

# Building a Universe

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There comes a time in the development of any "civilized" culture when that culture is arrogant enough to believe that there isn't, sometimes that there cannot be, another culture like itself. This can come through many paths: zealous adherence to misguided religious dogma, sometimes stern faith in incomplete scientific probabilities, although it is usually a mixture of the two. Eventually, however, that culture comes to the realization that there could be--hell, there *likely* are--more like it, and there is only one place those others could be hiding.

We met them too close to home for comfort, but really, any distance would have been too close. We weren't ready to handle the implications of first contact, and we later learned that they were equally ill-prepared for us. It was scout-to-scout. At that time, our supraluminal drive technology was still in its infancy, and colonizing worlds outside our own system was still slow going. We were taking childlike steps into a wilderness more vast than we can even now imagine; we were nervous, tense, suspicious and jumping at shadows.

To this day, we still don't *really* know who fired the first shot. We just know that our scouts met their scouts, and, from there, relations quickly devolved. We warped back to system, nursing wounds and screaming of terrifying beasts from between the stars. They told us tales of creatures, huge and powerful. Our new enemies defied logic, similar to the small, furred creatures of our own worlds, but so much bigger. Their snouts were boxier, their ears tapered and external. Their feet, rather than claws, ended in heavy, clumsy-looking nails... hooves.

They called us cold-blooded child-eaters. We called them dumb, hulking beasts, little more than food. Both species were wrong, up to a point, but it hardly mattered to the families of those first casualties. It shames me to admit it, but it was *my* people that were the fiercest aggressors. Ours was a violent, feudal culture, and while we were trying to claw our way free of our self-destructive tendencies, the aliens gave us an outlet for our aggression, something to turn against as a single, united people for the first time in our history.

The resulting boom in science and industry prepared us for the war we would make for ourselves as we burned across the local star systems, but our two species weren't the only ones to be found out there. Through a quirk of probability, perhaps, other races had turned toward the light-studded darkness at nearly the same time. We met more, and then more, and still more. Lines were drawn across the galaxy, and even while war threatened to destroy entire species, progress was made, alliances were formed. Similarities were found. Predator joined with predator, prey with prey. Planets were turned to glass and millions of lives were lost over the course of wars between whole peoples, wars that lasted for decades and cost us all dearly.

It would have continued until we were all nothing but dust. Some fought for peace, rather than blood, but fought we all did, for our own reasons. As luck, or as some would say, unluck, would have it, there was one group that was unwilling to sit back and watch us all destroy ourselves. It just so happened that the only way they could make us stop was by force.

They came screaming out of the darkness from a world only ever known to them, the dragons. They stunned us all with their violence. Even the most predatory of species quailed under their savagery. Their numbers were relatively few, but their technology and ferocity was utterly overwhelming, and when they were roused to a fight, they never showed anything but utter dedication to the cause of peace through overwhelming force.

Planets and cultures who had tried to stay out of the fighting were spared, and the dragons only ever fought to stop the loss of greater numbers. There were, it pains me to say, a great many fights. We, not just my species, but we *all* were stubborn children back then, trying to cope with the implications of what we had experienced away from our homes. They stopped it all, though.

They helped those they could, and a great many lives were saved just with the advancements in medical technology that they brought with them, but many *more* were saved by the obliteration of the will to fight. They would appear in the middle of a battle between two other species, and offer a single warning: leave peacefully or else. If the fighting continued, the dragons would turn their guns on the ships of both sides and the fire wouldn't cease until there was nothing left but dust and those who had wisely surrendered.

They fought not to conquer. They never even hinted at any interest to capture or subjugate. The worlds left in their wake were untouched by them, though many were scarred by previous battles. Eventually, over the course of many more decades, the last of the wars were stamped out under the weight of potential annihilation. The dragons hosted all of the peace talks; they begged people of all species to find common ground. They urged predator to walk with prey, carnivore with herbivore, fur with feather with scale. They helped with the reparations; they nursed the entire galaxy back to health, fueled economies and fostered the sharing of knowledge and understanding.

What they put the most effort into, though, was assembling every known, habited world into the galaxy's first, real government. The dragons took no seat for themselves in the newly created Congress of Worlds, a galaxy-wide democracy that ensured every species and planet was represented. Their warships receded back into the darkness, and while they oversaw, they let the galaxy govern itself.

The representatives, some elected, some appointed, according to the whims of each species, met under their watchful gaze in the Assembly, a massive space station that some called the Capitol. The Congress couldn't have met on any one planet without being accused of bias, and so the Assembly moved according to the whim of all peoples, bouncing from planet to planet.

What surprised nearly everyone in the galaxy, I think, was that it worked. Scars healed, and while the dragons lording their superiority over us chafed for a while, nearly everyone agreed eventually that it had been better than the alternative. With that, true peace settled over the galaxy for the first time. It was uneasy at first, but as nearly another century passed, that initial, blind anger at those that were so different hesitantly subsided. The lust for war cooled into petty squabbles; entire armadas dispersed and were replaced by the occasional band of pirates that harassed shipping lanes.

The dragons watched us flounder, lending aid when necessary. They watched us struggle, and eventually succeed, in keeping our heads above the water, such as it was. It, like everything, wasn't perfect. There were still dissidents and arguments, brief skirmishes and strained relationships, but on the whole, we were making it work for us. We were able to move forward despite all that had happened between us.

As the representatives gathered time and time again in the Assembly to speak for their people, the dragons observed from their central ring, facing outward toward the gathered masses. Most believe that they are there to police and oversee, to keep an eye on the burgeoning government. There are others, however, myself included, that think that they look not on the

congregation, but further out, beyond us. They sit not as judges, but as silent protectors, watching over us, their eyes directed out, facing the darkness with the light they kindled at their backs.