

Dragons of the Deep

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The first thing Retha became aware of was a lack of awareness. It wasn't quite the same as being in a dream and realizing she was in a dream, because no matter how hard she tried she could not wake up. She couldn't see anything. The darkness around her was absolute. And yet it wasn't darkness, for that implied that she could sense the absence of light. She floated in a sea of nothingness, an absence of everything including form. She could think, and her thoughts were all there was in the universe.

That, too, was incomplete. There were parts of her missing. She could tell by the frayed ends of memories she found, remembrances that didn't fade into obscurity, but rather ended abruptly as though severed. She knew her name was Retha, but not who named her. She remembered children, but not a father. She could recall a dozen faces and a dozen names, none of which matched each other.

Damage assessment. Confirm operational capability.

The voice had come from outside, from beyond the veil of shadow enclosing Retha. She searched for her voice, some way to respond. She desperately needed that connection, a way to extend herself beyond her prison.

Minimal damage, another voice said. Retha was surprised to realize it was her own. Engines online. Weapons system at ninety-eight percent. Navigational relays ready for transpatial shift.

The words meant nothing to her. It was as if she shared her own mind with a stranger, one who responded to stimulus like a machine. *Machine*, the thought echoed in her mind. She remembered machines. Great hulks of alien metal hurtling lethal bolts of energy and the streak of missiles through the sky, of molten craters that once were cities, and the stench of burning death.

I am Retha, first gunner's mate aboard the Tethys in orbit around Sargo. I was in a battle. We were fighting the aliens. The Churls.

She sensed a change in the nothingness. There was sensation, a trickle at first, like dormant limbs returning to life. She felt the pin pricks of awakening nerve endings. She flexed her fingers experimentally.

Warning. Primary plasma cannons now armed. Long range subspatial disruptors in search mode. Specify a target?

“No,” Retha said, finding a voice by instinct. The words weren’t actually spoken, not from her throat. Thought flowed along nerves to relays, relays conveyed the impulse to a circuit, and the sound emerged from sophisticated synthesizers. The explanation was there before she could think to ask. “What’s happened to me? Am I wounded?”

Weapons system stand-by. Initiating damage assessment protocol.

“That won’t be necessary,” a new voice intervened. “You mustn’t fight it, Retha. Allow yourself to become one with your new abilities.”

Retha tensed. “Who are you? Where am I?” The questions came so fast they crowded her mind, choked off her reason. She knew she was skirting the line between sanity and the abyss, just as she could feel the input of a thousand data streams just at the edge of her perception. Her awareness wasn’t limited, it was larger than she could comprehend.

“Relax, Retha,” the new voice soothed. “You are safe. The tests are complete. The integration of your mind with Tiamat is progressing. It will take you a little time to get used to it, but you will.”

“Used to what?” Retha demanded. “And who is Tiamat? The last thing I remember is...”

“Yes?” the voice prompted. “I am very curious as to what you actually can remember. Do you recall the battle?”

A great sphere, miles in diameter, its surface bristling with weaponry and armored so thick that nukes couldn’t penetrate. Blue and violet rays of light lancing outward, the orange flashes of ships exploding, the screams of dying men and women filling her ears...

“I remember some,” she said. “Where is my ship? Was it hit?”

“Yes.”

“And the fleet?” she asked eagerly. “What about the fleet?”

“There were no functioning spacecraft in the system when I arrived,” the voice told her.

“Are you with the fleet from Emeron? I heard they were sending ships to help us.” She could feel connections in her mind, pathways that didn’t lead to memories or anything else she could identify. She toyed with one and felt herself expand exponentially, as

though there was a well inside herself that led to someplace large and powerful. It frightened her.

“Emeron was destroyed by a Churl strikeforce two days ago,” the voice responded. “I must assume their fleet perished as well.”

Retha’s mind reeled. She’d had friends on Emeron. “Two days ago?” she repeated. “We were just talking to them. To their fleet, anyway. How long have I been unconscious?”

“That is difficult to answer.”

“Well, what about Sargo? How is my planet holding up?” She could hear the desperation in her own voice.

“I’m sorry, Retha,” the voice said sadly. “Sargo is gone.”

Retha tried to pull away, to withdraw from what she was hearing, but although the void encasing her was vast, there seemed no place for her to go. “That can’t be,” she said distantly. “I have children on Sargo. They would be in the shelters, miles below ground. Maybe you could check...”

“I have checked, Retha. Very extensively. Sargo is a barren rock of cinders and ash. The Churls have destroyed your world. They destroyed the shelters. They killed everyone.”

Retha said nothing for a long moment. She had known when the alert was first sounded, when she’d boarded the shuttle that would take her to orbit and to the warship she served on, that there was a possibility of defeat. Mankind had fought the Churls for a long time, nearly a century. As the weapons of man grew stronger, so did those of the aliens. They never negotiated, they never showed mercy. It was as if they had one purpose in life, to destroy any other race they encountered. And they were very, very good at it.

Yet if mankind had one dominating characteristic it was the ability to survive. No other intelligent race had ever given the Churls so much trouble, had been so difficult to extinguish. It was that same domineering optimism that drove people to expand the frontiers of human habitation, to colonize new worlds, to rebuild on the ruins of those who had faced the aliens and lost. Always, always, Retha and those like her had faith that the battle could be won, that though the Churls might come they would be turned away, the serpents tamed.

“So,” she said, finally finding strength to speak again. “I am the only survivor?”

“No, Retha,” the voice said. “You did not survive.”

“Ah,” she responded, letting that sink in. “That would explain why I can’t see. Am I in Heaven, or the other place?”

“That is something for you to decide,” the voice responded. “As for your vision, allow me to correct that.”

Retha felt a tickle in her side. It moved deeper, much deeper than it seemed possible, until the world was suddenly filled with brightness, blinding her with light as she had been sightless in shadow before. Objects took shape quickly around her. She saw a room of cold unpainted metal, a polyhedron of flat walls pointed at her from all sides, all angles, and Retha realized that she could see completely around herself. Not just three-sixty vision, it was *global* vision. The walls were covered with machinery, dials, indicators, viewscreens, all alive with activity. The only thing she couldn’t see was herself.

“Is that better?” the voice asked. “Forgive me. I am still making connections. The human brain has millions of nerve endings, you know.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Retha demanded. She felt fear circling the edges of her thoughts, but it was distant. It was almost as though she had lost the capacity for it. Too much had happened, she had seen too much carnage and terror and experienced too much loss to be afraid for herself anymore. She wanted to weep, and could not. She wanted to close her eyes and shut out the confusing reality surrounding her, and could not. She wanted to die.

The data began to sort itself, becoming a rapidly changing flux of sensations. There was a sense of a great amount of mass beyond the polyhedral prison. She was connected to it intimately, feeling the pulsing energies of great machines like extensions of her own body. There was more to see than the multi-faceted shell around her. Just by focusing her attention, Retha discovered she could see through her other senses, and far beyond the visible spectrum. She was surrounded by a massive ship, and all around her were stars, thick clusters of them swirling streamers of solar fire in an hypnotic dance of blazing light. She willed the view to dim, and the back of her mind knew she was closing off spectrums, eliminating x-rays and gamma radiation, narrowing the visible field to that space between infrared and ultraviolet that a normal human was familiar with.

But I’m not normal anymore, she realized. “What have you done to me?” she said. Speaking wasn’t something she had to think about, just like she wasn’t actively thinking about all the millions of components now attached to her body, the thousands of miles of circuitry she could feel stretched out away from her. If she thought about it, though, she could feel the connections being made, the microscopic relays that carried commands from her mind to the voice synthesizer, that carried images from the viewers to her, and the commands that radiated steadily out from her to the ship.

“Do I really need to answer that?” the voice asked.

“No,” Retha responded. “I’m hardwired to the machinery. How much of my body survived? Do I even have a body anymore?”

“You’re taking the realization quite well,” the voice commented. “As I told you before, you did not survive. I found the wreckage of your ship on your smaller moon. It looked as if the pilot had managed to make a crash landing there, but Churl ground units negated the effort. You, I believe, were already dead before that happened. I salvaged your frozen brain from what was left of your body and revived it.”

“That’s impossible,” Retha argued. “Medical science hasn’t advanced that far yet. You’re lying to me.”

“Am I, Retha?” The voice sounded bemused. “What do your senses tell you? You are directly linked to a computer, Retha. It is the most complex computer ever designed or constructed. In turn, the computer controls a ship like none other in the history of man. You have become the ship, Retha. You know this to be true, so how can you explain it? The answer is simple. Give a man a task and nothing else to occupy his mind, and he will pursue answers doggedly until the task is accomplished. Convicts in prison invent tools and weapons from seemingly nothing because they have nothing else to do. Likewise, I have learned to see what others have not because I could do nothing else.”

The voice fell silent. Retha’s awareness continued to expand. There were mighty furnaces of energy here, like nothing she’d ever heard of. Titanic forces lay dormant but ready at her virtual fingertips, weapons that might tear a planet’s surface to shreds. And there were factories, quiet now but resonating with the promise of purpose. Nowhere, however, could she find the source of the voice.

“You haven’t told me who you are,” she pointed out after the silence had gone unbroken for some time. “Or where you are. I can’t see you.”

“You aren’t looking in the right place,” the voice said. “I am behind you. If you have altered your exterior vision filters to the human range, I might appear as a small moon. Actually, I’m not the moon, but I am inside it.”

Retha could see it, an irregular planetoid nearly as black as the space around it, made visible only because of the stars it eclipsed. “Is that your ship?” she asked.

“No, it is actually a moon. Tiamat was my ship. But Tiamat is now you.”

“Tiamat?” Retha asked. “I’ve heard that name before. That’s the name of the ship?”

“It is the name of the computer controlling the ship as well,” the voice said. “And you control the computer. You have to understand, the ship is far too complex for your mind to grasp. Using a machine interface was the only solution.”

Retha flared angrily. The ship responded. The engines growled to life making her leap forward. Weaponry clawed at the vacuum and chewed at the fabric of space. Controls clamped down almost immediately. *Emotional reactivity dampener in effect*, the computer told her. *Do you wish to specify a target?* Retha forced herself to be calm, but she still eyed the distant rock with cold temptation.

No, she said subvocally. Tiamat seemed to be able to hear her thoughts. *Sorry, I'm just frustrated.*

Complying, the computer responded. *Weapons on standby. Autonomic control restored.*

Thanks, Retha replied and strangely did not feel foolish for doing so. Aloud, she said, "I think I deserve a better explanation."

The voice was silent again for a time. She felt the world around her shift, the light and sound blurring, twisting into a kaleidoscope of mixed sensory input. It snapped back to normal and left her dizzy. "There," the voice said at last. "That was the last one. The medical nanites have been disengaged. How do you feel?"

Retha started to respond but hesitated. She could feel the entire ship. All of it. Like her own body, but it was steel and plastic, carbon fiber and diamond coating, it was lubricants and superconductors, magnetic fields, bulkheads, missile launchers, plasma cannons, factories and robots of every conceivable type and function. She could feel hangars for smaller spacecraft, one so large a Sargoian dreadnaught could have easily fit inside. There were components that could sift the fabric of reality and beyond into the weird realm of quantum flux, dipping through holes in the universe to sense things light years away. There was space for humans, too, miles of tightly packed corridors and sleeping areas, food storage and medical facilities. And there were the engines, two of them, each more massive than the entire warship she had once served aboard. Their specifications were there at the tip of her thoughts, ready for the asking. Lightyears meant nothing to her now. She could fly between the stars on wings of subatomic flame, skipping through space as lightly as a swallow upon the wind.

"My god," she exclaimed softly. "What have you done?"

"What I set out to do nearly eighty years ago, Retha," the voice responded. "I once had a wife, and children like yourself. My world was called Terrestria, and it was a jewel among jewels. We built cities of gossamer spires and lived in peace undreamt of. Unlike most worlds, we embraced our technology and depended upon it. We utilized robots to labor for us, giving us freedom to follow our pursuits wherever they led. I had a name then, when I still had a life worth living for. It doesn't matter now."

The voice paused. It was growing weaker, the weight of exhaustion pulling the speaker down. "Then the Churls came. They had been a distant rumor until then. We'd heard of

the first contact, of how the cargo ship *Mushu* arrived at Aurora only to find a world on fire and ten thousand Churl ships waiting. Their last broadcast, the cry of warning, was already legendary. Yet like most others we did not believe we were in danger. Aurora was hundreds of lightyears away. We should have been safe. We quickly learned that safety is an illusion.

“The alien fleet filled our sky and blotted out the sun. We sent our ships against them, our finest engines of war commanded by humans and crewed by robots. We held out for a long time, Retha. We actually destroyed them. Devastated the alien fleet and drove them away. But we were too quick to celebrate. A year later they returned, more terrible than before. I needn’t tell you the eventuality. Terrestria is no more. It will be the same for all human worlds eventually. Churls are not alive in the sense we know, they are a force of nature. They are the very incarnation of Death. They have surrendered themselves to their unholy cause and are no longer capable of doing anything else. I feel no remorse in planning their extinction.”

Retha felt dizzy. The voice was sad, yet filled with a powerful anger, a hatred that had burned itself down to something pure and terrible. The most frightening thing about it was that she could empathize. The words carried the ring of inevitable truth.

“I was a scientist,” the voice continued, “a specialist in the mechanics of life. Already my people could look forward to lifespans twice that of our brethren on other worlds. Oh! The secrets we might have shared had we not been so vain. All was not lost, however. But I chose not to help my fellow man by giving to them what I have learned, what I managed to take with me as I fled the final fires of destruction. No, I sought for vengeance. And now I have it in you.”

“You expect me to fight the Churls by myself?” Retha asked aghast. “Even with all that I have, that’s not feasible. The Churls travel in huge fleets, and I’m only one person. One ship.”

“You will not be alone for long,” the voice said. “I named you Tiamat for a reason, my dear. You’ve heard the name but do not recall the legend. Tiamat was a dragon, the very first dragon. Mother to all the dragons that followed. A primal force of creation itself. You have within your memory banks complete schematics for building others like yourself. You will have many children, Retha. Many more children than you could ever have had in life.”

Hyperspatial distortion detected, Tiamat said to Retha. Long range scan indicates possible Churl advance unit.

Retha’s startled reaction kicked the ship into motion again. The engines came alive, clawing at the vacuum to turn the ship to face the incoming vessel. She flexed muscles she no longer had and felt the weapons respond, coming to life with eager readiness.

“What is it?” the voice asked, sounding worried and frightened. “Have they come back?”

“Seems so,” Retha said. “One of them, at least.”

“Only one?” the voice said. “Are you certain?”

Retha let her thoughts flow out along the lines of force connecting her to the ship’s long range scanners. “Yes,” she answered. “But it’s big.” She hesitated in uncertainty, not sure whether she should stand her ground or leap out to meet the onrushing enemy. So far, the enemy ship had shown no sign that it even knew she was there. That would change soon, she knew.

“In the beginning,” the voice said incongruously, “there was God. God was all. Then God separated the waters from the firmament, the substance of matter from the fabric of universal energy, and he saw that it was good. And he breathed a great sigh upon the waters. That sigh formed a mist, and the mist became a Dragon. You are the salvation of the universe, Retha. You and Tiamat. Like Dragons, you will spread your wings and soar across the skies, mighty predators in search of the destroyers. That is the purpose I have lived so long to fulfill.”

“What if I don’t want it?” Retha complained. “You egomaniacal fool. You didn’t stop to consider whether or not I would go along with it. Why should I do it? Why should I spend my life chasing revenge?”

The voice sounded surprised. “You’re life is over, Retha. The CHurls took it. Just as they took the lives of everyone you knew, everyone you might have known, and as they will eventually take the lives of every last breathing thing in the universe unless we stop them. That is why you should do it.”

“But why do you need me at all?” she asked. “Isn’t the computer smart enough?”

Churl unit dropping to normal space and closing fast, Tiamat said. Shall I begin weapon deployment?

Yes, Retha responded quickly. She could see the hulking enemy craft now, a ragged sphere of scarred metal that resembled a half-rotted peach. The space around it grew thick with tiny masses, and she knew there were missiles coming for her before Tiamat told her so. She waited until they were well within range before swatting them out of the sky. She felt like a lion sweeping flies from the air with a huge clawed paw. She kicked Tiamat’s engines and raced forward to close the gap. She reached for the Churl warship with arms made of searing hot particle beams. Another cloud spread out from the sphere, and her sensors told her the warship had deployed individual fighter craft. She allowed them to close in on her before letting her smaller guns start their work. In seconds, the cloud of alien fighters had become vaporized metal and whirling shrapnel.

“Look at what you face,” the voice said. “They are alive, but do not live. They can think, they can reason, they can learn. For all of that they are no more than biological robots. Tiamat could fight without you. It could use its robots to gather the raw materials, its factories to build another like itself, and so on and so on. But if Tiamat didn’t have a soul, it would be no better than the Churls.”

Retha flashed by the side of the Churl warship, raking it with talons of energy. It was larger than Tiamat, but not by much. Tiamat was longer, streamlined, built for high speed maneuvers despite its enormous mass. The alien ship couldn’t compensate quickly enough. Retha dove on it again, hurling her rage down upon its surface, digging into its bowels as her powerful magnetic shields deflected the mammoth energies hurled at her by her foe. She lost herself in the lust of the battle, in the frenzy of destruction, and barely heard what the voice was telling her.

“Do you know why humanity has never fought back with automated war machines before?” it went on. “I think it’s the nature of the war that dictates the choices of weaponry. The Churls are bent on the destruction of life, so we must fight them with the essence of life. It must be a living mind behind the combat decisions. Else we risk unleashing a great demon upon ourselves and becoming the same as the Churls. We must win the war but we must keep our souls in the process.”

Retha felt pain in her side as the Churl warship’s weapons slipped past her shield. *Damage report*, she demanded tersely as she redoubled her attack.

Minor buckling of hull plate 41, Tiamat responded smoothly. Repair units dispatched. Overall hull integrity at ninety-one percent. Weapons systems at eighty-five percent.

Retha howled with glee as she stabbed into the heart of the alien ship. Her sensors told her exotic gasses were streaming around her as the Churl’s air bled from the gaping wounds she had delivered. Neither ship was moving now. They were locked in a dance of death, trading blows at point blank range. It was over so suddenly that Retha missed it. Her strikes found the power center deep in the bowels of the alien ship and tore it open. A tremendous explosion engulfed the opposite side of the Churl ship. It shuddered in death and its weapons fell still. The shields remaining around the sphere collapsed. Retha had won. Any surviving Churls on board would die as the ship drifted powerless through the empty vacuum.

“It’s done,” she announced. She listened as Tiamat read off a report on ships resources and damage control efforts. In her mind’s eye, she withdrew her talons from the berserker’s carcass. The engines worked equally well in all directions and she used them to ease herself back and away. She envisioned great dragon’s wings sweeping backward, propelling her away from her enemy.

“Do not mourn for them,” the voice advised.

“Why would I?” she retorted. Strangely though, she did. Mixed with her hatred was pity. “Tell me, what happens to the dragons when the war is over? What are we supposed to do then?”

“Then you will face the same choice I will,” the voice said. “You can join those you loved and allow yourself to die, or you can learn to live again. I don’t have all the answers, Retha. No one ever does. All we can do is ask the questions and see where that leads us. That’s what it means to be alive.”

Retha saw the planetoid begin to rotate, turning its profile parallel to Tiamat. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll do it. I’ll take the war to the enemy. I’ve got nothing else to do.”

“Boredom is the father of motivation,” the voice said.

“I thought the saying was necessity is the mother of invention,” she returned.

“That too.”

The tip of the planetoid flared with golden light. Retha dialed up her vision, reading the spectra of the emission. Engines, not as powerful as her own, but larger. Very large. She probed the planetoid delicately. The voice chuckled.

“You’re a ship, too, aren’t you?” Retha asked softly, awed by the size of the craft she was watching. Tiamat and the dead berserker both wouldn’t have made half the mass of the craft behind her.

“Yes,” the voice replied. “I was already old when my world died. How else do you think I learned so much about neurochemistry?”

“You’re a dragon like me?”

“No, Retha. Not like you. I can defend myself, but I am not capable of offensive strike. This vessel had one purpose, and that purpose was Tiamat. I’m done now. Decades of research and construction are behind me. I’m tired, Retha. So tired.”

She watched the ship accelerate. The fabric of space was bending around it. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I think it’s time for us both to fly,” the voice answered. “Don’t you?”

Retha turned her attention to the stars surrounding her. Somewhere out there were her prey. “Yeah,” she said, her voice emerging from the synthesizer as a regal whisper. “Will I see you again? I don’t think I’m ready to be alone.”

“You’re never alone,” the voice said. “You have Tiamat. Besides, it’s good incentive. You want a companion? Make one.”

“And where am I supposed to get a brain for it?”

“The same way I did,” the voice told her. The planetoid sized ship was rapidly diminishing in Retha’s vision. She sensed the hyperdrive engines engaging. “Good hunting,” the voice said, then the ship dove into hyperspace and was gone.

Retha remained where she was for a long time. She searched inside herself, and she watched the stars. She listened to the currents of subspace, and she tasted the winds with her expanded mechanical senses.

To defeat an enemy, she recalled the words of her combat instructor from her days at the academy, one must understand the enemy. And to understand the enemy, one must become the enemy.

Almost, she decided. *Come on, Tiamat, she said subvocally. Let’s you and me find some trouble before it finds us.*

Agreed, the computer responded with more humanity than Retha expected. She shrugged it off. Sargo was gone. Her family was gone. She couldn’t change the past, but there was definitely something she could do about the future. She gazed at the waiting stars through Tiamat’s eyes.

Here there be dragons.

Retha spread her wings and flew.