
Out there in the deep dark,
Away from the trodden lanes and secret paths,
In the darkest shadows between the stars,
There are places where angels and demons dare not tread.

Out there, there be *Dragons*...

The world was a twisting, dizzying morass of light, pain and motion. Laser and grazer fire vaporized battle-steel, as the bulkhead before her vanished in a blaze of raw, elemental force. Grav plates failed, and the floor below her heaved as heat bloomed barely three metres away, boiling through durable metals and plastics. The world whirled and spun as the ship she had been aboard sped away into space, shedding debris and atmosphere as it spat fire into her assailant.

The two cruisers exchanged fire at knife range: missiles raced back and forth, met by counter missile, point defense and electronic jammers; lasers and grazers blasted apart armour plating and superstructures, vaporizing metres wide swathes of metal, plastic and flesh; gravity lances roiled and plasma projectors threw tornados of energy back and forth.

Secondary explosions rippled through the two ships as they left her in the void, spinning and futilely grasping for something, anything to save herself with.

An eruption of light dazzled her vision - a fusion bottle failing as one of the two ships died. Shortly after, a second eruption, just as vibrant, glared before her. The 'victor' dying moments after it's opponent.

A piece of debris, smaller than she could measure smashed into her helmet, starring her vision and shattering the tough crystalplast of her visor. Atmosphere leaked from her shattered helmet and she gasped for air that rushed from her lungs. Stars swam across her vision as the pain of an unimaginable cold washed through her skin.

She reached out for something, *anything* to save herself with as her vision went dark.

Somewhere in the back of beyond, nestled in a corner of space either forgotten or ignored, a lonely world without a name - just an outdated, computer generated identifier number - continued its long, placid orbit around its small, but generous primary.

Habitable, and previously terraformed with the increasingly vain hope of attracting colonists, the world was too out of the way to attract interest, even from dishonest men and

women. It was, by and large, the back of beyond and the universe seemed to agree - treating the place as some grand dumping ground.

Littering the endless plains were the dead husks of war machines, star-faring vessels and other constructions besides. Left to rot and rust, the dead hulks littered the terrain like some haphazard city from before space flight, resting on their sides, backs, ends and so on.

On the hull of a dead starship, broken in half by the violence that brought it to this graveyard of technology, a human woman rested, face down against the warm metals and plastics of the surviving structure.

Human was an odd word for her, as it described something she was - and at the same time, something she wasn't. Since waking on this world, half-dead and with barely the strength to support herself, she had been...different. Her body had been...warped. When she initially awoke, almost a third of her had been disastrously mangled or broken in some way. Now - some six months, three weeks and two local days since - she was beyond peak physical condition for even the most determined of athletes. More than that, her body had been subtly reshaping itself since she awoke - slowly and gradually. She hadn't noticed the changes until she realized the hatch-frames of the abandoned ships she frequented began lowering to inconvenient heights.

Just as surprising, she realized, her mind worked with greater focus and efficiency. Her memories were clearer, and her ability to recall specific details was becoming increasingly acute. Multitasking was easier, and learning was swifter. Logical conundrums became more straightforward, and she could perceive the cause and effect of multiple courses of actions at once, before making a decision.

She had been able to use her expanding mental capability to suss out the issue of long term survival. With a judicious amount of salvage, and no small effort of tinkering and jury-rigging, she had been able to cobble together the niceties of a powered campsite. She had to grant, though, with her current experiments, she might have to rebuild some of her amenities to better suit her changing body.

Moving as little as she could, she pulled out a protein ration bar - little more than a compressed block of concentrated proteins, vitamins and various supplements - and idly gnawed on a corner. Such bars were designed to be portioned off sparingly, and a single one could sustain a person for weeks. She could polish off a bar a day, and surmised the excess intake might speed along whatever process that had taken hold of her.

A part of her lamented her situation - she was still prone to momentary fits of depression. They were fortunately few and far between, but they weren't abating as she settled into her new lifestyle of being marooned. She acknowledged, somewhat guiltily, that eating as she did was one of the few coping mechanisms she had to calm her nerves.

Her hypothesis concerning excess intake did seem to be validated, however, and she was both concerned and fascinated by how her body was changing.

Before, she had barely topped a meter and a half in height, now she was almost three meters tall, and nearly two meters wide. Her frame filled out with muscle, faster if she indulged herself, and she grew broad in the shoulder, chest and hip. She couldn't tell for certain, but she was convinced her very skeleton was changing, giving her a deeper chest, thanks to changing dimensions of her rib-cage; and her hips had notably widened, even without excess, to make traversing hatch-frames and other small portals difficult, if not impossible.

Her excess intake, bland though the rations bars were, didn't go unpunished. Excess formed under her skin in uniform layers, much like the blubber of great whales, softening the hardened edges of her expanding musculature. The heavy definition of her increasingly powerful physique was hidden by these layers, and some of her features grew decidedly plush, as a result.

The end result was a strange evolution of her figure from athletic to some combination of Herculean and doughty over the span of barely two months. More concerningly, she had noted that limiting her intake to a reasonable level didn't stop the transformation, or maintain her current state - doing so merely slowed progress towards whatever end state her body was growing toward.

Bringing her thoughts back to her current locale and the sun rising higher in the sky, she concentrated on her latest experiment. Many of the changes to her body had been of a subconscious nature - repairing damage, growing more capable to survive a harsh situation, storing nutritional excess. While those subconscious demands were evidently only partly hers, she wondered if her new form would respond to conscious demands as well.

Over the past morning she had been sequentially trying various methods of trying to consciously influence her body. Her complexion was lightly tanned from her exposure to the elements on this world, but she'd never had birth-marks or even freckles mar her skin. Now, she was trying to visualize freckles forming on the back of her dominant hand.

Setting aside her latest attempts of concerted, and exhaustive concentration on what she wanted to happen, she began her next attempt. Steadying her breathing, she began the simple exercises to induce a meditative state, with the sole image of a specific pattern of freckles on her hand locked in her mind.

Hours later, the sudden loss of the sun's warmth caused her to wake herself from her meditation. Dark clouds loomed overhead, blocking out the sun. Sighing softly at the uncooperative weather, she paused as she noted the neat pattern of freckles on the back of her hand.

She drew herself out of her meditation with a sigh. Weeks had become another month after she first shaped herself, the practice becoming easier with each passing day. She'd grown since, watching her form go from wide and heavy-set to something else entirely. Hulking, was the first of many descriptives that came to mind - followed shortly after by bestial.

Her transformation both interested and perturbed her. She could slow her growth, sculpt her features as she desired, but there was an undercurrent of thought that propelled the process onwards without her influence. She had been trying to delve into her own thoughts to follow that undercurrent, determine its source. But she was suffering setbacks.

Chiefest among those setbacks were her own emotions. She had come to the conclusion that, somehow, whatever the source of her transformation, part of it was to enhance, or elevate her intellect, and all the necessary senses that went with it. What she hadn't counted on was the complexity and depth it added to her emotions. She had not been prone to mood swings or depression before, but the stresses of her miraculous survival, and following marooning - and the strange transformation following that - were beginning to take their toll.

If the subtle strangeness to her mind had been an undercurrent, then her emotions had been a roiling torrent. So many layers and depths of excitement, fear, angst, terror and other emotions besides. She was painfully aware of how overwhelming it was all becoming, and glad for the transformation that had taken her - in part. Her enhanced intellect gave her a stunning amount of self-awareness, and the ability to inflict distance on her emotions. Not separating them from her consciousness, but placing her immediate focus at a distant remove, where her emotional turmoil seemed dim and placid by comparison.

Like this she could inspect and study those currents, as if an outside observer. She had learned how to spin off thought-simulations in her imagination, carefully watching and noting her own estimations from that same distant remove. Rather than whimsy, or the reality she imposed on her thoughts, these simulations used her knowledge of various subjects - physical and medical sciences, mathematics, even theoretical sciences - and imposed that framework of understanding onto her predictions. That knowledge base had expanded greatly, in no small part due to her own increased learning capacity, and plundered records and documents from the wrecked ships around her.

So far, she predicted her emotions would debilitate her, or else force herself to lock her mind up in her meditative remove. It wasn't a happy prediction, and one she hoped she could prove wrong - or amend, if not. Despite her fears of her depression that came with these strange transformations, there were parts that she enjoyed. The level of complexity her emotions took was just as breathtaking in the moments of good, as it was crippling in her frequent low moments. Beyond her emotions, her awareness was so broad and detailed, and her ability to process it all so swift, her mind must have been the equal of a supercomputer.

She had tried to imagine, to simulate, what it might have been like to revert herself - forcibly reverse her transformation to resume her once-human norms. The simulations didn't provide her solace. Whatever was happening, she had reached peaks of physical and mental capability that no other she knew had reached, and, despite her tumultuous emotional state, they were glorious.

To reach those peaks, only to regress to the norms she had left behind...It would have been all the more crushing.

So she studied her thoughts. Observing. Following the flows of her own thoughts and emotions, trying to perceive, and then dive through the currents of emotion roiling through her mind to discover their source. Then, hopefully, she could find a way to address the issue more fully.

There.

She had found it. The outer periphery in her very psyche that was the source of her increasing depression.

She had been exploring her thoughts for weeks now. She had learned how to plumb the depths of her own psyche, or take an even further step away from her consciousness to witness it from outside. The complexity was amazing, and watching as the different parts interacted allowed her to root out the cause of her increasingly disturbing emotional seizures.

Embedded in her psyche was another. She had spent hours every day, for many weeks now, trying to come to this, or any other answer. Hidden among the flow of her thoughts, she had found it. The implications of what she had found were unsettling.

She dared not inspect the Other fully, for it had established an outer periphery of thought designed to draw in and tangle her own, before swiftly rending them apart. Beyond that, she had discovered little, as a concerted effort to probe the Other's defences would certainly draw a response. She had been imagine-simulating what they might be, from interactions that might never happen, to crushing assaults she may have to defend against.

What was apparent was that the Other cared little for her wellbeing, or operated on a moral scale she didn't want to spend the time or effort to comprehend. That thought surprised her: the Other was a consciousness, possibly as complex, or moreso than hers, and yet she didn't want to take the time to learn about it, converse, or even make an attempt to understand it.

She understood her initial feelings. This thing, without a doubt, was the source of her depression, which had grown from frequent bouts of sadness and apathy to what she could only describe as seizures of emotion. During these events, she had witnessed the Other worm its

way further into her thoughts. Subtly, but steadily invading key parts of her psyche. Her thought-simulations revealed that these places, if assailed in a certain fashion, would collapse great portions of her higher thought processes.

A parasite. For all the depth of emotion and thought she had inherited, it was because of some parasite - one whose eventual goal could be to erase her very consciousness. That danger was foremost in her mind, and the possibilities of what would come after only sharpened the emotions she felt now - even at her observational remove. The possibility, though theoretical, of the Other being benign to her continued existence was an afterthought. She had no way of knowing whether it was responsible for her survival and transformation, although she suspected it highly likely.

In the end though, it had saved her from a violent physical death for an even more abhorrent mental slaughter. The imperatives of her survival ruled out coexistence and her emotions ruled out negotiation.

Since discovering the Other, she had been watching and preparing. It had not gone unnoticed, as the Other expressed itself subtly, trying to push her to certain actions and modes of thought. Other times it worked to undo active reinforcement of her psyche, or disguise it's subliminal invasions even further.

She had done all she could to prepare. The last step was to signal her final intent, and, for better or worse, settle the coming conflict.

Looking inward, she let herself be herself one last time. Taking herself out of her remove, and simply enjoying the lull between emotional storms. Her body was hers, but now it was both familiar and alien for the scope and scale of her transformations. Physically she was no longer human, and biologically, she doubted she was anything humanity might recognize either.

The time came, and she reasserted her safe remove - creating layered partitions of thought between her very consciousness and the rest of her mind. All she had to do now was stop thinking.

One by one, she closed off stray threads of calculation, theorizing and other meandering thoughts. Her imagination-simulations closed and her deeper introspection halted. All that remained in her mind was herself, and the unending thought-loops of her subconscious.

At once her attention focused solely on the Other, and the silence in her mind was echoed in the silence of the plains and wreckage around her.

She would remember this moment with grim fondness, as she recognized the undercurrents of dread in the Others opening gambit.

A bright turquoise eye blinked at her in the reflection of the river.

Her form had changed more and more over the passing months, hindering her travels at times, but was no less recognizable to her.

A Dragon. That's what she had become.

The reflection in the river gave her an affirmative nod at the mental declaration.

The Other was gone. She had fought it and excised it from her very being like a surgeon cutting out a tumour. The confrontation had been short, but violent, and she had been merciless. Partly it was due to her own misgivings on the Other, but mostly it had been her instincts which had driven her.

It attacked from the very start, attempting to lay her low through mental assaults and manipulations, many of which she suspected, and some that took her off guard. She had not been without her defences or counters, but the Other had still entangled itself deep into her emotional centres, and tried to engineer in her a crippling loop of emotional feedback. Unfortunately for it, the gambit had backfired spectacularly. Instead of crippling her, or weighing down on her own capacity for thought, her roiling emotions simply spurred her forward. She could not flee from an enemy embedded in her very mind, so the only course she had left was to fight.

Whatever the Other had been, it was gone from her psyche - if not wholly destroyed. Her berserker-assault, and the instinctive imperative of survival, had won over any studious desires during the desperate battle between her and it.

On reflection of her memories, she had discovered it had been a creature of pure thought, which had come to her in her desperation after she had been ejected into space. She hadn't been able to glean how it had gotten her from deep space to the surface of this world, but it had, and in the process it had sewn the seeds for her transformation.

Beyond that, she neither knew, nor cared for the Others actions, or any justifications it could have devised. Her control over her mind, during the confrontation, had not been as complete as she hoped. While her mind hadn't been destroyed, she had been forced to rebuild parts of her psyche - restoring them from memory as needed. Her body had also been assailed - the Other using her same ability to manipulate her transformed form to inflict pain and destroy vital organs.

She had felt at the time, and recognized with determined reflection, the level of desperation and malice the Other had for her: if it could not be the victor, it would doom her as well. It had tried, and nearly succeeded, leaving her crippled, and forced to repair grievous

physical damage, as well as mental. This only reaffirmed her hostility towards the Other, and cemented in her mind the threat to her being it, and others like it, represented.

She had survived, however, and managed to restore herself in mind and body, with little signs of the trauma sustained. More than that, she reasserted her control over her entire psyche - rooting out and destroying the pernicious, subtle thoughts and adjustments to her that the Other had created. She did recreate the hidden loops and streams of thought that sculpted her form over time, with an end result of her choosing.

That end result, or at least, the first phase of it, peered back at her from her reflection in the slow flowing river she had settled beside.

Her head extended from a long, sinuous neck, thickly built with layers on layers of muscle. Her body was roughly humanoid still, but hulking in size, both for her redesigned musculature as for her reinforced, impossibly efficient vital organs. Her gait had shifted to quadrupedal, and a thick, tapered tail grew from the base of her spine to a gentle point at its end.

A lateral line of sensory organs extended down either flank - spanning from her ears all the way to tip of her tail. These allowed her to perceive her surroundings more easily than her now limited human senses could. They were necessary now, as her length was exceeding that of passenger trams. She kept her great bulk nourished through swathes of purple-coloured flesh across her back. These patches, made dark by the density of their internal structures, synthesized nutrients from sunlight, not unlike a plant using its own chlorophyll to create needed sugars.

These and a plethora of other subtle and unsubtle adjustments allowed her to maintain her impressive, and growing tonnage, while cheating the physical laws humanity understood. The thought that her dimensions were now so grand caused her no small amount of amusement and embarrassment. Mental images of young boys teasing equally young girls using such terms came to mind.

Those images caused her to pause for a moment. They had been innocent self-deprecating humour, but a much more important line of thought had been sparked. She had been on this world for eighteen months, three weeks and two days. That entire time, her only contact with another thinking being had been a murderously short mental confrontation, which had ended in her counterparts destruction, and her own debilitation.

A simple sadness swept through her thoughts, for while she was thriving on this world, there was no equivalent to her presence here, either. The thought of returning to humanity as she was sparked all manner of simulations, many of which came to unfortunate possibilities.

Chiefly was the danger she now presented to humanity, and vice-versa. In form she could be dangerous for her destructive potential - not the least of which due to some of the more complex organs she had been patiently engineering for her second phase of transformation. Beyond that, she could have a dangerous ecological impact, as her body was engineered with efficiency beyond most world's ability to sustain. It would take ages for her to exhaust a world's resources alone, but she barely made waste, and anything she consumed would ultimately be used, or stored in her expansive form.

The afternoon drifted on, and she contemplated the problem like the engineer she had once been. Her isolation was an, unfortunately, 'ideal' situation. She could do no harm to any humans as long as they weren't here, niece r did she have to worry over betrayal or subterfuge. It was unpalatable, due to the lack of interaction - if not companionship - with other beings like her.

That last thought caused her to stop for a moment. Her transformation had put her beyond her former humanity in many ways. That gulf in capability would ultimately antagonize other humans into reacting in a similar way she had towards the Other. Even if she took the time to explain and assert her origins, or just her benevolence towards humanity, there were too many factors and dangers of doing so.

Those thoughts leading to unsatisfactory conclusions, she considered the possibility of raising other humans to her capability - or within acceptably similar limits. The thought of deliberately restricting the development of a companion to be inherently inferior to her didn't sit well with her morals. Her counter argument stood strong however, for not only would a second creature of her physical and mental scale be just as destructive, there were no guarantees a chosen companion would not seek to do harm to her, or humanity in general.

She was the first of whatever she was, and possibly the last, that she know of. Such a course of action would need to be considered with the greatest of care.

He gasped for breath that wouldn't come. His left arm was numb below the elbow, and he could hardly see from the blows to the face he had taken.

Some sense compelled him to look up, and staring back at him was a dragon.

He was a peculiar sight. A worn and beaten human, alone in a field of bodies, covered in grime and fresh stains of blood and missing most of his left arm from a recent injury. The shuttle that had brought him - one man amongst a dozen or more beaten and broken prisoners - sat placidly barely a hundred meters away.

She had witnessed his attempt to escape from a hiding place in a nearby wreckage. While she hadn't been so bold as to immediately intervene, she had aided him in other ways.

With thought alone, had learned to compel electronics to do her bidding, and had done so to the captors computerized weapons - stifling some, and misfiring others to lethal effect. Evidently this ability had its limits, as other guards found their weapons unaffected, and simply cut down their prisoners with reckless abandon. She'd had to intervene bodily at that point, shielding the rebellious man while ushering a deadly subliminal command into the minds of the captors as they witnessed her.

"Am I dead?" He croaked, his voice hoarse from a combination of disuse and injury.

"No...As you are, you will be soon." She replied. Her voice was a soft whisper to his ears. It wasn't unpleasant to listen to, and he found the numbness in his arm invading the rest of his body.

"...Oh."

She set about her task as quickly as her mind would allow. Hundreds of thousands of calculations churned through her as she worked her very will on the nearly dead young man below her. She had been able to gently, subliminally assert a form of her own safe remove on the mans, thoughts, dulling the pain of his injuries, and preventing his body from entering catatonic shock.

He stood frozen, out of a mixture of fear and plain bewilderment at his situation.

"I don't..." he tottered as if the ground shook, but all was calm around him, " I want to..."

His declaration was cut short as he overbalanced himself and fell to the ground. She hastened her calculations until her head pounded with strain, her senses feeling his simpler consciousness waver - on the verge of unravelling.

Reaching to his tiny, near-lifeless form, her calculations came to a conclusion and she held her breath as she bent her will into this single task. Her head pounded, and she could feel a cold fire sear through her spine, and then...