

"World-building rises to an art and alien biology takes your breath away."

Julie E. Czerneda, author of *To Each This World*



# A WRECK OF DRAGONS

E L A I N E I S A A K



“Elaine Isaak’s *A Wreck of Dragons* is a rocket punch to the mecha v. kaiju genre. Energetic and thought-provoking, the adventure thrills while posing questions about sentience, purpose, and finding common ground in a vast universe.”

R.W.W. Greene, author of *Mercury Rising*

“When world-building rises to an art and alien biology takes your breath away, you’re reading a stellar work of science fiction. Add a battle of conscience as large as a planet and memorable characters — plus an ending I will not spoil for you, but still makes me tear up — and you’ve *A Wreck of Dragons* by Elaine Isaak, your new favorite. Bravo! Very highly recommended.”

Julie E. Czerneda, author of *To Each This World*



# A WRECK OF DRAGONS

ELAINE ISAAK

copyright © 2023 by Elaine Isaak

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, except for the purpose of review and/or reference, without explicit permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover design copyright © 2023 by Niki Lenhart  
*nikilen-designs.com*

Published by Water Dragon Publishing  
*waterdragonpublishing.com*

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

# 3

“ARE YOU READY FOR THIS?” Johari gestured toward the broad sweep of his view window, opaqued for the moment, with the churning display of tight beam data flowing like a cascade down the far left.

“Oh my god, am I ever.” Maya wriggled in her seat, extruded a little lower than his own. He watched her as he gestured for the window to clear.

As the glowing green filled her face, her lips parted. She drew in a breath and looked weightless, with that naked delight he remembered from the first time she’d seen the bots. Any time a bot considered adding a child — their external hands in a more agile form, and their internal conscience, the living reminder of their mission — they had to test the kid’s receptiveness. Maya had run up to Earhart’s foot, patting and banging on it until the bot relented and extruded a set of rungs for her to climb up. Even now, the graphic at the lower left that indicated Earhart’s progress on the repair showed an image of Maya, climbing.

Yes, okay, the delay had been worth it for that expression on her face, and so far, the team hadn’t reported any hint of civs, so it’s not like they had needed him. The only things in the atmosphere

## *A Wreck of Dragons*

down there were some kind of flying reptiles, some with feathers, and the only unusual markings on the ground lacked the patterns of organized activity, but he'd have to get closer for a better look.

"Let's go in reflective."

"Are you certain it's necessary, Master Johari? All signs indicate an unoccupied planet."

"You want to just go down there and fly around naked? Who are you trying to impress?"

"He calls you 'master'?" Maya interjected. "That's weird."

"It's a new thing. He got interested in this vid series from Old England. I tried to get him hooked on *"Fleet Fighters,"* but he didn't go for it."

The comm pinged. "Armstrong to Norgay, ears up?"

"Ears up, Tolui," Johari confirmed. "What have you got?"

"I have all the scans I can do from this altitude. We're negative on signs of intelligent life. I want to land and take samples."

"It's about time!" said Shawntelle.

Maya groaned.

Reaching out to the screen, Johari spanned an image of the world with his hand and gave it a slow twirl, finding Armstrong's beacon near the southern ocean, not far from the brown-patched skies. Eriksson performed a flyover of the largest mountain range on the other side of the world while Zheng He moved in a slow pattern over a dense area of forest. As they worked, the image of the world became more detailed. "We're pretty dispersed. We should come back together before anybody goes for planetfall, in case anything goes wrong."

Shawntelle's face, lean and dark-skinned, framed by a nimbus of coiled blue-streaked hair, appeared in the corner. "I can understand you worrying, after what happened to Delta Force, but may I remind you, they were close together when it happened. You told us to use our judgment — we each found the spot with the greatest level of data for our specialty. Which one of us should give up the job because you're afraid of phantoms?"

Tension crept along Johari's spine. "Phantoms killed my parents."

Maya's teeth snapped together — she had never known her parents. Fleet chose orphans for their scouts because, with a tweak in the fertility treatments for approved parents, babies were easy enough to get. Fleet already had too many mouths to feed: that's



what made the resource allotments such a big deal. It wasn't that Fleetcom were heartless, just that would-be parents who'd already shown their value to humanity represented a stronger investment than kids who got left behind when bad things happened.

The lighting shifted a little dimmer and a little warmer as Norgay responded to the changes in Johari's biorhythms. Maya reached for the window and started scrolling through images and data packets, flicking them this way and that to sort the files.

"I don't know if that's exactly true," Shawntelle replied, but in a subdued voice, her glance aimed a little off from his.

"Close enough. And they died on an approved planet, more than five years into colonization, never mind a complete unknown like this one. I don't want something like that to happen here. Besides, we're the last scouts — we can't risk the bots."

"I'm the one who wants down," Tolui inserted. "Come be my back-up. You and Maya both."

"Maya hardly counts without Earhart," Shawntelle pointed out, then an instant later. "Yes, totally, if you're worried, that's what you should do. Just in case Armstrong can't handle whatever's out there."

"Those flying reptiles seem pretty fierce." Johari captured one of the files Maya was generating and expanded it to examine one of the creatures. Scrolling measurements detailed a wingspan as broad as Norgay was tall, a short tail between muscular legs. The creature's long neck swung back and forth as it flew, its arms clutched tight against its leathery chest. The skin was mottled green on top and pale underneath. Something like gills opened and closed along the neck, revealing glimpses of feathery membrane, and in the broad, flat head: a series of round divots marking at least three pairs of eyes, slit nostrils, and a mouthful of teeth. Fierce, yes, but strange and beautiful, like the creatures drawn in the margins of ancient European manuscripts, or the ones who guarded wisdom in old China. Beguiling.

"Armstrong can take them one handed," Tolui replied. "Like that King Kong guy you like so much. Are you coming? Come on, Johari — you've got to see this place!"

Shawntelle added, "It's not like there's much for you to do, anyway."

"Except maybe name the place." Emm's voice, chiming in from where they methodically examined the forest below.

## *A Wreck of Dragons*

“How come he gets to name it?” Shawntelle protested.

“His role is civilization. In the absence of such, it is also his part to be the ambassador of ours. But if you prefer, we can use the celestial designation —” Emm read off a string of digits.

Maya giggled. “No way! Johari names it. After we get to see the surface? Please?” She looked up at him, and their eyes met, just like the little sister he’d never had. According to his research, little sisters were considered highly exasperating, but everybody seemed to love them in the end.

“Hold position, Armstrong, we’re on the way.”

Norgay soared over a deep blue-green sea, following the coastline. In deference to Johari’s concern about being spotted, he flew reflective — his surface material optimized to make light bend around him. Johari and Maya’s seats swiveled forward, the ocean rippling beneath them with the swirling fins of strange fish.

Cliffs of yellow and blue banded stone crumbled into that pounding sea, and huge broad-leaved trees bent down at their tops as if searching for someone who’d fallen below. On a grouping of off-shore rocks rested thick-bodied birds of some kind — that was Tolui’s department — birds with skin flaps they stretched as they lounged, liquid pulsing through the veins that showed in the translucent skin. Their flaps sealed as Norgay soared directly over them. He might be invisible to the eye, but not to every other sense. Interesting. “Norgay, those things — they notice us.”

“Then we shall hope they do not have a taste for robot.”

“Or people,” Maya added. “Preliminary analysis shows a high level of biodiversity, concentrated around the coastline and the dense forest. Zheng He is capturing a variety of audible tones, but it’ll take a little while to figure out who makes what sounds, or even how many creatures are making them.”

“What do we know about those?” Johari pointed toward their horizon, coming up fast on a rock formation that seemed to blend seamlessly into the brown murk of the sky. As they approached, the formation resolved into a series of stone towers channeling thick smoke from thermal vents. Like the formation of volcanoes, the heated liquid lay down mineral layers over eons to create huge stone chimneys.

"It resembles a tornado, but not moving," Maya said. "Powerful chemical mix, according to some samples that Eriksson snagged on the way by. Heavy sky. That's so weird."

The surface of the sky indeed swirled slowly, striated like milk being stirred into hot chocolate. On the near side of the smoking chimneys a small group of creatures soared, drawing together enough to overlap wings, then spreading apart again. Smaller than the one Maya had already begun to diagram, they were clearly the same species, their side-pointing eyes open, their heads comparatively large. One of the group swung sharply downward and steered them all closer to shore.

"Stay straight! See if we can weave, or duck beneath them."

"If we pass too close to the water, we'll create ripples that will alert them to our presence," Norgay observed.

"Up, then! Up, up!" Johari cried as eight winged creatures slid through the air around them.

One flew directly in front of them, huge wings outspread, twisting just a little to tilt the creature to the side. Dark gray on top, with scintillating streaks of greenish light, and pale blue-green below, the wings cast a long, sweeping shadow over the sea and over its companions.

One of those below dodged aside and slipped downward in a dizzying arc. Johari wished they could follow, wheeling down after the creatures. He wanted to spread his arms and soar along with them. Flying with Norgay gave him his greatest joy — how much more incredible if he could soar into the wind, hovering on a breeze, feeling the tingle of ocean spray against his skin and breathe in the world. So many living things, an entire landscape of them, but with the window separating him from all of that, it could be nothing more than a clever vid or a VR game, a projection, just like all the images he'd ever seen of trees or cliffs or oceans.

The altered course gave them a broad view across the coastal ledges and out to sea where a series of low islands broke off from the land. Low islands topped by round knobs. Johari caught his breath, then magnified, leaning forward into the window. That portion of his view zoomed in. Strangely symmetrical islands protruded from the sea not far from a southern spit of land, and each one carried a series of shapes that resembled leather stretched

over a frame of branches. "Norgay, seven degrees east. Are those huts?"

"Huts?" Maya stared with him. She prodded her files around again, frowning. "The atmosphere is inconsistent with large-scale agriculture, but it doesn't rule out smaller, more primitive farming."

"Hold position, Armstrong — we've gotta check this out." Huts! For a moment elation rushed through him. Civilization at last! But civilization meant the planet was a no-go. They'd have to abort their exploration and find a new target. Every man, woman, and child in the Fleet depended on finding a planet where they could finally settle down and have a home.

The weight of their hopes and expectations dampened his enthusiasm. Was it worth displacing or destroying some native civilization in order for humanity to survive? When nuclear and volcanic destruction swept over the surface of the Earth, those off-planet looked on in horror. Those scientists, miners, and laborers, along with the crews and occupants of a handful of pleasure ships, became the seed of the Fleet, a working-class remnant population mostly black and brown, and determined to rise from the ashes to create a better humanity.

Fleet's founders, acknowledging the thousands of exoplanets found by decades of astronomers and buoyed by the spirit of union after humanity's wars were finally over, vowed not to ruin someone else's world as they had their own. They vowed not to inflict the same horrors that had once been imposed on their own ancestors by groups of warlike or even well-meaning colonists.

Half of Johari's lessons as he prepared to take on the role of civilization envoy for the Saturn Five focused on understanding everything humans had done to each other in their quest to better their own lives at the expense of others. Trouble was, those vows were made a long time ago, and nobody still alive in Fleet had signed that contract.

"Hurry it up, would you?" Tolui replied over the comm. "Or better yet, save the location and get back to it later."

"Taking a closer sweep, Master Johari," said Norgay. "We should still arrive only shortly off schedule." He pronounced it "shed-jewel". Thank the long-dead British Broadcasting Corporation for that one. He soared a little higher and nearer to the curious mounds. No sign of

life, no smoke of fires or anything moving among the structures. Closer-to, they looked more like dead leaves of giant plants than any kind of construction project. Some were little more than empty vanes, whatever had covered them disintegrated with time or weather.

"Are those some kind of dead cabbages?" Maya wrinkled her nose.

"Tolui — what do you think?" Johari swiped a few still shots and slid them across the screen to send to Armstrong.

"Got it." Silence for a long moment, then Tolui's voice again. "Weird but not unnatural. Cabbages is a good analogy." Maya beamed at this acknowledgment. "No sign of tools or tool use. If I had to guess, I'd say some kind of sea-vegetation that probably revives when the water gets high enough."

"You guys want to see something unnatural," Shawntelle chimed in, "Check this out. From my southwest quadrant." An image popped onto the view screen showing a cluster of holes in the water. It lapped over the edges and trickled inside. "Mineral in origin. Lava tubes, maybe, but super smooth. Can't get a good view of them."

"Wow — that is so cool! Maybe I can rappel down one of them." Maya expanded the image and drank it in.

Johari tapped the image of the "huts" and regretfully filed it away. Nothing. They'd investigate later, of course, and find out what kind of plant or animal or plant/animal hybrid might have lived or died there. Tolui had a complete ecosystem, replete with potentially useful organisms, and Johari had only a handful of dead cabbages.

"Come on, Jo-jo! Don't keep me waiting."

"On our way," Johari replied as Norgay performed an elegant sweep and turned back for the shore. His disappointment vanished in moments. The sea and the sky rippled with secrets, and the lack of civs meant they had all the time they needed to explore. They only needed one — and this planet looked, every moment, like it might be that one.



# 4

ARMSTRONG'S BEACON ALERTED to their proximity, and Norgay veered inland, sliding carefully out of the flocks of creatures into a cove where the vegetation parted in a series of large, round bowls. Maybe where trees had fallen?

His window overlaid the image of Armstrong, outlined in blue to indicate that he still moved in reflective mode. Even as they slowed their approach, Armstrong rotated in the air and his stabilizers drew back in as his arms separated. The smooth shell of his flying exterior crinkled and folded to reveal joints: waist, hips, knees separating from the whole, huge silvery feet hovering as gently as butterflies.

Armstrong's hands flexed through a series of movements. Fingers longer than Johari extruded a variety of tools ranging from chisels and bolt drivers to guns, nets and suction tubes. The opaqued window at his chest concealed Tolui's chamber, the habitat, office and control room, as if Tolui were Armstrong's living heart.

"Awesome. Let's go!" Armstrong's careful jets and repulsors leveled his feet to the ground over a patch of stone and he set down with a little puff of dust. Maya cheered and clapped. Their

previous planetfall, that methane swamp inhabited by water striders as big as toddlers, hadn't been nearly as pleasant. Johari grinned. What would he name the world? They had a list of themes proposed by Fleet Command, and suggestions from the col itself — probably millions of them by now — but in the end, it would be up to him, regardless of whether they stayed.

The thought gave him a little chill. Stay. On a planet, bound by gravity you couldn't turn off, surrounded by people you didn't even know. The list of names from Fleet included words like "Freedom," "Liberty," "Unity," "Prosperity". The suggestions from regular citizens were stuff like, "New Earth," "Happiness," and simply "Home".

Johari settled back into his seat and Norgay swelled a little around him, cradling him, as he always had. The only definition of home Johari had ever known.

"Wow!" Maya leaned forward and Norgay obligingly stretched out the chair so she could press her palms to the view. Her breath made little clouds against the window. Beyond, Armstrong's various tools collected bits of foliage, soil samples, a cloud of some tiny creatures. Insects, or what passed for insects around here. Over the rounded pits hung immense blossoms in dripping rings of yellow and red, with lolling fronds around their stems. Armstrong's cameras beamed close-up images of the fronds where streams of liquid pumped along, and little things swam inside. As Johari watched, a larger, worm-like entity detached from the inner wall and slurped a mouthful of the smaller creatures then glided downstream and burrowed against the wall again. A whole ecosystem in a single plant. Freaky. Emm would want to know about that for their botanical studies.

Armstrong moved carefully forward, a serene statue in a garden of wonders. He leaned down and reached into the nearest round pit, then adjusted his position, and leaned further, almost precarious now, sending one of his suction tools toward a pile of stones.

"What does he want with that?" Maya said aloud.

"Bacteria, probably, or lichen. Or maybe Shawntelle asked him to bring her one for chemical analysis."

The suction tool rose slowly, the barely-captured thing wobbling on its end. A second suction tool tried to assist, but overcompensated. With a tearing sound, the thing broke open and the unmistakable goop of an egg spilled out onto the ground.



"Gross." Maya flinched back from the window.

"Tolui. What are you doing?" Johari tapped and magnified. A thicker blob lay amid the murky pool. The egg had been fertilized. Gross indeed. The crazy flowers swayed and arched backward in slow-motion. Sensitive plants. Cool.

"We need to gather one. I suspected they were eggs. If the proteins check out, the eggs could be used to recharge our kitchen pods. From the air, the pattern of these bowls reminded me of fish nests, but above ground."

"Yeah — dragon's nests." Maya nibbled on a fingernail.

"Dragons?" Johari protested.

"Giant flying reptiles? What would you call them?"

"We think they may be amphibious, actually," Tolui offered. "I'm going to try again."

"Negative. Check your position! Armstrong's gonna fall in there and get egg all over. One or two samples for testing is fine, but we didn't come here to wreck the place."

Armstrong straightened and turned from the waist, scanning the pits all around them. Most were empty. In those that contained eggs, the eggs clustered close in the middle. Johari pictured the bating wings of one of those — okay, fine, dragons — as it tended its nest. They would need that kind of span between the egg caches.

"You got a point," said Tolui. "I'm going EVA."

"No way! We're not close to ready for that. We need more samples, a broader range. Comparative analysis, you can't just —"

Tolui's face appeared in the center of Norgay's view window, his expression direct, his bronze-tone features almost too handsome, to judge by Maya's sudden reddening as she studied her files. Johari suspected she had a crush on Tolui — at seventeen, their oldest member, and the guy who should have been Civi, if he wanted it. He didn't.

During the flight from their last planetfall, Tolui had shaved his black hair into a familiar shape: the back and sides of Armstrong's head. That was new. Of course, his short, sharp beard undercut the effect — unless Armstrong planned to extrude one so they could still be twins. "We don't have time for that," Tolui said. "The atmosphere tests fine. This won't take long. One egg and

I'm back." He flashed a grin, then vanished. Armstrong squatted near the pit and extended one arm, swiveled at the shoulder to reveal a staircase.

"The atmosphere is one thing, we don't even know if the suit's filters can handle the local pollen and spores! Tolui!" No answer. Johari sagged in his chair.

"We want to hurry, right?" Maya asked. "I mean, if stuff is starting to break down."

"That doesn't mean we want to rush and screw this up. The only other time scouts okay'd a planet for colonization, they overlooked a few tests, and the colony got destroyed." His parents had been there; Johari barely escaped with his life — the only survivor.

In the view before him, a hatch opened where Armstrong's ear would be and Tolui stepped through, wearing a slick EVA suit. At least he was wearing a helmet in spite of the encouraging atmospheric testing. Tolui descended the stairs from Armstrong's shoulder and made his way down the slope into the broad, round pit. The pile of eggs stood as high as his waist, the eggs themselves double the size of his head. At the perimeter, the flowers stretched upward.

Johari sat up straighter. "Something's happening. Tolui — come back. Those flowers —"

One of the nearest gave a sudden burst, spewing greenish liquid across the pit. It splattered Tolui, knocking him sideways. He flailed his arms, righted himself, and the sound of laughter came through the comm. "And you thought the egg was gross! You had no idea." He reached a hand up and swiped gunk away from his faceplate, then he gave a shudder. The liquid still contained the organisms Johari had noticed earlier. Now the small ones crept over the surface of Tolui's suit. And the larger ones, the predators, wriggled toward his joints. Shit. "Armstrong! Norgay — we've gotta get that stuff off of him."

Tolui spun about, stumbling back toward the slope, his movements jerky as he kept pausing to slap away the creatures. Armstrong's left arm pivoted and bent at the elbow. A barrel emerged and he blasted Tolui's suit with a fine etching powder designed to remove any foreign matter before re-entry. Norgay zoomed closer, shooting out a cable that latched to Tolui's suit and drew him up the slope.

A shadow swept over the stone, and the flowers recoiled as huge wings rushed downward.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Isaak writes adventure novels inspired by research subjects like medieval surgery, ancient clockworks, and Byzantine mechanical wonders. Published works include *Drakemaster* (Guardbridge 2022), The “Dark Apostle” series (DAW), as by E. C. Ambrose, and the “Bone Guard” archaeological thrillers. One recent adventure is the interactive superhero novel, *Skystrike: Wings of Justice*, for Choice of Games.

While researching her books, she learned how to hunt with a falcon, clear a building of possible assailants, and pull traction on a broken limb. A former adventure guide, Elaine lives and writes in the Granite State. To learn more about her works and world visit her website: *RocinanteBooks.com*.

***TEENS AND THEIR GIANT ROBOTS SEARCH FOR A  
NEW HOME FOR MANKIND, BUT THE PLANET THEY  
DISCOVER BELONGS TO THE DRAGONS.***

Two hundred years after the Climate Wars left Earth uninhabitable, Johari and his giant robot companion lead a squad of scouts on a quest for a new Goldilocks planet to settle the remnants of the human race.

When one of the scouts and his bot go down in a hostile wilderness, Johari's fight to save them reveals complex behavior in the dragon-like dominant species. The scout team fragments as Johari strives to rescue his friends and discover the truth about the aliens.

If he's right, mankind will lose its best hope for a home —  
or sacrifice its own humanity.



"Elaine Isaak's *A Wreck of Dragons* is a rocket punch to the mecha v. kaiju genre. Energetic and thought-provoking, the adventure thrills while posing questions about sentience, purpose, and finding common ground in a vast universe."

R.W.W. Greene, author of *Mercury Rising*

"When world-building rises to an art and alien biology takes your breath away, you're reading a stellar work of science fiction. Add a battle of conscience as large as a planet and memorable characters — plus an ending I will not spoil for you, but still makes me tear up — and you've *A Wreck of Dragons* by Elaine Isaak, your new favorite. Bravo! Very highly recommended."

Julie E. Czerneda, author of *To Each This World*

Elaine Isaak writes adventure novels inspired by research subjects like medieval surgery, ancient clockworks, and Byzantine mechanical wonders. While researching her books, she learned how to hunt with a falcon, clear a building of possible assailants, and pull traction on a broken limb. A former adventure guide, Elaine lives and writes in the Granite State.