



*With everything at stake,  
how do you stay human?*

# WE ARE DRAGON

ALASTAIR CHISHOLM

*nosy  
crow*



Also by  
Alastair Chisholm

I AM  
WOLF

I AM  
RAVEN

WE  
ARE  
DRAGON

ORION  
LOST

THE  
CONSEQUENCE  
GIRL

ADAM-2

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*For Mum,*  
**A.C.**



# DRAGON

PARLIAMENT

LANDING

FARSIGHT

BEAK

SEED

STEEL GULLY

COBALT SEA



FASTVALE

SORROW FOREST

SALT CLIFFS

SWEETWATER RIVER

HIGH ROAD

PARLEY

HIGH ROAD

HIGH ROAD

WESTCLIFF

PAW

REDWOOD

HIGH ROAD

STONE TUSK

MARROW

SCATTER

HOUND'S TOOTH

HOWL

CLIFF'S EDGE

GRUNT

HARDPAW

MORTAL RIVER



**1**

## **PACKRAT**

In a rocky canyon on the southern edge of Lion's territory, Packrat ran for its life.

Packrat was a small Construct, only a few metres tall, with a long silvery tail and a round fat body. Its 'fur' was made of steel and fibre-optic cables, a grey-brown colour to blend into the landscape, and its large metal ears twitched as it ran. Packrat wasn't big, but it was fast, and it leapt and scrambled over the loose stones as it tried to escape.

Behind it was a Construct no one had seen before.

Misko stared at it from her seat, strapped into Packrat's deck, while the crew worked and sweated and heaved to get more speed. The Construct chasing them wasn't big like Lion, or even Wolf or Puma. But it charged towards them in a terrible way, as if its anger made it bigger. It

had a wide head with flaring nostrils, a long thick neck, four strong legs with fierce claws, a tail that ended in a heavy club, and two stubby wings on its back. The wings were almost useless and should have looked silly – but all Misko felt as she stared at it was fear.

On board Packrat, Tinker bellowed orders and glanced back nervously. Tinker was the Chief, and Misko knew he would get them out of trouble. He always did. Short and round, with a wide brown moustache, he looked a bit like a rat himself, and sometimes joked about it. He was always joking.

Except now.

“I reckon it’s Dragon,” he muttered.

“How can it be?” asked his second in command. “It’s too small. And why would Dragon be all the waydown here? And isn’t Dragon painted all red and green?”

They raced over a small hill and charged down the other side, back into the canyon. The Construct followed. It *did* look like a dragon, Misko thought. But it wasn’t brightly painted. It was pale grey, with black markings. Those were the colours of Jackrabbit, another Construct from further west...

“What do they even *want*?” Tinker demanded. “We’ve not nicked anything of theirs, have we?”

The rest of the crew shook their heads.

It made no sense. Packrat wasn’t a threat to anyone. These lands belonged to Lion. Packrat was just a bodger, a tiny Construct that scurried between townships, trading for parts and food. Everyone smiled when Packrat turned up with new trinkets and bits and bobs, ready to buy and sell and then be on their way.

“Scurry!” shouted Tinker. “Scurry, little Packrat!”

Misko remembered she was supposed to be helping. She closed her eyes. Around her, or below her, she could feel the beat of Packrat’s metal heart: *boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom*. The song of Packrat. Like all Constructs, Packrat’s power came from the crew themselves. Misko could feel it. She poured her own faith into it.

*Scurry, little Packrat! Scurry!*

Packrat bounced and jostled and speeded up with a burst of energy. But behind them, the terrible enemy kept going. Its crew were hidden. Packrat’s deck was open to the sky, but Dragon’s had a heavy metal cover over the top. Somehow, the fact that they couldn’t see *who* was chasing them was even more scary...

“Aim for the Narrow!” shouted Tinker. “We’ll try to lose them there!”

The crew concentrated, and Packrat skidded and

slipped through a tiny gap between two tall columns of stone. Dragon chased. The gap was so tight that it barely made it through, and its metal sides screeched as they scraped the rocky walls. But it didn't stop – and now it was *gaining*. Misko could hear its thudding claws close behind. *Scurry, little Packrat! Scurry!*

“Hold tight!” shouted Tinker. “Hold—”

Then a shadow flitted overhead, and something *crashed* into the enemy and knocked it sideways. Misko yelped. Packrat kept running, but behind them, Dragon had been thrown to the ground by ... by...

“What's *that* now?” muttered Tinker.

Something was hammering at Dragon's side, a Construct even smaller than Packrat but somehow ferocious. Its shape was hard to make out. It had a heavy head and long tusks like a boar. But hadn't it flown down over them? Dragon twisted and struck back, and the new Construct went tumbling but landed well. And now its head looked different – a long muzzle, pointed ears, sharp teeth. A wolf?

Packrat stopped. Misko knew they should run, use this distraction to escape. But what was going *on*? Dragon paused. It didn't seem to know either. Before it could recover, the strange new Construct leapt at its back and

gripped with sharp claws and teeth, holding tight.

“Now!” bellowed a fierce voice, and someone jumped off the Construct's deck and landed on Dragon's back. It was a boy, and he was holding a metal device the size of a dinner plate with a cable stretching behind. He slapped it down on to the surface of Dragon's back and it stuck there.

“Clear!” he roared, scrambling back. There was an electrical crackling noise, and a smell of burning, and then—

And then Dragon collapsed into the dirt like a puppet with its strings cut.

The boy rolled away and landed gracefully on the ground. His arm flashed in the sunlight, as if it was made of metal. He was panting but seemed unharmed. Behind him, his Construct settled and two more figures came out – a girl and a younger boy. The girl was flicking switches on a device in her hand.

“It worked!” the younger boy shouted.

The Packrat crew stared at them. They seemed to be the only crew – no adults, just them. And their Construct was very strange. Misko was sure it had been flying, but it didn't have wings now. And its body had changed, too. But that was impossible...

Tinker stepped up next to Misko and gazed at Dragon. “What in the moon...?” he murmured.

Something was happening. Dragon was still lying there, apparently broken, but now its armoured panels were falling away. The huge heavy head was shrinking, the tail collapsing in on itself. The legs became thinner, the back ones longer, and its ears stretched out. As the Packrat crew watched in amazement, the transformation completed. Dragon was gone, and another Construct lay there instead.

“It’s *Jackrabbit*,” said Tinker in astonishment.

Now they could see the deck and the crew sitting in their harness seats. But there was something odd about them. They were all wearing headsets, black loops over their heads, and they were blinking and looking around as if they’d just woken up.

A woman at the front peered up at them. Misko recognised her – it was the leader of the Jackrabbit Construct. She seemed bewildered. Misko didn’t understand – Jackrabbit was friendly, normally. Why would they attack? And how had they become *Dragon*?

And now Misko realised there was something else on deck. Three somethings. They looked like the mechanical Ants that roamed wild across the land, but different

somehow. Wild Ants were about a metre long, but these were almost twice as big, with grey arms and gripping pincers. They weren’t moving.

“Get them!” shouted the boy. He and the younger one leapt up on to the Jackrabbit deck and rushed towards the strange Ant machines, holding zapper guns, firing at one, then another, disabling them. But the third one had staggered back to its feet and started to move...

A hammer smashed into its head, and it slumped back to the deck. The Jackrabbit leader stared down at it, panting. Her face was a mix of disgust and fury.

For a few seconds, nobody moved. The scene fell silent – just the hard breathing of the crew, and the settling of gears and servos, and a thin wind through the canyon.

Tinker shook his head. “I don’t understand any of this,” he muttered. He called out, “What’s going *on*, Jackrabbit?”

And now, for the first time, the girl from the other Construct spoke.

She was thin, with brown skin and black hair pushed up in spikes. She was holding a device of some type – the kind of thing used by the Tocks, the people on board who made the Constructs work. She wasn’t tall, but there was

an aura of authority about her. Her eyes were glaring, her face drawn into a scowl.

She looked angrier than anyone Misko had seen in her whole life.

“War,” she said in a clear, hard voice. She checked her device and shut it down, then stared up at Tinker and the Packrat crew.

“What’s going on is war.”



2

**RIEKA**

Rieka tried to ignore the others.

Coll was talking to the two leaders, trying to explain what had happened. The Packrat leader was a short, round man who looked as if he was normally cheery. The Jackrabbit leader was taller, and her thick boots made her loom over Coll, even though Coll was getting to be quite tall himself.

“But I don’t understand,” muttered the Packrat leader.

Rieka turned away. How many times had she heard that? *I don’t understand. It makes no sense. I don’t get it.* No one ever understood. She spent her life explaining things to people who couldn’t be bothered to *think*.

But Coll stayed calm. He held up one of the black headsets from Jackrabbit.

“It’s these things,” he said. “They change the way you

think. Control you. I don't know how, but when you put them on ... it's like you become someone else."

"I swear, we couldn't stop ourselves," said the Jackrabbit leader. She seemed to be on the edge of angry tears. "Those Ant things swarmed us, and forced these headsets on us, and suddenly we were *Dragon*. Dragon crew. It was like we were someone else. And there was a woman – a beautiful woman..." Her voice trailed off. She seemed confused.

"Queenie," said Rieka.

The two leaders turned. "Who is Queenie?" the woman asked.

"Well, it's a bit complicated," said Coll. "But basically—"

"It's the software system built to look after the first inhabitants of this planet," said Rieka impatiently. "It malfunctioned and tried to kill us all, then set off the bomb that created the Glass Lands. Then it malfunctioned even more and became convinced it's an *actual* queen and wants to control us all instead. It sent Dragon down to attack other Constructs, and uses these headsets to brainwash the crews and make new Dragons. Now it's trying to use its Ants to do the same."

The leaders stared at her. Packrat's mouth fell open.

Coll grimaced. "Like I said, it's a bit complicated."

Rieka shrugged. "Not really. Watch out for big Grey Ants like those ones. The usual Ants you see around the place – *Wild* Ants – are OK, but these Grey Ants work for Queenie. But they're disabled now, we saved you, you're welcome. Coll, we have to go."

The Jackrabbit leader glared at Rieka. "I have more questions," she said quietly.

"Everybody always does." Rieka sniffed. "Look, there's a war on, us versus Queenie. She owns the west; we're holding the High Lands. If you want to help, get to West Cliff. But *we're* leaving. Coll!"

She turned on her heel and strode back to their own Construct, Cub.

Cub was lying a few metres away, with his back legs tucked in and his head resting on his front paws. The short legs, round body and long muzzle made him look like a wolf cub. He hardly seemed like the beast that had head-butted the Jackrabbit-Dragon into submission. But Cub wasn't like other Constructs, and his crew weren't like other crews. Coll came from Wolf. Fillan came from Boar. Rieka was originally from Lion, the greatest of the High Constructs. Crews from different Constructs didn't work together, but the Cub crew had been thrown

together and forced to find a way. And they'd managed – Coll, Rieka, Fillan and Brann of Raven.

Except Brann was no longer with them.

As Rieka climbed aboard, there was a clatter from below deck, and a metal head poked out of the hatch. Kevin the Ant emerged, looked at Rieka, then turned to watch Fillan down on the ground. Kevin was a Wild Ant, a small Construct made from scraps of metal, plastic and other random pieces. Normally, Wild Ants lived in their own colonies scattered across the land, but Kevin had been damaged, and Rieka had repaired it. It had latched on to Fillan and happily followed the boy around.

On the ground, Coll and Fillan were finally saying their goodbyes and returning. Behind them, the Packrat and Jackrabbit leaders looked sombre, but no longer bewildered. Coll was a tall boy, with strong shoulders and dark hair that sometimes flopped over his eyes, and a prosthetic left arm and left leg. He had the kind of face that people seemed to trust, and he got on with them in a way Rieka couldn't. It was frustrating. She was smarter than him – smarter than anyone – but he was the one they listened to.

Coll swung on to deck, carrying the round metal device they'd used in the battle. Fillan, younger and smaller with

a tumble of blond hair, clambered over the rail behind him, chattering.

“They seemed nice,” he was saying. “I liked Packrat!”

“You like everyone,” said Coll, grinning. Fillan shrugged.

“I know. Hey, Kevin!” Kevin rushed up to him and he patted its head. Its antennae quivered happily. “Who’s a good Ant?” cooed Fillan. “You are! You’re a good Ant, yes you are!”

“Are we quite done?” asked Rieka. “Can we leave?”

Coll glanced at her. “You could have been nicer to them,” he said. “They’ve had a shock. You know how it feels to be taken over like that.”

Rieka sighed. “We’re in a rush. We have to get back and report.”

Coll shrugged. He held up the metal disc. “So, your Disruptor thing works, then?”

Rieka nodded. “Kind of. Short range, but it blocked Queenie’s signal for about thirty seconds before we ran out of power.”

“Awesome!” said Fillan, and, despite herself, Rieka grinned.

“But it blew out its capacitor in the process,” she said ruefully. “It’s a one-shot only, unless we can get

some better parts.”

“All right,” said Coll. “We saved Jackrabbit, took out the Ants, and tested the device. It’s not a bad tally. Let’s head back.” They strapped themselves in. “Ready?” he called.

“Ready,” said Fillan.

Rieka let her mind drift, with the trick that every crew member learned as a child. Constructs were powered by anthryl, the amazing shape-changing material controlled by the crew’s thoughts. Rieka felt the deck under her feet, then below, listening for Cub’s song. *There...* She could feel his presence, the *idea* of Cub that all three of them shared. Cub, wolf cub, now stood and trotted forward a few steps, then moved faster, heading up a small hill, reached the top, and *leapt*.

Most Constructs stayed the same shape forever. But Cub’s crew had been forced to adapt to their different backgrounds. Somehow, on the way, they’d learned the trick of being *all* the things...

Rieka imagined wings.

The anthryl reacted, shifting and re-forming, and Cub’s front legs stretched and flattened into wide sails. His claws retracted, his paws widened into wing tips, catching the air, and instead of falling, the little Construct rose...

“Down and up!” bellowed Coll, and together they worked the wings.

It wasn’t very elegant. Cub flapped and struggled and hammered at the air, not smoothly like when Brann had been with them. Rieka, Coll and Fillan could make Cub fly, but they needed the one who had first taught them the trick, the one who had *been* Raven.

They needed Brann.

Rieka thought about Coll’s comments as the little Construct flapped awkwardly north. *You know how it feels to be taken over.* Rieka did. Queenie had taken *her* over with one of those headsets. Brann, too. And Brann had sacrificed herself – allowed Queenie to recapture her, so that Rieka could escape...

“Hey,” murmured Coll. Rieka glanced up. Coll said, “You’re thinking of her, aren’t you?”

Rieka sniffed and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” said Coll gently. “We all miss her. We’ll get her back, I promise.”

Rieka scowled. How could he possibly get her back? Why make promises he couldn’t keep? People just said stuff like this, but it was always Rieka who ended up having to actually solve the problem. But that was Coll for you. And he meant well, she knew. Rieka held her

tongue and nodded.

“I can see West Cliff!” called Fillan, and Rieka turned away and gazed forward.

They were over the High Lands, separated from the rest of the world by sheer cliffs west and south, and the sea north and east. A single winding path down West Cliff was the only route between them.

This was where the two armies faced each other.

Lining the edge of the cliffs were Constructs of every shape and size from all over the High Lands, and a few that had escaped from the west. Dingo, Beetle, Badger, Wildcat and Cheetah, Hawk and Wolf further north. They cast long shadows before them, their metal hides gleaming, their fake fur rippling in the steady High Lands breeze. Wolf was long and lean, her tongue lolling from her mouth, her ears pricked. Badger was squat and powerful. Hawk fluttered above them, Beetle scurried back and forth.

It was the greatest gathering of Constructs ever assembled, led by Lion, Tiger and Eagle, the three surviving High Constructs. Eagle, the only High Construct who could fly, was away patrolling the skies above the High Lands, watching for enemy attacks. But Tiger was here, prowling near the back of the group, padding up

and down the line. Tiger’s body was orange, with thick black lines as sharp-edged as knives, and white around the eyes, which were yellow and cruel. Steel muscles and cables moved under his skin as he paced, as if preparing to leap at any moment. In front of him lay Lion, stretched, relaxed, golden-haired, his head surrounded by a mane that caught the sunset and glowed like a halo. He stared ahead, seeing everything.

Rieka’s breath caught when she saw Lion. Even now, after everything that had happened, part of her thought of Lion as home. It was her original Construct, the place where she’d grown up – not as Rieka but *Leondra*, little lioness. Just her and her mother, before...

Cursing, Rieka shook her head, turned away and stared at the enemy.

The enemy was Dragon.

A whole row of Dragons, stretching left and right at the foot of the cliffs. Different sizes, but all the same shape – the heavy head, solid shoulders, vicious tail, small wings. Razor-sharp claws. Glowing eyes. Every one of them seemed to reek of danger, every one of them ready to pounce.

They stood in the lands that had once belonged to Puma. In fact, Puma was still there in a way. The

machinery, anyway. The metal and carbon, the anthryl powering everything.

But the Construct that had been Puma was now twisted into the shape of Dragon. Only Puma's old sandy yellow colour remained. Puma-Dragon now. Beside it was Hyena. But again, Hyena was gone, rebuilt. Hyena-Dragon. And there, Panther-Dragon. Scorpion-Dragon. Boar-Dragon. More. All once their own Constructs. All once independent.

At the centre was the original Dragon, and looming over it was Bear-Dragon. Greatest of all the Constructs, bigger even than Tiger or Lion. It had been one of the High Constructs. When it fell, the world had changed...

The Dragons glared at them, ferocious and unstoppable. The west was under Queenie's control. First she'd taken the Constructs. Then she'd attacked the settlements, capturing the citizens, forcing her headsets on them and turning them into helpless puppets. Now Queenie ruled the thoughts of every human west of the High Lands, on ground or on Construct.

And their thoughts were *Dragon*.

Cub settled on the ground near the main camp. His wings transformed back into front legs, his back legs grew, his

beak flattened, and he became a wolf cub shape again, trotting towards Lion. Crews from Dingo and Cheetah watched them warily. Some people still found it hard to accept the way Cub shifted between shapes. But there was also Beetle, the tiny Construct with their friends Dolan and Namir. Dolan waved cheerily as they passed, and Namir gave them a nod.

Cub sat on the grass, and Rieka and Coll climbed down and approached Lion. Two guards nodded to Coll and he nodded back. Rieka bristled. Coll was technically leader of Cub. Rieka had said so herself. And, she admitted, he was a good leader. But still, it rankled that they nodded to him and not her. These were Lion crew, after all. They *knew* who she was.

She drew herself up tall and glared at them.

"We need to see him," she said.