



A moment of triumph
in the midst of
endless war...

STAR FRONTIER
FALLING
STARS

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

FALLING STARS: A Star Frontier Story
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

For a time, I considered including *Falling Stars* in the collection of stories that I published in *Star Frontier: The Compendium* and later in *Star Frontier: Dangerous Games*. However, it never seemed to fit. It's one of my stories set during the Levarc War but, aside from the bittersweet ending, its tone is a lot more upbeat than the others. On its own, this isn't a problem but when read in sequence with the other stories, the shift in tone is too jarring.

Still, it is a nice little piece and it includes the only interaction I've written so far between Gilham Roth and his father, Harlan.

If you've read *Star Frontier*, you'll know Gilham Roth better as Admiral Roth and he is introduced as the supreme commander of the Federation navy. During the events of the Levarc War though, that position was held by his father. However, you'll be pleased to know that Gilham didn't become an admiral on the virtue of being Harlan's son. He earned that position for himself. As you'll see at the end of *Falling Stars*, Gilham doesn't want his father pulling any strings for him.

Hamish Spiers, 2018

There was a noticeable shift in the tone of the *Gargoyle's* massive engines. The ship was decelerating and would soon emerge over Caliega, where a large Levarc occupation force was waiting.

For Major Gilham Roth, Company Commander of the 7th Battle Meteoroids, 'D' Company, that was not his concern. That's what their warships were for. He had his own job to do.

Briefly, he thought of his father. His flagship, the *Retribution* would already be there – laying down a barrage of fire to bring down the shield and occupy the Levarc forces in orbit. This in turn would allow the *Gargoyle* to get close enough to the planet for Roth and his men to get down safely.

It was rare for Gilham to see his father these days but that was understandable. Admiral Harlan Roth had been the Supreme Commander of the Federation Naval Forces ever since Admiral Sharnost had been forced to step down from the position due to the injuries he had sustained over Corsida – when his flagship the *Vigilant* was irreparably damaged by Prince Askaera's forces. The Federation still mourned the loss of that majestic dreadnought. That lengthy siege over Corsida, or the Long Vigil as it had come to be known as in honor of the *Vigilant*, had taken a heavy toll on the fleet.

Gilham had been a junior first lieutenant at the time, serving in the 83rd Vanguard. In that respect, things had changed. But in other, more immediate ways, they hadn't. This was not the first time the Federation had liberated Caliega from the Levarc.

This sort of thing had been wearing everyone down for the past year or so now. Gilham suspected that was part of the objective, since the Levarc had retaken several worlds of negligible strategic importance.

The Levarc had also made things tougher for the Federation this time around. When Caliega had been last liberated five years ago, an orbital bombardment had taken out most of the Levarc's bases on the ground. Then once the orbital defenses and the planetary shield had been taken out, the operation had been quite straightforward. This time though, the Levarc had built their garrisons and supply depots throughout the main population centers. That would make things difficult.

Gilham stepped into the hangar and admired the battle meteoroids he and his comrades would be piloting in this operation.

In a way, the Levarc had commissioned them. Since they were larger and stronger than the humanoid members of the Federation, with more substantial weapons and armor, the battle meteoroids had been initially built to level the field in ground combat.

He admired the compact fuselage of the one nearest him. The pilot's seat was well positioned in the forward section, protected by a reinforced frame – allowing the pilot to feel as though they were in its head so to speak – with the rotating shoulders of the arms on either side. It also allowed more direct control over the gripping claws and the arm mounted blast cannons. The legs were intricate as well with several spring-loaded sliding sections that absorbed impacts – and when power was provided, enabled the battle meteoroid to leap – while rotating thrusters could both propel it forward and control descents.

Briefly, the engineers had toyed with the idea of attaching the thrusters to the forearms of the vehicle but it had been abandoned; separating the thrusters from the main arms allowed the 'battleroids' to fire at forward targets while making descents and high leaps. Of course, what amounted to another pair of arms for the vehicle meant it was more difficult to operate but after completing the prerequisite two-month training program, no pilot ever had any trouble with it.

The battle alarm sounded and Gilham waited.

"Gentlemen," he said after his men had arrived and assembled. "We all know the job we're here to do and I know we're going to do it well. Yes, this is the first time we'll be taking the battleroids into a civilian area but we've fought in confined spaces before so it's not as though this is entirely new."

"It wouldn't take the Levarc long to round up some hostages or some human shields," one of the men pointed out.

"We are not going to give them the time," Gilham countered. He understood the anxiety that the men were feeling. It was often just before the battle that self-doubt crept in. However, talking through the plan again tended to settle everyone's nerves.

"We are surrounding their barracks and the garrison as soon as we get planetside," he said. "And Arlington, you're taking out the communication tower before they can rally any air support. It'd be most unlikely that the orbital defense force would be able to help them at this stage anyway but it is good practice to cover all eventualities."

He smiled. "We've had more than enough drills in this operation and intelligence has, at some risk, provided us with very clear orbital visuals. No doubt, some of you are feeling a little pre-battle anxiety – I certainly am – but we are prepared."

He glanced up as there was another shift in the engines' tone and checked his chronometer. "Ah. I believe we are coming out of lightspeed... now."

They heard the sound of the hyperspace to sublight deceleration – barely audible in the other compartments of the ship but noticeable in the hangar – and Gilham finished the briefing. "Gentlemen, man your battleroids."

"The shield is down, Admiral."

On the bridge of the *Retribution*, Admiral Harlan Roth nodded. "Thank you, Lieutenant. Port gunnery – what did those fighters just take out?"

"The second point-defense repeater, sir," came the reply.

Roth glanced at the radar display closest to him. The Levarc fighters were making another strafing run down the flank of the ship.

He pressed the comm switch. "Commander Everli."

"Admiral?"

"Pull back and head aft down our starboard side. A group of Levarc fighters will come the other way."

"Copy that."

“Your people have some daring pilots, Karaek,” Roth remarked to the gigantic reptilian being beside him.

Karaek, his Levarc advisor and the first of his kind to defect to the Federation, shrugged. “The lower ranks of the warrior class believe it is a great honor to die in battle,” he rumbled in intelligible but animalistic Corsidan. “We taught them to believe it.”

“Rather well, it seems. Comm, the carriers’ newest ETA if you would.”

There was a moment’s wait. “Nine minutes, sir.”

“Very good. Commander Everli?”

“Targets eliminated. Heading back to the light cruiser now, sir.”

Roth glanced at his visual display. That ship was well and truly out of the fight now. “Belay that. Assist squadron one.”

“Understood.”

He turned his attention to the remaining enemy warships – formidable titanic thins with their massive cannon arrays encircling and protecting their cores. Those massive cannons pummeling their shields.

Roth checked both the chronometer and the shield displays. It was time.

“Forward group – ready your broadside gunnery,” he announced over the communicator. “*Harbinger, Goshawk* – drift out. Rear group – mark your targets now. Hold your lines of approach.”

Strapped inside the armored cockpit of his battleroid, Major Gilham Roth ran through the start-up sequence. He raised and lowered the arms, checked the responsiveness of the gripping claws and whether the thrusters were rotating simultaneously. Satisfied that everything was in working order, he waited.

Secretly, he looked forward to the ‘deck drop’ for a couple of reasons. For one thing, it allowed for a much faster drop than slowly guiding the vehicles out of a conventional hangar. For another, he’d been one of the first to suggest it.

“All meteoroids, prepare for drop.” The announcement reverberated through the hangar and Gilham felt a tinge of excitement. “All right, you heard the commander,” he told the others over his in-built helmet comm unit. “Thrusters in positions.”

As one, the rotating thrusters on all the battleroids swiveled.

The voice of the commander came over the main ship speakers once more. “Drop in five... four... three... two... one.”

The deck seemingly collapsed from under them but it was really the controlled opening of the new ‘deck drop’ system – as it separated into two sections that slid into the hull on either side of the hangar.

There was a brief sensation of free fall and then they were hovering above Caliega. Sitting in the small cockpit of something that was not really even a ship, Gilham found that the scope of the planet spreading out beneath him was far more breathtaking than it was from the deck of a larger vessel like the *Gargoyle*. As if the thought were a mental reminder, he glanced back at the carrier to make sure it was a safe distance away before he and his men engaged their thrusters.

Then there was one last thing to check. He saw the battle between his father's warships and the Levarc orbital defenses and it looked as though everything was proceeding as planned – but one could never make assumptions. He hit a switch on his instrument panel.

“Gentlemen, the shield is down,” he announced when the readings came up. They were already falling towards the planet at some speed now but it would have been easy enough to pull away if necessary. However, everything was clear for their drop.

Although most of the pilots referred to the vehicles as battleroids, Battle Meteoroids was the full name as that was how they operated – plunging into the atmosphere like falling stars before launching their devastatingly effective attacks.

Various Levarc units had seen how efficient they were already, mostly from their ground bases. Occasionally, the battleroids had been deployed to tear chunks out of ships to either disable them when conventional means had failed or to allow Federation troops to board them. However, it was planetside where they were most in their element.

As the surface of the planet rushed towards him, Gilham Roth checked his visual displays. “They’re trying to track us with their ground cannons,” he announced to the rest of his unit. “Take them out.”

Gilham was glad at times like these that the more aesthetically pleasing concept of placing the thrusters onto the battleroids' forearms had been discarded. Without altering the speed or angle of his descent, he took aim and fired alongside the other battleroids – disintegrating the large ground cannons before they landed.

“Arlington, go!” he shouted as they eased off their thrusters and positioned their battleroids' legs to absorb the impacts without toppling over. A number of pilots had trouble with this when they started the training program, although Gilham for his own part had always found it straightforward enough.

“Sir,” the other replied, his vehicle already leaping above the sandstone buildings of the city of Praeis. With a controlled burst of his thrusters, he brought it down onto the roofs and made his way towards the Levarc communication tower, his machine blending in against the dark storm clouds that were gathering over everything in sight.

Gilham swiveled his vehicle to face the large octagonal building at the end of the street. Already, other members of his unit were converging on the other sides of the garrison – while the remaining battleroids were attacking the barracks.

The barracks were a simple affair. Demolish them, the Admiralty had instructed and when Gilham relayed the order, the men had sounded all too happy to oblige. There was a crack like thunder; for a moment he thought that was what it had been and there was lightning in the distance which would certainly correlate with that. However, he realized immediately afterwards that the barrack doors had been blown open. It was amazing how much louder everything seemed when there were lots of buildings around for sounds to echo off.

He turned his attention back to the garrison and engaged the claws on the ends of his battleroid's arms so they'd be in exactly the right position when he needed them.

Then momentarily releasing the levers that controlled them, he brought the battleroid into a leap. Pushing down with its spring-loaded leg sections and engaging the thrusters for additional height and control, he brought it sailing through the air and landed on the rim of the garrison building – in front of the main command room.

Levarc officers stared at the battleroid through a reinforced screen that ran the circumference of the room – and while Levarc expressions were more difficult to read than some, Gilham got the impression that he'd surprised them.

Taking the arm levers once more, he placed the gripping claws on the edge of the roof. Three other battleroids also gripped it. Gilham clamped the legs of his own vehicle down as a counterweight to the force that would be needed – and fortunately, the surface beneath him was strong enough that it didn't give way. Then with a shriek of protesting metal being torn in different directions, the four battleroids ripped the roof from its base. The other three battleroids released their grip and, swiveling one leg to turn around, Gilham skillfully dropped it to the street below... right on a group of Levarc soldiers who were heading out of building.

With the hazard of large falling slabs of roof now out of the way, another battleroid moved along the street to block any more Levarc who tried to get out that way.

Gilham turned his vehicle back to the group who were now standing exposed in the control room. The other battleroids had their massive blasters trained on them and he lowered his own as well until he had the Levarc officers in his sights.

He activated the external loudspeaker. "Officers of the Levarc. Your barracks have been destroyed and your garrison has been taken. Surrender immediately and no harm will come to you."

Levarc officers rarely took such an offer but it was worth a try.

Once the area was secure, the 7th Battle Meteoroids of 'D' Company were used to assist in placing the roof back on the garrison and some technicians assisted in welding it in place. The inevitable rain began to fall just as they finished but nothing inside the control room was damaged – which meant that Karaek and a team of specialists could look around it later to see if there was any useful information to be found in the computer systems.

As he climbed down from his cockpit and stepped onto the deck of the *Gargoyle*, Major Gilham Roth gave the battleroid an affectionate pat. Despite the fact that he had promised himself he wouldn't, he still felt a little sad.

"Well, gentlemen," he said as the others assembled around him. "The operation was a success and thanks to your efforts, an unqualified one. The reports from other cities across the planet have been generally favorable as well and the sweep teams should be able to move in soon. Well done."

The men tried to smile but clearly, they felt a little sad too.

"It won't be the same without you, Major," one of them said, disregarding the formalities. The others nodded their agreement.

“Thank you, Captain Engelsten,” Gilham replied. “Or should I say Major?”

This raised a few more smiles and lifted the mood a little.

“Well, not yet, sir,” Engelsten replied.

“Only officially,” Gilham said. “And that will come soon enough.” He addressed the entire group, giving them a formal salute in parting. “Gentlemen, it was both an honor and a privilege serving with you all.”

“Sir?” Engelsten asked as he started to leave. “We’re going to have a celebratory drink in the mess. Would you like to join us?”

Gilham smiled. “I might. However, you will forgive me if I join you a little later. I have to debrief and there is another small errand I have to attend to.”

Engelsten returned the smile. “Understood, sir.”

“So,” Admiral Harlan Roth said as he and Gilham entered his quarters off the bridge of the *Retribution*. “You’re finally moving into the navy. I always thought you were too good for infantry.”

Gilham nodded. He’d been proud of what he had accomplished in infantry and in the thirty-five months he had served in the Battle Meteoroids. His father had been too, of course, but he had always hoped that Gilham would follow in his footsteps – and sooner rather than later.

“Here,” Harlan said, pouring him a drink and offering it to him. Perhaps he realized he could have phrased that last comment better. “In honor of your successful operation.”

He poured his own and they both raised their glasses.

“I wonder,” Harlan mused as he put his glass on a table and took a seat, “why won’t you let me arrange a transfer to a fleet position? There are many officers serving on our warships who are younger than you.”

“I know,” Gilham replied, sitting down himself. “All the same though, I want to become a navy fighter pilot. I’m still young and while I would one day like to have my own ship under my command, I believe I need more experience in space combat. Besides, nobody pulled any strings for you, sir.”

“I didn’t have anyone who could,” Harlan replied. “But I respect that. As I said, I was merely wondering. I’m proud of you, Gilham, and surely you can forgive a father for worrying about his son a little.”

“I understand,” Gilham said.

When Harlan looked at him, a facade had been lowered and he was no longer Harlan Roth, the Commander of the Federation’s Naval Forces, but Harlan Roth, the man.

“You were reported dead when you were interred in that Levarc mining camp, you know. I received that report. So did your mother.”

“That was nearly five years ago,” Gilham pointed out.

“Well, it feels like yesterday to me,” his father replied. He took another sip of his drink. “By the way, how is your mother?”

“She’s safe and sound. She misses you though.”

“I miss her too,” Harlan said.

In the ensuing silence, the communicator chimed.

“That will be Karaek,” he told Gilham, standing up and placing his arm on his son’s shoulder. “It was good to see you again, Gilham. And congratulations on your transfer. I’m sure you’ll make a fine pilot.”

Gilham did his best to return the smile. “Thank you, Father.”