

Freespace: The Great War

Posted on March 20th, 2011

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Chapter 2 The 11th Hour

"I'll never get used to these early days," Roach said with a yawn.

"Maybe if you actually went to bed early you wouldn't be so tired," Lucy muttered.

"I went to bed early," Roach said. "3 am is damn early for me, Babe."

"Don't call me Babe!" Lucy yelled.

Joe shook his head as he reminded himself not to call Lucy Babe, at least when she was within arms reach.

"Admiral on deck!" someone yelled. All of the pilots stood at stiff attention as Admiral Wolfe walked to the front of pilots briefing room.

"At ease people," the Admiral said. "And be seated." Behind him the giant screen changed from the Galactic Terran Alliance emblem to a long list titled KIA, Killed In Action. "Command Briefing for January 10, 2335 will commence now." Wolfe pressed the touch pad on his tablet. On the small screens in front of each pilot, a copy of the briefing appeared. The Admiral began to read what was on the small screens.

"Operation Thresher in the Antares system did not proceed as planned. Terran Command estimates Terran losses at 504 pilots dead, fourteen missing and presumed dead." The main screen changed to a node map and centered on the spheres representing Vasuda Prime and Antares. "The Vasudan foothold on Vasuda Prime and the subspace node remains solid. However, their supply lines have been cut off, which means they are most likely lacking reinforcements and supplies. Expect more news on that front in tomorrows briefing."

"You mean we have to do this tomorrow?" Roach whispered to Joe.

"Shhh," Lucy said.

The main screen returned to the GTA emblem as Wolfe folded his arms in a scolding manner. "There have been rumors about the appearance of another sentient species. These are rumors, nothing more. Investigation of the Ross 128 attack has determined nothing. Concern yourselves with the known enemy, the Vasudans. There is to be no more talk of phantom ships."

"I didn't know there was talk of phantom ships," Roach whispered.

"Would you shut the hell up," Lucy whispered back.

The Admiral lowered his arms and smiled. "Let this serve as a "welcome aboard" to all newly-arrived pilots aboard the Galatea. Since you're here, your flight records must speak highly of you already. Serve the Galatea well, she's a fine ship." Admiral Wolfe looked back down at the pad. "Your squadron commanders will give you your flight assignments."

"Ten hut!" Bull yelled. Everyone snapped to attention as Admiral Wolfe left the briefing room. "Alright, all Freespaceers gather on the right side of the room, Hell Bats to the left and Poker Faces in the middle, lets move it." Bull clapped his hands, encouraging the move. Joe fought his way through the crowd to the right side of the room.

"Maybe we should sit on the right side from now on?" Roach said.

"Are you kidding?" said Hound. "Bull changes the order everyday. I think he gets some

macabre pleasure watching us hustle about.”

“Okay people, here are the assignments,” Bull pushed on the pad. The little screens at each seat lit up with the flight assignments, organized by time. Bull began reading off the list, starting at 0800.

“I wonder how long we’ll have to wait?” Joe said jokingly.

“Smith!” Bull called.

“Uh, what?”

“0830, briefing room C. Get going, you have forty minutes.”

“Yes sir,” Joe hurried out of the briefing room. He stopped when with the sound of laughter echoed from the room. He turned around and read the sign next to the door. “Briefing Room C. I should have known.”

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“Have trouble finding the place?” Bull said with a laugh.

“Ha ha, very funny,” Joe sat in the front row. Lt. Harbison was already there.

“At least you’re on time,” Bull pressed the button on his pad. “Okay, here’s what’s up. Due to some screwy assignments, there is a gap in one of the patrol schedules. You two are going to fill it.” The main screen flashed to life and project the icon representing a cruiser and a fighter icon. “You will be patrolling the area around the GTC Orff. The Orff suffered an engine breakdown and is awaiting repairs. Your job will be to insure the Orff’s safety. The 6th Freespace Delta wing will relieve you as soon as their watch comes up. You’ll be out there for about an hour, a relatively short watch. Get to the quarter deck, you leave in ten minutes.”

As Bull left the room, Harbison quickly stood at attention, and Joe followed suit. “Shit,” Harbison said.

“Excuse me?” said Joe.

“Oh,” Harbison caught himself. “It’s not you, but patrols are so damn boring.” Harbison looked at Joe. “Come on Player, let’s suit up.”

Joe huffed. “That name spreads fast.”

“All callsigns do, Player,” Harbison said.

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The quarter deck was crowded with fighters and people. Some of the fighters were being repaired, others rearmed, and still others undergoing final preflight checklists. Joe watched the organized chaos as he and Harbison made their way to their waiting fighters. They weaved through the rows of Apollo’s and Athena’s while dodging the various maintenance personnel. Joe caught something with the corner of his eyes. On one of the upper storage levels were several slim fighters.

Joe nudged Harbison. “What are those?”

“Um?” Harbison looked where Joe was pointing. “Oh, those are the new Valkyries. Command shipped them out here, but we won’t be allowed to use them for a few days. A real shame.”

They reached the two fighters they would use at that moment. “Why is it a shame?” Joe asked as he climbed into the fighter. He had to practically shout to be heard over the din of the

flight deck.

“They’re supposed to be based on the old Angel Scout,” Harbison reminisced for a moment. “Those were a dream to fly, of course you’re too young to remember.”

“Bull,” Joe said. “I learned to fly in one of those. Hell, before he joined up, my brother was building one in his garage. That’s part of the reason he joined, to get the parts he needed to finish it.” Joe laughed at the thought.

“So how’s your brother doin’ now?” Harbison said.

“Oh,” Joe’s smile melted away. “He went down with the Eisenhower.”

Harbison looked away from Joe. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright, you didn’t know.” Joe put his helmet on and activated the inter-fighter communications channel. “Testing, one, two, three,” he said into the microphone.

“I hear you just fine,” Harbison’s voice came through Joe’s headset.

Joe took out the checklist from the side pocket and began pre-flight check. “So what do I call you out there?” he asked.

“Jack,” responded Harbison.

“You want me to call you by your first name?”

“No,” Harbison said with a laugh. “Jack’s my callsign. All members of the Poker Faces have names based on playing cards. It’s tradition.”

“A lot of that floating around,” Joe muttered. “I’m ready to go, are you?”

“Are you kidding, I’ve been waiting for you.” Harbison laughed again. “Command, this is Alpha wing, we are ready for launch.”

“Copy that Alpha,” Command’s voice came loud and clear. “We’re putting you on the catapult now.”

The large crane lowered down onto Joe’s fighter. Joe flipped the lever and the Apollo’s canopy closed just as the crane latched on. The fighter rose with a shutter. Joe looked out and saw Harbison’s fighter being lifted by a second crane. The crane pulled back to the rear of the flight deck.

“Remember to raise your landing gear, Player,” Harbison said.

“Oops,” Joe said as he raised the landing gear. “Sorry about that.”

“I wouldn’t be the one that would be sorry when that gear gets ripped off,” Harbison said with a chuckle.

“Alpha one, prepare for launch,” Command said.

“Roger that,” Joe said. Seconds later the fighter launched off the catapult. Joe was plastered against the seat. He watched as the HUD read his speed going from zero to forty meters a second. The blue glow of the flight deck opening grew larger until it seemed that the Apollo would be smashed against it. And then it was black. Joe grabbed the stick and thruster and moved away from the Galatea. He looked back for a moment to see Harbison’s fighter come out of the flight deck.

“Let’s form up Player,” Harbison said as his fighter shot ahead of Joe.

“Roger, here I come Jack.” Joe relaxed and began flipping through his systems, making his final checks before the jump.

“Alright, let’s go Player,” Harbison said. “Activate subspace drive.”

“Activating.” Player watched as the blue white vortex of the subspace portal opened. The fighter was absorbed and for a brief moment saw subspace, the blue, black swirling void. This disappeared as another vortex opened and dropped him in front of the GTC Orff.

“GTC Orff, this is Alpha wing here to take over patrol,” Harbison said over the comm system.

“Roger that Alpha,” responded the Orff. “Nice to have you here. House wing you are relieved.”

“This is House wing, we are out of here,” said House wings commander. “We haven’t seen any Zods, so you should be okay Jack.”

“Catch you later, Ten,” Harbison responded.

Joe watched as the four fighters of House wing each opened their subspace vortexes and vanished. “Friends of yours?” Joe asked.

“Just a Poker Face wing,” Harbison said. “Let’s just relax, this is a short patrol.”

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“God is this boring,” Joe muttered.

“I hear ya” said Harbison. “At least with longer patrols there’s a chance for some action.”

Joe looked at Harbison’s fighter. “What do you know about the Eishtmo?” He asked spontaneously.

“Eishtmo? Not much except. . .” an alert suddenly activate. “Hold on a sec.”

Joe looked at his own radar. The blue dots representing jump points activated. “Delta shouldn’t be here for at least another twenty minutes,” he said.

“Those aren’t Terrans,” Harbison said. “Looks like you get to fight a real battle. Let’s go.”

Joe turned his Apollo toward the newly appeared red blips on the radar. He activated his targeting display. A small red square appeared on his HUD, with little numbers indicating distance to target.

“You take Virgo two, I’ll take one,” Harbison said.

Joe studied his target info and found he was already on Virgo two. “Got it,” he jumped on the afterburners and shot out toward the Vasudan fighter. He began blasting at the Anubis with his primaries then launched a salvo of Furies at the fighter which quickly exploded.

“Nice shooting,” said Harbison as he downed his target. Two more jump blips appeared. “Looks like we got more company.”

Joe whipped his fighter around only to find he was practically on top of the intruders. He quickly launched a MX-50 and blasted away. The first fighter vaporized without realizing what hit him. Joe then turned and launched a salvo of Furies at the second fighter which exploded soon after.

“Hey, save me some,” said Harbison.

“Sorry,” said Joe quickly as two more blips appeared, right behind Harbison. “Check your six!”

Harbison dove out of the way as Joe laced the fighters with laser fire followed with a couple

of MX-50's. One of the fighters exploded, but the second one managed to get off one of its own missiles which rocked Joe's fighter as it hit.

"Watch yourself Player," Harbison said as he dove his fighter onto the unsuspecting Zed and blew him apart.

"I'm okay," three more blips appeared. "Great, more company." Joe rolled over and launched more Furies at the attackers one of whom dove away. Joe targeted the escapee and chewed into him, eventually destroying him. Harbison fired a few shots, finishing off the last two fighters.

"That's the last of them," Harbison said. Two more blips appeared on the radar.

"Not more," muttered Joe.

A howl echoed across the comm system. "The Dogs of Delta have arrived, how's it going out there," Wolf said.

"Not to bad Wolf," said Harbison. "The young rookie just made his first kill, and then four more."

"Probably from playing all those video games," Hound said.

"Alpha wing, you are relieved, thanks for your stay," said the Orff.

"Roger that," said Harbison. "Let's go home Player."

Joe activated his jump drive and slipped into subspace.

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Joe collapsed on to his bunk. His arm was sore from the battle. It was as if he had fought the whole damn Vasudan navy. Bull had called them remnants of a convoy, but it sure didn't feel like it. Joe rolled onto his side and looked at Eishtmo's bunk. On top were several bags. Joe hopped down from his bunk and carefully leaned over to read the shipping tags. "GTD Reliant to GTD Galatea" it read. The Reliant, so that's where Eishtmo was from, but why was he transferred to the Galatea? Joe shook his head and laid back down. He was so tired. That's when the door flew open.

"Top bunk on the left," he heard Roach say. A large group poured into the room and grabbed Joe. They carried him out of the room and eventually on to the flight deck.

"Stand over there," one of the other pilots said to Roach.

"Why?" asked Roach as he moved next to Joe and Lucy.

"What the hell is going on?" Lucy asked.

"Cus' I said so," that's when one of the other pilots whipped out the ships fire hose and began to hose all three down.

"Cut it out, goddamn it!" Lucy yelled as she desperately tried to stay standing. Joe fell down and rolled as the water plastered him across the flight deck.

"This is great," Roach yelled as he was again knocked back by the blast of water.

"Are you crazy?" Lucy yelled as she fell down. She quickly tried to stand back up, but the slick deck caused her to fall right back down on her face. The other pilots laughed, hooted and hollered. Joe glanced up just in time to see Eishtmo standing behind the group, a small smile graced his lips. Suddenly the water stopped.

"All right, that's enough," said Bull. He walked over to the now soaking Ensigns. "You are

now official members of the 6th Freespace Fighters Squadron, congratulations.” He then handed each a Freespace patch. Lucy glared at him through her wet hair. “Oh, and due to the fact that he got his first kills today, Player, you are Alpha wings’ commander.” He then handed Joe his patch, as well as the wing commander pin.

“Thanks,” said Joe. He stared at both the patch and the pin. He felt like he earned it. The other pilots turned and headed back to barracks. Joe looked up and saw Bull slyly hand Eishtmo his patch, and then continued to follow the rest. Eishtmo then walked up to the rookies with several towels.

“Use these to dry off,” he said as he tossed them each one. He then turned and left.

“Why the hell didn’t he get hosed down?” Lucy asked with disgust.

Joe watched Eishtmo as he left. “I think he’s been through this before.”

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“Do you know how to make a Reliant Repellent?” Eishtmo asked the bartender.

“Sure do,” the bartender said. “I served on the Reliant a couple of years ago, she’s a great ship, how about you?” The bartender began mixing the drink.

“I was there a few years,” said Eishtmo grabbed the finished drink. “Cheers.” Eishtmo downed the whole thing in one gulp.

“What are you doing here?” asked Joe. “We’re supposed to leave in ten minutes.”

“I’m coming kid,” Eishtmo said. He turned to the bartender. “Could you mix a whole bottle for me?”

“Not a problem,” said the bartender.

“Let’s go,” said Joe as he grabbed Eishtmo’s arm.

“You don’t have to drag me,” Eishtmo yanked his arm away from Joe. “Kids,” he said as he rolled his eyes.

The two of them walked onto the flight deck. Roach and Lucy were leaning up against their Apollos. “Where was he?” asked Lucy.

“At the bar,” said Joe.

“Hey, that doesn’t sound like bad idea,” said Roach as he started for the door.

“Don’t make me hurt you,” Lucy said as she punched her hand.

Roach raised his hands in surrender. “I’m just kidding.” He climbed into his fighter and looked over at Joe. “Bitch.”

“I heard that,” said Lucy.

Joe sat in his fighter and put his head in his hands with frustration. “Alright,” said Eishtmo. “Cut it out, we have a mission to fly.”

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Alpha wing fell out of subspace into the asteroid field. Joe looked at his radar. Only flashing red blips, nothing concrete.

“I can’t get a lock,” said Lucy.

“Asteroids always do that,” said Eishtmo.

“Form up on my wing,” said Joe. “Then we’ll head for the first group.”

The fighters moved into diamond formation, with Joe leading, Roach and Lucy to either side, and Eishtmo taking up the number 4 position.

“By the way,” said Eishtmo. “If that Zod ace shows up, I want to take him, alone.”

“Are you crazy?” said Roach. “The way Bull was talking, it was going to take all of us just to take that Zod on, let alone beat him.”

“Bull meant it would take all of you to beat the ace,” said Eishtmo. “I can do it all by myself.”

“I have a lock,” Lucy said triumphantly.

“Everybody take one,” said Joe. Suddenly a flurry of Furies zipped past just inches from Joe’s canopy and into the first Anubius fighter. “Hey, watch it!”

“Sorry,” said Eishtmo.

The battle was over quickly and the fighters returned to formation and continued on to the next target. The next group of Vasudans didn’t even know what hit them. Each exploded with bright fireballs of light. Joe smiled as he wasted another fighter.

“This is easier than I thought,” he said.

“Hey Player,” said Lucy. “I’m picking up a jump signature.”

“It’s the ace,” said Eishtmo. “Head for the next group, I’ll take care of him.” And Eishtmo dropped out of formation and headed for the newly emerged ace.

“I guess we’re on our own,” said Lucy.

“Does that bother you, Babe?” said Roach.

“How ‘bout I frag you right now?” Lucy said angrily.

Suddenly, one of the Zod fighters launched missiles at Lucy. “Babe, look out!” yelled Joe. Lucy’s fighter rocked with the first hit, but subsequent hits missed. Joe dove on the attacker and soon destroyed it. “Pay attention, damn it!”

“I got Pisces three,” called Roach. Moments later the Vasudan wing was gone. The fighters reformed and moved on to the next target. “You okay, Babe?”

“Fuck you, Roach,” said Lucy. “If it hadn’t been for you I wouldn’t have gotten hit at all.”

“Would you two cut it out,” said Joe, nearly at his wits end. He shook himself to dispel the anger. He looked at his radar. Eishtmo and the Zod ace were still both on screen. “Hey Eishtmo, how’s it going?” Silence. “Eishtmo respond.” Still nothing. “Computer, is there something wrong with Alpha four?”

“Negative,” said the computer.

“Then why isn’t he responding?”

“Alpha four is currently not using an Allied channel.”

“What?”

“Player, twelve o’clock,” yelled Roach. The final group of Vasudan fighters dove on to Joe. Joe kicked in his afterburners and looped up and behind his two attackers. Joe fired a salvo of Furies and a couple of MX-50’s, sending both Zods to meet their makers.

“I warned him,” Eishtmo’s voice suddenly came. Seconds later the last red blip on Joe’s radar vanished. “I took out mine, how about you guys?”

“Uh, we’re done here,” said Joe.

“Good,” said Eishtmo. “Let’s go home.”