

# Soft Come the Dragons

by Dean Ray Koontz, 1945-

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This was my first published story in the field of science fiction, the one that changed my life. Ed Ferman had rejected several stories with encouraging notes instead of form rejection slips. When I mailed *Soft Come the Dragons* to *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, I told Ed that I had a Druid friend who was going to cast a spell upon him and the entire staff of the magazine so that they would start buying my work. With the check for the story, Ed enclosed a note beginning "I had thought Druid spells were long ago impotent, but..."

This is a story of myths and science and how one is nothing without the other. If we live by myth alone, we do not advance. But if we should ever live by only science, disregarding our fantasies, we will be less than machines in the skins of animals. This opinion must be universal, for I have received letters on this story from England and Australia. It will soon be published in Spanish. And Samuel R. Delany once told me it was a beautiful story. I consider that a compliment from highest sources...

"AND what will you do when the soft breezes come and the dragons drift in to spread death?"

Marshall wriggled in his seat, reached for another sugar packet to empty into his mug of coffee.

"I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll get up when the alarms sound and dress in your uniform and go down in the cellar complex like a red-eyed mole in flight from his own fear. You'll get up when the alarms sound and monitor everything as usual, hiding until the dragons float out and are gone."

"What am I supposed to do?" Marshall asked. "Maybe I should pet them and pour out milk?"

"You wouldn't pet, you'd club. The milk would have cyanide in it"

Marshall slammed his fist into the table. "You forget, Dante, that I am commander here and you are only third line officer."

Mario Alexander Dante snorted, picked up his folio, and walked out of the rec room. Mounting the twisting stairs, he climbed two floors, stepped out into a dark, narrow hallway, and ambled to the glass observation lounge that hung like a third story patio over the beach.

It was low tide. The sea stretched away across the horizon like poured glass, glittering like a queen's jewels or like a shattered church window. Only small waves lapped at the shore, depositing minute quantities of sand, etching out microscopic gullies in the orange beach as they dragged away a corresponding amount of other grains.

It seemed to Mario Dante that the ocean was the same on any world. It was the womb, the all-encompassing mother where men migrated at least once in their lives—like lemmings. He had walked to the edge of it on some nights, hoping to see a face...

Just above the horizon floated the twin moons; their reflections stretched long across the ocean, cresting every wavelet with a tint of golden dew.

The trouble with Marshall, Dante reflected, was that he lacked imagination. He accepted everything at face value—tempered only by what his instruments told him. Being truthful with himself, he understood that he saw the old Mario Dante in the commander, and that this was why he disliked the man. The old Mario Dante, before the car crash that took Ellen and broke her body and tossed it into the ocean, before he lay in a hospital piecing together his shattered mind for seven months, the old Mario Dante had been lacking in sensitivity, in imagination. In unlocking his mental block so that he could accept the death of Ellen, the psychiatrist removed other things in passing, and opened a whole new portion of his mind.

But still, he disliked Marshall. And he was certain that the commander's Achilles' heel would be struck by an arrow from the quiver of the dragons. The dragons that came daily with the tidal winds.

The first three he tossed in the wastebasket without reviewing. The fourth he read, reread, then read aloud for full effect.

*"Discovery Upon Death"*

*"dear mankind: am writing you from purgatory to say that i have made a discovery that i wish you would spread around up there, god, now listen mankind, god is a computer and someone misprogrammed him..."*

"Not bad," said a voice from the darkness. Abner stepped into the small circle of light around the chair. "But don't tell me the Pioneer Poet has doubts about life?"

"Please, the name is Mare."

Pioneer Poet. It was a name *Life* had coined when his first volume had been published and had won critical acclaim. He admitted it all seemed romantic: a space force surveyor drafted for three years, writing poetry on some alien world in some alien star system. But, Pioneer Poet?

"Heard about your fight with Marshall."

"It wasn't a fight."

"It was the way I heard it. What bothers you about him, Mare?"

"He doesn't understand things."

"Neither do any of us."

"Suffice it to say he might be a mirror in which I can see myself. And the reflection isn't a nice one."

They sat in silence a moment.

"You plan to sit up all night?" Abner asked.

"No, Pioneer Physician, I do not."

Abner grinned. "Dragon warnings should go up in six hours. You'll need your rest."

He folded his poems and rose, flicked off the light, and said: "Fine, but let us just look at the ocean a minute, huh?"

*The snakes growing from her scalp hissed and bared fangs.*

*His hand burned with the dribbling of his own blood where their sharp teeth raked him.*

*Slowly, she turned, and the beauty was there in the face— and the horror was there.*

*In the eyes.*

*And his muscles, slowly but doubtlessly and without pause, began turning to granite.*

*"No!" he screamed. "I think I'm just beginning to see—"*

*His hair became individual strands of rock. Each cell of his face froze into eternity and became a part of something that could never die—that could only be eroded by wind and rain.*

*And finally his eyes, staring into hers, slipped into cataract, then to stone.*

*And he woke to the sound of screams in his ears.*

*Before opening his eyes, he could see her, pinned behind the wheel, mouth twisted in agony.*

*The flames licking at her face as he was tossed free, the tumbling, burning car, plunging over the cliff and away.*

But when the waking dream was over, he still heard the screams. He fumbled for his bed light, and the flood of yellow fire made him squint. He looked at the clock. Five o'clock in the morning Translated Earth Time.

The dragon warning was in effect. They were not screams, but the wails of mechanical voices. "Beware and Run," they seemed to say.

*Bewareandrun, bewareandrun, bewareandrun...*

He had been sleeping in his duty suit, a uniform of shimmering purple synthetic fabric. The United Earth emblem graced his right arm: a dove sitting on a green globe. That was one symbol that always repulsed him. He pictured the dove loosening its bowels.

Stumbling across the room, he palmed open the door and stepped into the corridor, blinking away the remainders of sleep from his eyes.

Holden Twain was running down the hall, strapping his nylon belt around his waist. "I have some poetry for you to look at while we're in the shelter," he said breathlessly, coming to a halt at Dante's side.

Mario liked the kid. He was five years the poet's junior, but his innocence seemed to add to his immaturity—and charm. He had not met Hemingway's *Discovery of Evil*. He never understood "The Killers" when he read it. Dante made him plunge through it every few weeks, searching for that glint of understanding that would mean he saw it all.

"Fine," Mario said. "That'll help pass the hours in that dreadful hole."

They set out at a steady trot down the hall, past the large windows that peered out upon the alien landscape.

At the stairwell, Mario ushered the younger man down and waited at the head for the others from that corridor. He was captain of the block and was to be the last into the shelter from that particular accessway.

He glanced out of the nearest window. There was sure to be wind. The spindly pine-palms were swaying erratically, some bent nearly to the snapping point in the gale. This was only the front of the tidal winds, he knew, and the soft breezes and the dragons would follow.

The dragons that looked so beautiful in pictures but which killed any man who looked directly into their eyes.

The dragons that seemed to live constantly in the air— without eating.

The dragons that killed with their eyes...'

He had a vision of the first victims, their eyes crystallized, shrunken within the blackened sockets, the brain wilted within the skull. He shuddered.

Still, it did not seem right to hide when they came.

Though the specially designed lenses failed, though dozens of scientists died trying to prove that they wouldn't, that men's eyes could be protected from the deadly dragons, it did not seem right to hide.

Though gunnery officers could not shoot them down (because only a shot in the eye seemed to kill the beasts, and aiming at those misty, pupilless orbs was impossible), it did not seem right to squirrel away in the earth.

The last man in the corridor pounded down the stairs. Dante swung the door shut, sealed it, then flicked the shutters that would partially protect the windows.

The shelter was filled with men. The city's compliment numbered sixty-eight. They were sixty-eight prepared to wait out another three hours of dragons and silence in the cellar.

Dante decided the entire affair got more ridiculous each time. It hardly seemed as if the planet were worth all the trouble. But then he knew it was. There were

the Bakium deposits, and the planet itself was central to this galaxy. Someday, it would be built nearly as heavily as Earth. A grand population.

Certainly more than sixty-eight.

Sixty-seven.

"Sixty-seven!" the Secretary shrilled.

"Impossible!" Marshall shouted.

"Menchen. Menchen isn't here."

"Who has that corridor?"

"I, sir."

"Anamaxender. Why the hell didn't you notice he was missing?"

"Sorry, sir."

"You'll be damned sorry before this is over." Marshall turned to the other faces. "Who saw him last."

"I believe just about everyone was asleep, commander," Dante said quietly. Marshall opened his mouth to speak, then thought better of it. He turned to Twain. "You know corridor F?"

"Yes, sir."

Every man was required to have a memorized floor plan of the installation buried deep in the emergency vaults of his mind. It was a ridiculous question.

"Go after Menchen. Go to his room and see if he needs help. At any cost, get back here."

"But the dragons," someone said.

"They won't be out yet, and it will be another half hour before they gain access to the upper floors."

Twain was strapping on a radio set, fastening a blaster to his belt. He crossed to Dante and handed him a sheaf of eight papers. He smiled and was gone.

At the head of the stairs, there was a sucking of a door unsealing, then a second whine as it sealed again—behind Holden Twain.

Mare Dante had nothing to do. He could have sat and worried, but the commander had been right. Dragons would not break into the upper corridors for a while yet. Until things really started getting bad above, there was no reason to worry.

He sat down and opened the folded sheets of yellow papers.

*Hath a man not eyes?  
Can he feel not pain?  
Does the grass grow greener?  
Is Gods blood rain?  
And so it goes,  
And so it is.  
Is there a soul?  
And if there is,  
Where is it?*

M.A. Dante was jealous. *Jealousy?* When he translated that and deducted the source, he realized that Twain's poetry had taken a change for the better. It was no

longer what Dante called "tree and flower poetry." There was something of a philosophical note in those last three lines. At least, there was pessimism.

Pessimism, he strongly believed, was merely realism.

Suddenly, he was very worried about the boy—the man —upstairs.

He stood and approached Marshall. "Commander, I—"

Marshall turned, his eyes gleaming, immediately on the defensive. Between clenched teeth: "Dante. What is it now? Would you like to take over command of the operation? Would you like to—"

"Oh, shut up!" He turned up the volume on the receiver that would carry Twain's words back to them. "I am not an enemy of yours. I disagree with your methods and procedure. I do not lower myself to personal vendetta."

"Listen—"

The radio crackled, interrupting the building rage within Marshall. "Twain here. Menchen is in his room. Ill. I'm going to trundle him back."

"What about the dragons?" Marshall snapped into the mike.

"I can hear them bumping softly against the window shields, trying to get in. Like big moths. Creepy."

"None in the halls?"

"No, Starting back. Out."

The dragons that killed with their eyes. Beautiful dragons so the automatic cameras showed. But dragons that no man could look upon.

*Somehow, men must be able to see*, he thought. *The photos*—Dante's mind seemed dangling on the ravine of inspiration.

When Twain returned, he was quite relieved, forgot about Marshall, and lived the moments of good poetry the younger man had composed, commenting and discussing.

"Why do you write?"

Twain thought a moment. "To detail Truth."

"With a capital T?"

"Yes."

"There isn't such a thing. Don't interrupt. There is no such thing as Truth, no purity with a tag. It is a shade of gray somewhere between black and white. It is one thing to a slave, another to a monarch, and yet another to the monk who kneels alone in cloistered walls of towering granite, fingering beads. It is for no man to delineate, and for no man to criticize another's understanding of it. Truth, old son, is relative. And more than relative, it is nonexistent as a pure entity."

"But in the literature classes in college, they said we were to search for the truth. The textbooks on poetry say we should write to discover truth."

The sixty plus men muttered among themselves. Marshall followed his scopes, his dials, his unfailing measuring devices that justified the way of things to man.

"That's what they tell you, Mr. Twain. That is also what I will tell you. Write to delineate truth. Yet I warn you there is no such thing. Yet I tell you never to stop looking, never to forsake the search. Yet do I tell ye that ye shall never end the quest. Do you have guts enough to keep looking, Holden Twain?"

Twain looked at him, and silently without needing to explain, he walked off and sat in a corner, staring intently at the wall where it joined the ceiling.

The rest of the day he spent tramping in and out of Abner's clinic, checking on Menchen's progress.

The blue walls of the med room made him feel as if he were hanging, dangling precariously from the center of the sky. The thin silver instruments on the table, the stark functional furniture, the university degrees on the walls, the anatomical chart above the operating table as if the surgeon followed a paint-by-number method in removing an appendix—all seemed like flotsam and jetsam swirling around in the crystal sky, remnants of mankind's achievements hurled into the stratosphere after a violent swipe of a disgusted God's powerful hand.

"What does he have?"

Abner stared at the diagnostic machine's readings. "Could be a tumor."

"Could be?"

"Could be half a dozen other things. It's hidden in the maze of tissues in his bowels. Maybe I found it. Maybe not.

"What can you do?"

"Nothing."

"He'll die?"

"We don't have the most modern hospital devised by mankind at our disposal."

"I'm not blaming you, Abe."

"I am."

"He *will* die, then?"

"Yes. And because I don't understand. I don't understand."

At night, while Dante slept, Menchen died. But the poet didn't know. No one would know until the morning. And it would disturb no one's sleep. A thousand sparrows could fall at once . . .

*A thousand sparrows, a million sparrows fell from the sky, between the snowflakes. They crashed silently into the pavement. They tangled in the telephone wires—looking like notes in a staff of copper, separated by pole-bars into economical musical measures. But there was no music.*

*After they fell, he stood, the collar of his coat turned up to ward off the cold, and looked at their bodies, broken and bleeding. And he did not understand.*

*Looking up into the gray sky from whence came the snow swirling like a thousand dandelion puffs blown on by children, he searched hopefully for the source of the coldness.*

*Far away, tires screeching...*

*Metal shredding...*

*Ghostly screams in the night, a woman in agony...*

*Perhaps, he thought, if I could look with a mirror, I could see and know. Perhaps, seeing everything backwards, the world makes sense. Maybe, if we change our perspective...*

*"Yes," said a voice.*

*He turned and looked at the snakes in her head, and he could not keep his eyes from dropping to hers. And slowly, forever and for always, he turned to stone, crying: "From another perspective you might be love and not hatred."*

*"Yes," she said, smiling.*

Waking, sweating, he knew the answer. It was just crazy enough to work. But he could not say anything. Marshall would see his effort as an attempt to gain power. It would, of necessity, be a secret project.

He turned on the bed lamp, forced himself totally awake, and set to dismantling his dressing mirror.

He was the last down the stairway at the dragon warning.

"Did you hear?" Twain asked.

"Hear what?"

"Menchen died during the night."

"Now there might be your only truth. Death."

"What?"

"It is indisputable, inevitable, and impossible of misinterpretation."

He walked away from Twain and secreted himself in a corner hoping to blend into oblivion. It was a corner near a stairwell. Roll was called, and all were found to be present. An hour into the warning, he rose, meandered through a clot of men to the edge of the stairs. Suddenly, like a tired apparition, he was gone.

At the head of the stairs, he unsealed the door, stepped into the corridor, closed the portal behind. Carefully, he removed the delicate, makeshift spectacles from his pocket. They were diamond-like, circus-prop spectacles of glittering looking glass and golden wire. They worked roughly like a periscope so that the wearer saw a mirror reflection of what was in front of him.

Sucking in his breath, he swung open the outside door and stepped onto the black soil.

The humming of giant wings sung above him.

Slowly, he turned his head to the skies.

*The far-darting beams of the spirit, the un'loos'd dreams,* he thought.

They were spirits and fairies above him. They were orange and magenta and coffee brown and crayon brown and pecan brown. They were white and chrome yellow and peach yellow and pear yellow.

They were thin, and in spots, through their silken wings, he glimpsed the sun. "Daedalus, your labyrinth was no more mystifying than a single wing of these creatures. And Icarus, turn from beside the sun, beauty is not up there. Look down and see."

They were dragons of the wind.

And with his lenses, their eyes did not burn him.

He walked forth, his mouth gaping. Other lines from Whitman's *Passage to India* entered his mind.

*I mark from on deck the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level sand in the distance...*

Truly, there was something about the alien landscape that seemed fresh. In the sunlight filtered through gossamer wings, he seemed to see more detail. The strange way the chlorophyll was formed as a crystalline substance within the yellow-green leaves; the patterns in the sand that he had once considered only chance happenings. He looked around. There were patterns to everything. The sky was delicately shaded in a soft-hued, artistic effect. There was a tasteful blending of all nature—something he had never seen before.



He could almost see the rays of sun like individual golden rivers, beaming into everything, showering back when reflected, soaking in and disappearing when refracted. The world was more real...

*The gigantic dredging machines...*

He saw the mining shafts and cranes, recognizing them as dredgers that sucked the scum of a planet, sent the base ores in gross tanker ships to run large, smoky factories on an over-populated Earth where some lived in poverty and some in plenty. And they were no longer just mining fools...

*I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world...*

From the air, vibrating the molecules of his body so that he heard with his eyes and ears and mouth and nose. So that he tasted the notes, 'the pitched wailings of melancholy and joy. So that joy was sweet and melancholy bittersweet. The dragons flocked above him and sang.

The music was soundless and all sound. It was the trumpets of the marching dead and the flutes of the living angels. They were strange songs.

*Crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold the enchanting mirages of waters and meadows...*

He stumbled over the sand, heedless of destination. Everything was new to him. A thousand times before had he looked at it. Never had he seen it.

The dragons sang of it, the why of it. The why.

Careening drunkenly to the mirages, he dipped his hands in cool water and there was no mirage. The meadows smelled fresh and grassy. They were real.

A spark within his mind was relighted; his search had ended.

Stumbling, laughing, seeing and hearing the gossamer butterfly-formed dragons, he reached the complex, went inside, and started for the shelter door.

They were all standing there looking when he came down the stairs. He threw the glasses at their feet and laughed loudly.

"He's insane," someone said.

"No!" Mare Dante shouted. "You're insane. All of you. Crackier than a box of saltines. You hide while all of life waits for you out there with the Gods."

"The dragons?"

"The dragons, the Gods. I'm not sure yet."

"Someone grab him," Marshall shouted, working his way up front.

"And you," Mare said. "You are phony to the bottom of your being. You don't even want to be captain. You're afraid of the position. But you have to prove yourself; you're impotent—"

"Shut up!" Marshall screamed, his face white.

"Impotent because once when you were eight, your aunt—"

"Shut up!"

"I can't. It's in your eyes. God, can't the rest of you see it in his eyes?"

"How did you look at the dragons?" someone asked.

"Through a mirror."

"But other men had their eyes burned out."

"Because they could not face what they saw in the liquid eyes of the dragons. They were not killed by strange, burning rays. They simply folded and lost their

souls. But it's beautiful. If you have always searched for it, you will find it in their eyes."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Abe asked.

"The dragons are not constituted of matter."

Abe stepped closer. "Talk sense, Mare. For God's sake, you'll be committed."

"When Menchen died, Abe, you told me you couldn't understand. You can understand if you will only let yourself. Your weight estimates on the dragons are incorrect. The dragons are weightless, for they are not formed of matter. The life forms on this planet are composed of what we call abstract ideas. The dragons are truth—Truth. Truth personified. Through them, you can understand why."

"He's insane."

"And there are other life forms here we haven't seen. The dragons were the only ones trying to contact us, to break down our shelter. There is an opposite life form living in the ground. We thought those desert holes were caves, but they are not. There are worms that burrow miles beneath us and fester. The worms are Hate. Hate personified."

Someone reached forward to grab him. He struggled and fell.

Miles below the sands, a long, caterpillar thing glowed momentarily and turned over.

The floor shook. Almost gleefully, the mob descended and covered Mario Dante until black swallowed and consumed him as he muttered lastly—"Ellen."

Upstairs, the pair of discarded spectacles clamped to his head, Holden Twain stepped forward into the outside world, a blaster on his hip, determined to seek out every cave, every wormhole...

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