

Star Frontier: Hindsight Part I

by Hamish Spiers

Preface:

This is a short story related to my Star Frontier series, one of many in a growing collection that I intend to one day publish.

However, I believe that this particular story gives interested readers a nice little taste of the Star Frontier universe, as well as fitting the theme of ‘expectation’. Naturally, I believe the actual novel ‘Star Frontier’ is the perfect jumping in point but ‘Hindsight’ might be a good way to get your feet in the water, so to speak. It’s set twenty–eight years before the events of ‘Star Frontier’, early in a decade–long war that heavily shaped the nations and regions that feature in the series. Those who have read ‘Star Frontier’ will probably work out who one of the characters is and those who have read its immediate follow–up ‘Star Frontier: Beyond the Veil’ will instantly recognize her. However, whether you’re already familiar with the Star Frontier series or are just checking it out for the first time, I hope that you enjoy ‘Hindsight’.

Hindsight Part I

257 Corsidan Standard

“This is nothing less than a conspiracy hatched by Lord Eras himself.”

The man was strong, broad shouldered, with a rich tan and thick hair of an auburn hue that was more red than brown. Although he was now in his forties, he was nevertheless the picture of youthful strength – but his voice faltered as he spoke and his gaze was unfocused.

Beside him, his wife heard and saw these things and looked on him with concern. She too projected the strength and vitality of youth and she was a woman of beauty to equal her husband’s, though hers was of a markedly different kind – with dark eyes, alabaster skin and light blonde hair.

“Jarekeiv,” she said, her tone soothing. “Tell me. What is the matter?”

“It is clear as if it were written before my very eyes that Lord Eras has assisted the Taelemeirs at every step along their path. The Swift Hawk is mine. It –” Jarekeiv broke off. “For years, my staff and I...”

“Tell me,” his wife said. “Just tell me what happened today.”

“We lost the industrial espionage case against the Taelemeir Ship Building Family,” Jarekeiv said at last, tears welling in his eyes. “We cannot manufacture the Swift Hawk and it is now *we* who must provide compensation commensurate to the losses of... *We*, I ask you!” He sat down and held his head in hands. “Katraezyna. My sweet Katraezyna. We’re ruined.”

“There’s been some shifting in the gravitational mass, sir.”

General Lindelsen leaned over the display next to the navigation officer. “Cometary?”

“Yes, a stray’s been drawn in on this vector here,” the officer said, pointing to the display. “Caught by this star over... here. It poses no collision hazard to us but it’s large enough to affect our hyperdrive systems and we’ll have to revert to sublight speed in another twelve minutes as opposed to the thirty-seven we were counting on.”

“Well, all’s fair in love and war,” the general replied, giving the navigator an encouraging smile. He then stood to his full height. “Signals. Relay to all ships. Revert to sublight speed in eleven minutes. Power up point defences and main guns and prepare scout ships for immediate launch. We lost a supply convoy here four days ago to ships from the Third Division so I want all ships at battle readiness.”

As his orders were carried out, Lindelsen watched the timer by his chair as the minutes went by and soon they emerged in the middle of nowhere. There were planetoids nearby and, of course, a comet – but through the forward view screen, there was nothing to be seen. Lindelsen released a breath he hadn’t realised he’d been holding.

“Signals – are all scout ships away?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Radar – anything that’s not ours?”

“Ah...”

Lindelsen frowned. This was not a particularly orthodox response for an officer in the Federation Navy. “Well?” he demanded.

“Something appeared fleetingly, sir. It’s just out of range now but it’s on the same vector as we are and... Sir, I have it now. It’s one ship.”

“Levarc?”

“Unknown, sir. It looks like a private vessel.”

Lindelsen’s frown remained fixed. If this was a pirate spooking his officers when they were already wound up tight enough as it was...

“Any weapons readings?”

“No, sir. It appears to be a civilian transport of some description but not a design I’m familiar with.”

“Keep it simple,” Lindelsen said. “Signals – alert the rest of the task group to stay clear then send out a hailing frequency. I’d like to have a few brief words with these people.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a slight wait as his new directions were carried out and then the signals officer gave him a nod. “Ready when you are, sir.”

“Very good.” Lindelsen straightened his posture, though the recipients of his hailing signal would not see him, and began his address.

“Unidentified vessel, this is the Federation cruiser *Fortitude*. You are in a regulated navigational area without authorisation in a time of war. By federal edict, I am authorised to arrest you and transfer you to an appropriate facility for processing. If you wish to provide an exception to this edict, this is your opportunity to do so.”

“There has been a most grave mistake,” came the reply, “though by no means do I account myself blameless, but my good sir, we did not know –”

“That this is a regulated navigational area? Everything from here to *Saeban* is off-limits to civilian traffic. There’s a war going on, you know.”

“Yes. So you said. However, we knew nothing of this war either until you spoke of it just now. We are emigrants.”

For a moment, Lindelsen was rendered speechless. “You’re kidding.”

“By the orders of the commanding officer of this vessel,” the guard said, “you are to remain on board your ship until instructed otherwise. If you violate this condition, you will be placed in one of the *Fortitude*’s holding cells. Is that understood?”

“Why, yes, we will comply of course,” Jarekeiv said, nodding acquiesce. “I understand that there are valid reasons for these procedures and that we are guests on board –”

“That,” the guard replied, “remains to be seen, although it is not my place to say anything further on the subject. Now, do you have adequate provisions to remain on your vessel for another six days?”

“That is not a problem, sir. We have enough provisions to last several months.”

“Very well then. We will check up on you periodically over the next few days until we reach a safe port where we can transfer you off this ship.”

The guard then turned to leave.

“Just one moment, if I may,” Jarekeiv said.

“Yes?”

“Who is the Federation at war with?”

The guard looked at him as if he were mad. “Who do you think? The Levarc.” With that cryptic remark, the man stepped down the ramp and the hatch slid shut behind him.

“Father, who are the Levarc?”

Jarekeiv turned back and regarded his daughter. She was turning out to be a very beautiful girl, and she wore his rich tan and red hair even better than he did. When she became a woman, he had little doubt that she would find no shortage of suitors.

When she became a woman, he reflected silently. At seventeen, that day was not far off.

“I don’t know, Laila,” he admitted. “But whoever they may be, they are clearly not a group to be regarded lightly. There was fear in that young man’s eyes – fear as I have never seen before.”

“Jarekeiv,” Katraezyna said, stepping into the room. “What did the man say?”

“We are to remain confined aboard our ship until we are told otherwise.” Jarekeiv watched his wife for her reaction. “It appears that we have inadvertently become a burden to these people, whoever they are.”

“Warriors of the Federation, that is all we need to know.”

“Father,” Laila said, “if there is indeed a war here, then this is no place for us surely.”

“Let us not be hasty in our judgements, daughter,” Jarekeiv replied. “We must ascertain the entirety of the circumstances we now find ourselves in before we can make any such decisions.”

“Then what shall we do for the time being?”

“Wait, my daughter. Whatever path we must take will be clear enough in time.”

Two men in guard uniform walked away from the strange vessel that was now sitting in one of the *Fortitude*’s hangars.

“What kind of nuts turn up in a known Levarc hotspot flying a civilian ship?” one of them wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. And I have no idea what we’re going to do with them either, now that they’re here.”

“Well, that’s for the general to decide,” the first said. “But anyway, the sooner we get rid of them, the better, I imagine.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that,” the other said. “Did you see their daughter?”

“Yeah, Sarech. She’s jail bait.”

“Well, I can think of worse ways of getting away from the fighting.”

“Do you want me to report that comment?”

“Knock it off. We’ve been stuck on this ship for six month’s straight now.”

“That’s knock it off, *sir*,” the other replied and then frowned. “Six months?”

“Not a single day planetside. I’ve been counting.”

“Yeah, I imagine you have.”

Suddenly, the deck buckled underneath them and a loud crash reverberated through the hangar, followed by the all too familiar sound of a battle alarm.

“Oh, for crying out loud!” Sarech complained as they staggered back to their feet. “Can they give us a break?”

General Lindelsen winced as he pressed the healing patch against his forehead. With the application, fresh blood streamed through his hands, getting in his eye and sliding down his cheek. With a little more pressure, he managed to stem the flow. The stickiness of the blood was irritating but he didn’t dare move the patch until the wound was sealed off, naturally or otherwise. Besides, as he became more aware of the agonising headache – the pounding, crushing, stabbing and all round ~ing that was going on inside his skull – the bleeding became a rather distant secondary concern.

Then, somewhere in the midst of all this discomfort and excruciating pain, he became dimly aware of another awful fact: he was the commander of this sorry little task force and his next in command was watching him for some reason.

He blinked. “I’m sorry,” he said, getting the words out only with some effort. “What did you say?”

“The damage is...” The officer looked on him in alarm. “Sir, do you wish to go to sick bay?”

“I wish someone would kindly take a blaster and put me out of my misery,” Lindelsen replied. “But duty takes precedence. Go on.”

“We’re blind on the portside and our point defence weaponry is not yet back online. The techs are working on it.”

Lindelsen closed his eyes for a moment and counted to five in his head to make sure he didn’t black out entirely. Then he opened them again. “Go on.”

“The main starboard engine is overheated for some reason. It may be connected to whatever the damage was that caused the point defence weaponry to short out –”

“But the techs are working on it, yes? You told me. What of the rest of the group?”

“The numbers are still rolling in. We may have lost seven squadrons of fighters in that engagement. But I think the scout ships made it out of the melee in time.”

Lindelsen nodded again, winced and made a concerted effort to fight back the tears that the blinding pain induced. He hated his officers seeing him in his present condition. "Go on, Commander."

"None of the frigates made it. One of the light cruisers was also destroyed, the *Pincer*. The carriers are still intact, although one of them will require forty minutes to get its engines back online... Sir, if you don't hand acting authority over to me, I will assume the responsibility myself. You could have a brain haemorrhage for all I know."

Lindelsen closed his eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Commander Levitt. You are right. I'm appointing you acting commander of what remains of our sorry little group – but before you take command, this is my final order... before you take command. Oh, I said that already."

"It's all right, sir."

"Get us to the nearest safe port as soon as possible."

"That's what I intended, sir. If that group comes back, we won't be in any position to engage it."

Lindelsen felt sleep overcoming him. Exhaustion brought its own comforts.

"Medic. Take the general to the sick bay at once."

"Yes, sir."

"You were told not to leave your ship." The guard threw his hands in the air in exasperation. "For goodness' sake, can't you look around and see what's going on here? Half the crew's in the medical bay, we're blind and crippled... Do you have any idea how many people just got killed? *Do you?!*"

The guard then looked at the man in front of him as if he were only really seeing him right then. The man hadn't said a word during his diatribe and had simply stood waiting... and, the guard now realised, with tears rolling down his cheeks.

"I am sorry for your losses, my friend. I truly am but my daughter needs help."

"What did you say?" the guard asked in a gentler tone of voice.

"My daughter needs help," the man repeated, not moving, still crying. "During one of the impacts, she was thrown off balance and cracked her skull, I think. She's unconscious. She's breathing but she needs help."

The guard placed his hand upon the man's shoulder. "I'm sorry. Of course. Show me."

He followed the man, pulling out his communicator as he walked. "This is Corporal Emertson reporting a concussion injury in starboard hangar four. Request assistance."

"Copy that, Corporal. All the medics are presently engaged but I will send personnel to assist you in moving the injured to the medical bay."

Commander Levitt let out a sigh of relief as the main drives kicked in and the tattered remains of the task force leaped to hyperspace. At long last, they could lick their wounds without worrying about the Levarc coming back.

"Commander?"

He opened his eyes and contemplated applying another one of the medical patches they used in the navy to fight fatigue when duty required long periods without rest. He realised then

that he had been awake for fifty-two hours. After a moment's hesitation however, he withdrew his hand from the patch. He didn't know what this new matter was but it probably wouldn't take too long to see to.

"What is it, Lieutenant?" he asked, closing his eyes again.

"Our guests, sir."

"What?"

"Our guests. The civilians we picked up right before the Levarc hit us."

"What do they want?"

"Their daughter's presently in the medical bay, undergoing treatment for a concussion injury."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yes, well... the parents are obviously very concerned and they really want to see her."

Levitt rolled his head slightly to make himself more comfortable. "Oh, right. Yes, that order's rescinded. They can move about but just tell them to stay out of the way."

"Yes, sir."

"Is their daughter going to be okay?"

"I think so, sir, but the medics are still running some tests."

Levitt nodded. "Thank you, Lieutenant."

"Sir."

"And Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir?"

"When you've finished seeing to our guests, get some sleep."

"Yes, sir. Um... Thank you, sir."

"Your daughter will make a full recovery without any adverse effects," the medic said. "However, we'd like to keep her under observation for the next two days to be on the safe side."

Jarekeiv glanced across the room at all the other concussion patients under similar observation. By practical necessity, the observation the medic referred to could only be cursory unless Laila exhibited any more serious symptoms – and he also realised that among the numerous patients there, Laila's condition was probably the least serious.

"I understand," he replied, giving the medic a smile of appreciation. One medic, he realised, for over fifteen or twenty patients... and this was just one ward in the medical bay.

"Thank you."

The medic smiled back and returned to his rounds, leaving Jarekeiv and Katraezyna standing by their daughter's bed. Jarekeiv leaned down and kissed her forehead, then Katraezyna put her arm around his shoulder and guided him outside the room where there was a small lounge area.

"What have I done?" Jarekeiv asked as they sat down.

"You made a choice that, under the circumstances we faced, was perfectly reasonable," Katraezyna replied. "If we had remained, then we would have lost everything we had."

"We would still have our ship."

Katraezyna shook her head. "It would have been repossessed with everything else we held in our name."

“But, my Katraezyna, we cannot stay here. You have seen what these men and women face. There is death here.”

“There is death everywhere,” Katraezyna replied. “However, it does seem to come with far more swiftness and brutality here.”

Jarekeiv shook his head. “I have never seen anything like this. I do not think I could have ever *imagined* anything like this. Who are these Levarc?”

For a minute or so, neither of them spoke. Then Jarekeiv stirred. “Whatever they may be, there are no Levarc in the Empire.”

“You want to return then? Destitute as we are?”

“We have friends.”

“And by your own account, most of our friends have fled as well – here and among the systems along the Frontier.”

Jarekeiv leaned forward and rested his head in his hands for a moment. “I wonder who amongst them is faring best.”

“That is a good question, Jarekeiv,” Katraezyna said, her tone now approving. “That is the question that we should ask ourselves.”

Jarekeiv turned to her in disbelief. “But does it make any difference whether we are here or among the worlds of the Frontier? If these Levarc are here, striking at will along the Federation’s borders... what makes you think they would spare the Frontier worlds?”

“It all depends on what they want, my husband,” Katraezyna told him. “And that is what you must understand. We should not make any rash judgements until we understand the extent of the situation we are now in. You said so yourself.”

“Laila wanted to go back,” Jarekeiv sobbed.

“Laila understands the situation, Jarekeiv. Besides, do you not realise that we have already tempted fate with far too much impudence in coming here?”

“And we are paying for it now.”

“No, you fail to see my meaning. We tempted fate every moment we stopped along the way here. When we refuelled, when we stopped for navigation adjustments and whenever our flight paths forced us to travel at sublight speeds, we tempted fate sorely, though we did not realise it at the time.”

Jarekeiv contemplated his wife’s words for a moment and then shook his head. “No. *No*. Are you suggesting that the ships of these Levarc are that widespread?”

“I am not suggesting it, Jarekeiv. I believe it is true.”

Jarekeiv slapped the empty seat beside him. “But that cannot *be!* Think, my dear. That would be akin to every world of the Minstrahn having its own task groups and armadas. Who would *have* so many warships?”

“The Levarc would, it would seem. And the Federation itself is hardly akin to the Empire either, from what we have witnessed so far. This task force that we are now travelling with is surely just one of many such patrols. Likewise, the Levarc group that so mercilessly attacked us is just a small part of a far larger force. Did you not hear what the men and women around us have been saying? The size of the areas that they have cordoned off against civilian traffic is staggering in and of itself. And then of course, there are the ships of the Levarc that attacked us. We have overheard the men and women discussing these ships. You heard as much as I.”

“And what did we hear? I cannot remember.”

“These were ships of the Third Division. The *Third*. Contemplate the full implications of that for a moment, Jarekeiv. These ships were not the division itself; they were a small group

within it. And by the virtue of its being the third, then it is equally clear that this division is just one of several. And from all I have ascertained so far – and that, I am certain, is only a small fraction of the entirety of the situation – this third division alone would be far larger than all the naval ships of the Minstrahn combined.”

Jarekeiv said nothing to that. Instead, he covered his face and wept.

During the next few days, on board the *Fortitude* was a joyless place to be. With many of the crew in sick bay, it was really all the remainder could do to periodically run the ship’s systems checks and keep an eye on the various instrumentation. The medics were exhausted caring for so many injured and were basically running on stimulation patches – not good for anyone’s long-term health. And when they weren’t doing tasks or sleeping, which everyone tried to do as much as possible, the uninjured spent most of their time worrying about friends and comrades in the sick bay.

As for their Minstrahn passengers, Katraezyna remained confident that their situation was not as dire as Jarekeiv believed it to be – but her husband’s depression became more serious, worsened by the guilt he felt for placing his family in such a situation and for Laila’s injury. He spent a lot of time by Laila’s bedside, not speaking, not eating and not sleeping. After the initial assessment, the medic they had first spoken to decided that he would like to observe Laila for another day on top of the initial two and despite his assurances that there was most likely nothing to worry about, it nearly brought Jarekeiv to hysterics.

At that point, Katraezyna decided that her husband might have needed more help than she could provide.

“Could I ask for a moment of your time?” she asked the medic, when Jarekeiv was out of earshot. “I would be most grateful for some advice.”

The medic gave her a kind smile and gestured to the sleeping patients around him. “It’s all right. As you can see, things are finally beginning to calm down a little.”

“Thank you.” Katraezyna slid her hands over her face and brushed away some tears, then smiled with a little effort. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” the medic replied. “It’s okay. What do you want to ask me?”

“I am afraid for my husband.”

The medic nodded. “His daughter’s injury has clearly been a shock to him.”

“That’s true enough but it’s not just that. He feels responsible for what happened. We are from the Minstrahn Empire, you understand –”

“Yes, I had heard.”

“He thought that coming here would give us the opportunity to rebuild. We had a calamity of sorts and so we came here to start again. So you can imagine what is going on in his mind. He is panged with guilt, overwhelmed with horror at what we have discovered here, afraid for the future and, although I have told him time and again not to abandon hope, I fear that he has. Entirely.”

The medic nodded.

“Oh, he was a strong man, I must tell you. Before any of this happened, only several months ago – yet lifetimes, it seems now – you could not have reconciled him with the man who now weeps by my daughter’s bed.”

The medic placed a comforting arm on her shoulder. “Ms. Ereiana. I understand all you are telling me but the condition your husband is suffering from is not one that we can adequately treat on board this ship. This facility is for the immediate treatment of minor ailments, the stabilisation of patients suffering from more serious illnesses and the first line of treatment for battle injuries. If we can help the men and women in our care and bring them back to health, they remain on board and resume their duty. If we cannot, and there is still a chance for them, then they are transferred to facilities where they can receive more sophisticated treatment than what we can provide here.”

“I understand you entirely and I suppose that you do not have psychiatrists on board –”

At this, a shadow appeared to cross the medic’s face. “Actually, we usually do. They are sometimes required. Unfortunately however, our own psychiatrist was killed during that engagement.”

“Oh. I am so sorry.”

“Me too.” The medic then forced a smile. “However, I can give your husband some medication that will combat any hormonal imbalances that may be worsening his condition, although I would have to make a brief assessment of him before I can do that to make sure that is a valid approach. But the conditions of stress and fatigue are well-known triggers for such imbalances. However, I doubt that such a course can have any meaningful effect. It would be treating the symptoms, not the cause, and as such any positive effects it would have would only be temporary.”

“I understand.”

“Perhaps when your daughter is released from this facility, that may go some way to help him.”

“It may but I think you are right, and that you are acting in our best interests in your decision to keep her under your care for one more day.”

“Hang in there, Ms. Ereiana. Don’t forget. We’re not far from a safe port.”

The medic didn’t add the proviso that it was at least a safe port as far as they were still aware.