



A story about letting go
of the the past and
embracing the future...

STAR FRONTIER OUT OF THE DARK

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

OUT OF THE DARK: A Star Frontier Story
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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Out of the Dark was first published as part of *Star Frontier: The Compendium*, a collection of stories no longer in print, so to speak. Many of these stories were republished in another book, *Star Frontier: Dangerous Games*, but *Out of the Dark* wasn't one of them.

The story concerns Drackson Araujion, a key character in the first *Star Frontier* novel, and an incident in his past that's alluded to in that book. When Drackson is introduced, he is in self-exile, living outside his home sector to escape a familial shame that was brought about by a crime his brothers committed.

The specifics of that crime aren't detailed in *Star Frontier* but it was an act of treason during the Levarc War, a long and brutal conflict that ended a number of years beforehand. After Harskan forces captured a Levarc Prince by the name of Tethralae, a small group of Harskans attempted – in secret – to return the captive to the Levarc in exchange for ships, weapons and items of transferrable wealth. The plan was foiled and the guilty were offered the choice of death or exile. If they chose to die, no one would know what they'd done and if they chose exile, their families would be dishonored.

This was the option that Drackson's brothers chose and so Drackson went into exile as well, to live among the worlds of the Frontier and the Federation where his name was unknown.

After the Levarc War ended, Drackson found his brothers and confronted them one last time. That story is told in *Renegades* and, of the two short stories I'd written about Drackson for *The Compendium*, it was the one I chose to include in *Dangerous Games*. It's the more dramatic of the two so it was not a difficult choice. Nonetheless, I still have a soft spot for *Out of the Dark*. It takes place after *Renegades* and, in a way, it's a coda to that story.

However, it also marks a turning point in Drackson's life. It won't spoil the story to mention that after the ending, Drackson takes on some patrol work that leads to jobs escorting cargo and passenger vessels. Eventually he ends up on a ship called the *Feet First* where he meets Asten Korrr and Carla Casdan, his crewmates in *Star Frontier*.

Hamish Spiers, 2018

The Phalamkian man stepped out of the speeder and rose to his full height. Despite the gray in his long plated hair revealing his years, his stature had in no way diminished as yet, leaving him considerably taller than most of the other species around him.

He was on the outskirts of Taler, one of Kordan's enclaves for the transient crowd, so there were a number of other offworlders like himself about. Behind him, three of them got into the speeder he'd just stepped out of and headed off in the direction of the spaceport. For the Phalamkian however, his destination was the non-descript building in front of him. Stepping inside, he was somewhat but not entirely surprised to see that the Kordan security forces had opted to leave the interior as drab as the exterior.

There were a handful of people in the place and while none of them were wearing uniforms, it was still obvious to him that the one who answered the door was the most senior of them.

"Aramei Mendaeis," the Kordan human greeted him, shaking his hand.

"Commander Garrett, I take it?"

"At your service, as it were," the man replied, gesturing for him to enter. "Good to see you."

"It's good to be here," Aramei replied.

"No, it's not. This must be the seediest dive on the whole planet. I'd much rather be back in Nerac." Garrett gestured for his guest to be seated. "And as I'm sure you yourself would rather be back on Phalamki, let's get down to business so we can wrap this up and go home."

"Just as long as we don't jeopardize my people to get it done," Aramei said. "Drackson, Evika and I go back a long way."

Garrett frowned. "Yes, you were all involved in the liberation of the Hie'shi system. I read the report. Although... are you sure about the Harskan?"

"Yes, I'm sure of him," Aramei replied, not quite preventing the resentment the question provoked from coming through in his voice. "He's a close friend."

"If you say so," Garrett said, holding his hands up in a gesture of appeasement. "I didn't mean any offence. I know that the Harskans helped us a little bit during the war... even if it was as much for their interest as ours and our neighbors. And... well, anyway, if you say Drackson's on the level, that's good enough for me."

Aramei nodded. "All right."

Garrett pulled out a pad. "Okay, the operation then. If it's the same gang, then they've hit the weapons caches on Colobran, Nimmato, Epsilon Vollud and then Broc Targan. Assuming they intended to continue following this pattern of hitting one on this side of the border and then one on the other, we can assume that they've got their eyes on a cache somewhere near here as well and that if they succeed here, they'll head on over to Valham next."

"Assuming they intend to go on indefinitely. They'll have to unload their wares somewhere."

Garrett nodded. "Right. Assuming they're not planning to use all this stuff themselves."

"What do our friends from the Federation have to say about the whole thing?"

"Well, they're obviously not much happier about the situation than we are. They've got agents investigating leads on their side of the border but they haven't found anything conclusive yet. However, they *have* said that if we find these people, they can send in a task force to deal with them."

“Good.”

“I’d like to be able to share information though,” Garrett said. “I can’t say I like the fact that we’re holding this whole operation back on account of you and your friends.”

“My friends and I, specifically Drackson, are the reason you have anything resembling an operation in the first place,” Aramei reminded him. “And their information checked out, didn’t it?”

“Yes, Kaelein fei Memenbrac’s ship was on the landing records at nearby ports at every place hit. But there’s something I don’t understand. How did Drackson find her?”

“By chance initially. He happened to see her here. However, his tenacity in following her back to her ship shouldn’t be overlooked.”

“And he did that why exactly?”

“Oddly enough, he’s got even less love for renegade Harskans than you do.”

“Strange.”

“He’s got his reasons.”

“Fair enough.” Garrett shuffled in his seat to make himself more comfortable. “All right then. Let’s get back to the operation. As I understand it, you’re going to be our go-between since we won’t be able to communicate with Drackson and Evika directly. I should also remind you that we’re going out on a limb for you here because we’re practically running blind. So I sure hope you’re playing straight with us.”

“Well, you can take my word if you like but you’ve seen my credentials.”

“Yes, a recommendation with Lord Colein’s signed endorsement no less.”

Aramei smiled. “A formality only, I’m afraid. I’ve never actually met him in person. But, yes, you are running blind. However, don’t forget that so are we until we can move onto the next step of the plan. If you impounded Kaelein’s ship and brought her in right now, you’d lose any lead you had to the rest of the organization.”

“That’s why we’ve agreed to work with you three, isn’t it? But what I need now are the details. What exactly do you want us to do?”

“We want you to put on a show, Commander Garrett.”

The female Hie’shi climbed into Drackson’s private speeder, probably the most expensive thing he owned at that point in time. Not that he didn’t have money. He did, but his needs were few and his wants were fewer.

“No one saw you?” Drackson asked.

“No witnesses,” Evika replied. “No cameras.” Her eyes narrowed slightly. Hie’shi, being of avian descent, did not visually express emotions in the same manners as humans, or Harskans for that matter, but the narrowing of their eyes typically expressed disdain or concern. In this case, it was the latter.

“What’s Aramei’s reading of this Commander Garrett?”

Drackson shrugged. “He thinks Garrett’s uncomfortable about the fact we’re involved. He’d rather let his people handle it the official way.”

“But he won’t try to shut us out or double-cross us?”

“Aramei doesn’t think so but there’s no sense in worrying about it.”

“I guess not. If he does try to pull something, I’ll just break his nose.”

“You always were the diplomat.”

“Well, I didn’t get where I am today by being diplomatic, did I?”

“No, you got where you are because you could make even the biggest Levarc turn and run.”

Evika made a clicking sound. “Happy days.”

“Hold on,” Drackson muttered, bringing the speeder to a halt and glancing left and right. “There’s an obstruction up ahead.” He turned right. “Don’t worry. I think I know a short cut.”

“All right.” Evika played with the speeder’s communicator. “I think it’s time I checked up with Aramei anyway. Hello, are you there?”

“I’m here,” Aramei’s voice came back. “Did you have a pleasant trip?”

“Lovely as always. What’s the story?”

“The ship’s been seized and the news should just about be ready to be ‘leaked’ now. Are you in position?”

Evika glanced at Drackson.

“No,” Drackson said. “There was a road block back there. All right. We’re fine now.” He brought the speeder to a stop and nodded to a nearby building for Evika’s benefit.

“We’re in position now,” she told Aramei on the communicator.

“Okay. Hold on,” came the reply.

Drackson and Evika waited in silence for about five or six minutes.

“They’ve broadcast the news,” Aramei said.

“So now we wait,” Evika replied.

“I’ll stay on,” Aramei told her. “Tell me when something happens.”

“Will do.”

There was something of a wait but it wasn’t unbearable. All up, it was about forty minutes.

“There she goes,” Drackson said as a Harskan woman darted out of the building and cut across the block to the street on the opposite side. “Evika, stay with her; wait for the right moment.”

“Got it,” Evika replied as she leapt out of the speeder.

“Aramei, are you still there?” Drackson asked, leaning towards the communicator.

“I’m still here. The target’s on the move?”

“She’s on the move and Evika’s in pursuit.”

“All right then. I’ll tell Commander Garrett to get all the decoys in place.”

“Don’t waste any time on my account.”

Evika saw a flash of bronze between two buildings across a street. She raced over and sprinted alongside them and then another hundred meters ahead in order to overtake the target. Without slowing, she cut across the block by climbing a fire escape and leaping onto another building and climbing down the other side. Emerging alongside the next street, she crouched down in position behind a shrub.

The street was very narrow, very dark from insufficient lighting and the Harskan woman coming towards her was very much alone.

When she got within a meter, Evika struck, leaping out and tackling her to the ground with vice-like strength.

“What the hell are you doing?” the woman demanded, attempting to pry herself free.

“Keep your voice down,” Evika snapped. “There are six patrol speeders a block ahead

and another twelve within a block in every other direction.”

“What?” the woman gasped.

“These people have cordoned off half the city looking for you, Kaelein fei Memembrac.”

“How do you –?” Kaelein started. “Never mind. Just tell me... Who the hell are you and what do you want?”

“Call me Evika. As for your other question, I know what your friends are up to and I want a slice.”

“A piece of the action?”

“Call it what you want. I want a share of your profits.”

“No deal,” Kaelein said and tried to pull away.

Evika pulled her right back down and gripped her around the throat. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t hear.”

Kaelein gripped Evika’s arm and started pulling it away but as she did, Evika pressed down harder on her neck.

“Listen, you little midget...”

“I don’t like that word,” Evika said, her tone calm. “But if you feel compelled to use it, then I should point out that adding ‘little’ to it is superfluous.” Her claws punctured Kaelein’s skin and the Harskan released her arm.

“That’s better,” Evika told her. “Anyway, there’s no reason why the two of us should be fighting. I’m here to help you.”

“In exchange for profits I can’t see you’re entitled to, since you weren’t involved in any of the initial heavy lifting. And besides, I don’t need your help.”

A siren then rang through the neighborhood not far away. It faded quickly but it still had the desired effect.

Evika turned her head in the direction of the sound and back to Kaelein. “Oh, I think you do.”

Kaelein seemed to relax, although Evika still held her pinned down.

“Now what?” Kaelein asked.

“I’m going to get you to my own ship. Your ship’s impounded.”

“Evika hasn’t contacted you?” Aramei asked as they entered Drackson’s apartment.

“Not directly as such,” Drackson replied.

“She took off with the target two days ago.”

“And the ‘target’ could have been looking over her shoulder the entire time. However, you needn’t worry about Evika. She knows what she’s doing.”

Aramei nodded. “True. Although, Commander Garrett –”

“Is of little concern to me.”

“Maybe not but we do need these people.”

Drackson was quiet for a moment. “Of course. You’re right.” He nodded towards a communicator console at the far end of the room. “However, I’ve been checking for messages every day.”

“She wouldn’t leave a voice recording, would she? That could be intercepted.”

“No. You know her. She has her ways. Ah. It seems the message has been sent.”

Drackson played with the device for a while, got out a pad and made some notes.

“Well?”

“A rather quick succession of calls from a public relay station just out from Epsilon Vollud. Five were picked up by the automated answer machine, although of course she disconnected immediately afterwards without saying anything.”

“All right.”

“Seven disconnected before they were picked up. Four were picked up and then disconnected like the first five. The switch between the numbers is there to delineate the separate sets.”

“Yes, that follows. So we have five, followed by seven then four. Five seven four. What’s next?”

“Five seven four. Ten six ten ten. Two four.”

Aramei sat down and frowned. “So what is she telling us?”

“First, she’s telling us that she hasn’t been able to get away from Kaelein long enough to send anything more substantial. Also, she might be helping us maintain control of this operation by keeping all her information out of Garrett’s hands as long as possible.”

“Possibly,” Aramei said, a little absently. “E-G-D... They don’t refer to letters of the alphabet.”

“Unless it’s an acronym,” Drackson suggested. “But I doubt it.”

Aramei frowned. “Wait a minute. You couldn’t delineate zero using that system of hers so could it be that ten is being used in lieu of it?”

Drackson shrugged. “No reason why not. So you get zero six zero zero in the middle.” He paused a moment. “Or could it be oh six hundred?”

“That’s what I thought,” Aramei said. “And since two four is right at the very end, that could be the date.”

“The twenty-fourth is tomorrow.”

“That’s true... five seven four... a crossroads? Drackson, any five seven fours near here you know of?”

“Crossroads Blue 574 is ten hours from here.”

Aramei climbed to his feet. “Right. Time to bring Garrett in.”

“All right. But make sure he tells all parties that Evika’s out there too. I don’t want any overzealous pilots firing on her ship. And you can tell him we’ll be coming along to make sure.”

“I was going to.”

The collection of ships drifting into the rendezvous zone at the crossroads was impressive, and dubious. They were divided in two separate groups, with several battle-capable vessels in each... and in the midst of one of the groups was a Novatech Bolt, a small lightly armed personal transport.

In the cockpit, Kaelein turned to Evika. “Got that? If anything comes out of that Universal, then we’re up.”

Evika shook her head. “You really don’t trust this guy, do you?”

“Oh, if he could take everything without paying a credit, he would. The only thing that’s holding the deal together is that he can’t fire on us without damaging his merchandise.”

“Well, that’s nice to know.”

Kaelein scowled. “You wanted in on this. You’re in. What did you expect?”

“An ounce more professionalism,” Evika said, eyeing the instruments and casually bringing engines online.

“You think you know better, do you?”

“Well, it’s not my place to say.” On the radar, some new arrivals appeared... from multiple directions too, including from the Federation. “But if I were running the show,” Evika continued, “I’d –”

“What the –?” Kaelein nearly leapt out of her seat and immediately slumped back in it after Evika jabbed a syringe into her arm.

Evika turned her ship around and high-tailed it out of there. Behind her, customary surrender warnings were being issued and ignored and things were about to turn ugly. Already, several Federation Hornets had broken off from their main group and were on her tail.

She pushed more power into her rear shields but veered away. Her communicator chimed and she flicked it on.

“The Kordan authorities have told that Federation group who’s on who’s side,” came a familiar voice. “You’re safe from us. Is Kaelein with you?”

“Yeah,” Evika replied. “But she can’t talk right now.”

“Then there’s no reason to stay here,” Drackson told her. “Get back to Kordan and we’ll meet you there.”

“Are you in Aramei’s ship? That thing’s shielding isn’t worth the amps it pulls to run.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him. But don’t worry. We were only out here to make sure our associates didn’t fire on you. Now that you’re clear, we’re heading back too.”

“Glad to hear it. Well, I’ll see you back on Kordan then.”

“See you there.”

Drackson’s last comment however had only been for the benefit of anyone who may have been listening in. He had no intention of going back to Kordan straightaway, and Aramei and Evika knew that. After an hour’s travel at lightspeed, he contacted Evika again and soon, both her ship and Aramei’s were coupled together in dead space, where no one would interfere with what he had in mind.

He looked at the prisoner. She was in a makeshift holding cell and wearing stun cuffs that had been provided by Evika, a wartime souvenir from her days in Hie’shi naval security, back when she’d been a liaison officer to the Phalamkian–Narvashae unit he and Aramei had been attached to during the liberation of the Hie’shi system. Looking at how well Evika had rigged the room to keep the prisoner contained, he saw she had lost none of her touch.

“Kaelein fei Memenbrac, *kallajai’es*.”

Kaelein gave him an expression of distaste. “If you want to speak to me, do it in Corsidan. That language is dead to me.”

Drackson sat down across from her. “All right. I know who are, Kaelein. I recognized you from public records I saw back home. You were one of the Younger Lords reported still at large after the group was disbanded shortly after the Tethralae incident.”

“Does this *look* like the Harskan Sector to you?” Kaelein asked him, distaste giving way to anger. “I don’t know what your deal is but if you’re a law enforcement official, you’ve got no jurisdiction here. And there are plenty of local authorities who’d have your hide if

you killed me. I'm a wanted girl, you know."

"I'm not going to kill you, Kaelein," Drackson said. "And I have no intention of trying to take you back to the old sector. If you tell me what I want to know, you'll get no trouble from me. I'll take you back to Kordan and hand you over to those friends of yours who want you so badly."

Kaelein studied his face and her expression now gave way to one of suspicion. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. I only want to know one thing."

"Is it about the Younger Lords?"

"Yes."

"Why?" She stared at him a moment. "Wait... You had a personal connection to the group. A friend? A brother?"

"Brothers," Drackson said. "And the Tethralae incident destroyed them. A plot to return a high ranking Levarc prisoner in exchange for personal gain in the middle of a war? It's difficult to conceive a more serious crime. Or one more shameful. Is that enough?"

Kaelein sat up. "All right. What do you want to know?"

"Who was the instigator of the plot?"

Kaelein sighed. "After I left the Harskan Sector, I met with some members of the group who'd been there when it all went wrong. The survivors. The older ones in the group knew who he was, and they told us they'd kept his name safe from the authorities."

Drackson frowned. "They didn't name him? But if he was there..." He trailed off as understanding dawned.

"The survivors didn't name *any* of the dead," Kaelein said. "Now, do you really want to know who he was?"

Drackson knew all too well the fate that would have fallen on the Harskan's family if his associates *had* named him. Letting out a long breath, he shook his head. "No."

Two days later, he was back on Kordan with Aramei and Evika, although admittedly in a much nicer place than Taler. Presently, they were seated at an outdoor café. It was early in the day and there were few other patrons around.

"I know you wanted to know who was responsible for the crime that tore your family apart," Aramei told him. "But I think you made the right choice. You've got a long life ahead of you, Drackson. The war's over and while I know this isn't the Harskan Sector, it's not a *bad* place to call home. It's time to move on and put your talents towards other pursuits."

"It won't be easy though," Drackson replied.

"Maybe not at first," Aramei said. "But it'll *get* easier. And I've found a place where you can start. Phalamki."

"Go back with you? You told me yourself that wouldn't be a good idea."

"I said I was getting a bit old for all this running around and that I was probably going to be dull company fairly quickly. And I'm not going to be much help to you in the long run anyway. You know that. You Harskans tend to live a lot longer than the rest of us. However, that doesn't mean there's nothing for you in the Phalamkian system."

"Listen to Aramei, Drackson," Evika joined in. "You want to hear this."

“All right,” Drackson said. “What is it?”

“I’ve found some patrol work,” Aramei replied. “And I think it’d suit you. It wouldn’t be career work, mind you – and I don’t think you’d want it to be – but I think it’d be something that could tide you over while you work out your next move.”

“But will I be the only non-Phalamkian in this group?”

“No, no. It’s one of the reasons why I think it would suit you. It’s an irregular unit and it already has members from all over the place so you won’t feel as though you’re an odd one out.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“Their route does cover part of the Federation border though so once the old border patrols are back in place, the unit will probably dissolve. But it’ll give you something for a couple of years at least.”

Drackson smiled. “That’s all right. It’s as you say. It sounds like a good place to get my bearings.”

“Exactly.” Aramei told him. “You’ll find your feet again, Drackson. I know it.”