

Star Frontier: Hindsight Part II

by Hamish Spiers

“I’m all right, Father,” Laila said, crying a little from the emotion she felt at seeing her father in such a state and blushing from the embarrassment his repeated embraces caused her. “The medics said I was in very little danger.”

“I thought that you had been taken from me. That I would never see you again.”

“But I’m all right.” Laila hesitated for a moment as she looked at Jarekeiv. Despite the fact that it was she who had been unconscious in the medical bay for the past three days, it was her father who looked the worse for wear. His posture, once so proud and erect, was now slumped and defeated. He was even noticeably thinner and his gaze had lost all of its former strength. He looked worn and haggard.

Laila reached to him, placing one hand gently on his cheek. “I’m all right, Father. Do you understand? It’s all right. And tomorrow, we will reach Saeban. Then we will be able to decide what course we shall take.” She turned around. “Isn’t that right, Mother?”

“That’s right,” Katraezyna said with a cheerful smile. “We’ll be all right.”

“And there was nothing for us back home, Father,” Laila insisted. “I know you tried to hide it from me but it was as plain to me as to you and Mother that the life we had there was over. War or no war, this is where we will forge our future – and, Father, it matters little how terrible the Levarc may be. No war lasts forever.”

“Laila’s right,” Katraezyna rejoined. “Jarekeiv, we will find a way to rebuild what we have lost.”

Neither Katraezyna nor her daughter noticed it immediately but later they realised that after he had told Laila how worried he had been, Jarekeiv did not say a word all day. Or the next.

The space surrounding Saeban was far busier than Commander Levitt had expected. There were a number of large cruisers in the system... and a considerable amount of debris and wreckage, some of it Levarc in origin and some of it Federation. As his group approached the remaining orbital platforms, he saw quite clearly that a large clean-up operation was presently underway.

“Signals – announce our arrival if you would, please. Nobody appears to have hailed us yet.”

“Yes, sir.” There was a momentary pause. “Sir, a signal’s coming through now actually.” Levitt nodded. “Thank you. Patch it to the main speaker.”

“Sir.”

There was another pause. “*Fortitude*, do you read?”

“Saeban control, this is *Fortitude*. Commander Levitt speaking, acting command on behalf of General Lindelsen.”

“Saeban copies, Commander. We’ve received your updates. Transfer to orbital station Zenith 50–150 for debriefing.”

“Copy that, Saeban. *Fortitude* out.”

“Admiral Locaun?” Levitt exclaimed on seeing the head of the Federation Navy reserve waiting for him in the small conference room. “What brings you out all the way to Saeban?”

The old veteran pursed his lips in a grim smile. “I’m here primarily at the invitation of the Levarc. The king’s grandsons have outdone themselves in tying up all our active squadron commanders – and then one of them started hitting targets here.”

“And who was it? Valaekei or Askaera?”

“Valaekei, thankfully,” the admiral replied and then hesitated. “Or not. The second division has caused us more grief overall so far but Valaekei has become increasingly tenacious.”

“They’re competitive siblings though, aren’t they? Valaekei and Askaera. Valaekei is attempting to surpass his brother in reputation.”

“So our analysts and all our Levarc defectors say. Points in his favour in the king’s eye with every successful campaign. And the end result is that both the third division and the second division are becoming increasingly more bold and increasingly more brutal. Which brings us to our present predicaments, doesn’t it?”

Levitt sighed. “Yes.”

“And your predicament is somewhat more dire than the situation here. We managed to repel our attackers with additional reinforcements and drive them away – while your task group, as I understand your report, barely held the enemy off and only just managed to escape before they reformed and struck again.” Locaun gave a slight wave of his hand. “Oh, I do not mean that as a criticism, Commander. Your group was caught off guard and you faced overwhelming numbers. It’s clear from your reports that that group was waiting for anyone who happened to pass and they were using the radiation from that comet to hide their drive emissions before they launched their attack. So if any other group had come along first, they would have been blindsided just as yours was.”

“Admiral Roth or Admiral Mynart would have turned the thing around though.”

“Perhaps... but perhaps not. However, when General Lindelsen has recovered further, we’ll conduct a more thorough debriefing. Then the battle analysts will be able to determine whether any better outcomes were possible under the circumstances.”

Levitt swallowed. “The medics say...”

“Yes, I’ve actually read all the reports already, Commander, so you needn’t worry. This is not really a debriefing per se. But I did want to meet with the commander of your group, and since he is presently incapacitated, then that will have to be you instead. Basically, I have to inform you of two rather hard facts. First of all, based on the reports from your medical wing, General Lindelsen is unlikely to recover to the point where he can resume active service. He’ll be mostly fine – so you don’t need to look at me that way – but he won’t be able to withstand a lot of the physical strain that goes with active service any more. However, he will be retained on staff on Corsida.”

Levitt sighed. “I understand, Admiral. What about the rest of us?”

“That’s the second piece of news. Your task group is definitely under strength right now. Many of your men and women will require further medical treatment like General Lindelsen will – and that’s for starters. However, you also have few intact ships and too few people.

“Right now, I am giving you and all your remaining personnel planetside leave for the next three weeks. After that, you will all be reassigned to suitable positions in the Tenth Squadron at Admiral Liatagrant’s discretion.”

“Thank you, Admiral.”

“And Commander?”

Levitt paused before turning to leave. “Yes, Admiral?”

“I am sorry for your losses.”

Katraezyna leaned over the desk. “Ereiana. E-R-E-I-A-N-A.”

The official sitting before her nodded and entered the name into a databank. He then looked up and frowned. “You know the penalties for violating the no-fly rules in regulated navigational zones?”

“I assume by your tone that they are severe,” Katraezyna replied, “but you have that documentation from that officer on board the *Fortitude* to verify that we are not Federation citizens so –”

“So those fines and possible prison terms don’t apply to you,” the official scowled. It was apparent to Katraezyna that there was far more bothering the man than the particular matter at hand. However, that was not her problem and she did not balk under the official’s glare.

“Also, we did not intentionally violate your laws,” she told him in a sweet tone, “as we did not know of them, or the war either for that matter... which reminds me. My family and I need to decide what course of action to take from here, with regards to finding some form of residency more permanent than our ship and I wonder if you could provide me with a small amount of assistance in this matter.”

The official instinctively felt like suggesting that deportation might simplify her dilemma but then, getting a better look at the rather beautiful woman he was speaking to, he felt his hostility drain away. And when he also realised that she was still smiling at him after he had behaved like an insufferable ass for the past ten minutes, he changed his tone rather dramatically.

He affected a slight yawn, feigning weariness, and then gave her a smile of his own. “I’m sorry, Miss. It’s been a long day. So you are debating where to go next and you’d like some information to help you make your decision, is that right?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“Are you planning to head further into the Federation?”

“I am not even sure yet whether the Federation is the safest place right now,” Katraezyna replied. “If we are to be honest with ourselves, then the Federation would be a rather more tempting target for the Levarc than the Frontier worlds, would it not?”

“The fighting is still heavy along the Frontier,” the official told her. “But... that said, the Levarc are somewhat more tentative in choosing their targets there as occasionally when they attack Frontier nations, they’ve become embroiled in engagements with Harskan groups.”

“The Harskans are at war with these people as well?”

“If you can call those crazed lizards people, well yes. It seems that apart from the Minstrahn, the Levarc are waging war on everyone. But the Harskans must have given them a few good scares because they’re not as bold with those hermits as they are with us.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes, but if you’re thinking about heading to the Harskan Sector for refuge, then you’d do well to get the idea out of your head right now. Yes, perhaps they occasionally support some of the Frontier worlds in joint engagements but they’re still a monoculture and they’re about as neighbourly as a spider under a rock. The bottom line with their worlds is that if you’re not Harskan, you’re not welcome.”

“Well,” Katraezyna said, “thank you for the warning. However, I do not wish to impose on your time –”

“Oh, it’s no imposition.”

Katraezyna feigned embarrassment, laughing lightly and glancing away for a moment. “You’re too kind. However, if we decide to apply for residency with the Federation, then perhaps I might ask you for your assistance then. However, for now, what I’d really like is to know where I can find as much information about the Levarc and this war as I can so I can simply sit down and consider all my options. Therefore, is there anywhere on this station where I can find publicly available information of that kind? News? Retrospective articles and editorials? Possibly archives covering the war so far?”

The official smiled. “Certainly. I can direct you somewhere where you can find all that. As it so happens, there is a public library on this very level of the station.”

“We’ve got another fifteen transports carrying refugees from Ceres Talimere, nearly four thousand of them.”

“Crowded transports.”

The first of the two Corsidan officials looked solemn as he skimmed through the data in front of him and entered the relevant information into his records. “I’d say they left there in a hurry.”

The other man sighed. “Is it just me or is the war getting worse?”

“It’s getting worse,” the first man replied. “I feel like I haven’t slept for a month. I can’t imagine what it’s like out where the fighting’s taking place.”

“Worse,” the other said. He then turned back to his own screen. “Ah. Another group of Minstrahn have chosen this rather opportune time to move into the neighbourhood.”

The first man frowned and leaned over his partner’s screen. “Show me.”

“Here,” the second man said. “A family was picked up in a regulated navigational zone right before a Levarc ambush... a rather serious attack, it looks like. Anyway, they’re presently at Saeban.”

“They haven’t made an application for residency yet,” the first man observed, glancing over the data.

“No... the customs officer here has made a note that they’re still weighing up their options.”

“The best option would have been to stay home.”

“True but that’s hardly a valid one any more. Getting back could be a pretty risky venture.”

The first man shook his head in frustration. “How many Minstrahn ships is this now?”

“What? You really want to know?”

“Yes, I do.”

“But it’s not our problem.”

“Maybe not but there’s a sector out there that’s presently off the Levarc’s radar, with millions of people, and they don’t know just how tenuous their situation really is. The ones who head out here are taking their lives into their own hands, that’s clear enough, but it also wouldn’t take much for an attentive Levarc commander to notice that these ships are coming out of an unknown region and then who knows what would happen? And I don’t know much about the Minstrahn but I doubt their chances against the Levarc would be better than ours.”

“No,” the other man agreed, “you’re right. If the Levarc discovered them, their chances would be pretty dire... but what can we do about it?”

“Warn them,” the first man replied. “Tell them what’s going on just outside their borders and tell them to batten down the hatches and stay low.”

“Well, that’s really nice and all but we can’t authorise that kind of diplomatic envoy.”

“No, but I can send my recommendations onto people who can.”

“I imagine you’d have to go pretty high up before you could get anywhere with that,” the second man pointed out.

“I’ll take this as high as I have to,” the first man told him. “This is damn important.”

“You’re serious?”

“Deadly. When we’re done with these reports, I want to bring up all the records on Minstrahn emigrants we have.”

Laila pried open the panel in front of her and looked inside. Then after a brief inspection, she reached back and picked up a small wrench from her toolkit. Just then, her mother entered the room reading a data pad.

“What is that you’re reading?” she asked her, glancing back.

“Information about this war,” Katraezyna replied, her eyes still on the screen, “as much as I could find.”

“Where did you find it?”

“A public library.” Katraezyna then looked away from the screen. “What are you doing?”

“I have discovered why the port side stabilising engine would not respond when I tested it this morning. It isn’t the engine, it’s –”

“Laila,” Katraezyna said, “why don’t you ask your father to help you?”

Laila frowned. “Father?”

“It might do him good, Laila. Ask him. Ask him for me.”

“Very well.”

Laila found her father in the next room. “Father?”

Jarekeiv didn’t reply immediately. He blinked and then took a few breaths to help himself put away whatever thoughts had been troubling him at that particular moment. “Laila?” he asked, turning around. His voice was very weak.

“I wonder if you may be able to help me locate an engine fault. I believe I have narrowed down the fault to just a few items of componentry. Can I show you?”

Jarekeiv closed his eyes and nodded. Then, opening them again, he slowly climbed to his feet and followed his daughter into the next room. Katraezyna had hidden herself away in the interim but she watched her husband from the shadows of a hatchway.

“That there,” Jarekeiv said, pointing to something under the panel that Laila had opened. “That could affect the port side stabilising engine if it is putting the slightest amount of pressure on either that line or the heat sink underneath it. And it does look dislodged.”

Laila looked at it with a good imitation of surprise. “Oh. You’re right. I think, by looking for a more complicated fault, I missed the obvious catalyst that was sitting right in front of me.”

Jarekeiv smiled and patted her kindly on the back, turning away as he did. “It happens to me as well, my daughter. Anyway, it should not be difficult for someone as skilled as you are to repair.” He then left the room and resumed his silent vigil.

Katraezyna then re-emerged.

“That was hardly –” Laila started.

Her mother smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Your father said more just then than he said all day yesterday. You did well, Laila.”

Two days later, Katraezyna announced her plans to her husband and her daughter, the latter who listened attentively and the former who had not yet returned from his silent inner world.

“I don’t believe that we should proceed further into the Federation. The Levarc have already struck deep within its borders time and time again and the war at present is only escalating in its intensity. If what I have read is any indication, I would predict that far worse terrors await the Federation than what it has encountered so far. The fighting is now heavier than it has been at any point preceding the present.”

“But surely, the Frontier nations would offer no better sanctuary,” Laila said.

“There you are wrong, my daughter. The Frontier nations are nothing to the Levarc. They hit them en route to more worthy targets. I have no doubt that, should the Federation fall, the Frontier worlds will follow almost immediately but it is the Federation that they wish to break first and they have unleashed wave upon wave of devastation against it.”

“And the Harskans?”

“If we sought refuge with them, the Harskans would not likely welcome us, my daughter, so any point related to them is moot – but it seems that the Levarc consider them to be difficult opponents.”

“So they may abandon their attacks on their sector then?”

“Possibly,” Katraezyna said, “but any such decisions would only have temporary implications. It seems to me that they are putting the Harskan Sector aside for later campaigns but they still clearly wish to subdue everyone around them – the Federation, the Frontier nations and the Harskans all.

“Anyway, as an option, there is no refuge to be found for us in the Harskan sector. Also, if I can go back a little and make another point with regards to the Federation, we must not forget that immediately after we were brought aboard the *Fortitude*, that task group was ambushed by Levarc warships.”

“But the members of that group itself know that we had nothing to do with that,” Laila protested.

“Yes, but the events will remain in Federation records and with a simple shift in public mood, perhaps after a particularly horrific tragedy, we could easily find those events turned against us.

“Anyway, in summary, we cannot avoid the war and we cannot go back to the world that was our home. However, we can find – and I *have* found – a Frontier world that is of somewhat less immediate interest to the Levarc. Living on such a world, we should stand a better chance of weathering this storm.”

“What world?” Laila asked.

Katraezyna hit a display switch, producing a hologram of a partial star map, along with a hologram of a rotating globe and some data relating to both. “This is the Frontier nation of Laonist. It fits the criteria that I have just mentioned and it is relatively close. Furthermore, I believe we could reach it directly without the need to stop for fuel or course adjustments. We could therefore bypass the Levarc lines that I understand are moving along the border not far from here. We could bypass them entirely.”

“Would it be a difficult course to plot?”

“It would require a certain amount of precision to reach Laonist without the need for refuelling but I don’t believe it is beyond us.”

Laila smiled. “You don’t believe it is beyond *you*, Mother.”

“No, but I can teach you to plot courses like that someday as well.” Katraezyna then looked at her husband. “Jarekeiv, what do you think of the plan?”

Jarekeiv nodded, showing that he had heard everything after all, although his gaze was still unfocused. “You know best, my dear.”

They left Saeban that very day. As predicted, the journey to Laonist required careful navigation to avoid the need to emerge from lightspeed anywhere en route but it was an effort that was well worth the trouble it required as they avoided any risk of encounters with Levarc vessels on the way.

“Unidentified vessel. You are entering Laonist space. Respond or be destroyed.” The order came seemingly out of nowhere and startled Laila, although Katraezyna appeared to be unperturbed.

“They seem less friendly than the members of the Federation already,” her daughter muttered.

“They cannot afford to be friendly to strangers,” Katraezyna said, speaking quickly and reaching for the communicator. “They cannot afford to let their guard down even for a moment.” She then replied to the Laonist official. “Laonist control, this is Katraezyna of the Ereiana family. We are seeking refuge for the duration of the war.”

“You are civilians? Where are you from?”

“I think it is best if we tell you in person,” Katraezyna replied. “When you know, you will understand my reason. In answer to your first question though, yes, we are civilians.”

“We are really not in any position to offer safe harbour to refugees. If you wish to use our facilities to refuel and restock your supplies however, you are more than welcome.”

“Then let us begin there,” Katraezyna said.

“The Minstrahn,” the Laonist representative said, leaning back in his seat and contemplating the matter before him. “You have come a long way then.”

“Yes.”

“And you have made a mistake.”

“Several people have gone to great lengths to tell us this,” Katraezyna replied. “None of them have been exactly subtle. However, while we did not anticipate what we have discovered here, our situation back home was also difficult for us. We are destitute.”

The man frowned. “You have just made a second mistake. What good are you to us if you bring nothing?”

Katraezyna held her ground. “I anticipated such a response but I assure you, while we do not have any currency – and certainly there is no exchange between the Minstrahn Empire and the Laonist system anyway – we hardly bring nothing. The ship we brought with us is a very efficient vessel – fast, manoeuvrable, highly fuel efficient and economical in its use of space. My husband designed and built it himself. And my daughter is every bit as capable as he was –”

“He *was*?”

Katraezyna nodded, her expression solemn. “Unfortunately.”

“He is dead then?”

“Not dead. He is a broken man.”

The representative nodded. “I am sorry, Ms. Ereiana. My sympathies.”

“Thank you. However, I believe that with time, my daughter and I can make him whole again.”

“If you believe so... although, I have little experience in matters like that. Still, you say your daughter is every bit as capable as he was?”

“Yes. Maybe more so. And I myself have some skill in the family trade as well.”

The representative leaned forward again, clasped his hands on the desk in front of him and thought in silence for a moment. “Perhaps I should introduce you to Jace Casdan. He’s probably the most prominent engineer working with the navy at the moment.” He then nodded to himself as he further developed the idea that he was turning over in his mind. “Money is obviously your most immediate concern and I take it that when you mentioned your ship, you were offering to sell it to us, is that correct?”

“Correct. Laonist is in a state of war, is it not? And nations at war require ships.”

At this, the official actually smiled. “I think we actually understand one another quite well, Ms. Ereiana.”

“And I would like to make it clear that there is the addition of a design here that may be of interest to your Mr. Casdan.”

“Yes, I took that as implied as well. You are quite mercenary, Ms Ereiana, you know that?”

“I’m quite desperate. It requires me to be somewhat more mercenary than I am by nature.”

“Yes,” the man replied, “I think we understand one another quite well. I’ll tell you what. I’ll arrange for you to meet with Jace. He will assess the value of your ship, both in terms of its direct use for the war effort and any design innovations – and the Laonist government will pay you that amount accordingly. Then perhaps you and your daughter might also find that there are engineering positions available for you both, although Jace will no doubt want to assess you on your knowledge and practical skills first. Anyway, the point is I believe we can help each other.”

Katraezyna gave the man a smile. “That’s all I want.”

The man smiled in return and then extended his hand. “Welcome to Laonist, Ms. Ereiana.”

Seventy-eight days later, the Empress of the Minstrahn Empire received the following dispatch relayed via several couriers, originating from a small Federation envoy near the border of the Empire:

The Federation is in a state of war with the previously unknown entity the Kingdom of the Levarc. All Frontier systems, as well as the Harskan sector, are similarly engaged in continuous warfare with this relentless and extremely dangerous enemy. The war commenced in the year 251 Corsidan Standard, six years and three months prior to this communication.

The enemy has also been observed to have been active very close to the Minstrahn border and has annihilated the residing population of an independent world known as Felarias, two days travel from the Empire's border. Several Felariam refugees have confirmed that the damage was substantial enough to render their world uninhabitable. The danger posed by the Levarc cannot be overstated.

The President of the Federation advises the Empress of the Minstrahn to inform her subjects of this danger, refrain from any activity that could draw the attention of the enemy and take whatever measures she deems necessary to ensure the security and safety of her people.