

A story about
family and the
simple things
in life...



STAR FRONTIER PLANETSIDE

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

OUT OF THE DARK: A Star Frontier Story
Copyright © 2018 Hamish Spiers
All rights reserved.

The right of Hamish Spiers to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted to him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988. With the exception of fair use for the purposes of criticism or review as permitted under copyright legislation, no part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or otherwise, without written permission from the author.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Unlike *Falling Stars* and *Out of the Dark*, *Planetside* was written only recently and was never part of any *Star Frontier* anthology. The story is also set shortly after the events of *Star Frontier: Descent*, which is my most recent *Star Frontier* novel both in terms of when I wrote it and where it fits in the *Star Frontier* timeline. As I write this, that makes *Planetside* the most recent *Star Frontier* story overall.

For a while, I've thought about doing a quieter story in the *Star Frontier* universe and looking at things from the perspective of someone who spends most of their time on one planet, hence the name *Planetside*. Because as huge as space is, a planet is not a small thing by any stretch of the imagination. We could spend a thousand lifetimes exploring our own and only see a fraction of it; and in many respects, someone who spends their life planetside would have a wider range of experiences than someone who sits on the bridge of an interstellar freighter, no matter how far they travel.

It's easy to imagine an interstellar traveler in the *Star Frontier* universe being a lot like a real life jetsetter who spends more times in airports than the cities surrounding them.

I'd also wondered what someone who lives planetside would think of a friend or family member who went offworld and rarely came back to visit. While thinking of these things, I imagined a brother for Asten, one of the recurring *Star Frontier* characters. While Asten was having various adventures, his brother was living a quite eventful life of his own. Neither of their lives seemed to me necessarily more interesting than the other's - just different - but I thought it would create a sense of distance between them. I'm talking here about metaphorical distance of course, although literal distance is there too. So this story is about bridging that divide and, through a shared experience, bringing these brothers closer together.

Hamish Spiers, 2018

Derek Korr pulled his visor over his eyes and drew his hood tight. The piercing wind still rang in his ears.

It was pretty out here on the glacier though. The dark, almost black, clouds covering the ocean were lit up by brilliant sunlight from over the mountain ridge behind him and the snowflakes falling from them sparkled in this light like a million stars on a clear night.

He planted a metal stake in the ice, tested it, hooked the end of his tether line to it and took a few steps down the slope.

The avalanche the night before had been a lot stronger than anyone on the team had expected and it had smashed most of his permanent anchors from the ice, along with remolding the entire surface of the glacier. It looked like a different location this morning, not only because it was bereft of his anchors. He hoped the temporary observation station had survived the night.

He'd descended fifty meters down the slope now. He planted another stake and secured the line to it. He repeated the process another eight times, remarking in silence on the magnificent size of this river of ice. If he looked back, the distance he'd traveled was marked by the regular placement of the stakes. If he looked toward the ocean though, it appeared no closer than it had when he had left the research station.

However, he wasn't there to admire the view. With a mixture of pride and affection, he placed a gloved hand on the raised platform in front of him. The base of it was buried in snow but the avalanche hadn't shifted it from its foundations. He found a line hanging from the side, looped over an industrial strength pulley system. He hooked himself up to it and, hand over hand, pulled himself up. There was a motor he could have used if he wanted but he preferred to climb up.

On top of the platform, he cleared the snow off and uncovered an enclosed terminal beneath a series of mounted cameras and radar systems. Entering, he was pleased to see it was none the worse for wear after the adventures of the night before. He played through the footage at high speed, watching flying debris from snow and ice exploding on the screen in rapid fire and then a clear brightening blue sky. Then he got a glimpse of something more interesting.

He stopped the playback of the recording and watched the precious few seconds again. A blurred shape. Stretched wings. A vestigial tail, too long to act as any sort of rudder, but a distinct feature that made the creature identifiable on sight. The *Stancelsiar* or the Halean dragon as a lot of people liked to call it. The largest recorded specimens were over four meters from head to tail with a wingspan double that. Their feathers glistened like the ice of the glaciers and the snow capped mountain peaks that made their hunting grounds. Also, the males had a brilliant head crest with feathers of many colors forming patterns unique to each individual.

And one had flown over the valley this very morning.

Derek took a deep breath. For a moment, he was overwhelmed with emotion.

The footage might be enough, he knew. The corporations that wanted mining access to the Caylithe Caverns would argue of course. They'd say it could have been a large bird flying close to the camera or that the footage was forged. But there were ways to check the authenticity of the footage and Derek would be more than happy to submit it for inspection. Expert analysts would back his claim.

Still, if he could get better footage, it would make things easier.

He recorded what he had onto a pad and clipped it to his belt. They still had four weeks before the storm season arrived. Still enough time for someone on the team to get lucky.

He closed the terminal, abseiled down from the platform and made his way up the slope. It never failed to amaze him how different the incline seemed when he was walking uphill.

When he got back to the research station, he found Reman, the young intern working with them. Twenty-five and always full of cheer, she was a welcome addition to the team. And this morning, Derek thought, he had almost enough good cheer of his own to match hers.

"Morning, Reman," he said.

"Morning, Derek," she replied with her usual friendly smile. "You look happy today."

"I am happy today," he told her, passing her the pad and flicking it on so she could see the footage. "Take a look."

"Derek!" she exclaimed. "That's a dragon! You've actually found a Halean dragon."

"I don't know about *found*," Derek said, taking the pad back. "Seen perhaps. But I don't deserve the credit. We've all pitched in together on this. Who knows? Maybe you can be the one to actually find the thing."

"That'd be amazing," Reman said, shaking her head. "You know there are fewer than two thousand individuals left on the whole planet?"

Derek shrugged. "That's what they say anyway."

"I thought you were supposed to be the expert," she told him, though only in jest.

"An equipment expert, sure," Derek replied. "Experienced in working in extreme conditions, definitely. But an expert on these things, not so much. Still, I'd sure like to see one up close."

"But not too close, I'd imagine," Reman said.

Derek smiled. "Well, no."

"Maybe you can find one with your brother while he's out here."

Derek frowned and turned to her. "What's that?"

"Asten," she told him. "Your parents told you he was coming, right? And he called you last week, remember?"

"Yeah," Derek said. "I kind of lost track of time though. When's he supposed to be getting in town?"

"Uh, this morning."

Derek checked his watch. "I did schedule some time off for a few days though, didn't I?"

"Yeah," Reman said. "You remembered *that*." She grabbed his arm, beaming. "Come on. Why are you looking at me like that? Spending some time with your brother. It should be fun."

It *had* been fun, Derek thought as he flew his air car out of the valley and down to Jävar, the pretty little town forty kilometers up the coast. When they were little kids, it had been great.

When their dad was drafted near the end of the war though, things changed. His relationship with Asten was different with him then having to shelter his little brother.

Trying to distract him from the fact that their dad was away for several years. Trying to distract him from how down their mom was.

In the end, their dad came back safe and sound but he'd developed an aversion to space travel since it reminded him of things he'd rather forget. Halea was home, he'd said on more than one occasion, and you couldn't have asked for a better one.

Derek didn't know about that. He'd learned enough and seen enough books, documentaries and movies to know there were many incredible worlds out there. It'd take a thousand lifetimes to compare even a small fraction of them. And even now he wanted to see a few of them himself.

But Halea had so much to offer already. So many regions. Such vast beauty. Every little place with its own stories to tell and its own secrets to yield. Like the dragons in these mountains or the Caylithe Caverns he and the others were trying to protect.

Asten however had been drawn to the very thing their dad had renounced. Listening to their dad's stories, where Derek had imagined horrors, Asten had pictured adventures. Where Derek had traveled around Halea, learning everything he could about field observations, documentation, photography and recording, Asten had gone off to the academy. Then he'd got a berth, and a position as first mate or something. And a little later, he'd acquired the *Lady Hawk*, a little ship of his own. Asten had offered to take him for a ride in it someday. Derek had said he'd think about it.

Then Asten had thrown himself right in the middle of the battle of Phalamki. Far out on the Frontier, when the Federation's former security minister had been illegally occupying worlds out there. And a little after that, he'd been involved in stopping an attempted coup in the Minstrahn Empire, which was even farther away than Phalamki and half the Frontier worlds beside.

Derek smiled as he reminisced on all this. In a way, he guessed Asten had got his adventures after all.

But he hadn't come back to Halea to tell stories like Dad had. He'd stayed out there on the Frontier and married a Phalamkian girl. Well, half Phalamkian at any rate. She had the eyes like marble, true enough, and there was a slight blue hue to her skin. But in all other respects, she was human and she completely lacked the additional pair of arms that was the hallmark of those people.

She was a lovely girl, Selina. And it wasn't hard for Derek to understand why Asten had fallen so hard for her. But with her family being so prominent in the Phalamkian navy, there was next to no chance now that Asten would come back to live on Halea.

Derek missed his brother a lot these days and he knew Mom and Dad did too. And after the terrible things that had happened recently with Imraec Tarc and the attack on Phalamki that had killed many people, including Asten's father-in-law, they wished more than ever that Asten was back on Halea. Away from it all.

Mom and Dad had gone to see him afterwards. Of course, they'd also gone to see his little baby girl Elise – and she was beautiful – but they'd been worried.

Derek regretted not going with them. At the time, he'd been halfway up a river in Arellai, about as far from his home city as this place was – though a lot warmer – so it hadn't been an option. But he regretted it all the same.

And as he brought his air car into the Jävlar, a lively town in the middle of several hundred square kilometers of untamed wilderness, the picturesque harbor failed to lift his spirits. His smile had faded, replaced by a sense of melancholy.

It wasn't that he didn't want to see his brother. It was that he didn't want to see him go again.

There wasn't a lot of flat ground in Jävlar for a large air transport or even small spaceships to land. So the commercial vehicles 'landed' in the sea and gliding on specialized hulls designed for this possible usage, they docked at the water's edge like regular seagoing vessels.

Derek was glad the sea was gentle this morning. The waves lapped the edges of the large pontoon with a pleasant rhythm and he couldn't imagine that anyone stepping off a vessel this morning would find the conditions unpleasant. And when Asten disembarked, looking a little ill-prepared for the cold weather, he looked quite cheerful.

Derek smiled and walked over to him, carrying the thermal protective jacket he'd brought along for his brother.

"Derek," Asten said, grinning with a slight chattering of teeth. "How are you?"

Derek smiled and threw him the jacket. "Great. Now put this on before you freeze to death. You're not in Calesa any more."

"Yeah, don't remind me," Asten replied. He took off the insufficient jacket he was wearing and put on the one his brother gave him. "Thanks for that." He looked around. "I can't believe I'm really here in Jävlar. I remember in high school how Lelana came here on a trip. Skiing and snow mobiles and all that."

Derek rolled his eyes. "Yep. That's why Jävlar's on the map. Snow mobiles."

"That and the unusual name," Asten said, either missing the jab at his local geography knowledge or not caring. "It's not Corsidan."

"No," Derek agreed as they walked. "It's not. But not all the early colonists used Corsidan."

Asten frowned. "You know a lot about the early colonists?"

Derek shook his head. "Not really. No one does. It's all too long ago."

"Really?" Asten asked. "I heard Halea might have been settled as recently as five or six hundred years ago. That's not too far in the past, is it?"

Now it was Derek's turn to frown. "Who told you that? That bastard on Imraec Tarc who was playing head games with you?" He didn't know all the details of what had gone on there but he'd heard enough to know Asten and Selina had been badly messed around with.

"Um. Yeah, when you put it like that..."

"I wouldn't trust everything that guy told you. Anyway, as far as I know, Halea was settled a millenium ago. Possibly longer. But no one really knows for sure."

They walked away from the water's edge and into the town. Most of the buildings were low set, and some were on flat level ground while others were built into the sides of the mountains. Derek led the way to one of the latter. A little cafe he'd taken a liking to over the past month. It was warm inside without being too toasty. And once they'd hung up their jackets, got their drinks and sat down, they were able to get a good view of the harbor too.

"How are Mom and Dad?" Derek asked.

"They're good," Asten replied, nodding. He sipped his coffee. "I saw Haley and the kids too. We went to the beach a few times. It's actually kind of hard to believe sitting here that I was swimming just a couple of days ago."

"Well, we are pretty close to the north pole here," Derek reminded him. He felt a tinge of sadness at the mention of his wife and his two children. He was accustomed to going away on his work for one or two months at a time but he missed his family whenever he thought about them. However, he'd see them again in a few weeks. Whereas after Asten left, he might not see him again in years.

"I'm sorry about Selina's dad," he told his brother after a few moments had passed. "And all that stuff you guys went through on Imraec Tarc."

Asten sighed. "It's all right. We're moving on. And we've got Elise now."

"Yeah, she's gorgeous," Derek said, smiling at how Asten cheered up at the mere mention of his daughter.

"It's like a whole new life," Asten continued.

"It is a whole new life," Derek told him. "Literally and figuratively."

"I'll have to bring her to Halea one day," Asten said. "Introduce her to her uncle. Let her play with the cousins."

"That'd be nice."

Asten looked around the cafe. "You know I've missed this place. I mean not this place specifically. I've never been here before. But, you know. Halea. Calesa. Being home, I guess."

"Yeah, it's nice," Derek agreed. "Although it's good seeing new places and things like that too, right? You've seen more places than I ever have."

Asten frowned. "I don't know. More planets maybe. But mostly spaceports, you know? Spaceports here. Spaceports there. Occasional sightseeing a few kilometers from one but it's not... It's not like coming to a place like this. You know, it's funny really. When Selina and I were stranded in the jungles of Imraec Tarc, it felt like the first time in ages that I'd really *seen* a planet. Up close, I mean. Do you know I actually *miss* that place sometimes?"

"Yeah, I can understand that."

Asten exhaled, took a swig of his coffee and planted the mug on the table. "But anyway... Enough about Imraec Tarc. What about you? What have you been up to? Mom and Dad tell me you're trying to find some Halean dragons or something?"

Derek took a sip of his drink and put it down. "Found one."

Asten stared at him in disbelief. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. It's not great footage but one of our cameras picked up a few frames of one this morning. It's kind of blurry and you can't see the whole thing but it was definitely there."

Asten shook his head. "Oh, I'd love to see one in real life. I've only ever seen them in documentaries."

"Well, I haven't seen one in real life either," Derek pointed out.

"You haven't?"

"No."

"But you've been all over the world," Asten said.

"Sure," Derek replied. "But that just goes to show you how rare they are." He smiled. "You know, I've got an idea of where it might be nesting. These animals are non-

migratory and they tend to do their hunting close to home. How about we see if we can find the one that flew over the glacier this morning? You and me.”

Asten frowned. “You serious? I didn’t think you’d want me anywhere *near* your field equipment.”

Derek chuckled. “I don’t. But don’t worry. I wouldn’t take you to the research station or any of our observation stations. I thought we might just take my car to a few likely spots in the mountains and have a little look around.” He shrugged. “We might get lucky. We might not see a thing. But it can’t hurt to give it a try.”

Derek brought the car down on a large slab of snow covered rock. The fourth site for the morning. The dark clouds that had been hanging over the ocean earlier were all gone now and the sun was high in a clear blue sky, conveying a sense of warmth that would be dissipated the moment they stepped outside. However, there was nonetheless something inviting about this vale in the mountains two kilometers above the ocean. The heavy moraine, chunks of ice and packed layers of snow that filled it brought the level very near the height of the ridges to either side, forming a gentle U-shaped valley.

“This place looks pretty cool,” Asten remarked.

“Oh, it’s cold all right,” Derek replied.

Asten looked at him and shook his head. “That was pathetic.”

Derek chuckled. “Sorry. Dad jokes. You’ll be making your own soon. You’ll see.”

“I hope not.”

They pulled their hoods tight, lowered their visors and stepped out.

“Let’s look up there,” Derek said, nodding to the ridge right above them. It wasn’t too much of a climb. A bit under a hundred meters at a gentle incline.

“Sounds good to me,” Asten replied.

“By the way,” Derek asked him, “are you and Selina still going to continue serving in the Phalamkian naval forces?”

“Ah, sort of,” Asten told him. “We’re not really commanding officers or anything. We never were. Selina could have been, I guess, but she was never really interested in it. Maia’s in charge now that Father’s gone. We’re just advising her. And that’s only officially. Unofficially, we’re just leaving her and Zak to it.”

Derek nodded. Maia was Asten’s sister-in-law and Zak was her husband. Neither of them were Phalamkian in the least but after being adopted into Selina’s family, Maia had become her father’s protegee and eventual heir. Derek hadn’t met either Maia or Zak but he’d heard a lot about them.

“So there aren’t any real obligations in being Master Asten of the Phalamkian navy?”

Asten laughed. “You sound like Dad.”

That was their dad, Derek noted, since Asten used ‘Father’ when talking about his father-in-law.

“Why do you say that?” he asked.

“Oh, you know,” Asten said. “Worrying whether I’m in over my head being married into Selina’s family.”

Derek snorted. “You’re not?”

Asten stopped walking and contemplated the question for a few moments. "Too early to tell," he concluded. "We survived Imraec Tarc. Just. But there's no real way of knowing what else might come our way."

"But you think you're ready for it?"

"Probably not," Asten replied. "But you do your best."

"I suppose," Derek agreed. "I guess –"

He would have said more but a loud noise cut him off. And everything afterwards happened so fast, he almost didn't register it.

Something lunged at them both, from out of nowhere it seemed, with a great swish and an explosion of disturbed snow. There was a terrific screech, a flash of talons and, with a startled expletive, he fell tumbling down the slope.

His vision a swirl of white and blue and glimpses of the landscape racing by, he managed to see Asten rolling down beside him. They shot past the flat rock where the car was parked and flew into the middle of the vale, slowing as they hit the incline going up the other side and then rolling to a halt, sprawled out on the snow. Dazed. Dizzy. A bit bruised. But none the worse for wear.

High above, their assailant glistened in the late morning light. Feathers like crystals, a long swishing tail and great wide wings. A Haelean dragon.

And as it disappeared in the glare of the sun, Asten and Derek laughed and laughed. On this bright morning, lying sprawled across a blanket of snow in a mountain vale in the middle of nowhere, it was fun again.