

## ***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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Heaven's Eyes

# Dragon Fire



## The Starriders Saga Volume One

**J.A. Anderson**

A CHALICE PUBLICATIONS BOOK

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DRAGON FIRE  
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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!

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*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."

Castig 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.