

## Freespace: The Great War

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# Chapter 9: Beginning of the End

“Attention,” yelled Spook. Everyone in the ship's main briefing room snapped to attention. Admiral Shima walked in with a sad look on her face.

“As you were,” she said. “All ship Command Briefing for March 1, 2335 commences now.” She turned to the newly arrived Vasudan representative and nodded. The Vasudan then said something in his native tongue. All the Vasudans stood up and marched out the door.

“What did he say to them,” Joe whispered to Eishtmo.

“Something about talking to them in private,” responded Eishtmo.

“You understand Vasudan?” asked Roach.

“Of course he does,” said Joe. “What do you think that book he's always reading is written in?”

“Well, I'm not perfect at it,” Eishtmo said. “In fact, I still haven't finished that book.” He then slapped himself on the forehead. “Damn, I left it on the Galatea.”

“Crew of the Bastion, this briefing is to relate some bad news.” Shima looked like someone had punched her in the gut. “At 1700 hours last night, the GTD Legion and her escorts engaged the Lucifer over Deneb three. We lost all contact with the Legion at 1730. Command believes the Fleet was destroyed.” The Admiral took a deep breath. “At 1900 hours, the Lucifer made the jump to Vasuda Prime. Our forces engaged the Lucifer Fleet, but were repelled or destroyed quickly. The Lucifer Fleet then proceeded to bombard Vasuda Prime for thirteen hours straight. Every major city, town, installation and monument was destroyed. For all practical purposes, all evidence of Vasudan civilization is gone. It is estimated that over four billion Vasudan lives were lost.” There was a moment of total silence in the room. Shima swallowed. “Our orders are to keep the Lucifer from getting any closer to Earth. Also, we have been ordered to assist in the evacuation of all refugees from the Vasuda Prime attack. Your squadron commanders will give you your assignments.” She looked around the room. “No one is to mention the attack on Vasuda Prime to any Vasudans on board. I will not tolerate anyone who makes inappropriate remarks regarding this event. Is that understood?” There were no objections. “Very well, you are dismissed.”

Joe followed the other pilots out of the briefing room. Wolf suddenly called to him. “Player, can I see you for a moment.” Joe sat down in one of the front row seats, Wolf took a seat next to him. “You know that since Bull is gone, I'm now Squadron Commander.”

“Hell of a way to get a promotion,” said Joe.

“Yeah,” Wolf said sadly. “In any case, I need to name a second, in case something happens.”

Joe gave Wolf a curious look. “And you want me?” he asked. Wolf nodded. “Whoa, I thought that went to second in rank.”

“It's whomever I choose,” said Wolf. “That's the way it's always been that way in the Freespacers.”

“More tradition,” Joe muttered.

“Yup,” said Wolf.

“But why me,” Joe whined. “Just about anyone else is better qualified.”

“Nah,” Wolf shook his head. “Player, with the exception of Eishtmo, you are the best pilot I’ve ever seen. Hell, given time, you could become even better than Eish.” Wolf looked right into Joes’ eyes. “I want you to be second in command, no one else. Will you do it?”

Joe closed his eyes and sighed. “What do I have to do?”

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“Cut it out!” yelled Joe. He watched as Ma’ka’s fighter charged into an oncoming wing of Shivans.

“I will avenge Vasuda!” Ma’ka cried.

“All fighters,” Command called. “The Vasudans are sending armed transports to deal with the Shivan threat. We are also sending a wing of freighters to resupply them.”

“Copy that Command,” said Eishtmo.

“Gamma one, stand down,” Joe said as he tried to pull up next to Ma’ka’s Hercules.

“Begone Terran,” Ma’ka said. “I will not be denied.”

“More Shivans coming in,” Lucy cried.

Joe dodged around the various Shivan fighters and bombers. Ma’ka was always in his sights, his guns glaring as they ate into each enemy fighter in turn. “Cover those transports,” Joe ordered. “I’ll try to get Gamma one to join us.”

“Good luck,” said Eishtmo.

“Two Shivan cruisers arriving!” yelled Command.

“Shit! Just what we need,” said Roach.

Ma’ka spun around and charged toward the newly arrived Cain cruisers. Joe dumped more power into his engines and played catch up. “Gamma one, you are ordered to stand down!” he yelled.

“I will not,” said Ma’ka. “This is my quest.”

“Damn it!” Joe cried. “Getting yourself killed is no way to avenge your loss.”

“He’s right,” said Eishtmo. “I had to learn that the hard way.”

“Listen to Eishtmo if you won’t listen to me,” said Joe.

“Never,” said Ma’ka.

“Don’t make me stop you,” Joe said angrily. He kicked in his afterburners and edged closer to the Vasudan’s fighter.

“You will not fire on me,” said Ma’ka. “You do not have the will.”

“Perhaps, but I can do this.” Joe charged at Ma’ka. In the middle of the chaos of the raging battle, Joe rammed Ma’ka’s fighter. The collision warning flashed on, the hull indicator taking a two percent hit. Joe waited a moment then called to Ma’ka. “You said I earned it, now return to base, you are relieved.”

Ma'ka looked shocked at Joe. "You hit me," he said with disbelief.

"Gamma one, jump out now!"

"As you wish, Lieutenant," Ma'ka said and his fighter jumped out.

"Command," said Joe. "Gamma one is having an apparent weapons malfunction. He is returning to the Bastion."

"Understood," said Command.

"The two Cains just jumped out," said Lucy.

"The Cain and Abel have jumped to Sirius," said Command. "We are now alerting our forces there."

Joe pulled around and targeted the nearest Shivan bomber, bringing his new Banshee laser to bare on the little bugger. After a few shots, the Nephilim bomber soon exploded in a bright fireball.

"Pilots," Command boomed. "The Vasudans are sending in the Mecross to help secure the area. Stay with the Mecross until additional fighters can be sent to relieve your post."

Joe turned in time to see the Aten cruiser jump in through the node. "Gamma, protect the Mecross. Alpha, let's kick some ass," he said.

"Music to my ears," yelled Roach.

"That's because you're tone deaf," retorted Lucy.

Joe smiled. 'At least they're not trying to kill each other,' he thought to himself. He pulled up behind another Shivan and began blasting away. The lock signal went off, indicating Joe had a lock on the Basilisk. With a quick punch, a swarm of Hornets shot themselves forward, the streaks of the four missiles twisting into the Shivan's hull.

"Where are they all coming from?" asked Gamma three.

"Who cares?" said Roach. "As long as we send them to hell!"

Joe spun around and began carving into another of the endless black fighters.

"Shit," yelled Lucy. "More bogeys coming in."

"Command," Joe said. "Where's those extra fighters?"

"They're busy at the moment," said Command.

Eishtmo shook his head. "Reinforcements are always busy."

"AHHHHHHH," screamed Gamma four.

Joe watched as Gamma four's fighter spun out and exploded. "Maybe I shouldn't have sent Ma'ka home," he muttered.

"It was for the best," said Eishtmo.

"This is Theta," said the transport pilot. "We are jumping out."

"Thank god," said Roach. "Now I can concentrate on killing Shivans."

Lucy sneered at him. "What were you doing before, sleep flying?"

"Ha ha," said Roach.

"I am taking heavy fire," said Gamma two. "Please assist."

“I got ya,” said Joe. He targeted the Shivan on Gamma two’s tail and began wailing on the fighter.

“Thank you Terran.”

“No problem.”

“This is Zeta wing,” said Zeta one. “You guys order a pizza?”

“You’re late,” said Eishtmo. “No tip for you.”

“Let’s clean up these bastards and go home,” said Joe as his target burst into flames.

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“I’m sorry,” Joe said as he sat next to Ma’ka.

The Vasudan looked at him. “You have no reason to be sorry. I was not in my mind.”

“We all have days like that,” said Eishtmo. “Sometimes more than one.” He took a sip from his glass. “The pain will dull eventually, but it will take awhile.”

“If it dulls, then it is forgotten,” said Rock. “And this can never be forgotten.”

“Some things are better forgotten,” said Coyote.

“No,” said Rock. “To forget is for the event never to have happened.”

Suddenly, Ma’ka spoke in his natural voice, the translator off. All the Vasudans turned and looked at him shock. So did Eishtmo.

“You can’t be serious?” Eishtmo said.

“I am,” responded Ma’ka.

Joe looked at the Eishtmo. “What are you talking about?”

“Ma’ka wants to declare a, uh,” Eishtmo looked for the words. “A blood oath on the Lucifer.”

“It is the highest form of revenge,” said Rock. “Once made, only extraordinary circumstances can undo it.”

“I’m surprised your whole species doesn’t do that,” said Fox.

“To do so, would be suicide,” said Gamma three. “Once declared, one must take every measure to ensure that it is fulfilled, or that they die trying.”

“Ma’ka, you don’t want to do this,” said Eishtmo with concern.

“I will, and I must,” said the Vasudan.

“Well,” said Coyote. “If he’s going to do it, why don’t we all do it.”

“Say what?” said Roach.

“You heard me,” said Coyote. “We all have some reason to want to destroy the Lucifer, so let’s make it official.”

“This isn’t exactly official,” said Wolf. “In fact, it’s plain crazy.”

Joe looked at Wolf. “Well, why not. If we weren’t crazy, we wouldn’t have signed up in the first place.” Joe slapped the table. “I’m in.”

The others began voicing their willingness to join. Wolf shook his head. "You're all crazy. But that's why I love ya. Count me in."

"Love?" asked Rock.

"Another figure of speech," said Roach.

Suddenly the intercomm system began blareing. "Freespacer Alpha wing, report to the flight deck for immediant scramble!" the voice screamed.

"Ah hell," yelled Roach. The rest of Alpha wing leapt out of their chairs and rushed out the door. Wolf followed them out but went the other direction, probably to get news on what was going on.

People rushed around the flight deck. Four Valkyries sat already attached to the launch claws, ready for immediant launch. Joe shot up the ladder and quickly buckled into his seat. "So what's going on anyway?" he asked.

"I'm sure we'll know soon enough," said Eishtmo.

"You got that right," Wolf's voice came over the comm. "As soon as you're ready, launch and jump out."

"Alpha one, ready for launch," Joe said without hesitation. The claw lifted the fighter up and began moving forward, without even reaching the ceiling. Joe shot through the blue glow of the hanger force field.

"Alpha wing," said Wolf. "The Beta Aquilae installation is under attack. Protect it at all costs!"

"Roger that," said Roach.

Joe punched his jump drive and after a few moments, fell back into normal space. He saw Beta Aquilae, then out of the corner of his eye, he saw its attacker. "Holy fuck," he said.

"What?" asked Lucy as she jumped in. Then she saw it, the black and grey body of the Lucifer. "Oh shit."

"I didn't expect I'd have to live by that vow so damn soon," said Roach.

"Don't worry," said Eishtmo. "We hadn't even begun the ceremony."

"This is..." the signal from Beta Aquilae faded in and out. "...badly damaged..."

"Beta Aquilae, this is Alpha wing, what is your status?" asked Joe. He already knew the installation was doomed, but he had to do something.

"Alpha..." the comm went staticy for a moment. "...see you. It doesn't look like we're going to make it. We...ejecting ....pods. Protect them."

"Alright everybody, take a pod," said Joe. Joe slammed on his afterburners and shot out toward the newly arrived escape pods. As he neared the small box, the Lucifer fired another beam of fire at Beta Aquilae. The station sparked, flames shooting out of the many of the openings in the hull.

"We have incoming fighters," said Lucy.

"Cover the escape pods Alpha," said Command.

Joe targeted his pods' nearest attacker and began dogging him. He looked back for a moment to see the Lucifer fire another shot into Beta Aquilea. The station couldn't take the it any more and exploded. The shock wave nudged Joe's fighter a little, but didn't do any other damage.

“My god, Beta Aquilae has been destroyed!” said Eishtmo.

Joe swallowed and continued to hammer on the Shivan fighter. The green blobs of light from his Prometheus laser ate away at the Basilisk. The Shivan weaved to the left, and charged another escape pod. Roach took offense to the attack and fired a Phoenix V at the attacker. Joe pulled away and targeted another Basilisk as his first target exploded.

“Alpha wing, we are sending the PVD Hope to secure the area,” said Command. “Escort the escape pods into the Hopes’ hangerbay.”

“Oh, this just keeps getting better and better,” muttered Roach.

“Shut up and do your job,” said Lucy.

“Damn it woman,” said Roach. “If I hadn’t been drunk, I wouldn’t have this job.”

Another Shivan died a fiery death in front of Joe. He pulled around to his charge. “Well that explains everything,” he said.

“The Hope is warping in,” said Lucy.

Joe looked up in time to see the Typhon destroyer slip out of the subspace vortex.

“Alpha wing,” said the Hope’s comm officer. “We are launching Cancer wing to assist you.”

“Copy that,” said Joe. He turned to a Shivan that dared to target his charge, but the Hope’s guns took the nasty bug down.

“That’s the last of them,” said Eishtmo.

“Alpha wing, Cancer wing is here to help,” said the distinctly human voice of Cancer one.

“Bravo, is that you?” Roach asked.

“I was wondering how long it would take you to recognize us,” said Bravo.

“All fighters,” the Hope announced. “The Shivans are attacking the Comm center, stop them.”

“Back to the grind,” said Bravo.

Joe targeted the nearest Shivan and charged ahead. His guns began blazing as he got into range. The Shivan dove to escape. Joe kicked in his afterburners to follow, but he didn’t notice another bogey pull behind him.

“Watch your back!” yelled Bravo.

Joe turned to see his attacker begin firing away. He dove down, afterburners glowing to escape his attacker. “God damn it!” Joe yelled as his fighter rocked from the impacts.

“Hold on Player,” said Cancer two. “I’m coming.”

Joe looked back to see a Vasudan Thoth fighter launch a missile into the Scorpion. “Thanks,” said Joe.

“Not a problem,” said Cancer two.

Joe pulled up to the next bomber and began wailing away. The Shaitan turned and twisted away from the green beams. “You’re not getting away that easily.”

“Damn it, get ’em off me!” screamed Bravo.

Joe looked to his left to see Bravo's Thoth dive away from a Shivan Dragon. Joe retargeted the Dragon, took a few more pot shots at the bomber, then went to assist Bravo. "I'm coming, hold on."

"We will be in position in three minutes," said the Hope.

"Hurry up Player," Bravo yelled. "I'm taking a beating."

Joe lined up behind the Dragon and began firing away. The Shivan pulled off of Bravo and turned on its new attacker. "You're clear Bravo," said Joe.

"Thanks Player."

Joe looked up as Bravo hit his afterburners. Suddenly, a streak of white streamed up and slammed into the Vasudan fighter. There wasn't even a scream as Bravo's fighter went up in flames. Joe fixated on the fireball for a moment, long enough for the Dragon to let loose a volley of fire on him.

"Watch yourself kid!" Eishtmo screamed.

Joe shook himself and pulled hard on the stick in an attempt to shake the Shivan. "Bravo just went down," he said.

"Yeah, I know," said Eishtmo.

Joe hit his afterburners and dove down towards the Hope. The Shivan didn't stop the chase. Joe dropped in and began skimming the hull. "Hope, this is Alpha one," he said. "How about giving me some fire support?"

"As you wish," said the Hope. A pair of the Hopes' laser turrets turned and began blasting away, just behind Joe's fighter. In moments, the Dragon disappeared from Joe's targeting display.

"Thank you," said Joe.

"It was our pleasure," said the Hope's comm officer. "We are now in position, clean up any remaining hostiles and return to base."