survive long without a Master; if no Lord Citizen accepted his service, then it would be preferable to have his existence taken from him, rather than be left to rust.



The sun was beginning to sink to earth when they finally gathered before the cliff face. Their shadows stretched across the ground and washed up against the grey door. Gonard traced the recent marks left by his claws. At that time, he had wanted to return.

‘Greetings to you, Lord Citizen Rumpfus Max!’ Philson shouted, striding up to the panel. ‘We’ve come to return your property to you--grant us entrance!’

Rumfus Max? Gonard's tail twitched. Yes, of course the Master must have had a name. But I never knew he did.

'Grant us entrance, Lord Max.' Bately joined Philson, dragging Itsa along. 'We have one of your creatures in our care. To return it to you--that is all that we seek.'

No answer. There will never be an answer. Gonard lowered his head. He watched grass blades ripple as he exhaled.

'Maybe he don't like visitors.' Itsa's voice brought Gonard's head up again. 'Ever thought of that?'

Philson shrugged. 'Maybe he doesn't have a vid-cam out here.'

'Not entirely normal, is he?' Bately said quietly. 'Just go in, I'd say.'

'Yeah, sure he'd like that.'

'Shut it, Outler.' Philson raised his voice again. 'We are concerned with the lack of a reply, Lord Max. If our presence is unwelcome, we offer our sincerest apologies and ask for your pardon. But, as we fear that you may be unable to answer--'

'Equipment failure, I wager,' Bately muttered.

'--and we believe it would not be your wish to permit your property to wander freely and thereby sustain further damage, we shall seek entry into your domicile to return it to you.'

'How can he say no?' Itsa tore her arm from Bately's grasp. 'Both of ya are just out to get whatcha can, ain'tcha? That's all ya care 'bout.'

'And what did you come to Earth for?' Philson countered. 'Now, shut it, or I'll shut it for you. Right?'

Gonard took a step forward. Vomer suddenly came to his mind--Vomer, who had been reduced to a pile of discarded parts. If only he had acted earlier, he might have saved her, she might still exist... And he thought at Philson, Do not harm her. I will not allow another to be destroyed.

And what will you do? What can you do? '*Dragons can only rust.*' The Master's voice rumbled through his mind. '*That is all you can do without me.*'

Bately ran his hands along the left edge of the door. 'Standard repro socket,' he informed them. He fished a small object from a trouser pocket, aimed it at the panel. There was a high-pitched squeak; then the door rolled back, disappearing into the rock. 'Welcome to the lovely abode of the Lord Citizen Rumfus Max.'

Gonard obediently followed the humans inside, leaving behind the smells of grass and trees. The chemicals worn by the two Citizens made his nostrils narrow to slits; the sharp scent seemed stronger now, rebounding from sleek walls, unable to escape. Every few steps, one of the men would glance back, ensuring that he still trailed them. They imagine me to be valuable, he thought. He took a deep breath of the strong scented air. What value? Pieces of metal strung together by wires and clothed by rubber. '*You are unimportant.*'

They finally reached the main portion of the Master's dwelling. The Master's bedroom was given a quick glance. Philson called out his name, while Bately explored the computer room and the library. Gonard looked longingly at one of the books protected behind glass. *The Beasties of Earthe and Sea*--the title, faded into scuffed spine, drew his mind back to a long day spent in the laboratory, books spread out across the long work table. The Master had sat in a high chair, his hair tumbling over his face as he studied intently the old, finely etched drawings of gryphons and unicorns. Muscles had cramped, but Gonard had not moved from his place behind the Master, watching over his shoulder as each page yielded new wonders and ever more intricate descriptions.

Then only the laboratory itself awaited inspection, the door opening at their approach. 'Has to be in there,' Bately muttered to Philson.

'Yes.' Philson hesitated in the doorway. 'Great place.'

'Seen better.' The two men stared at each other for a moment. Gonard lifted his head to look over them. Did they not smell the acrid scent of burnt flesh? 'Going in?' Bately finally asked Philson.

Philson coughed. 'Hey, you!'

'He's called a "dragon",' Itsa said dryly.

Gonard glanced down at the man. 'What is your command?'

'Go on in.' Philson moved to one side. 'Say a hello to Lord Max for us.'

Flames, a scream, smoke, and then nothing more. Nothing left for flame to consume. Gonard froze for a moment, as the face of his Master burnt red, stripped of skin, muscle, then bone, until ash floated to the floor. Then, head bent, chest tight, he shuffled forward.

Bone, ash, rags--the small remainder of a man's existence lay on the gleaming floor. Gonard stopped beside it, awaited the response of the Citizens. I killed you, and now I lead others here to defile your rest.

But the humans strode past, their gazes passing over the ashes without a sign of interest. Itsa soon returned to his side, allowing the two men to continue the search on their own. 'Serve them right to get nothin',' she grumbled. 'I found ya. I should get the credit. Not them.' She looked up at him. 'Don'tcha think, dragon?'

Gonard hesitated, puzzled. 'Do you ask for my opinion?'

'Who else's? Those 'puters ain't gonna talk, are they?'

'There is no one here,' he said slowly, 'to reward you.'

Philson and Bately wandered back into the laboratory. 'Looks like he was building another Hunt-thingy,' Philson said. 'Look at that burnt panel--maybe there was an accident.'

Bately nodded. 'Wager he keeps records. Look for a vid.'

They were off again. Gonard closed his eyes. How long, he wondered, before they realised? He had expected Citizens to be more intelligent. The Master had always asked the right questions--what was wrong with these men? How could he serve Masters like these?

He shivered. I must have a Master. I must have someone to serve.

A sharp yell snapped his head around. 'Got it,' Philson announced. The men strode through the doorway, Philson grinning, Bately scowling. 'Said there'd be a vid. Now we can see what he was doing.'

'Golly gee,' said Itsa, yawning pointedly. 'Have fun. I'm goin' to crash the cage.'

She marched away. Gonard trembled as the Citizens revealed an image panel, which flickered into existence on an otherwise blank wall. I didn't know that was there. What else don't I know?

The panel began to glow. An image came into focus; the laboratory, viewed from the far end of the worktable. The scene followed the Master as he prepared his instruments, Vomer still lying on the table. With one deft movement, a knife-laser sliced the scales of her red belly. A thin mist rose.

A door seemed to open in Gonard's mind, giving him access to certain knowledge for the first time. Lasers--the word was new to him, but within a few seconds their history, construction, and uses flashed before him. The skin was of a rubber compound, the scales quick growing chemical formations, and the formulas for both danced through his mind.

It was forbidden to watch the Master create, betrayal of one of the oldest commands, but still Gonard watched the destruction of Vomer. His sadness changed to fascination as the Hunt dragon was built. At one point he jumped forward, absently registering the exclamations of the Citizens as he pressed his nose against the screen to study an exposed section of the Hunt dragon's side. A long nerve coil was twisted, set incorrectly in the cavity. That was why the dragon had collapsed in pain. The energies of activation had been too much for the wrongly set component to bear.

The Master had made the same mistake on me. He closed his eyes, confused. How could the Master have been so careless?

'Takes his time,' Philson grumbled. He raised his voice. 'Fast forward.'

The image speed increased, the Master's hands appearing to fly over the body of the Hunt dragon. Gonard hardly drew breath, intent on the construction. That's what I look like was quickly replaced by But if that connection were extended down the leg, it would speed reaction time and Why not site that behind the ears instead?

He shook his head. It is not my place to criticise the Master. But he could not stop the thoughts, the questions, the alternatives racing through his mind. If only the Master were here, so he could discuss them all with him...

'Show that once again.' The screen responded to Philson's command, repeating the image, in normal time, of the Hunt dragon toppling from the table, its voice ringing pain through the laboratory.

Gonard tensed. Once again, the Master called for his dragon. He saw himself slide into the cavern, golden wings gleaming against dark blue sides. 'Get on the table.'

'So, that's him,' Itsa said, coming to his side. 'Don't blame ya for not listenin' to him. Why shouldcha do what he says?' A pause, then, 'Whatcha mean, letcha think ya were alive?'

But Gonard did not answer. He watched the recorded image of himself torch one of the laboratory panels. Then the same flame consumed the Master, the short body contorting in the heat. Itsa whistled, long and low. 'Ya really did it, dragon. Ya really did it.'

'Yes,' Gonard said heavily. 'I do not lie.'

'Better get away from it, Outler,' said Philson in a strange, tight voice. 'It's already killed once.'

Itsa turned towards Gonard. He felt her look deep into his eyes, as if she could penetrate his mind with her glance. Then she smiled. 'No, ya don't lie, do ya? Or go back on whatcha promise, I s'pose. I go by my guts, dragon.' She laughed, then glanced at the men. 'He won't kill me--don'tcha worry. He's an Outler too, now. Whatcha gonna do 'bout us?'

The strong scent of fear dampened Gonard's nostrils. His ears twitched, the double hammer of rapid heartbeats thundering through the cavern. I won't harm you, he wanted to reassure them. I won't kill you. But their wide eyes made him hesitate. Would they believe him? Would anyone believe him?

Itsa did. He looked down at her, reassured by her straight stance, the strength in her fists. She did not fear him.

'Calm, now,' Bately muttered at Gonard. Philson murmured something to the other man, then backed slowly into the corridor. 'Stand still,' Bately continued. 'We will not harm you.'

Gonard relaxed to his words. 'Will I be given a new Master?'

'Of course,' Bately said smoothly. His eyes kept darting to the door. 'No need to worry about that. No need to concern yourself about anything. We will take care of you. We will bring you to a new Master. You will be--'

‘Don’t trust them, dragon,’ Itsa broke in sharply. ‘Whatcha up to?’

‘But they’re going to give me a new Master.’ The tension left Gonard’s chest. They must realise that he would never kill again. Everything would be all right now. He would have a new Master to serve, new duties to perform--and the questions which had disturbed him over the last few days would disappear. He would have a Master’s thinking to do again.

Gonard suddenly jerked his head up, ears flicking furiously. ‘What’s wrong?’ Itsa demanded.

‘That sound.’ Could she not hear it? A high-pitched series of notes, repeating over and over, becoming louder and louder. He knew them from somewhere, if only he could remember... But the noise made it hard to think. It only it would stop for a moment, let him remember...

His front legs collapsed. He stared at the floor, wondering why he had fallen. Then his hind legs gave way, spilling him across the warm surface. Itsa swore as she jumped out of his way; then her voice rang loud and clear, ‘What the shat is goin’ on?’

‘What can be made can be destroyed. I’m just mixing up its brain.’

Now Gonard recognised the noise. It was the sound of a dragon’s mind being activated, the song of his creation. The notes which had once called him into existence were now being used to block his thoughts and paralyse his muscles. He felt consciousness swirl away, the song pulling him down into the deep blackness of nonexistence.

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