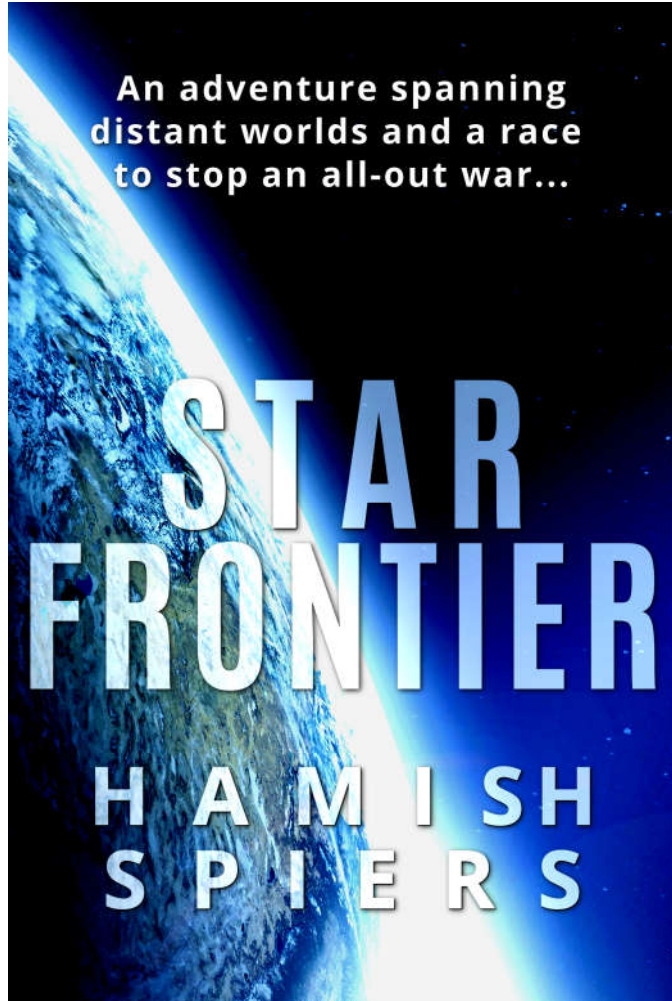




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“Calling that thing the Adari refueling station is a joke, right?” Asten said to anyone who was listening. “Sure if you turn a few clicks starboard and head along that vector for a day, you’ll hit the Adari system... but honestly.”

Carla shook her head. “You do talk rubbish sometimes.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She looked at the radar scopes. “Well, I can’t see Zak and the rest of Sigma squadron so I guess they’re already on the station. And there’s nothing out here.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Asten said.

They were in the middle of nowhere. There were no planets of any kind, no nearby stars or even asteroids.

The station however was quite the hotspot. Large and surprisingly lively. During the three weeks that had passed since their arrival at the Therah asteroid base, Asten and the others had made two trips to the place to familiarize themselves with it at Lieutenant Janson’s suggestion and there were enough hangars in the station to rival an average spaceport, large enough to accommodate anything up to a mid-sized bulk freighter and pylons underneath for larger vessels to dock with.

The whole thing was constructed in an open ring shape with one large shaft spanning its diameter that braced the structure and also allowed people to travel between both ends of the station without having to walk around the outer rim. Although if they wanted to, there was a generous walkway for that as well, with large viewing windows where people could look at the stars or watch ships coming and going. And along the walkway were a number of shops, bars and cafes too. Asten remembered one of the latter quite fondly, although he doubted he’d have a chance to get a hot drink there this time.

“Now,” he said, “our friends from the Harskan sector... Hangar forty-three?”

Drackson nodded. “Forty-three.”

“All right then. Let’s wait a few minutes and head in.”

On board the station, Vendon gazed about the central control room. He had several plain clothed commandos outside and a handful of technicians with him, while in

another part of the station, a large division of shock troopers were waiting on standby alert. He wasn't taking any chance of a repeat of the Palanami debacle.

Across the room, the station chief supervisor eyed him warily. Having been expecting another uneventful shift, he hadn't been happy when Vendon and his men had come in and requisitioned his control room.

"Well," Vendon said, "our Harskan friends are no doubt here already and whoever this resistance group is sending can't be far off. I think it's time we got started."

The technician nearest him nodded. "All right." He started keying in some sequences that would seal off various sections of the station, preventing anybody but authorized security staff from moving between them.

"I hope your men are up to scratch," Vendon told the chief supervisor but there wasn't any warning in his voice. He'd already taken the liberty of assuming they weren't and with the commandos and the shock troopers, he was confident they had enough men to handle the job.

"We're ready for the lock-down," the technician beside him said.

Vendon nodded to the chief supervisor. "You can make the announcement. Say we believe there are ship thieves operating in the area. I'm sure you know the drill."

"I'll do my best," the man replied, stepping over to the communicator but keeping Vendon in sight the whole time.

"Attention," he said into the speaker. "Attention. All pilots, crews and passengers are requested to return to their vessels. Ship thieves are operating on the station. Please return to your vessels and remain there until the all clear is given. Repeat. Ship thieves are operating on the station. Please return to your vessels and remain there until the all clear is given."

Satisfied, Vendon headed for the door. “Good. Repeat the message a few more times.”

The man considered telling him that he knew how to do his job but decided against it.

Outside, Vendon saw red lights flashing while, every five seconds, an automated message broadcast the fact that a lock-down was in progress. Groups of people were running about the place, hopefully heading back to their ships, although there were of course a number of people who seemed to think they were above running for some reason. He wondered if they might get a move on if he fired a few shots at their feet.

Curbing the impulse, he went back inside the control room to look at the surveillance cameras.

Moments later, the communicator aboard the *Lady Hawk* came to life with a short series of beeps and a blinking light.

“Someone’s hailing us,” Asten said. He checked the display. “It’s not Zak’s signal. It might be our Harskan friends.”

“I think you’re right,” Drackson agreed, fiddling with the controls. “Let’s see if we can get a clearer signal...”

He broke off as a clear Harskan voice came through. “...sa ch’aj, hesj’on. Elas’maie-ensa ch’aj, hesj’on.”

“Cha laej’ast saes,” Drackson replied and waited. Something wasn’t right.

“Laie’fron elstae tralaesta,” came the voice of the other Harskan. “Sevaerai haledaesol est basaec neravast-ach laherst. Jera hesta aleia jea chaj braecol anestalsa est mei del a’estra jea ilae taleshem si jea tae’laes.”

“Karai’esach,” Drackson told him and flicked the communicator off.

Asten raised his eyebrows. “Trouble?”

“He told me that Federation authorities have ordered a lock-down as there are ship thieves operating in the area.”

“How does he know Federation authorities are there?” Carla asked. “I’ve been in a lock-down before. These stations have their own security staff who handle these things.”

Drackson shrugged. “I don’t know. And it’s entirely possible he might have been wrong. But he also said he thinks the timing is too convenient to be a coincidence and I think he’s got a point.”

“I agree,” Asten said. He eyed the station and fidgeted. “Let’s hold position for a moment. I want to see what’s going on before we head in. And decide if we still want to go ahead with this.”

“But you promised -” Carla started.

“I know what I said.”

“What was that?” Vendon demanded.

“Someone sent a transmission from the station,” the technician at the workstation beside him said, tapping some keys to bring it up. “And it looks like they got through to someone.”

He paused. “Well, that wasn’t long.”

“What?”

“The transmission’s finished already,” the technician told him. “Anyway, here it is.”

Vendon listened as it played out.

“That must have been the Harskans we’re looking for,” he said after it had finished.

“You recognize the language?” the technician asked him.

“No. But who else would risk sending a private transmission in the middle of a lock-down?” Vendon reasoned. “Where did it come from?”

The other man backtracked it, while glancing over the landing records. “Hangar forty-three. There’s one large freighter listed there that landed four hours ago.”

“That’s them.” Vendon faced everyone in the room. “All right, keep your eyes on the scopes for incoming ships. I don’t think we’ll have long to wait.”

For a few moments, the control room was silent. Then there was a short beep from one of the control panels and one of the technicians turned around. “Something’s just come in radar range now, sir.”

Asten was still deciding what to do when he saw it: a mid-sized frigate that dropped out of lightspeed on their portside before heading towards the station. It didn’t look like a Galleon or anything from Novatech Systems or Aurora Prime and he was wondering what it might be when a worrying thought crossed his mind.

“Oh no,” he muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Carla asked, while Drackson looked at the disappearing frigate with concern as well.

“If there *are* Federation agents aboard the station and they’re expecting resistance fighters to turn up at any minute, then they’re going to swarm on that frigate the moment it lands,” Asten told her. “We’ve just placed some innocent people in a very dangerous situation.”

“But even if they swam that ship,” Carla replied, “they’ll realize the crew aren’t members of a resistance group, surely.” The suggestion was made more in hope than anything else.

“How?” Asten asked her.

Carla didn’t answer, and she could already picture the crew of the ship declaring their innocence to a cynical Federation officer as they were hauled away.

“We’ve got to go in, Asten,” Drackson said.

“All right,” Asten muttered. He hit the controls to fire up the weapons emplacements. “Get ready for some fancy flying.”

He kicked the engines into gear and they accelerated towards the frigate, which was already slowing down to land in the hangar it had been allocated... which Asten noticed was forty-one.

“Damn it,” he muttered.

Drackson saw it as well. “That’s too close to be a coincidence. They’re onto the Harskans as well.”

Asten decelerated. They were right in front of the hangar now and the frigate’s landing pads were locking in place. It had landed on the left side of the hangar, leaving a generous space around it. And that space was filling up as men in gray blast armor moved in to flank the frigate. Every one of them wore a protective face concealing helmet and even from a distance, their appearance was distinctive enough that neither Asten, Drackson nor Carla had any trouble recognizing them.

“Federation shock troopers,” Carla said.

Asten felt a sudden rush of bravado. He even smiled. “That’s all right. These guys are ground troops. They’ve got nothing on us.”

Carla let out a nervous laugh. “Um... I think firing on the Federation’s finest from the air might permanently tie us in with our resistance friends, don’t you think?”

Asten sighed. The moment they’d taken that job with Lieutenant Janson, they had settled that issue. “I think we’re past that now.”

“All right, ready when you are,” Drackson told him, gripping the firing controls.

“One moment,” Asten replied and punched in the encrypted frequency he had set up with Sigma squadron before they had left the base. “Zak? You there?”

“I read you, Asten,” the younger man replied.

“We’ve got trouble. Shock troopers all over a frigate in hangar forty-one. We’re heading in but we’ll keep you posted.”

“Understood.”

Asten switched off the communicator. “Somehow.”

“All right, here we go,” he said as they accelerated towards the hangar. There was a slight jerk as they cut through the atmospheric seal and Asten realized he had never come through one this quickly before. He hoped he hadn’t done any permanent damage to the ship but it seemed okay. And right now, there were more pressing things to think about.

On the deck, the shock troopers were thinking the same thing as they heard the roar of engines and looked up to see some type of private gunboat coming straight for them.

“Watch out!” one of them shouted, right before a volley of blasts blew chunks of metal all over the deck. Several troopers were thrown through the air by the explosions and rolled across the deck, dead or concussed.

The ship meanwhile looked as if it were about to crash into the hangar but at the last second, it veered away, disappearing out of sight.

“Nice shooting there, Drackson,” Asten commended his copilot. He swung out of his chair. “Carla, take over. Now’s your chance to fly this baby.”

“What?”

“If we still want to pull this job off, I’ve got to go down there. Come on.”

Carla climbed up and settled herself into the pilot’s seat. “I’m not sure about this.”

“Relax, you’ll be fine,” Asten told her. “Just head back into the hangar, but slowly this time, and get nice and close to the deck so I can jump out. Then the moment I’m gone, turn around and get the hell out. I’ll call you on the communicator as soon as I can.”

Drackson leaned back. “You be careful out there, Asten.”

“I’ll be fine,” Asten replied.

The *Lady Hawk* turned towards the station in a graceful arc and glided into the hangar. There were still

a handful of shock troopers standing and a couple of them fired at the ship, one of them using some type of portable missile launcher instead of the more conventional blaster rifle. He hit the port stabilizer wing, blowing out a chunk of metal and exposing some scorched wiring underneath but, before he could celebrate, Drackson blew him halfway across the hangar.

Asten leapt out a moment later, rolling as he hit the deck from a little higher than he'd have liked but he picked himself up straightaway.

He watched the ship for a split second as it turned and shot away and he saw the damage to the port stabilizer. Most of it was cosmetic but it still ticked him off.

Just then, a shot sizzled past much too close for comfort and he dropped to the deck and shuffled behind some large boxes.

“How many did you see?”

Asten frowned. That wasn't a shock trooper. They always sounded a little mechanical because of their helmet filters. He wondered whether the man was an officer type but that didn't fit either. The voice was too harsh and not cultured enough.

“Just one.” That was a shock trooper. “Behind the boxes over there.”

“Leave him to me,” the other man replied. “Take your men over to hangar forty-three and wait for me there.”

“Right, sir. Let's go, men.”

Asten listened as the surviving shock troopers left, trying to separate the sounds of their boots on the deck from anything that might give away the position of the other man. However, it was an exercise in futility and once the troopers had gone, he had no more clue to where the man was than he had before.

For a moment, he panicked. His common sense briefly deserting him, he put his head out and nearly

had it blown off. The shot missed him by a hair's breadth, scorching the wall behind him, and he ducked back after getting a split second glance at his assailant. It was the man from Palanami.

He pulled out his blaster and mentally counted to three. Then he leapt to the right side of the boxes, firing several shots as he did, and crouched back behind them. He hadn't hit Vendon but he had forced him to retreat behind one of the frigate's landing pads, giving him a little more room to breathe.

Asten then looked at the ship and wondered what the occupants were thinking right then. No doubt, this was a little more drama than they'd anticipated when they had approached the station. There was also a small part of him that hoped they might come down and help him and he wondered why they weren't doing anything.

Then he saw something he'd missed earlier. A large ramp had been lowered to the ground and, above it, a few wisps of vapor lingered in the air, which meant the shock troopers must have lobbed something nasty up there. Asten hoped its effects weren't fatal.

Above him, one of the boxes exploded. He winced as a smoldering chunk of metal bounced off his shoulder. Clearly, Vendon had a pretty serious blaster.

Asten leaned out and fired a couple of more shots and saw Vendon duck back behind the landing gear again. Then he ran to his own right, getting some distance between them and hiding behind some more crates. He hoped they were sturdier than the first lot.

Then a glimmer of hope emerged. A familiar face appeared at the far end of the hangar and unlike Vendon, it was someone he was happy to see.

"Zak, get down!" he shouted and not a moment too soon.

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STAR FRONTIER BEYOND THE VEIL

H A M I S H
S P I E R S

“Well,” Zak announced as the lone world rose from the black ocean to meet them. “Here we are. Felarias.”

“It’s incredible,” Maia murmured as they saw the large areas of scorched brown across its surface.

Zak took a deep breath. “Yeah. It’s hard to see how anyone could have survived.”

Maia pointed to streaks of green near the eastern edge of the northern continent. "That area looks a little more promising. Maybe that's where the survivors are."

"Well, there's one way to find out. Would you like the honors?"

Maia hesitated. Her mother's people - the only remaining link to that side of her heritage - and they had survived the devastation that had befallen their world.

"I'll do it." She tapped the communicator switch and sent out a general frequency. "Felariam control. This is the *Lady Hawk*, requesting permission to land."

They had to wait a few moments for a reply. "We read you, *Lady Hawk*. Visitors are rare but are always welcome to our world. What is the purpose of your visit? Are you in need of fuel or supplies?"

Maia tried not to let her nervousness show in her voice. "We have important matters to discuss with the Felariam leaders."

There was a pause from the Felariam controller. "Are they expecting you?"

"No."

"I see," the controller said. "I'm sure you'll understand that such matters are a little outside my authority. However, I will arrange for someone to meet you at your ship when you arrive and you can discuss the matter with them further."

"I understand. Thank you."

"Very well. I've just activated the landing beacons. Can you see them on your scopes?"

"One moment." Maia glanced at Zak, who gave her a nod in return. "Yes, we see them."

"Then just follow them down and land on platform forty-three. But before you do, I must inform you we scan all incoming vessels to assess whether they pose any threat. Is there any weaponry on your vessel that might constitute a threat?"

Maia swallowed. She hoped this didn't ruin everything. "Um... unfortunately, yes. We're flying a ship that is sometimes used for escorting transports and cargo. And it has weapon emplacements for that purpose. However, I can assure you they're all powered down."

"That's fine. Thank you for your honesty. Just follow the beacons down and someone will meet you at landing platform forty-three."

"Thank you."

"Not at all. Control out."

With that, the comm fell silent.

"Okay," Zak said, taking the controls. "Let's bring her down. And it looks like you were right. The landing beacons are transmitting from those patches of green you spotted earlier."

"It looks like a huge network of wide canyons," Maia said as they broke through the upper layers of the atmosphere and got a clearer look at their destination. And a better look at the landscape that surrounded it.

As she made the remark about the canyons, Maia felt tears well in her eyes as she remembered the stories about Felarias her mother had told her as a child. It had been a world teeming with life. The great benevolent Laeshar that had grazed the plains of the southern continents. The playful Deltines who swam the oceans. Had they all died during the Levarc attacks?

"The canyon sides must have provided some protection against the bombardment," Zak said and then stopped. "Are you all right?"

Mist dissolved into a watery image and Maia saw the man she loved, his face full of concern and his pain at seeing her own mirroring it in its intensity. And somehow, it was enough. Not to make that pain disappear but enough to help her bear it.

She nodded, words being too difficult to form. Zak looked far from convinced but he turned his attention back to the landing ahead of him.

It was strange, Maia thought to herself. When people first met her, she always radiated a feeling of being somewhat distant or closed off but once she let them into her life, she inevitably laid her soul open to them. It was hard to believe that when she first met Zak, she hadn't even said a word to him. Right after he and Asten had risked life and limb for Selina and her as well. Life really drifted in unnavigable directions.

Then before she realized it, the landing gear had engaged and they were on the ground.

"Now, are you sure you're all right?" Zak asked as he powered down the shipboard systems. "Because I can go out and talk to whoever's waiting for us."

"No," Maia replied, wiping her eyes and climbing out of her chair. "It's sweet of you. I know that. But let's go down together."

"All right."

As they stepped on the landing platform, it was dark and overhead the sky was a mixture of browns and grays. Scattered storm clouds were gathering for a late night show and there was a faint light from a sun that had set ten minutes earlier. In the gloom, the glowing embers of two red eyes revealed the waiting representative of the Felariam before the features of his face came into focus.

He was middle-aged, with a set to his expression that suggested more smiles than glares in his youth and even now, faced with two strangers, he gazed on them with warmth. Maia wondered how someone who had suffered as much as this man undoubtedly had could still smile and she realized that this was strength, far more impressive than the physical feats of youth and far more enduring.

“Welcome to Felarias,” the man said. “I’m Chief Commander Cyraes. I’m in charge of the Felariam Defense Network.” He looked at Maia then broke his gaze away to greet Zak with a firm handshake. “And to whom do I owe this pleasure?”

“My name is Zak Materson. I’m a squadron leader in the Koratav defense forces, although my companion and I aren’t here under Koratav directives.”

“I see. You’re on leave?”

“In a way,” Zak replied. “Although we’re presently on an errand in the interests of the Federation, the Frontier systems and your own.”

Commander Cyraes smiled. “It sounds like most pressing business.” He turned to Maia. “And do my eyes deceive me? You appear as one of our own.”

“My mother was,” Maia told him, “but my father was Minstrahn -”

“Demas Kaleilae!” Cyraes exclaimed, falling into a kneeling position and clasping her hands. “You are Maia!”

Frozen in shock, Maia blinked back tears. “He... knew me? Mother said he never returned.”

“What she says is true,” Cyraes told her, standing back up. “He gave his life defending our people.”

“For what good it did,” Maia murmured.

Cyraes sighed. “Yes. In the end, the devastation the Levarc brought to our world was outside our power to prevent. However, your father and the warriors who fought for our people allowed us to withdraw to the relative safety of hidden fortresses deep in the bedrock. Not all our fasts withstood the bombardment but as you can see by the evidence of your own eyes and by virtue of the fact that I stand before you today, some did.” He looked at her hopefully. “What of Iriana?”

“Mother died during the war,” Maia told him. “She was on a transport in the Saeban system when she was caught in the middle of a Levarc strike.”

Cyraes was quiet for a long moment before he found his voice. And when he did, tears flowed from his eyes. “I am so sorry, Maia.”

“You speak of both my parents as if you knew them yourself,” Maia said, startled by the other’s reaction.

“I did,” Cyraes said at last. “Iriana was my sister.”

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STAR FRONTIER DANGEROUS GAMES

H A M I S H
S P I E R S

The light courier ship JM112-436 was not a remarkable vessel in itself. It had only recently been manufactured in a shipyard on Dren Vaschal alongside a hundred other vessels just like it but it was about to play a pivotal role in the war and the history of the Federation.

“Portside roll!” the captain snapped to the

helmsman. "Dive! They're still tracking..."

"They're right on top of us!" someone called out.

The captain shook the sweat off his brow, unable to move his white-knuckled hands from the arms of his seat. "Right. Helm! Bank starboard! Navigation?"

"We're out of the gravity well," the navigation officer reported. "The course is set. No obstructions."

"Then hit it!"

There was a lurch and JM112-436 shot away to the safety of lightspeed.

The following morning, Admiral Roth woke early and took a minute to trim his beard. Just because they were at war, it didn't mean they had to give up all of life's little civilities; although the quick breakfast he had afterwards made him wonder whether that ship had already sailed. He shook his head as he put his tray away. It hadn't been a very nice thing to think, even if he hadn't voiced it aloud. The chefs were doing an incredible job with the shipboard supplies considering how long it'd been since they'd last stocked up. He gave them a smile as he left the officer's mess, then he went to the bridge where Captain Arkei was waiting.

"What's the hour, Captain?"

"Oh-five hundred," Arkei dutifully replied.

"When do you sleep, Captain?" he asked, buttoning up the top of his tunic.

"When I can, Admiral."

Harlan smiled. "Well, we're still at lightspeed for another few hours. I suppose you were hoping for news from the scouts like I was, were you?"

"I was, sir," Arkei replied. "But nothing's come through yet."

"Nothing? Core-12 gave the scouts strict orders to get back to us once they'd raised the Fourth Squadron."

"Sir?"

"Damn it," the admiral muttered. He shook his head.

“No, it’s all right, Captain. How’s our fuel?”

“We’re not running out any time soon.”

Harlan nodded. “All right. Captain, I’m going to ask you to do something a little unorthodox. Are you familiar with a holding loop? It’s a navigational term. They used it in the Fifth Frontier war.”

“You want to change course and loop back onto our present position to keep our present range from Corsida a little longer so you can hold position without dropping out of lightspeed.”

“Very good, Captain. And then we don’t have to wake everyone in the task force for a full battle alert.”

“So how long do you want?”

“Five hours,” Harlan replied. “Inform the helmsman. Then tell Signals to relay the order to the rest of the group. Then they can send a looping signal to Core-12, encrypted of course, and tell them that Admiral Harlan Roth of the Second Squadron demands an immediate update on the status and the whereabouts of every ship in the First and Fourth Squadrons.”

They didn’t have to wait long for a reply. “Sir,” the head signals officer of the first watch called out, “Core-12 have nothing to report. They’re having just as much difficulty with the signals traffic out of Corsida as we are. They also wonder whether they should send the scouts back.”

“Our scouts can stay there for a while,” Harlan replied. “Tell Core-12 we’ll get back to them on that. Also tell them that we’re still waiting for news and we’ll be in range of their direct transmitters for the next nine hours.”

“Yes, sir.” The signals officer turned back to his communication equipment while Admiral Roth paced across the bridge like a caged animal. About a minute later, he stopped and turned back to the signals section. “Signals. Raise Commodore Tael’s group and put him on the bridge viewscreen.”

There was a momentary delay before a man in his forties appeared with a rather deep scar on his chin from his rock climbing days. It was amazing to Harlan that just a few years ago, people had time for things like that.

“Admiral.”

“Commodore, I require a brief update on the current status of your ships.”

“We lost two cruisers in that engagement and I had to send another to Dren Vaschal for urgent repairs,” Tael replied.

Harlan frowned. “Unescorted?”

“It had enough operable systems to make the journey unassisted and Valaekai hasn’t made any moves on the place.”

“But with the recent attacks on Fel Vaschal, the Levarc are still likely in the area. Why didn’t you send an escort?”

“Because frankly, Admiral, I think Valaekai’s boys may be regrouping for a second attempt at the Deimarc Yard.”

“And what do you base that on?”

“The fact that they retreated too readily. The Levarc don’t fight like that. It’s a feint.”

Harlan let out a breath. “All right. Noted. How many ships do you think you’d need to hold off a second attempt on the yard if they make one? Or how many ships do you think you could spare right now? Ignore the first question.”

The commodore frowned. “Do you want a cruiser in this group?”

“If you can spare one.”

“I can give you a cruiser and two fire support frigates. What should I tell the crews?”

“They can bolster the orbital defenses at Fel Vaschal proper until I can assign new ships to relieve them. Appoint a suitable captain to command the group and

inform me if the enemy makes another attempt on Deimarc Yard.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Incidentally,” Harlan asked, “have you heard any news from the First or Fourth Squadrons?”

“I haven’t, Admiral, no.”

The next three hours passed at the rate of an advancing glacier. The officers on the next watch began to emerge. There was a change-over at the signals station and Harlan asked the new officers for updates with a level of frequency that increased with his agitation.

Then at 0947 hours, a call came through, after which all the mysteries were clear.

“Admiral!” the head signals officer on the day watch called out across the bridge. “Urgent signal from Core-12!”

Harlan sat in his command chair, facing the bridge viewscreen. “Put it through.”

The screen lit up and a senior naval signals officer appeared. “Admiral Roth, Commodore Keigen of the First Squadron has raised a red alert.”

“Keigen? Where is he?”

“The commodore’s en route to Corsida. Admiral Sharnost is there already.”

“I know. What’s the situation?”

“Prince Askaera and the Second Division are there.”

“When did they enter the system?”

“Seven days ago.”

Two days after that first attack on Fel Vaschal, Harlan reflected. “And Admiral Sharnost and Vice Admiral Himaeron have been holding Askaera back since he arrived?”

“Over a hundred and sixty hours of continuous fighting,” the man replied before hesitating. “Um... but Vice Admiral Himaeron was killed on the first day of the engagement when the *Inflexible* sustained heavy

damage.”

“Alert all the commands you can reach,” Harlan replied, doing his best to keep his emotions in check. “And tell them to do the same. And I want a message sent to Fel Vaschal and Commodore Tael. All units are to be placed on full alert. Inform them that I expect Valaekai to launch heavy diversionary attacks within the next forty-eight hours. And that I’m taking my task force in to assist the First and Fourth squadrons at Corsida.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where’s the rest of the First Squadron now?”

“Commodore Keigen just passed deep space wayfare station 406 in the *Stallion* six minutes ago. Their ETA for Corsida is twenty-six hours.”

“We’ll be there in nineteen.”

“Shall we try to raise Commodore Keigen?”

“No need. We know where he is now. I’ll contact him directly within the hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

“However,” Harlan said, “you can raise Admiral Liatagant and inform him of the situation as well.”

“Yes, sir.”

“That’ll be all.” Harlan turned around as the screen went dark. “Did you copy all that, Captain?”

“Yes, sir,” Arkei replied.

“Then relay to the rest of the task force. Set a direct course for Corsida.”

As the captain set about carrying out the directions, Harlan allowed himself a brief moment of anger. So while Prince Valaekai had been running him ragged, the Levarc had taken control of the system’s long range communication relays and launched a direct assault on the capital of the Federation, with all its governing bodies, military centers and the countless millions of civilians who resided there.

Soon, heading for the battlefield, he contacted Keigen.

“Admiral,” Sharnost’s deputy greeted him.

“Commodore, I’ve received your alert and I’m en route to Corsida. We’ll be there in nineteen hours.”

“Then you’ll be of more use than us. We’ll be there in twenty-six.”

“So I’ve been told,” Harlan replied, “but you’ll still get a chance to be useful. I doubt Prince Askaera’s going to leave without putting up a fight. Now, I understand the Levarc have hampered efforts to contact anyone outside the system.”

“They have but what they’ve done isn’t exactly clear. Sharnost’s courier said they detected loops of pre-recorded signals being transmitted in and out, along with new signals with false information and they think the Levarc have captives producing them.”

“Noted. Now, what about the planetary shield? Is it holding?”

“It’s holding but frankly, it sounds as though the only *reason* it’s holding is that the First and Fourth squadrons are acting as a secondary shield and they’re being hammered for it.”

“How did Admiral Sharnost alert you?”

“He sent enough ships and one of them finally got through,” Commodore Keigen replied. “The courier said they had a slight reprieve in the fighting yesterday.”

About the time those new tankers would have arrived if he hadn’t destroyed most of them, Harlan thought to himself. That would have slowed Askaera down somewhat, although he could easily siphon the fuel he needed from his damaged ships or send a sortie to steal it from Federation stations.

“And the courier gave you the admiral’s logs and battle recordings?” he asked the commodore.

“Yes, sir.”

“Transmit everything to the *Retribution*. You have our frequency?”

“Yes, sir. Transferring now.” Keigen nodded to

someone out of Harlan's view.

"Good. Now, if you'll excuse me, Commodore, I believe I have a long night ahead of me."

"I believe we all have, Admiral. Good luck."

"Thank you," Harlan replied. "I may need it."

On the bridge of the Federation Dreadnought the *Vigilant*, Admiral Kaeil Sharnost drank the concoction the medical officer had handed him. It didn't taste bad. In fact, it tasted fairly good for something that was artificial to an almost molecular level. However, along with the anti-fatigue patch on his arm, it was a reminder of how long this continuous fighting had been going on. In the concoction were certain chemicals designed to assist in the work of the patches in fighting fatigue, along with all the nutrients he needed for the day, but neither the drink nor the medical patch were a substitute for proper meals or an ounce of sleep.

"Thanks," he grunted to the medic, turning back to the job at hand. Behind him, one of the gunnery officers slid from his seat and landed on the deck with a dull thud. The medic called two orderlies over to help the unconscious man to the sick bay.

Sharnost didn't have any spare officers to replace that man now. He tried not to think about that, just as he tried not to think about the death of his captain who had suffered a stroke after the first eighty hours of continuous combat and how he tried not to think about the throbbing headache that had been his constant companion for the past five days.

Askaera had realized very early on in the fighting that he could use his numerical advantage to rotate attack forces while depriving the men and women in the defense grid around Corsida of the chance to rest. The Levarc prince was not foolish. He was not sporting or in the slightest way honorable. But he was not foolish.

However, as long as he had the capacity to move and

think, Admiral Sharnost was not going to give in. If the defense grid failed, the Second Division of the Levarc Royal Navy would pummel Corsida's shield and slaughter the planetside population. And with the capital of the Federation in ruins, the enemy would tear what remained of its scattered defense forces to pieces. If their vigil failed, if they lost Corsida, they could well lose the Federation.

Sharnost winced from the pain of his headache and turned to Lieutenant-Commander Peri Heschat, who had taken command of the *Vigilant* after Captain Auler's death. "Commander."

"Askaera's sending more fighter squadrons into the gap," the woman replied.

"Those heavy cruisers haven't moved yet?"

Heschat shook her head. "No. I have no idea what they're up to. It looks as though they're simply throwing the fighters away for nothing."

Sharnost frowned. "They don't do anything without a reason. Those cruisers are drifting. They just have to roll to port, drop several degrees and then... Radar!"

"Yes, sir?"

"I want trajectory projections for those two heavy cruisers, arranged by probability. Run it through the system."

"Yes, sir," the same officer replied. "I'm transferring the data to the main viewscreen now."

Sharnost looked at the screen and then turned around. "Signals, raise the *Duke* and the *Industrious*. I want them to break to port and circle back to rejoin the defense grid from behind. If those cruisers break through, they're on intercept duty."

He didn't catch the reply as the deck buckled beneath his feet for a moment and the whole bridge shook. He scowled as he regained his balance. "They're firing again?"

"Another wave incoming, sir!" someone shouted.

They were ferocious, Sharnost thought. And merciless. Their armadas seemed so large that their entire social structure must have been built around waging war and pounding their opponents into dust. He wondered how many worlds this vicious people had annihilated.

“Point defense, you’re up,” he said, bracing himself for the attack. “Signals, *Benevolence* is to position itself behind the wreck of the *Magnanimous*. *Eminent* is to cover the gap in the grid.” He turned to Heschat. “Get your poison brew while you can, Commander.”

“But...”

Sharnost gave her a warm smile. “I know, Commander. I can take things from here for a few moments.”

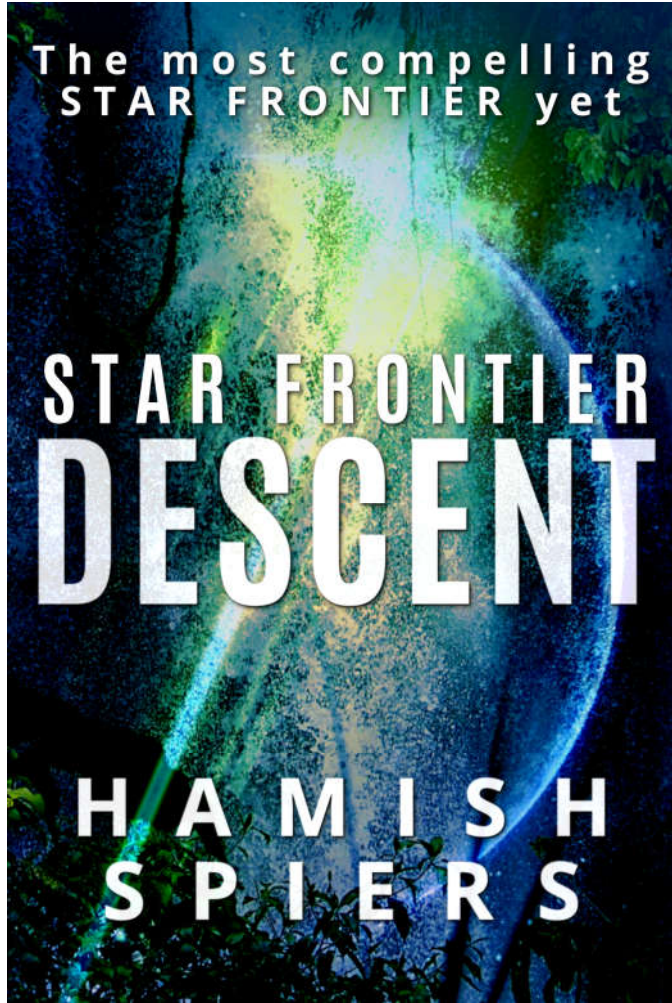
As Heschat staggered off in the direction of the medic, Sharnost assessed the situation and issued more orders.

Despite the difficulties in penetrating the heavy armor of the larger Levarc ships, the gunners in the defense grid - along with the fighter screens that were currently in place - managed to critically damage one of Askaera’s cruisers and destroy what appeared to be a support frigate. Then, on the *Vigilant*, there was a cry of elation. “Admiral! We have reinforcements en route.”

Sharnost exhaled in relief. “First good news all week. Bring Commodore Keigen onscreen.”

“It’s not Commodore Keigen, sir,” the communications officer replied. “It’s Admiral Roth.”

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Jiang finished buttoning up the shirt of the uniform she had acquired. Well, stolen would be a more appropriate word but it was stolen in a good cause. She gave Alia a little smile. “What do you think?”

Alia shook her head. “What do I think? I can’t believe you found something in your size in there.”

Jiang took one last look at the storage cupboard in front of her before closing it. Alia had a point. Most of the uniforms inside were made to fit much larger people, which also told her something about the how the people running security on this particular station thought.

She shut the door, locking it as she did so. For a moment, she glanced at the electronic keypad on the lock.

“Do you think anyone will notice you’ve tampered with this thing or that one of their uniforms is gone?”

Alia shrugged. “Not in the next hour or so.” She handed Jiang a card. “And don’t forget this. If I’m right about this, this is a top level clearance card. It will give you access to anywhere in the station and allow you to reassign security detail anywhere you want. Somewhere out of your way.”

While she got a good look at the cargo hold of the *Drifter’s Folly*. Nodding, Jiang smiled and clipped the card to her belt. “Thanks. All right. Let’s get going before anyone sees us here.”

They left quickly, Alia heading off one way and Jiang another. She checked the time as she walked; the security guards on the current shift were just about to go off duty. After that, there’d be a ten minute window in which she could get into the hangar where the *Drifter’s Folly* was without station security noticing. The crew of the ship would be another matter but she’d worry about that if and when it became a problem. According to the registry that Alia had uploaded from the station’s data banks, the ship was due to fly out by eighteen hundred hours and Jiang wanted to get a good look at its cargo before it did.

As she approached the *Drifter’s Folly*, the corridor adjoining that group of hangars was largely empty and all the security personnel had cleared out entirely. Swiping her card into a terminal, she was given

immediate access to the station's computer system, just as Alia had told her she would be. Then it was the work of one minute to find a way to unlock the maintenance hatch in the middle of the corridor and another two to reroute security - by requesting an additional security presence at the other end of the station.

That done, she shut down the terminal and stole across the corridor and through the maintenance hatch before anyone noticed her.

She was now in a service tunnel that branched off in several directions, each branch running alongside and slightly underneath one of the hangars. Each of these were numbered according to the hangar they serviced and she followed the branch marked as '32'.

As she walked the length of it, she observed fuel lines running along the walls - ruptures in the lines could easily be repaired here - and occasional small metal grates, through which she could see the hangar and the *Drifter's Folly* inside.

The only guards outside the ship were two bored looking men near the nose of the vessel and facing the main entrance to the hangar. And the hatchway to the vessel was open.

She pulled out her communicator and thumbed it on. "Alia. You there?"

"Right here, babe," her partner in crime replied in her usual nonchalant manner.

"Everything's looking good so far," Jiang said. "The ship's open for business and I should be able to get to it."

"And the guards?"

"Two men outside by the nose. A good fifty meters away from where I'm standing. How many people can you pick up?"

Alia was one level above with a gadget that Drackson had found, one that Jiang knew was probably illegal but was, for jobs like these, very handy.

“That’s all,” Alia said. “Just two readings.” She hesitated. “Now are you absolutely sure about this?”

Jiang realized she was sweating a little, beads trickling down her forehead. It seemed sound enough. She’d approach the hatch and if she triggered an alarm, then she’d just tell the guards she was checking the fuel lines. However, this wasn’t exactly the kind of work she had done when she’d been working for the Federation. She hoped she was up to it.

“Yeah, I can do this,” she said. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck then.”

Jiang switched her communicator off and opened the nearest grate, climbing out onto the hangar deck. Without making a sound, she entered the *Drifter’s Folly* and jogged towards the back of the ship - the area where, according to Alia’s opinion based on the type of ship it was, the cargo hold would be.

It wasn’t difficult to find but it sure was an eye opener.

After taking a couple of seconds to work out just how much cargo the crew were hauling, Jiang turned to leave... and stopped.

There were muffled voices in the distance.

She switched her communicator on again. “Alia, what’s going on?”

Alia’s tone was now anything *but* nonchalant. “The crew’s coming back. All of them.”

Jiang swallowed. Then she heard voices.

“What’s the story, boss?” someone asked.

“The agent’s ready to rendezvous with us,” another voice replied. “Get to your posts. We’re leaving this dump.”

“You’ve got to get out of there,” Alia hissed over the communicator.

“I can’t,” Jiang told her, keeping her voice calm. “I’m trapped.”

“But they’ll find you.”

“I can hide here until these guys land at their next destination,” she said, taking a nervous glance at the cargo around her. A cargo that seemed even more ominous now that she was facing the prospect of spending a day or so hiding amongst it. “Besides, you’ll know where I am.”

“I’ll tell Drackson and Naima right away.”

“Do that,” Jiang said. “And tell them that the *Drifter’s Folly* is carrying deep space mines. Tons of them.”

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In Fringe City,
anything goes...

THE SENTINEL

H A M I S H
S P I E R S

A late night train pulled into a station. A number of people got off, a number of people got on and then it was away again. One of those who had just got on was a man with a large piece of luggage. A bag full of all sorts of interesting things, including a costume of Kevlar armor and harpoons. To avoid unnecessary attention,

he sat towards the back of the carriage behind the other passengers, including another who had gotten on at the same station. Jason watched that man closely. When his quarry disembarked at Grand Central, he did too. And once he was sure that the man was heading into the building of the same name, he went his own way. He knew exactly where Alex Grigorie was going.

He scaled a neighboring building, one a little closer to Grand Central than the one he had used for his surveillance of the place. On the rooftop, he checked some climbing anchors he had put in place earlier. There was a wire running from them to some others on the rooftop of Grand Central, carefully positioned so as not to be visible in the offensive bright beams of light that projected from that eyesore into the night sky.

Jason then opened his bag and pulled out the pieces for his costume. He quickly changed into it and produced a flying fox contraption, and another little device, from the bag. He hooked the flying fox contraption onto the wire and swung across to the monstrous building where Grigorie and the mayor would soon be meeting, if they weren't already.

The mayor's office was on the top floor. Looking into the room was a little tricky but not overly so, thanks to a bit of ingenuity on Geoffrey's part; the other device Jason had gotten out of the bag. The small and unremarkable looking piece of equipment had two functions. One was a fairly simple prospect: a reverse periscope that, after he affixed it on the roof ledge, allowed him to see what was going on in the mayor's office without being seen himself. The second function however was the trickier one, a sensor that amplified sound and cleared the interference of dampening effects caused by walls and windows. The device allowed him to both see and hear what was going on underneath him and the audio was transmitted directly into a receptor built into the left side of his helmet. It was probably

illegal, as it basically espionage equipment, but then again so was vigilantism.

Jason then made himself comfortable and listened and watched.

“Martin,” Burges said, gesturing to the man who had just entered the room, “allow me to introduce Alex Grigorie.”

Lamont gave the newcomer one look and turned to the mayor. “Are you nuts, Reggie?”

Burges smiled and clapped a hand on Lamont’s shoulder. “Martin, Martin. Relax. No one’s going to know. I’ve already cleared this with Commissioner Levings.”

“What do you mean you’ve cleared this?”

“I’ve covered myself. I’ve covered us. The -”

“Us? Jesus Christ, you’ve roped me into this too?”

“The official story,” Burges said, cutting him off, “is that this man is a transport consultant who’s advising me and that the similarities between his appearance and that of the terrorist who’s being hunted across the country are entirely coincidental. Does that work better for you or do you want me to write it down?”

“Shove it, Reggie,” Lamont told him. “All right...” He took a moment to recompose himself and even managed to extend a hand to Alex. “It’s Mr. Lamont to you, pal, until I get to know you better. I’m only Martin to my friends and this asshole here. Nice to meet you, comrade.”

Grigorie ignored the lame joke, shaking his hand but not saying anything as yet.

“All right,” Lamont said, turning to Burges. “Now, do you want to tell me what you’re doing harboring this walking liability here?” He glanced back to Grigorie. “No offence.”

The urban terrorist just glared in return.

“Grigorie here’s the answer to our problems,” Burges

said. "Your problem and my problem that you didn't want to hear about."

"Get to the point."

"I will if you stop interrupting. I know about your rival organization. It's run by some guy called Danny Vincent who used to run an operation over in Detroit and they're currently holed up in Kingsford Station, that derelict station in the news. They're using it as a temporary warehouse to stockpile the drugs they're bringing in before they siphon them to the dealers."

For a moment, the tension in the room was stretched to breaking point and there was murder in the first degree in Lamont's eyes. "If you knew about these guys, why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because you didn't want to hear it before."

"That's no answer."

"Well tough, Martin. I told you I had an idea that I wanted to run by you but you shot me down without giving me a chance to discuss it. You wanted to have your little rampage and you've had it. You got loads of publicity to boost your already inflated ego and you got your kicks. So I don't want any more of your crap."

"All right, fine. So what's the story now?"

"Here you go, Martin. A few weeks ago, I placed a mole in Vincent's organization and with the info he's gathered for me, along with the services of my friend Alex here, we can blow their lair of operations sky-high. And in doing so, we'll take out a sizeable portion of the organization as well as their stockpiles. Also, we can assume this mob has contracts with a number of suppliers here in the city and that they've already received down-payments from these guys. So if any of them manage to get out alive and they've got any sense, they're going to skip town before their clients come chasing up their orders."

"And what do you get out of this? I always feel suspicious when you say you're giving me things for

free.”

“You’re as astute as always, Martin,” Burges said, his tone sardonic. “What I get out of this is a chance to make some much needed upgrades to the area.”

“Upgrades? You bomb Kingsford station and you’ll take out half the neighborhood.”

Burges smiled. “Exactly. A low-rent neighborhood that’s just wasting space. And here’s a little something for you, Martin. You know how you’ve been pushing me for ages to give you a chance to put in another large legitimate business to help fund your illegitimate one?”

“Are you finally going to come good on your promises?”

“I never promised a damn thing but, anyway, with Kingsford leveled and swept up, that whole area’s going to be prime real estate.”

“Are you kidding me? That land’ll be unserviceable for years until you can get another subway line in. I’m not going to waste good money setting up a business in a ghost town.”

“I know that’s what it looks like, but trust me. It isn’t the case.”

Lamont frowned. “What do you mean?”

“That other line you mentioned? It’s already there.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve been working on this for years. There’s already a new line running adjacent to the one that’s there now. And it’s ready to open whenever I decide to bring it into play.”

At this, Lamont warmed up and there was even a hint of admiration in his expression. “Jesus.”

“So as you can see,” Burges told him, “that land’ll be worth a fortune. And you can have as much of it as you want. And you can *put* whatever you want on it too. A shopping centre, a football stadium, a casino. Or all three.”

“All right,” Lamont said. “So what do you need from

me?”

Jason sat back and let out a long breath. “God, it’d be nice to be wrong for a change,” he muttered. For a moment, he contemplated whether or not he could stop all of this nonsense by jumping in through the window and thrashing everyone in the room but two things stopped him.

Although confrontations were almost inevitable now, he wasn’t sure he wanted to risk one with the three men together right then. The mayor probably wouldn’t be a problem but Lamont was likely to be packing a hand gun at least and there was Grigorie to watch out for as well.

But more than that, he didn’t have enough information to act on. If there were any other variables like timed explosives or more men on the mayor’s payroll awaiting instructions, then premature action might be worse than useless.

“Well, I think we’re all done here,” Burges announced, claspng his hands and walking around his desk. “Mr. Grigorie will accompany you downstairs, Martin, and will discuss the rest of the details with you in your car.”

“I’m going somewhere, am I?” Lamont asked.

Burges smiled. “Of course. You’re not going to get anything done sitting around here.”

“And where am I going, may I ask?”

“I can’t say, I’m afraid. Mr. Grigorie will tell you on the way.”

Lamont frowned, growing tired of the game. “Why can’t you say?”

“For the same reason that Mr. Grigorie will be discussing the rest of the details with you on the drive over. The less I know, the easier it is for me to lie about it to the press afterwards. I can act all shocked and condemn this act of senseless violence much more

convincingly this way. Also, remember the Black Baron? If this got out, it'd be a hundred times worse."

"Great. That makes me feel better."

"Martin, relax. You're too tense. Just do what Mr. Grigorie says. You won't even need to go *near* Kingsford station."

"All right."

"Oh, and one other thing," Burges called out as Lamont followed Grigorie to the door.

Lamont turned around.

"When you're done, take our guest to the airport. He has a flight out of the country later this evening and he needs to arrive there... what is it these days? Two hours beforehand or something like that?"

"You know, Reggie, if I go driving around with one of the most wanted men in the country, I might get a whole lot of attention I can live without."

"How many times do I have to tell you, Martin? Just relax. I've got everything covered. Mr. Grigorie has the best forged documents money can buy and as you can see for yourself, without his beard and long hair, he looks nothing like the man on the national news."

"The resemblance is still a bit too strong for my liking," Lamont muttered. He turned to Grigorie. "All right then, comrade. Let's go."

Reggie Burges waited a few moments after they had gone and reached for his phone. "David. Can you come into my office for a moment?"

"I'll be right there."

There was a click and Burges put the phone back down. He played with the paperweight on his desk, the mannerism a sign that he'd dropped the calm façade he had put on for Lamont's benefit.

His assistant David Merlon appeared at the door. "Yes?"

"What's the deal with this unwanted evidence that's

been handed to the police?”

“I’d say it’s our new friend again,” Merlon replied. “This ‘Sentinel’ guy.”

“Yes, and he’s a right pain in the ass,” Burges said hurriedly. “But what’s been *done* about it? Did you talk to Commissioner Levings?”

Merlon shook his head. “The prick’s screwed it up.”

“But I told him what to say! Did he use our official line?”

“Yes, he fed the unit that B.S. about Grigorie being a transport consultant and the rest of it. How he was a resident of San Francisco who was going to assist the transport department in dealing with some safety concerns regarding the Kingsford station upgrade. But he clearly didn’t do a good enough job of selling it.”

Burges stamped in frustration. “Damn it, what’s wrong with the man?”

“Do you want a short answer or a laundry list?”

“This could ruin everything,” Burges muttered, ignoring the quip.

“I guess Levings just panicked.”

“So how bad is the situation?” Burges asked.

“Someone tipped off the Feds that the police had received information on Grigorie’s whereabouts,” Merlon said, “that he was here in Fringe City and that the Police Commissioner had refused to pass the information on.”

“So in a couple of hours, we’re going to have Federal agents crawling all over the place?”

“I’d imagine so. You’d better let Lamont know and call the plan off.”

“Why? They won’t catch him.”

“He’s got Grigorie.”

“Good,” Burges replied. “With luck, he can get him to his plane and get him the hell out of here. Then when the Feds rock up, I can be completely shocked by the fact that someone who approached me as a transport

consultant was in reality an urban terrorist. Hell, my life could have been in danger. Maybe I'll have to take some time off to recover from it all. It'll be fine."

"Lamont won't see it that way."

"He won't know. I'll tell him that I was just as surprised as he was to learn that the Feds were in town." He reached for his phone again. "Which will be very easy once we cut Levings off. He's really dropped the ball this time."

Merlon frowned. "Cut him off?"

"Well, he can pin us," Burges pointed out. "We can't have anything to do with him."

"Hang on a minute. Do you honestly think you could get a more valuable employee on the police payroll than the commissioner?"

"We can't afford him," Burges argued. "And by your own admission, we're going to have external investigators all over the city in an hour or two. Besides, since he fumbled the ball so badly, he deserves to be left out on a limb."

"Great. And if you cut him off, do you think he's just going to sit there and take it? If you burn him, he'll burn you. And then what are you going to do?"

"Nothing because he's *not* going to burn me. I'm cutting him off permanently."

"You're out of your goddamn mind if that means what I think it means. If the Feds come and see that, the next group in town will be the national guard."

Burges shrugged. "They've come in before, haven't they?"

"Yeah, but -"

"David," Burges sighed. "You don't get it, do you? Because contrary to what you think, if external investigators come and see what I've got in mind, they'll go running back to where they came from. You see, the beautiful truth is that the rest of the country thinks Fringe City is beyond salvage and they're not going to

waste precious time and resources trying to stop its inevitable slide into the void.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” Merlon countered, “if the rest of the country thinks this place is a write-off and that it’s a waste of tax money sending the Feds in, then I guess no one will show up after all, right?”

Burges shook his head. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“The rest of the country is taking an interest right *now*.”

At this however, Burges relaxed and even managed to smile. “They’re not showing an interest in Fringe City, David. They’re coming here because they’re after someone who tried to bomb one of *their* subways. Now, relax.”

“You know, you scare the hell out of me when you say that.”

Burges nodded, still smiling. “I know. Now, I’ve got to make a call. If you scare as easily as you do, then you won’t want to be privy to this conversation.”

“Who are you calling?”

“Someone a lot scarier than me.”

In the back of his chauffeured car, Lamont eyed his new acquaintance with unveiled distaste. “You know, you don’t talk very much.”

Grigorie didn’t look at him. “No. Maybe you should try it.”

Lamont laughed uncomfortably. “Boy, did the mayor give us a frosty one this time.”

Grigorie sighed. “Look, I’m a diagnosed psychotic who likes destroying public property and killing people for the sake of it. What do you expect me to be like?”

“All right,” Lamont replied, raising his hands in a show of surrender. “Settle down.”

Just then, his cell phone rang. His bodyguard, sitting next to the driver, handed it back to him. “I guess that’ll

be for you.”

“Thanks.” Lamont held the phone close to his ear just in case the call was about something private. “Lamont.”

He nodded as he listened, digesting the news. “All right, thanks for the heads up. I’ll call you back later.”

“Trouble?” his bodyguard asked.

“Someone’s tipped off the cops about Grigorie’s rather close relationship with the mayor.”

“That’s not good.”

“Oh and it gets better,” Lamont smiled, giving the terrorist beside him a funny look. “Commissioner Levings covered it up with a bit of B.S. that Burges concocted, so someone down the chain went over his head and called the Feds in to investigate the whole thing.”

The driver whistled.

“He’s done it this time then,” the bodyguard said. “He won’t be able to talk his way out of this one.”

“Yeah,” Lamont agreed, still eyeing Grigorie to make sure the guy wasn’t going to try anything stupid now that his connection to the mayor had been uncovered. “Another hour, tops, and the Feds are going to haul Levings off to a cell, with the mayor straight afterwards.”

“Then we’d better lie low, right?” the driver asked.

“You mean call this thing off?” Lamont asked. “Forget it. Burges can’t pin us. There’s nothing on paper he can use. This is our chance to get rid of this ‘Vincent’ guy and his organization and I’m going to take it.”

“But what about the Feds? They’ll be crawling all over the place in an hour, if they aren’t already.”

“Great. Perfect cover. With everyone watching the city’s main police headquarters, no one will be paying any attention to the docks or Kingsford station.” He turned to Grigorie. “That is if you’re still happy to go ahead with it, comrade. Mind you though, I don’t like people who renege on their agreements.”

“Why would I renege? You’re my ticket out of town, remember?”

Lamont nodded, satisfied with the reply. “That’s right. Anyway, I guess we should be at the docks pretty soon. So what happens then?”

“You’re going to intercept one of Vincent’s freight boxes as it’s unloaded and kill all the guys he’s got there.”

“There’s no part of that plan I don’t like. Then what?”

“First of all, I’ll just have to point out that you need to be careful not to shoot the mayor’s mole. The guy’s done his job well so far and in my business, you reward people like that. They might be useful later on.”

“In my business too,” Lamont agreed.

“Good. Now, the next part is that Vincent’s boys have got the driver’s carriage of a train, along with two cargo carriages there.”

“So they can just shift their stuff straight from the docks to their headquarters at Kingsford station?”

“That’s right. Direct. No unloading necessary. No middlemen. Nothing. Then they distribute everything from their base of operations at their own pace.”

“Boy, I’d love to have a set up like that. All right then. Let me guess. Once we secure that freight box, we load it up with explosives -”

“Well, *I* load it up with explosives but close enough.”

“Got it. And then someone drives the train to the station, jumps off somewhere safe and watches the fireworks.”

“Basically.”

“You’d need damn good timing to pull it all off, though.”

“I believe that’s why the mayor hired me, Mr. Lamont.”

Jason headed for the docks as fast as he could. He was glad he’d put that bug on Lamont’s car a while ago; he

knew he wouldn't have had time to get down to Grand Central's basement parking lot and tag the vehicle before Lamont and Grigorie left.

He made swift progress, using the network of flying foxes he had set up across the city - quite an impressive network, he realized with some pride. He hadn't paid that much attention when he had been setting it up, just putting a few more wires in place every few nights, but now it felt as though he'd ended up covering a tenth of the city. He was overestimating the scale of course, but it still blew him away... until he hit a dead end.

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The thrilling successor
to THE SENTINEL



FRINGE CITY
NIGHTFALL

H A M I S H
S P I E R S

Jason crouched by the ledge of a fifteen storey building, looking at the scene below. There was a slightly taller building to his left, with another fifteen or sixteen storey one below it, another taller tower behind the building he was on, a ten storey one immediately below him and across from that, the six level office complex where

Charles Faulkner was now secured, surrounded by a handpicked guard of Hutchens' best officers.

And here *he* was, after eight years, in the Sentinel suit once more. He'd be lying to himself if he said he didn't get a thrill out of it but he wished the circumstances were almost anything else than what they were.

He'd tried to save people marked for assassination before. He'd saved Sofia Garcia from Orion. Admittedly, it was mostly by talking Orion out of killing her but he had still succeeded. He had also dealt with failure. He had been too late to save Diane's partner in that alley. And when he had warned the police that Orion was heading for the Graceville Hospital, Orion had still broken into the place and that nurse, Danielle Sutherland - whose name Jason had never forgotten - had been killed.

However, none of these experiences compared to the present. When the time came to act, he would get one chance to save Charles Faulkner and that would be it.

He glanced up at the building behind him, wondering if Cupid was on *that*. Tweaking the controls on the side of his visor, he found the binocular function and zoomed in on the ledge. There were two police sharpshooters stationed there, which effectively ruled out any possibility of Cupid using it as a vantage point from which to take his shot.

It also meant that Jason didn't have to go up there to check it out himself, which was another added blessing.

For one thing, he didn't have any grappling hook cables long enough for him to get up in one single ascent. And for another, he had what he liked to think of as a healthy fear of heights. While masked crime fighters standing atop of skyscrapers was all well and good in the movies, real life was a different story, what with things like vertigo and gale force winds to contend with.

He'd always tried to avoid taller buildings during his last stint as the Sentinel. When he'd made his network of flying foxes across town, he'd picked buildings under ten storeys wherever he could.

He didn't particularly enjoy being on the building where he was at the moment either. The only reason he could handle it was the fact that he had all his assorted grappling hooks that he had learned to trust over the years.

Although... looking at the taller buildings around, as much as he had no desire to go up any of them either inside or out, having longer grappling hook cables could be handy. He made a mental note to talk to Scott about it later.

Then he slammed the brakes on his train of thoughts. He had to concentrate on the job at hand.

"There's concrete on the other side of these walls, isn't there?" Commissioner Hutchens asked, tapping the nearest one.

"They're concrete, Eric," Charles said.

"I just want to be sure."

Charles looked around him. The other police officers were standing a small distance away, giving him and Hutchens a few moments alone.

"Eric," he said. "You've asked me that five times in the past hour."

"I want to be absolutely certain that Cupid can't reach you," Hutchens replied, pacing back and forth. Then he paused. "Five times?"

Charles smiled. "I'm afraid so."

Hutchens shook his head. "I'm losing it, Charles." He looked at him again. "And you're not helping me. Couldn't you at least *try* to look a little worried? Cupid's gunning for you and you seem to be the only person in town keeping their cool."

"Eric. Would worrying accomplish anything now?"

“It’s natural.”

“So’s resignation.”

Hutchens grabbed Charles’ shoulder. “Damn it, Charles,” he said, tears in his eyes. “You’re not going to die on my watch.”

Charles gently pushed his hand down. “Eric. You may be right. He might not get me. But if he does, I’m ready. I’ve had plenty of time to think it over. I’m not a young man, Eric. I’ve had a full and eventful life. Eventful enough for several, I’d say. And I’ve already planned for this. I’m not going to leave a vacuum in the city. I’ve taught Devan Fletcher everything I know and -”

“We’re not talking about your job here, Charles,” Hutchens interrupted. “We’re talking about you. You’re more than just the D.A., you know. You’re a friend.”

Charles’ smile remained. “Well, you can remember me as that. I’m glad to *be* your friend, Eric.”

From his vantage point, Jason tried to see the other police snipers. There were four on the roof of Charles’ office complex, looking in all directions. That brought the total up to six but he knew there’d be more.

He took another look at the building below him. There didn’t seem to be anyone there at first. Then he saw them. Three officers, partially shielded by some large turbine roof vents, bringing his running total up to nine.

He turned to the larger building to his left and zoomed in with his visor controls to have a look at the roof.

He paused.

Two officers, slumped over on the edge. He zoomed in as far as he could, amazed by how much he could magnify the image thanks to Geoffrey’s ingenuity eight years ago. He saw a dart in one of the men’s necks.

He thought about it for a moment. A high-powered dart gun wasn’t stipulated in Cupid’s rules but then

again, as everyone now knew, his rules seemed to only apply to the actual assassination of his selected targets. Killing Mike Evans with a bomb blast would have been against his rules but blowing the floor out from under him before killing him with a bullet to the head wasn't.

Cupid's rules were not all that restrictive.

Jason pulled out the untraceable cell phone that Geoffrey had made for him after that episode with the Black Bandit during his last stint as the Sentinel. He called Diane.

She answered a moment later. "What's happening up there?"

"Cupid's taken out two of your sharp shooters," Jason said, looking at the building for a name or some kind of distinguishing characteristic. "Top of the building behind you with the large antennae on the roof."

"Dead?"

"Don't know," Jason said. "The one I saw had a dart in his neck. Warn the others. I'm looking around."

"I'll use the police radio," Diane told him. "Don't hang up."

"Got it," Jason replied. He looked around, listening absently while Diane contacted the officers on the perimeter. He checked the building behind him where two men had been positioned five storeys above him. They'd been taken out too.

"Twenty storey building to the north of the last one," he told Diane. "Both men down."

"Then where's Cupid?"

"Believe me, I'm looking," Jason said, scanning his surroundings.

"We're getting all the snipers to report in," Diane told him. "So don't worry about them. Just look for Cupid."

"Right."

Jason kept looking. Then he heard the sounds of helicopters and he saw two of the things circling the area with their search lights swinging back and forth

across the buildings.

“Quite the party we’ve got up here,” he muttered to himself.

“What was that?”

“It’s crowded up here,” Jason told her. “This is going to give Cupid a whole lot of confusion to mask his movements.”

“Well, I don’t think anyone’s going to send the choppers away,” Diane said. “If Cupid’s taking out our men on the roofs, we’re going to need all the extra eyes we can get.”

“Yeah, I hear you,” Jason told her. “Although, you might want to tell them I’m one of yours just in case a trigger happy S.W.A.T. officer takes a shot at me. Tell them I’m part of a special unit or something.”

“All right,” Diane sighed. “For what it’s worth.”

Jason heard her making the calls.

“Come on, Cupid,” he muttered to himself. “Where are you?”

A shot then rang out, echoing between the buildings.

Jason whirled to his left to see where it had come from; one of the helicopters, swinging south on the near side of Charles’ office complex moved erratically for a moment and then quickly shot off, losing altitude at an alarming rate. Jason zoomed in on it with his visor and switched to infra-red view for a moment; the vehicle was leaking fuel.

It lined up with the street running alongside Charles’ office complex and Jason watched as it made a shaky descent.

“Did you see that?” he asked Diane.

It was a stupid question he realized as he watched cars moving out of the way and a crowd of onlookers breaking through police barricades for a better view. By the looks of things, several hundred people had seen it.

“Yeah, I saw it,” Diane replied, not bothering to point that out. “The other chopper’s moving in on the shot’s

point of origin now.”

Jason looked back up. Sure enough, the second helicopter was coming in fast, its rotor blades beating furiously. It was almost on top of him.

“Are they idiots?” he shouted into his untraceable, trying to be heard over the noise. “Cupid’ll take them out too!”

“I don’t know *what’s* going on,” Diane said. “But -”
There was another shot.

Jason heard the impact and looked back to see the second helicopter whirling out of control. The groaning vehicle, fire and smoke pouring out of a breach behind the cockpit, smashed into the side of the building behind him, tearing metal, shattering glass and spraying the debris on everything below.

For a moment, it looked as though all the debris was going to come right down on top of him.

Jason ran to the north side of the building, trying to get clear. But as he looked back, he saw that most of it missed the building, falling to the street along with the stricken vehicle. He heard the crash and the cries of panic below.

“Jesus Christ,” he muttered. He glanced at his watch. Not a specialized part of his gear. Just a watch. It was 8.23 p.m.

“What’s happening out there?” Hutchens asked.

“The other chopper’s down,” came the reply. “Cupid shot it out of the air.”

Hutchens knew the voice well. “Diane?”

Charles moved over to Hutchens to listen in on the conversation.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Diane replied.

“So this prick’s just killed five of my officers,” Hutchens said. “And now we’ve got no-one in the air or on the roofs. Is that about it?”

Diane hesitated but only for a moment. “Not entirely,

Eric. Jason's out there."

A few days ago, Hutchens would have taken issue with that. But now...

He sighed. "Well, that's something."

Jason knew it was all on him now and he had no more than seven minutes left. Cupid had already proven his split second timing.

However, in taking out those helicopters, Cupid had - even if only temporarily - given away his position.

Jason hooked his untraceable into a holder and got out two grappling hooks, holding one in each hand. He fired the right one at the top of the building behind him, tested the weight and held down the recoil trigger, shooting up towards the roof. Thankfully, a myriad of other anxieties were able to mask the terror of being so far outside his comfort zone height-wise. As he soared to the roof where his right grappling hook was lodged, he fired the left one at a protrusion to slow his forward momentum. Then he released the right hook and hoisted himself on top of the building, using the left one.

Then he looked around.

To his left was one of the police officers he'd seen earlier. He took a second to check on him and saw he was still breathing. The darts weren't lethal.

He then looked east. That was where the shots that had brought down the helicopters had come from. There was another building of similar height to the one he was now standing on and there was that other building immediately to his south... and there was a wire running between the two of them, with a flying fox mechanism and a harness swinging in the air; it had been used only moments ago.

Jason grabbed the untraceable again. "Cupid's moving in from the east. He's using flying fox wires to get around."

He looked at the building to the south. But Cupid

wasn't there; he'd rappelled four storeys down and crossed another flying fox wire to the next building over. And as Jason watched, the assassin pulled out two weapons that were strapped to his back.

The obvious sniper's rifle was put aside however in favor of something a little more obscure.

"Cupid's setting up on the KST centre," Jason said, keeping up his running commentary on the untraceable. "Is there anyone else up here?"

He could hear the anguish in Diane's reply. "Just you, Jason."

"Move Charles to the western side of the building," Jason told her. "Or down or something. I'm moving in."

He fired a grappling hook at the taller of the buildings to the south and swung across. He looked down to the roof of the KST centre.

"Where the hell did he go?" he exclaimed. He looked at the building to the south-west of the KST centre. In the time it'd taken him to swing across to his current position, Cupid had packed up his gear, slid across another wire to the next building over and set up again.

Cupid must have seen him.

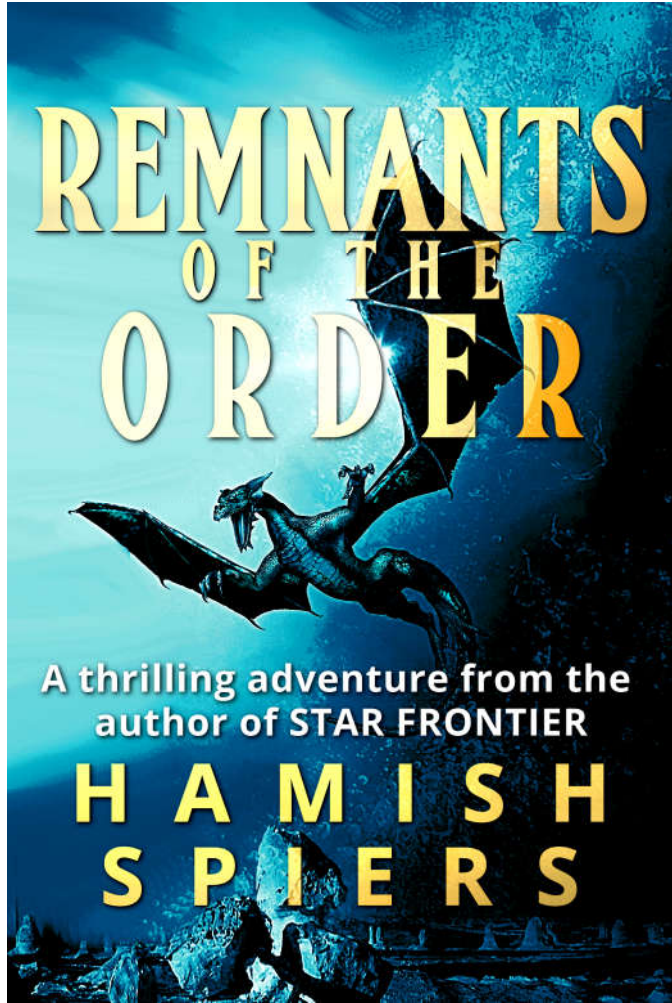
Or had he?

Still dangling by his grappling hook, Jason looked back at Charles' office complex. There were a handful of odd looking things on the upper eastern walls. Then he saw Cupid firing more of the things at the southern ones.

Jason rappelled down to the KST centre, released his grappling hook and grabbed the untraceable again.

"He's firing plastic explosives at the walls!" he shouted at Diane. "Get Charles out of there! I'm on Cupid now!"

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In the late hours of the night, Karn awoke in his room. All was not well in the palace of Bellasaire.

Making no sound, he climbed out of his bed and dressed quickly. A lofty breeze was blowing the curtains around and soft moonlight illuminated the room. He went out of it and walked across the corridor to Shaala's.

As her door was open, he saw that the covers of her bed were pulled back and that she wasn't there.

His curiosity driving him on, he searched the upper levels of the tower and worked his way down until he found her.

She couldn't see him as she was facing away from the door, semi-clad, crouched down in front of a small furnace with a hot fire burning inside. He watched and saw that she was holding a sword, heating its blade. Behind her was a flat stone that had been raised above the floor with a hammer on it that she would use to shape the sword once it was soft enough.

As she would have to turn around to do this, Karn couldn't stay where he was without being seen. And he didn't want to be seen spying on this woman. Before retreating though, he noticed that Shaala had a large number of completed weapons in this room and it looked as though she had made them all herself. He wasn't sure if he liked this or not but on the other hand he also knew it was none of his business right then.

He turned to leave but stopped and glanced at Shaala once more. Her smooth skin glowed in the light of the furnace and he knew then that he desired her. He physically and emotionally longed for her. He lingered another moment and then, knowing he was courting danger, he left.

Outside, he considered what he would do next. On the face of it, there didn't seem to be anything else *to do* but return to his room and go back to sleep but the warning in the back of his mind was still there.

Relaxing, he took a deep breath. He had always had an intuition for danger – a 'danger sense' as he thought of it – and it never awoke without a reason.

He concentrated on his feelings until he could sense where the danger was. Then, letting his instincts guide him, he discovered a series of stairs that descended underground.

As he worked his way down, he noticed that the rooms and passages around him now were much older and cruder than those in the tower and were little more than caves. It was in one of these rooms that the danger lurked.

Karn entered it with caution and looked around. He couldn't see anybody inside but his impression was that the place was some kind of lair. And seeing a few unfamiliar items scattered about it and a fire burning in an alcove in the far wall, he knew it had been recently occupied.

Then the warning in his mind grew stronger and he turned around to see an enormous man lunge at him. However, even with his naturally fast reflexes, enhanced by the gift, he was too slow to react.

The man grabbed him in a vice-like grip, sending agonizing jolts through his body. Then he hoisted Karn above his shoulders and threw him at the nearest wall.

Winded and immobilized with pain, Karn collapsed to the ground. With some effort, he held his head up so he could see his attacker.

The man had a mane of dark hair, a short beard and a stern, cruel face with venomous eyes set back beneath heavy eyebrows. He was easily over seven feet tall as well, far larger and stronger than any ordinary man.

As Karn looked at him, he felt a tinge of regret. He had made a terrible mistake in coming down here and most likely, it would be his last.

Then a familiar voice rang loud and clear. "Dominicon! Don't you dare harm this boy."

The giant turned around to face Shaala, who stood in the entrance to the room. He was breathing heavily now, but from frustration as opposed to exertion.

Ignoring him for the moment, Shaala walked past him and helped Karn to his feet. As she held him, Karn felt an incredible sensation of pleasure. It felt magical to

have this woman holding him in a way the gift could never be.

Dominicon for his part was still. In fact, right then, he appeared bored more than anything else.

“I don’t care if you want a companion in your palace,” he told Shaala. “But this is my room. Keep your pets out of it.”

Karn turned to glance at Shaala when all went dark.

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