

fun in the sun & rock'n roll...
every legacy has its beginning

Dragon Fire

Book one of the Starriders Saga



J. A. Anderson

AN A.I. IS BORN . . .

Shawnie and Karen each grabbed office chairs as Jason turned on the myriad of equipment with the flip of one switch. Without warning, two monitors turned on, half a dozen lights flashed around the room, and squeals and whistles assaulted everyone's senses at once.

The barrage took all of them by surprise.

"This is interesting!" Shawnie noted over the pandemonium.

Jason looked over his shoulder and grinned at her. "It's okay!" he yelled over the noise, "It's just running a self-test. Have a seat!"

"Sounds more like it's getting ready to explode!" Shawnie remarked as she pulled her chair up next to him, so she could watch over his shoulder.

Karen walked over to look at the computer. In such a mess of pieces, it looked unlike any other computer she'd ever seen.

A second later a synthesized voice said, "Entech Laboratories Active Intelligence System, Diamond, on-line. Start-Up Sequence complete. All subsystems read 'positive.'" Pause . . . "Good morning, Jason."

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Dragon Fire

The Eagle's Talon *

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Dragon Fire



The Starriders Saga
Volume One

J.A. Anderson

A CHALICE PUBLICATIONS BOOK

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DRAGON FIRE

www.thestarriders.net

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This book is dedicated to the Starriders. A guy never had a better group of friends in the whole world. You kept me looking to the stars, even when I was at my lowest.

Friends forever!

Special thanks to Jon and John, as well as Mark Spencer, Criss Rosenlof, and John and Shannon Robinson for all of their invaluable assistance.

*Dreams,
Lucidity of mind in a sleepfull state,
Are the power of my desires,
Abandoned when I awake.
As the sun dips low
I cast my gaze into the sky.
Grab hold a comet's tale.
Take me where my dreams abide.*

— *Mark Rauss*



chapter one

Who actually knows when a legacy begins and when it ends, as it's unfolding? Theirs began on a pleasant, cool California morning. The fabled "California Sun" had yet to make things unbearably hot today, and the cool ocean breeze made things even better. Planet Earth seemed in rapturous harmony with herself as students filed out of Mrs. Jackson's microbiology class at North High School, closing the heavy metal door behind them.

Bryant Johnson's strawberry blond hair was short and straight, framing his lightly freckled face perfectly. He stood lean and tightly muscled, even at sixteen years old, thanks to several years of martial arts training. He waited patiently outside Mrs. Jackson's closed classroom door. Within, he could hear her booming voice as she verbally railed on his best friend, Jason Akers. With a sigh, Bryant shook his head, wondering if once again Jason's hyper-kinetic personality was working to his disadvantage.

Jason soon slipped out of the classroom as if he were sneaking out rather than being excused. Bryant's blue eyes grew large as he searched his friend for signs of physical damage, even though he knew to do so was silly. Jason's clothes weren't torn and Bryant didn't see any blood, so he assumed everything was cool. "How'd it go?"

"Whew! I wonder if she's married to a preacher. The

woman's got the whole human race outlined, analyzed, and saved," Jason said to his buddy. "Thanks for waitin'. Where'd Kip go?"

"Tech class. He said he'll catch ya later. What'd Mrs. Jackson say?" Bryant asked as they began walking quickly up the hall.

"Oh, just the usual stuff about not being able to learn when my mind is being cluttered with 'that noise pollution that's not really music,'" Jason replied. "The irony is, it's probably the same stuff that was popular when she was our age!"

Bryant shook his head and countered, "You shouldn't have been listening to Queensrÿche during class." The two of them had been best friends since they were in late grade school and Jason's cocksure personality had plagued them the whole time. It didn't help that he was not only a genius but came from a wealthy family. He seemed to have plenty to be cocky about.

Jason didn't acknowledge Bryant's comment, but that thought *had* occurred to him. "She also didn't take like being shined on when I correctly answered every question she asked," he observed, "even the ones from the summer study guide at the end of the book. She was so sure that she could stump me and she wasn't happy when she couldn't."

"I wonder why, Mr. Smart-alek." Bryant wondered if his comment sounded as sarcastic as he hoped it did. "Just out of curiosity, did you really do her entire summer study guide in less than a week?"

Without pause, Jason replied, "Yep. Not much to do when you're awake at two in the morning four or five days straight every week. I thought maybe doing the guide assignments would put me to sleep, but nope. I've been working on a project at Dad's R&D lab during those all-nighters, too."

Casting his next-door neighbor a side-glance, Bryant

quipped, "You're a freak, you know that, don't you?"

Nodding and grinning, Jason readily agreed. "Did I tell you that I got my latest college entry exams back?"

"Let me guess, you failed again . . . on purpose." As close as Bryant and Jason were, it really irritated him that Jason insisted on failing the early entry exams that his guidance counselor kept making him take. Here Bryant was, hoping to someday get into a good college, and Jason was intentionally doing all he could to stay out of it, as long as it didn't hurt his GPA.

"Of course."

Shaking his head, Bryant grumbled, "You're a real idiot sometimes."

Jason merely shrugged. "If you worked five nights a week at your dad's company, you'd understand."

"Hey, I work at Dad's office whenever he asks me to!"

"And it's no fun, admit it!"

This time Bryant shrugged. "Not usually, no."

"Okay, then. I'm already out in the private sector on a regular basis. Why would I want to quit high school, too?"

Bryant had heard it all before. The conversation felt like a bad sitcom rerun, so he decided to let the subject drop.

They pushed their way past students getting into their lockers and rushing to class. The student body leadership committee had plastered posters along the main hallways the day before. "*THUMBS-UP TO A DRUG FREE SUMMER!!*" the posters proclaimed in DayGlow colors.

"Boy, they're sure hitting the 'No Drugs' theme hard," Jason noted as they fought their way through the mass of bodies.

"Didn't you hear? Thom Farnell O.D.'d last Monday. Cocaine overdose," Bryant explained, trying to direct his comments behind to Jason, who wasn't faring in their struggle as well as he.

Jason stopped cold in mid-stride. Thom was their school

mascot. Rumor had it he was offered a spot on the UCLA men's gymnastics squad. "Thom Farnell?" he demanded. "No way! I didn't even know he was using!"

Bryant stopped and nodded his agreement. "It's weird, a lot of the people you think are clean, use—and the people you think are users, are clean. It's getting to where you can't tell them apart anymore."

Jason nodded and noted, "Scary, isn't it." He began pushing forward again.

Pandemonium broke loose in the packed hallway as several of the guys from the jazz dance team blared a boom box stereo and tried to dance with some of the more desirable cheerleaders hanging out nearby. There wasn't enough room to walk in the hallway, let alone to dance.

The two friends turned a corner and Bryant asked, "Did Mrs. Jackson give you your stuff back?"

Jason patted his jacket where his trusty stereo rested. "She kept the magazine for good. And she says that if she catches me listening to tunes in class again, she'll take the stereo until my parents come to get it at the end of the year," he grumped. "Now I have'ta go buy a new mag."

They walked up to Mr. Ash's advanced calculus class. The seven minute passing period between classes had flown and most of the class began hurrying into the room.

"I saw Shawnie and Karen in the hall while you were being read the riot act by Mrs. Jackson. They're going to meet us at your locker before lunch," said Bryant, and he couldn't help the feeling of warmth that started inside him and radiated outward. He could only hope he wasn't blushing too much. He and Karen had been dating for two weeks now and things seemed to be going really well for them. Secretly, he hoped that the relationship would last long into the coming summer break.

Jason didn't seem to notice the pink flush that came to his friend's face at the mention of the lovely Karen Richards.

“Cool. Catch ya later,” was all he called and walked into the science class.

Without another word, his mind full of images of the young junior of his desires, Bryant hurried off down the hall.



chapter two

One lone man stood on the pier, looking out over a dark ocean of deep sea green and blue. A hurricane off the coast began making its presence known on land as the swells on the water started building, slowly at first, then with greater and greater frequency. Black storm clouds almost obscured the sun across the western horizon, casting a wicked, foreboding haze over everything. A slight breeze tossed the sea gulls around like pieces of paper on the wind; ripples played across the growing swells.

The solitary observer stood about six feet, six inches of solid body mass. Medium brown hair, tainted with a slight frost, was cut short. Sunglasses hid his eyes, even though it was dark. His jaw was set, determined. He didn't smile as he withstood the building wind, facing the angering sea. With a feeling of anticipation, he committed the scene to memory, intending to capture the kinetic energy around him in his next oil painting.

Another sound gradually overpowered the cry of the gulls and the roar of the waves, that of an outboard engine.

A moment later an expensive speedboat pulled up in front of the pier. In it rode three men. One had on a tweed suit, white shirt and tie, and expensive Italian shoes. His dark black hair contrasted with the silver hoop earring in his right nostril. This man climbed out of the boat.

“It looks like yer leaving us after all, yer *lordship*,” stated the newcomer, his heavy sarcasm hindered by a thick Irish accent.

There was no response, even when the two bodyguards in the speedboat took the time to join their boss on the pier.

The tall Anglo man never looked directly at the slightly shorter man, but instead preferred to gaze out over him at the horizon. It was darkening quickly and, as choppy as the water had grown, navigating the boat back to its origin was going to be a suicidal prospect at best. At last he spoke: “Your ability to overstate the obvious annoys me, Brennan. I’ve been planning to leave for a few days now.” The Dragon’s voice was almost a bass, and his New York accent clashed strongly with Brennan’s.

“But why?” Brennan demanded. “Business is grand; yer selling more ruddy Dragon Fire than ever before . . . why would ‘j’ a want ta leave?”

The Dragon turned his head to survey the horizon to his right. The sun had tried to win the battle with the clouds, but succeeded only in creating a breath-catching sunset. Sea swells swallowed the huge golden orb, and the clouds chose to smother it in from above. The Dragon found the sight oddly poetic, especially given what was coming. “I am not pleased with the way you handle your accounts or distribute my product. It looks like I’ll have to find someone else to do it for me.” His hard voice shattered the picturesque view, even for himself.

Brennan hesitated a moment, then laughed aloud. “Yer full of it! I run yer European business better’n anybody. Who else could distribute yer ruddy Dragon Fire like I do? No one!”

The Dragon calmly withstood the insulting laugh in silence. “My associates seem to think otherwise.”

Brennan spat out a curse that the Dragon couldn’t understand. One thing he hated about what he did was

having to cast his lot in with *foreigners*. It grated on his American nerves. Even in the land of the free, he had to deal with these substandard types.

Brennan's blond bodyguard cast a subtle glance at his partner, who was tensing gradually to go into action. All they required was the command from their leader.

For the first time in the meeting, the Dragon turned his face down to Brennan. "I gave you a shipment worth two hundred million. You gave me one-oh-five. That leaves ninety-five unaccounted for."

The Irishman spewed out another profane diatribe. The Dragon ignored, waiting. After a few moments, the bluster seemed to go out of Brennan and his shoulders slumped. His eyes looked haunted, reminding the Dragon of a disobedient dog caught digging in his mistress' prize rose bed.

Beaten, Brennan asked, "Where ya gonna go?"

"That's no concern of yours. I may head to the West Coast and oversee distribution there. I've always wanted to take the Universal Studios tour," the Dragon replied.

Brennan nodded. "Then good luck to ya," he replied and turned back to the boat. He didn't get far.

"Brennan, there's one more thing," the Dragon said.

Brennan stopped and turned around, that haunted look returning to his eyes. The Dragon found the man's apprehension fitting, given his present circumstances. He suspected that Brennan still considered himself somewhat in control of the situation, since he had his bodyguards and the Dragon was alone. The trouble for the Irishman was, the Dragon knew how to buy loyalty. And as far as he was concerned *everyone* was for sale. Without warning, Brennan's men turned on him, overpowering him in a matter of moments. The clatter of Brennan's pistol and his boot knife were almost lost in the rush of the increasing wind.

"What's all this, then?!" Brennan demanded, punctuating it with even more curses. His betrayers had him pressed

facedown to the pier's weather-ridden wood planks. Baffled by Brennan's obliviousness to the insult he'd committed by stealing from him, the Dragon knelt down so he was sure that the Irish drug dealer could see him clearly.

"Payback, Special Agent Brennan." A thin smile pursed his lips as Brennan's face whitened. "You see, I'm not as stupid as you may think, but when I found out that you were the mole in my organization, I did some investigating of my own. It seems that S.I.N. has done an immaculate job of hiding your real identity."

Brennan, one arm clawing for purchase, held his other hand up to the Dragon and begged, "Don't kill me! Have mercy!" His final plea ended in desperation and lacked any type of Irish accent.

Silence. Only the gale swirling around them made any sound.

"No mercy," was the Dragon's only response. He would have preferred the money, but he felt satisfied as he stood and turned his attention to Brennan's men. "Make sure you take him out far enough so the body's never found."

By now one bodyguard was binding Brennan's arms as the other had moved back to the boat to prepare the anchor and its heavy chain.

Brennan's cries of apology and curses of outrage at being betrayed echoed on the wind as the Golden Dragon turned and silently left the pier, confident that his instructions would be fulfilled to his satisfaction.



Melinda pulled the spoon away from the open flame and returned the lighter to her pocket. Carefully, as not to spill any of the expensive contents in the silver spoon, she picked up the hypodermic. The sight of the slightly off-color liquid cascading down the shaft and pooling behind

the needle sent chills up her spine. She delicately replaced the plunger into the hypo, then rested against the tree, gathering her resolve for what was to come. After a couple deep breaths, she slapped the inside of her left elbow to raise the veins, then carefully pierced her flesh with the needle's tip and injected the drug into her bloodstream. The drug burned all the way up her arm. *Fire*, but she'd grown accustomed to that. Melinda bit her bottom lip to distract herself from the pain in her arm. If she could get through the fire she was in for the trip of a lifetime. Then the fire abruptly ended, which had never happened before. Just as Melinda realized something was wrong, it hit. She slammed the back of her head against the tree, splitting her scalp wide open, caught in an uncontrollable spasm. Then her body fell over sideways and went rigid. Inside her, nerve ends fried completely; in her motor control center, gates fused shut; and in her central nervous system—meltdown. She couldn't see, couldn't hear, couldn't breathe, couldn't scream, couldn't feel, couldn't move. Her body lurched three times. The young high school student wasn't aware when her heart stopped. And she wasn't aware when she died. Mere moments later she lay on her back, perfectly straight, blank eyes staring up at the cool blue California sky. A single tear trickled down her lifeless cheek.