

PROLOGUE

Book 2

Sweat poured down his face, and his breath came out in wheezing gasps. Stumbling, Bain fell hard, scraping his knees and nose painfully on the unforgiving ground. He glanced behind him in terror, but the sight only served to stop his heart as overwhelming panic set in. Jumping up, he staggered forward, gulping in large amounts of oxygen to fuel his exhausted body. In the distance, he could hear the unmistakable sounds of pursuit as certain doom grew ever nearer to him.

How could I have come to such an end? His thoughts were frantic. Just a week ago he was an important man; now he was going to die. *Please, no. I'm not to blame! It's not my fault! I didn't kill him! This is not my fault!*

He fell a second time, landing hard against a broken tree, knocking the breath from his body. Twisting around, he saw the red blur as it rushed towards him, dropping from the sky like a flaming bird of prey. The blazing juggernaut landed just a few feet away with a heavy thud. Twirling angry eyes stared menacingly at the fallen figure. A generous reddened mouth opened to reveal twin rows of dagger-like teeth. Blue flames licked around an elongated tongue and danced along the leading edges of the enormous crimson wings, giving the dragon the appearance of something straight out of the depths of Hades. Sounds began issuing from the mouth of the furious beast as jaws, not meant for pronouncing human words, expressed indignation and outrage at the prone man.

“Bain Phillips! Your day of reckoning has come. I am your Judge... Jury... and Executioner!” The elongated maw opened even wider to fully reveal the rows of jagged teeth that waited to tear his flesh.

“Wait!” Bain screamed. “I thought your kind had laws against eating people... humans... *ME?*” he cried out in desperation, grasping at any opportunity for life.

Mouth agape, with clouds of steam issuing from her still-open jaws, she stared at the prone man, murder dancing brightly in her smoldering orbs.

“What you say is true,” she began. “Our laws forbid the taking of intelligent life for personal revenge.” Bain began to breathe a little easier, but his small vessel of hope was quickly shattered on the rocks of despair. “However, I was never any good at following laws and rules,” KyRia replied, with a malicious grin. “As KyRik would tell you, if he were still alive.” The reminder of Bain’s grievous sin caused him to gulp in horror.

KyRia moved forward as the flames that bathed her grew in intensity. Bain could only watch in horror as death descended upon him, his mind too numb with shock to flee. Then another loud thump came from behind him. It sounded as if someone had dropped an elephant from the sky onto the path he had just fled down. With

his terror growing stronger, he slowly turned his head to see what new horror awaited him. What he saw nearly caused him to pass out from fright. Bain's pants were suddenly wet as he stared dreadfully at the new arrival.

— But Bain's final moments on Earth had not started out in this manner. No, our story begins many months earlier, when the world seemed to be a calm and friendly place. It was a happy time, when a small group of very anxious individuals waited to welcome a new life into the world. A new life that would change them all...

Forever!

CHAPTER 1

The Awakening

Previously, in Book One

The small spacecraft finally reached a potentially suitable solar system nearly 500 years after leaving the Gilst homeworld. The precious cargo it carried had survived the lengthy journey intact, and the crystalline brain of the ship's computer systems experienced what could only be described as joy over the third planet circling the new system's modest sun. Long-range scans and sensors indicated an oxygen atmosphere with just the right combination of other elements to maintain life. While not as oxygen-rich as the world they once called home, it was within the required parameters. Cammera – the name given to the ship's artificial intelligence system – set the most direct course to this new world to investigate the possibilities of using it as a place to raise his valuable cargo. The spacecraft's path would take it past a large gas giant, a world of intense gravity and planet-sized storms. As the small ship circled around the immense world, the unexpected happened.

The enormous gas giant acted as a large celestial vacuum cleaner, sucking space rubble from the solar system into its massive gravitational field. A large amount of space debris was in the process of being pulled into the gigantic planet's atmosphere at the same time the ship was traveling nearby. Although the Gilst ship was equipped with powerful shielding for protection, it was not designed to deal with such large amounts of rock and ice. When the ship entered the outer limits of Jupiter's gravity-well, it encountered the largest meteor shower it had ever had to face. Strong solar winds, rocks, and ice all combined with the extreme gravitational forces of Jupiter to create the perfect storm. Most of the fragments were easily handled by the Gilst version of a powered force-field. However, many larger chunks were being drawn into the large planet's atmosphere. Multiple strikes against the powered shielding weakened the field sufficiently that some of the smaller meteors were able to penetrate the fragile spacecraft's skin. Alarms began to sound throughout the ship as damaged systems reported failures. Cammera might have found all the noise amusing, if he had had the time to consider the silliness of blaring alarms in a spacecraft where the only form of life was a computer, which was plugged directly into the ship sensors and therefore had no need for screaming sirens to inform him of potential problems or threats.

One of those stray meteors took the Crystal Fusion Reactor offline, automatically activating the internal power storage systems to take over the power needs of the spacecraft. Then, to add insult to injury, another meteor, much larger than the first, destroyed over 70% of the ship's power storage cells. Within a few microseconds, Cammera realized that only a shipyard would have the needed tools and parts to repair the damaged ship. To make matters worse, a very slow radiation leak had developed in the damaged Crystal Fusion Reactor. Built-in safeguards would be able to seal the leaky chamber, but the damaged ship would never be able to leave the solar system without extensive repairs. Left with no other option, Cammera continued on a course towards the blue-green world directly ahead. For better or worse, the third planet from the sun would become the new home of the unborn Gilst.

The ship circled the watery world for a complete full cycle, or what the humans who lived on its surface referred to as a year. During that time, Cammera studied the small world and its strange inhabitants. It was with great reluctance that Cammera finally guided the spacecraft down towards the weird and wonderful world below. Under the cover of darkness, with the ship's stealth systems fully activated, the spacecraft landed in a dense forest on the coast of one of the larger continents. The local residents referred to the location as the state of Oregon. It was a member of an earthly government known as the United States of America.

It was not the perfect world he had been searching for, and there would be many problems introducing the alien Gilst to the human race. The largest of these troubles would be the Gilst themselves.

Earth had a history that spoke of great creatures of massive destructive power who terrorized the intelligent humans of Earth in their far-off past. These creatures were called dragons. By some strange quirk

of fate, these ferocious, man-eating killers very much resembled a fully grown Gilst in virtually every detail. Other than their skin coloring and texture, the two creatures were very much alike. But that is where all resemblance ended. The Gilst were an intelligent, gentle race, who were not aggressive in the way the earthly dragons were described, that the humans feared so much.

The magnitude of this problem was not lost on the computerized mind of the ship. A solution would be needed if the Gilst were to survive and prosper on a planet of highly intelligent, yet sometimes foolish humans. After careful consideration, Cammera felt that having one of the Gilst available would greatly aid him in the development of ideas and solutions to this very large problem.

Setting the birthing process in motion, the first of the new Gilst race was born a short time later. It was a male child who, unfortunately, had no ability to speak in the way of his ancestors, but he did have the unusual gift of telepathy, which he used to communicate. Now, all Cammera needed was a way to incorporate the dragon-like Gilst into the aggressive human race.

Through a series of odd events, this newly birthed Gilst – named KyRik – befriended a young earth girl, by the name of Cheya (pronounced Shy-aah). It was through this strange connection that the world of men began to learn of the dragon-like species known as the Gilst.

KyRik became even more recognized when a devastating earthquake struck the small coastal community the young girl called home. The quake caused great damage, and many people were hurt. But KyRik – who had sensed in advance that the quake was about to strike – warned Cheya and her father, who then notified the people of Brookings, Oregon, of the coming disaster. His actions saved many of Cheya’s friends and companions from harm or even death. Working side-by-side with a few select humans, he helped rescue many trapped individuals. But the quake had created other problems for the young Gilst. Problems that would threaten the future of his people.

The damaged spacecraft that housed Cammera and the unborn embryos was now buried under tons of rock and debris due to the large earthquake. Severely underpowered, Cammera diverted all remaining reserves into saving the ship. The drain on the ship’s systems placed both Cammera and the Gilst embryos in danger of extinction. Working frantically with his human allies, KyRik finally reached the buried ship only to find that time was growing very short indeed.

The small group had only a few hours to find a source of power great enough to re-power the ship and save the remaining Gilst. But the earthquake-ravaged area had little to offer as power was already in short supply. It seemed as if they were doomed to failure before they were even able to begin.

With the assistance of his new friends, KyRik and the others finally located a suitable power source. But by that time, it was too late. The newly birthed KyRik was able to save the precious embryos, but the computer mind, known as Cammera, was no more. The computer had sacrificed himself to ensure that the unborn Gilst would survive.

It was with great sadness that the group secured the ship and returned to take care of another problem that KyRik’s presence had created. Far too many people had already seen the dragon-like creature to keep him a secret. Now the government, and people from all over the world, were coming to find and capture the mysterious flying beast. Only with the help of the Brookings community did KyRik narrowly avoid being captured.

Now temporarily safe, KyRik and the rest of Brookings were breathing a huge sigh of relief. Work resumed on restoring the damaged community, and things were finally getting back to a sense of normal. It’s too bad that normal rarely lasts, and in the wise words of a long-dead philosopher, they were reminded that:

This too shall pass.

Flakët

Present day

To say that it came as a surprise would have been an understatement of the greatest magnitude. Everyone, including KyRik, had long thought that the ship’s computerized artificial intelligence, known as the – *Command, Analysis, Monitoring, Management, Extrapolation, and Redundant Algorithms*, more commonly known as Cammera – had been lost when the starcraft’s power systems failed. The ship had been buried in an avalanche caused by an earthquake that rocked the Brookings area not that long ago. The

recently awakened Cammera reached out to KyRik as he was flying low over the forests surrounding Brookings, Oregon. The dragon was enjoying the unusually sunny winter day. Cheya was seated in her normal place, firmly secured on her dragon's back, using the straps her father had designed, so she could safely ride on her large friend — a precaution her father had insisted she use. The bright warm sun felt good on Cheya's exposed face. Recent events had lost their edge, and the two companions enjoyed a peaceful day of flying and exploring.

Cammera employed a device known as a *Dalker* instead of using the normal mind-link the two shared. The computer was concerned about how KyRik might react to the news that he still lived. The *Dalker* was an instrument approximately the size of a small sparrow. It employed a large variety of differing capabilities, but the ability that Cammera selected to utilize for his reintroduction was the *Dalker's* holographic projectors. Suddenly, Cheya and KyRik were surrounded by other dragons, flying in formation on either side of the surprised pair. KyRik hastily winged backwards, slowing his forward momentum. Cheya could only stare in shock as the multi-colored forms swooped in circling patterns above her.

“KyRik?” she questioned quietly in her mind, her tone confused.

“I am also at a loss,” he replied softly through their mental link.

“Could the others have been hatched by accident?”

“Birthed? No, it is not possible. These Gilsts have already reached their full adult forms. There has not been enough time for a molt to occur if a hatching had taken place, as you should remember from my own transformation. This is something else entirely. Could your own past myths of flying dragons be based on actual fact?”

“Well, even if they are, there have been no dragons sighted anywhere that I have heard of in well over a thousand years. So, it's not very likely.”

“I thought not. These also appear to be Gilst in both coloring and design. Yet, it is not possible,” he declared firmly, as if to convince himself that his statement was true.

The baffled Gilst sounded as confused as Cheya felt. One of the larger male dragons drifted near and winked at KyRik and then pointed with its head towards the distant mountains. It was obvious that he wanted the two of them to follow. KyRik wheeled around sharply and followed the strange group of dragons towards the mountain range several miles away. As they grew closer to the jagged peaks, a nagging feeling began pulling at the two friends.

“Are these guys heading where I think they're heading?” Cheya asked with considerable concern.

“It would appear so. I am finding this whole experience very unsettling.” KyRik's very logical mind battled with what his eyes were witnessing. He was clearly worried by the inconceivable arrival of five fully grown Gilsts. It just wasn't possible.

A few days earlier, KyRik had moved his alien spacecraft to a new location. It was the fourth such move over the last few weeks. They were continually on the lookout for a more secure site for the alien ship. The contents of the spacecraft were far too valuable to risk detection by the general public. Right now, it appeared as if all the new dragons were winging in the general direction of their most recent hiding place. KyRik prayed that these new creatures hadn't broken past the security protocols he had set in place. His unborn brothers and sisters were always foremost in his mind.

“I don't understand,” Cheya commented fearfully a few minutes later, when she realized how close they were to the ship. “Can't you talk with them?”

“I have already tried, but was unsuccessful. We will have to be patient and wait. Everything should become clear very soon, for we are almost there.” The other dragons were already landing in a circle around the area of the ship. KyRik wheeled in and helped Cheya to the ground. The two waited to see what would happen next. They didn't have to wait long. Suddenly, the five dragons simply faded from sight, puffs of smoke that dematerialized in the wind. Cheya almost fell to the ground in shock. KyRik's own eyes opened wide with astonishment. Then a nice-looking, large male human face appeared in the air beside the hidden ship.

“I am most sorry for my deception. I used the illusion that there were other Gilsts to ensure that both of you would come back to the ship.” The male face turned towards Cheya and smiled.

“I am most pleased to finally meet you, young lady. My name is Cammera.”

“That is not possible,” KyRik replied through the mind link to both the ship and Cheya.

“Actually, while it is very improbable, as you can see, not completely impossible. Unbeknownst even to myself, a safeguard had been installed just in case such an emergency should ever occur. I, for one, am most grateful. It seems that both Trakor and Selinna were very thorough in their preparations. I fully awakened only thirteen hours ago.”

KyRik could only stare dumbfounded. Cheya, however, was curious to learn more from KyRik’s teacher and friend.

“Who are Trakor and Selinna?” she asked the holographic image.

“They were the rulers of the Gilst homeworld; the Gilst king and queen, so to speak. They lived and, unfortunately died, more than five hundred of your Earth years ago. They were also KyRik’s biological parents.”

“Wow! You hear that, KyRik? You’re a prince!”

KyRik made a face very similar to the human expression of rolling one’s eyes over Cheya’s declaration of his supposed royalty. Then he turned back to address his friend, his amazement apparent. “I did not believe that we would ever meet again in this world. I am still having a difficult time believing that you are alive and here.”

“Well, I am not alive in the normal biological sense of the word. Yet, like you, I was also created. So, in some respects, I also share a beginning, much like yourself. As for a crystalline entity having an afterlife? That question is best set aside for future discussions.”

KyRik snorted, the dragon equivalent of a laugh. Cheya watched the exchange between the two friends with interest.

“I think that my sudden appearance has dulled your senses, my pupil.” Cammera’s voice was light and teasing, something Cheya found interesting as it came from the mind of a computer.

“I assure you that I am fully functional. I have suffered no long-term effects over my premature molting.”

“That is not what I was referencing. You also carry a link to the ship and its internal systems. Can you not sense that something has changed?”

KyRik scowled, at least the dragon equivalent of a scowl, and closed his eyes. Seconds later, they snapped open in shock. He quickly moved through the brush that covered the ship and then over to the entrance panel. He punched in the entry code and thrust his huge body through the ship’s door. Cheya watched her large friend with unease. Something had happened. Something that caused KyRik no little concern.

KyRik slowly emerged after several minutes, his expression unreadable. Cheya ran over and placed a comforting hand on her friend. KyRik didn’t seem to notice. He turned his face towards the floating image.

“Why?” he asked simply.

“There were two reasons for my decision. First and foremost, I am charged with ensuring the success of the Gilst race. But far more importantly, it was time. You need help that neither I nor the humans can provide you. You are a leader with no one to lead. In order to guarantee the success of the mission, it had to be done. Like it or not, it will happen, because it can no longer be changed.”

“What? What’s going to happen, KyRik?” Cheya quizzed her friend. But KyRik completely ignored her.

“How long?” the dragon asked the computer.

“The process was begun a little over twelve hours ago.”

“SOMEBODY BETTER TELL ME WHAT’S GOING ON!” Cheya stormed.

“In less than twenty-two hours a very special event will occur,” the computer informed her in a smug tone.

“What? What will occur?” Cheya was on the verge of yelling again.

“I will no longer be alone. In twenty-two hours, another of the Gilst will be birthed.”

“Oh... OH!” she declared a second time as the information finally sunk into her confused mind. “You mean another one... like you... will be born?”

KyRik glared at his human friend. “It would make little sense to have another like you?” Cheya looked embarrassed by KyRik’s unusual snippy response.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, looking down at her feet in embarrassment.

“No, it is I who should apologize. I have been shaken by Cammera’s revelation. I was not expecting another of my race for quite some time.”

“But this is a good thing. Isn’t it?”

“That remains to be seen,” KyRik answered. Cheya wondered why her friend was so worried. Little could she know that within the short span of a week, she would be just as troubled as he was.

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Two brand-new helicopters, painted sky-blue, with a picture of a soaring dragon on either side of the massive machines, moved out over the forests of the Oregon coast. The picture bore a strong resemblance to one, very reluctant Gilst. Roger and Ken had patiently explained to a completely bewildered KyRik that the more his image appeared on the buildings in town and on the two helicopters, the less likely people were to believe that he actually existed. KyRik thought that both the town’s mayor and the two business partners were somewhat misguided, if not outright foolish in their beliefs. How could exposing his likeness to sizable groups of people, lead the humans into believing that he was not actually real? It made no sense at all to the dragon. But like it or not, a fairly accurate representation of KyRik now adorned the two machines as well as the local bank, the city hall, and the main outer wall of the town’s only mall.

The immediate area, which had been devastated by a recent earthquake, was being given a huge shot in the arm by all the tourists who were flocking to Brookings to see the large dragon kite and Ol’ Blue, Mic’s overgrown monster truck. But mostly, they came to see if they could catch a glimpse of the dragon. Despite government attempts to downplay all the dragon sightings, they still occurred, and dragons were the new rage worldwide. Thus, the large pictures of KyRik on buildings, helicopters, magazine covers, the coffee shop entrance door, random walls, and even in hand-drawn pictures done by local school children – all played a part in bringing money to the financially troubled town. For an alien who was trying to keep a low profile, KyRik was rapidly becoming a celebrity, much to his dismay.

The two choppers landed in a large clearing, shutting down their engines. As the blades slowly wound down people begin pouring out of the machines. Two individuals were already waiting for them in the clearing. Once the crowd had unloaded, one of the waiting individuals motioned with his head towards the trees. The large group moved to a hidden clearing not far away. KyRik was waiting for them, his expression thoughtful.

“Hello, KyRik!” Ken shouted as he waved excitedly.

“It is good to see you, Ken. Were you able to summon everyone?” he asked looking around.

Ken pointed to the group moving towards the dragon. “As you can see, everyone, with the exception of Kandy, Kendra, and Ella. All the rest of us have arrived as you requested. So, what’s up, big guy?”

The large group gathered around the dragon and waited. The gathering was composed of many of KyRik’s closest friends. Jackson was there, along with the elderly Jacob, who was also known as KM or the Kite Man. Roger, Oliver, Dan, and Mic all waved at the dragon. The mayor and two others completed the group. Roger was still limping with a half cast from his accident, but broke out into smiles when he saw KyRik. Cheya and James approached from across the meadow. James had flown in on KyRik with Cheya.

The arrivals waited for KyRik to fill them in on the urgent need for a sudden meeting. Both Cheya and the dragon had been strangely reluctant to reveal any details, only stating that it was very important that they all meet. Even James had been unable to pull any information out of Cheya. KyRik looked over the assembled group for a few heartbeats before addressing them.

“I have asked you here to reveal several matters of great importance. The first... well... maybe I am not the proper one to continue.” KyRik became quiet as if he were waiting for someone else to speak. Abruptly, a large man walked out from the tree line. He was handsome and well-dressed, with mischievous eyes. Everyone stared at the new arrival, wondering who the unknown man was, and why he was at the secret hiding place of KyRik’s spacecraft.

“Please, do not be frightened by my unexpected appearance. I am most delighted to meet all of you. I must convey my thanks for the assistance you have given young KyRik in his time of need. But first, introductions should be made. My name is Cammera.” The man waited, to see if there would be any

response to his strange declaration.

“Camma? As in the computerized intelligence system of KyRik’s ship? But... but, you’re a man,” Ken pointed out. “Besides, I thought you perished when power was lost to the ship’s systems?” Ken gazed intently at the stranger, waiting for him to explain.

The man faded from view, and he was replaced by a face floating in the air before them. This new image continued the conversation. “You are most correct, Ken.” Everyone was surprised by the new ghostly figure as well as Camma’s knowledge of Ken’s name, but they were even more shocked when he continued.

“Yes, I know each one of you very well indeed. So do not be alarmed. KyRik’s memories are automatically transferred to the ship for storage on a daily basis. This is done through a direct mind-link. A safety precaution installed in the event of KyRik’s loss. His memories could then be accessed to provide valuable information to the remaining, yet to be birthed, Gilst. It is through this link that I have come to know each of you and of the many sacrifices all of you have made on behalf of the Gilst race.”

“But KyRik said you were lost. How is it that you’re still alive?” Ken persisted.

“Neither KyRik nor myself were aware that a special device had been installed just before the Birthing Project had been launched into deep space. A last gift from KyRik’s biological parents: a safeguard, if you will, that would prevent the loss of my crystalline memory in the event of catastrophic system failure. A gift, I might add, for which I am extremely grateful.”

“But that was weeks ago,” Roger interjected. “Where have you been all this time?” Several of them nodded in agreement.

“I was reawakened less than a day ago, myself. Apparently, the failsafe does not re-establish full system operation until it senses that all dangers have passed and sufficient power has been restored. It was not until the failsafe detected that no further risk existed, that it restored the entire ship’s computers, instruments, and systems. I was brought back online with my memories completely intact.”

“If’n I understand things correctly, you are an artificial intelligence composed of crystalline memory engrams, which act in a similar fashion to human brain cells. Am I correct, so far?”

“Yes, Jacob. You are most accurate.”

“Well, they say if you live long enough you’ll see everythin’ there is to see. I guess I must be gettin’ pretty close to kickin’ the bucket, now that I have seen a talkin’, floatin’, alien head, from another world. Of course, that’s what I thought not many weeks ago, after that young dragon of yours showed up on my doorstep askin’ for my assistance. One thing about that young lady, over there,” Jacob said, pointing a bony finger in Cheya’s direction, “she keeps life interestin’, if not downright dangerous.” The group chuckled at the old man’s comments.

“She ain’t the only one,” Jackson murmured under his breath, remembering his one and only ride on KyRik’s back, thanks to Jacob.

The levitating face smiled at Jacob. “It is true that young Cheya seems to have a special knack for keeping all of earth’s creatures on their toes, if you pardon my use of your human expression. But she is also the one most responsible for keeping KyRik alive. For that, I am forever in her debt.”

“Well, well, KyRik,” Oliver said with a smile. “I think my daughter is not the only one who keeps people on their toes, so to speak. You aliens never cease to amaze me. And I thought that life was finally on the verge of slowing down, after all the recent excitement.”

“I am afraid that the excitement, as you call it, is only beginning,” KyRik replied seriously.

“What now?” Jackson grumbled. Whenever KyRik was concerned it usually meant trouble for the big man. Jackson didn’t want any more dragon rides. Now or anytime in the future.

“Camma has restarted the Birthing Project.”

“Does that mean what I think it means?” asked Oliver.

“What does it mean?” James asked excitedly, not understanding why all the adults were looking at each other with raised eyebrows. It was Camma who supplied him with the answer.

“It means that KyRik will no longer be alone.”

“Alone?” James wondered aloud. “He’s not alone now.”

“You dope,” Cheya told James. “KyRik will have a brother or sister soon.”

“As in another DRAGON?” James’ eyes were practically bugging out of his head, his excitement

obvious to everyone.

“Indeed, young man,” Cammera interjected. “Soon KyRik will have a female companion. Technically, not a full-blooded sister. Yet a sibling for sure. DNA from KyRik’s own mother was joined with the combined genetic material from three separate hosts of the highest regard in the former Gilst society. Our leading scientist, a great artist, and our number one philosopher. The DNA from these three was scientifically combined with the DNA from KyRik’s mother to create the perfect mate.”

“You mean KyRik’s getting married?” Now it was Cheya’s turn to be shocked.

“Well... I suppose that would be a parallel analogy of the human equivalent.” Cammera stated thoughtfully.

“Congrats, big guy,” Jackson stated, slapping a startled KyRik on the shoulder with a meaty hand.

“You failed to mention that important detail,” KyRik stormed menacingly at the holographic image.

“*My bad*’ as the humans would say. You will have plenty of time to consider all the implications later.” Cammera’s apology lacked any sincerity and sounded very mischievous. Ken didn’t believe the computer was sorry at all. It almost appeared as if Cammera had developed a sense of humor.

“I must say, you sound more like a human than a machine,” the mayor informed the floating image.

“Yes, I am an ever-evolving life form, much like yourselves. Not in the evolutionary sort of way, so improperly taught in your learning institutions. I simply mean that I can learn, adapt, and modify my actions to fit my present environment.”

“Cammera has become more human in his actions, than machine. As such, he is prone to pranks and expressive emotional outbursts,” KyRik’s dry tone was not lost on the group.

“And my pupil sounds more like a complex calculating machine than a sentient being the majority of the time.” Cammera returned KyRik’s verbal shot, undeterred.

“Children, children!” Jackson said with a smile. “Play nice or Uncle Jack will have to set you both in the corner until you can learn to behave!”

“I do believe we will get along smashingly,” the computerized face stated with an impish grin as he looked over the large form of Jackson.

“He better hope KyRik doesn’t do the smashing,” Roger whispered to Ken, in a low voice. Ken nodded in agreement. He was enjoying watching his large friend being bested by a computer. No small feat, in Ken’s mind.

“So, should we be planning on a spring wedding?” Dan asked the dragon, with a pretend look of innocence. His reminder of Cammera’s recent proclamation did nothing to improve KyRik’s present mood.

“While I am sure that my biological parents and the Gilst leadership were concerned for my emotional well being, I do not think that I am ready or willing to make such an important decision without further investigation. I am still very young, and there are many challenges that have yet to be addressed.” KyRik’s voice held just a hint of panic. His talk with Oliver, not that many weeks ago, about earth male and female relationships had caused him no little concern. If Gilst females acted in any way like their earthly counterparts, he wasn’t sure that he *ever* wanted to form a lasting bond with *any* female. The big dragon continued to lay out his concerns before somebody else jumped on the wedding bandwagon.

“We must also remember that this is not the type of world the Gilst leadership anticipated when they sent the ship into space. Three very important questions need to be addressed before such an association could even be considered. First, would it be logical for such a relationship to be formed on a world such as this? Second, would it be sensible, considering the current dangers we are facing, to form such a close, personal connection? And, most importantly, there are issues of compatibility that need to be addressed, considered, and carefully weighed. It is far too early to give consideration to such an important proposal,” Cheya had never heard KyRik sound so shaken or concerned. His voice bordered on panic.

“Was that the big guy’s way of saying no?” Jackson asked Oliver in a whisper as he leaned closer to Cheya’s father.

“I believe it was,” Oliver answered out the side of his mouth, just as quietly.

“What my winged friend has just expressed, for those of you who don’t speak computer, is NO!” Cammera explained with a snort.

Everyone joined the laughter, except KyRik, who continued to look uncertain and perplexed.

“What’s a matter, KyRik? You look like someone stole your best new chew toy,” Jackson commented nonchalantly, a mischievous twinkle in his own eyes.

“My present concern is for the well being of the new Gilst. Until recently, the ship was buried under an avalanche of rocks and debris, and the future of my people uncertain. Your own government continues to hunt for me in secret. During my short life, I have narrowly escaped death or capture several times, and your world has yet to fully realize what having my people here will mean to them. My anxiety revolves around my people’s future and their safety. Nothing more,” he answered firmly.

“Ya can’t cook without breakin’ some eggs, KyRik!” Jacob cackled. “Besides, it’s like havin’ human youngsters. If ya wait until you can afford ‘em, they never come.” Jacob laughed again at his own humor. “What I am tryin’ to tell ya is this. There will be no good time to introduce an alien dragon from outer space to our world. We’ll just have to take it one day at a time. But I do think now is a good time for us to take the next step.”

“And what step would that be?” Oliver asked warily. Jacob was sharp, but some of his ideas bordered on the insane.

“It’s high time for KyRik to make his entrance! Having two dragons flitterin’ around is only gonna make it harder to hide ‘em. Let’s come up with some tricky story, and then parade KyRik out for everyone to take a gander. If we don’t beat the government to the punch, then they’ll be callin’ all the shots. I say we take the wind out of their sails, before they can strike!”

“He does have a point,” Mic replied. “Sooner or later, KyRik is going to have to face the music. It would be better if we were the ones who hired the band.”

“I like the way you humans think!” Cammera stated with a smile.

“So, what kinda yarn are you thinkin’ of spinning?” Jackson inquired, imitating Jacob’s drawl. “Are you gonna go ahead and tell them the big guy’s a space alien?” he asked curiously.

“No, that wouldn’t be a good idea,” Ken remarked slowly. “The arrival of an alien, who looks like a dragon, would make many people – including those who are presently on our side – all twitchy and nervous. We can thank Hollywood for that. Aliens have rarely been portrayed in a good light, so people are naturally just a little freaked over the thought of space invaders. What we need is a good story that’s close to the truth, without giving them too much.”

“We don’t have a lot of time,” Cheya interjected.

“No, we don’t,” KyRik agreed. “In less than nineteen hours the next Gilst will be born.”

“Then we better get crackin’ them eggs.” Jacob slapped his knee for emphasis, cackling again.

The group sat in a circle and begin discussing ideas and options for revealing KyRik to the world of men. A difficult task. How does a person explain the presence of a real live dragon to the human race? Even more difficult. How could they ever possibly explain the presence of an alien life form that is larger, stronger, and, in many ways, smarter than the average human, without causing a worldwide panic? That was the difficulty that lay before them. A sticky situation that if not handled correctly, could mean the end of KyRik and his people.

Alov

“So, the Americans agreed?”

“Yes. Their Vice President Wetford assured me that we would have their full cooperation, if not their direct participation. They are seeking to avoid more political fallout, should our attempts fail. The last time they tried to take matters into their own hands it embarrassed the present Administration badly.”

“Hmmm, and you believe this... Bain character, can be of use to us?”

“I do.”

“You’re certain of your findings?” The man glanced at several pictures on the surface of a large table.

“There can be no doubt, Prime Minister.”

“Very well. You will have the backing of the Crown. But be most careful. If this should prove to be true, it would be the biggest discovery in the history of mankind. Not to mention a technological windfall.”

“Indeed. Then I am off to America.”

“Be sure to give my best to the Yanks.”

The man chuckled as the Prime Minister exited the room. He moved over to a table and moved around several of the pictures on the desktop until he found the one he was looking for. A slight curl of his lips was the only sign of emotion the man displayed. Laying on the table was a long-range Satellite photo, taken the previous week. It showed a most unusual aircraft moving low over the forests of Oregon, a coastal region of the Western United States. Something that had not been made by the hands of man. He moved that photo over to one side and stared at the next one. This one showed something even more fantastic. It was a dragon in flight. On its back was a young girl. A red-headed girl. David smiled. *Well, well, my young lass. Just where were you going on such a fine day?* Without further thought, British agent, Sir David Crosby – a specialist in unexplained mysteries – gathered up the papers strewn over the large table and placed them inside his briefcase, before exiting the room. By this time tomorrow he would be in the lonely state of Alaska. There he would pick up an important package; afterwards he would be off to the Pacific Northwest of America. The only place in the known world that had an alien zip code.

Sugarrak

Bain shivered, even with the heavy parka wrapped tightly around him. The temperature was well below zero, and the nerdy man was miserable. The station he was presently at was so secret that it didn't even have a name, only a number, 6286. It was as far north as a person could get and still be on land. Even if that land was buried under many feet of ice and snow. It was a research and weapons development complex, half-buried in the frozen earth. But instead of being on the inside of the facility, working on some top-secret government project, Bain was standing guard duty outside. The former Managing Director of the National Space and Science Institute was cursing under his breath as he had been for hours. As the night dragged on, Bain repeatedly heaped a series of verbal abuses upon dragons, aliens, red-headed girls, helicopter pilots, as well as his former buddy – the President of the United States. Once he finished one round, he would begin another. His curses were becoming more and more creative, the longer he stood outside in the blustery cold.

"I hope your wings fall off, you bloomin' overgrown bat! I hope that men the world over suddenly become violently ill at the sight of a red-headed woman! I pray that..." A sudden sound caused Bain to pause in mid-rant, his eyes searching. *Surely, there can't be anyone trying to sneak into this facility. Who would want to be out here in the freezing cold, anyway? Guarding this dump is such a waste of my time and talents! Is my shift over yet? I could really use...*

"Good evening, Bain," a vaguely familiar voice whispered in clipped British tones from behind the man. Bain almost jumped out of his skin, dropping his gun in the snow. Bain spun around, his eyes as round as dinner plates.

"Sir David? How did you get here? WAIT! What are you doing here? This is a top-secret base. Are you spying?" Bain's strong accusation and demands were not lost on the British agent. After all, he was supposed to be on guard duty.

"Tut, tut, old man. Is that any way to address an old friend?"

"Friend? You told them I had a nervous breakdown."

"No. I simply stated that you were suffering from mental exhaustion."

"Some difference. You told me that we were going to be hunting the dragon together, then you upped and disappeared, leaving me to fend for myself. Did you know they took away my directorship of the National Space and Science Institute? ME! Then the President dumped me in this godforsaken freezer on the edge of nowhere. How could this have happened to ME? ME!"

"Calm yourself. I was the one who asked the President to get you as far away from the dragon situation as possible. As you can see, he did quite well. This is about as far away as a man can get."

"YOU? You did this to me?" Bain started searching for his gun in the snow, his thoughts murderous. David moved to Bain's side and easily pushed him over as he was probing through the frozen white fluff.

"Be a good bloke and listen up. I did all of this *for* you. I needed a place to put you away, out of sight from anyone who might be looking for you. A large number of people were most annoyed the last time you played dragon slayer. I needed to hide you until I could arrange everything."

"What do you mean... 'arrange everything?'"

“Do you have any idea what it is that you have found, my good man?”

“I most certainly do!” Bain replied, his former arrogance bursting through.

“If we were to locate that ship, we would be the two most famous men in history,” the British man informed him.

“You mean you planned all this? You meant to send me out here?”

“Now you are catching on. I have made all the necessary arrangements. How would you like another shot at nabbing that scaly beast?”

“Actually, he is covered in a thick dark green hide, except for his wings.” Bain’s condescending tone was not lost on the British agent.

David glared at Bain, his eyes narrowing. Bain abruptly realized that he had just irritated the one man who could get him out of his cold situation. He abruptly stammered out a different answer.

“I mean, yes! Yes! I would love another shot at nabbing... the scaly little... beastie... thingie.”

“Good. Then let us be off.”

“What about my job guarding this door?”

“Bain, have you ever wondered why they had you guarding this particular door?” he asked patiently.

“Ummm, no. Why?”

“Haven’t you ever looked inside, to see what is so valuable that it requires your presence?”

“Well... no. I thought it was probably just one of the rear entrances to the facility,” he admitted.

“Go ahead. Open the door, Bain,” the agent instructed.

Bain turned and opened the door. He stood there for a few moments, frozen in disbelief, his mouth hanging open.

“Come with me, Bain. I am sure they can find someone else to guard their emergency backup water closet. Sorry, I mean bathhouse or as you Yank’s say in America, bathroom.” Bain could only stand there speechless as he stared at the facility’s reserve outhouse. David grabbed his arm and gently led him away.

“But what about my gun? Won’t they want it back?”

“Remember the bathroom?” Bain nodded slowly. “Your gun was no more real than the fake secrets you were guarding.” The British agent’s smile was gentle, with a touch of humor.

David led Bain to a waiting Snow Cat, parked a few hundred yards away. Bain moved like a man in a trance, his mind whirling like the snow blowing at his feet.

Why does everyone hate me? Bain walked in silence, humiliated. As he climbed inside the large Snow Cat, he thought he could hear laughter on the icy breeze. A frigid mocking farewell floated on the frozen wind of his miserable existence.