

Freespace: The Great War

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Chapter 5: Strange Bedfellows

“Command briefing for January 25, 2335 commences now,” said Admiral Wolfe. “Last night, the GTA signed a cease-fire and non-aggression pact with the Vasudans. The fourteen year war is now over.” The Admiral stopped, probably expecting cheers. There were none. “Command has expressed great relief, largely due to the economic drain the war has caused. But there is no time to breath easy.” The screen changed to a hammer-like icon.

“The Hammer of Light,” gasped Eishtmo.

“The what?” asked Joe.

The Admiral continued. “Unfortunately, not all the Vasudans have agreed to the cease-fire. A group of rouge Vasudans calling themselves the “Hammer of Light” are willfully aiding the Shivan cause. Apparently, they are citing some Vasudan legend that claims some all-powerful race is coming to cleanse the universe. The HOL, as they will be called, is to be considered a hostile target and all possible force used to eliminate them.” The monitor showed a node map, Terran systems in green, Vasudan in yellow, and Shivan in red. The screen centered on Vega. “With the 3rd Fleets loss of the GTD Amadeus in Vega, both the GTA and the Parliament of Vasuda have declared an open state of war against the Shivans. Fortunately, thanks to the Bastion in the Ikeya system, we now have the data necessary to target and track Shivan ships. This will make it easier to track the bastards down. We also have received a shipment of Avenger cannons, so now killing them will be easier too.”

“I liked shoving Furies up there butts,” Joe said under his breath.

“Shut up, hot shot,” Roach said with a smile.

A image of a model of a strange device replaced the node map. “The missions in the Ikeya system have also managed to claim some Shivan shield systems. With these devices, we have begun building prototypes of our own shield system. They will soon be transferred through Beta Cygni to Earth where production can begin.” The image changed to the GTA emblem. “Finally, as part of a reconciliation effort, eight of our pilots will be part of a ‘pilot exchange program’ with the PVD Hope. We are looking for volunteers, but if none are found, eight of you will be volunteered. The transfer will be begin tomorrow. Dismissed.”

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“The Admiral has requested that two wings of the Freespacers be part of the ‘pilot exchange program,’” said Bull.

“I ain’t volunteering,” yelled Coyote. The rest laughed.

“We’re not looking for volunteers anymore,” said Bull. “I have already discussed it with the Admiral, and it’s been decided that Beta and Gamma will, volunteer.”

“Aw, come on Bull,” cried Bravo.

“Sorry guys,” said Bull. “But Delta is too important to lose and transferring Eishtmo could prove, problematic.” The members of Beta and Gamma moaned. “Gamma, you will take a transport to the Hope. Beta you will fly one last mission, then rendezvous with her.” More

moaning came from Beta and Gamma. Joe smiled at the cries. He was glad it wasn't him. "Gamma and Delta wing, you are dismissed. Alpha, Beta, stick around we have much to talk about."

"I guess the Zods are scared of you, eh Eishtmo?" said Roach as Gamma and Delta wings filed out.

"Nah," said Eishtmo. "Command just doesn't want me assassinated by someone who swore to kill me."

"Makes sense," said Joe. "Still, I'm glad we're not going."

"Don't get too excited Player," said Bull. "Beta and Gamma will be replaced by Vasudans. You'll still have to fly with them."

"Yeah, but they won't have to be on a damn Zod ship," said Plato.

"That's enough," said Bull. "Here's what's up." The main screen changed to an image of several ship icons. "At 1400 hours, a large convoy carrying one of our newly developed shield prototypes was deployed. The convoy was destroyed by the Shivans. This was expected. The convoy was a decoy. We had four working prototypes, only one of which was destroyed. Your wings will escort the remaining prototypes through the Beta Cygni jump node, were they will make their way to Earth." The image changed to a transport icon and fighter wing icons. "After escorting the prototypes to the node, the Vasudans will arrive to finish escorting the transports through Beta Cygni. Do not leave the transports until they leave the system. The Zods should appreciate the help if the Shivans or HOL decide to join the party. Get going pilots."

* * *

"Alright pilots," said Plato. "Pair up and take a transport. Player, you and me are going to take point."

"Copy that," said Joe. He pulled his Valkyrie up next to Plato. The two shot forward of the three transports. The group of ships slowly moved towards the jump node. Hours seem to pass as the group pulled away from Cygni station. Joe flipped on the auto pilot and stretched as best he could in the cramped cockpit.

"Better keep your hands on the controls, Player," Plato said with a laugh. "If not, you'll crash into something."

"Alright," said Joe. He grabbed the controls, disabling the auto pilot.

Lucy suddenly cried with alarm. "I'm picking up enemy jump signatures!"

Joe glanced at his radar that showed the blue dots representing jump signatures turn into red dots. He looked up and saw a Shivan fighter emerge from a vortex right in front of him. Joe pulled back on his stick to avoid hitting Basilisk fighter. The Shivan quickly turned and followed Joe up and away from the convoy. Unfortunately, the Shivan had not seen Plato pull behind him and after hacking away the black fighters rear shields, he sent the alien to meet his maker. "Thanks," said Joe.

"Just pay attention," said Plato. Joe turned his fighter back to the furball. Joe had just locked onto the second Basilisk when the others finished it off. Two more Shivans jumped in as the second Basilisk had been fragged. Joe quickly locked onto the first of them and turned to face the new opponent. The Shivan turned, desperate to avoid Joe's attack, but to no avail. Soon, the last of the invaders had been toasted. Joe pulled his fighter up behind Plato. "Nice shooting, Player."

"Thanks," Joe said.

“Only four,” said Roach. “I thought there would be a lot more.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” said Eishtmo.

“I’m picking up a distress signal,” said Lucy.

The strange murmur of a Vasudan was quickly followed by a translator. “Calling any ships in the area! This is the PVFR Andromeda! We have been attacked by enemy ships!”

“Andromeda? Wasn’t that the transport carrying the original shield prototype?” asked Roach.

“They called themselves the Hammer of Light!” said the Vasudan. “They are in pursuit and will be here at any moment! Please assist!”

“Sir, should we assist?” Beta two asked.

“Our orders are to escort the transports,” said Plato flatly.

“The Hammer of Light has arrived! Please assist! We are damaged and do not stand a chance!” Even through the translator, the Vasudan’s voice sounded alarmed. Joe looked to port. Through the blackness, he could just make out the image of the Zod transport. He looked down at the radar and the newly appeared red dots.

“Let me go help them,” said Roach.

“No,” Joe said. “Our mission is more important.”

“But the extra prototype. . .” Roach started.

“I said no, Roach,” Joe tried to exercise his authority and his rebellious wingman. Roach didn’t seem convinced.

“Aaaaahhhhh!!!!” The translator didn’t even bother to translate the Vasudan’s scream. Joe closed his eyes, trying to shut out the scream, even if it was a Zod.

“You should have let me go,” said Roach.

“Shut up,” said Joe.

“More enemy jump signatures,” Lucy yelled.

Joe’s auto targeting locked onto the newly arrived Shivan Basilisk fighter. “Protect the transports,” he called. Joe turned his fighter toward the nearest Shivan and began firing with all his might. His target dove away, desperately trying to avoid Joe. The others blew pass him, heading for the transports.

“Damn,” Eishtmo said. “They’re targeting the cargo.”

“Player, get back here and help us,” Plato said.

Joe pulled off of his target and retarget a cargo attacker. His previous target took advantage and turned on him. Joe’s fighter shook as Shivan lasers hit his hull. He pulled up and hit the afterburners in an attempt to get away from the attacker.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!” screamed Beta three as the her fighter exploded.

“Someone get this bastard off me,” yelled Roach.

“I got ‘em,” said Eishtmo.

“Command, when are those Zods getting here?” Plato demanded.

“They’ve been held up,” said Command. “They’ll be here as soon as they can.”

“Shit.”

Joe finally managed to shake his attacker, and now turned and re-attacked the Shivan. He fired his Avengers as fast as he could. It took time, but soon the Basilisk spun uncontrollably and exploded.

“Get them off me!” screamed Plato. His fighter shot in front of Joe followed by a pair of Basilisks. Joe locked on to one and began lacing him with all his might. One pulled away, but Joe stayed on the other as it continued to chase Plato.

“Break right, Plato,” Joe yelled.

“Too late!” Plato’s fighter exploded. Joe’s mouth dropped as his finger choked the firing trigger, eventually wasting the Shivan that had wasted Plato.

“Looks like you’re in charge, kid,” said Eishtmo.

“More incoming,” Lucy cried.

Joe turned to the new comers. “Protect those transports!” Joe began blasting into the new Shivans. One pulled away, while the other two headed after the convoy. Joe pulled behind the runner and launched missiles at it, destroying it after a moment.

“Just finished the rest off,” said Eishtmo.

“Alright,” said Joe. “Who did we lose?”

“Just Plato and Barefoot,” said Lucy. “Overall, not bad.”

“Aw, have a heart Babe,” said Roach.

“Pair off again,” said Joe. “Babe, you’re with me and we’ll take Theta one.”

“Copy that,” said Lucy.

Blue jump indicators appeared on Joe’s radar. The dots turned green, indicating friendly ships.

A Vasudan spoke from one of the newly arrived fighters. “Greetings Terran. We have come to take escort of the freighters. Alpha and Beta are relieved.”

“I’m sorry,” said Joe. “But we were ordered to escort the convoy to the node. We aren’t leaving until then.”

The Vasudan fighters pulled into formation with the convoy. “Your lack of trust is typical, Terran,” the Vasudan said, the translator squashing all emotion.

Joe smiled at the remark. It was true, he wouldn’t trust a Zod as far as he could throw one. Still, he was glad they had arrived. If the Shivans decided to strike again, they could serve as cannon fodder. Another group of jump signatures appeared.

“Looks like we have company,” said Roach.

One of the Vasudans of the newly arrived ships spoke with what alarm the translator would allow. “Beware Terrans! There are members of the Hammer of Light in your midst!”

Joe watched as the HOL fighter in front of him went from friendly IFF to hostile. It immediately turned toward Theta one, but Joe didn’t give it a chance. Within seconds he had wasted the fighter and turned to the next.

“Let’s waste these Zods” screamed Roach. The battle that followed was short, but fierce. It took only moments for the HOL fighters to be wasted. The transports reached the node just as Joe downed the last HOL fighter.

“Thanks for your help,” said the freighter pilot as Theta one jumped out, soon followed by the other two.

“Alright people,” said Joe. “Let’s go home.”

Just as Joe reached for the jump controls, the Vasudan who had warned of the HOL ships spoke. “You fought well, for a Terran,” came the translator. Joe was about to respond when the Vasudan disappeared into subspace.

“Thanks,” Joe muttered as his ship fell into his own subspace vortex.

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“Attention,” Bull yelled. Joe and the other remaining Freespaceers lined up in front of the first row of seats in Briefing Room B. Bull walked up and down the lines as he began speaking. “I know none of you is very happy with the thought of flying with a bunch of Vasudans, well I don’t care. You will fly with them whether you like it or not. I expect you to treat each of them with as much respect as you would any other pilot.” Bull stopped in front of Wolf. “Any other transferred pilot, not a rookie. Got it Wolf?”

“Yes sir,” said Wolf.

Bull smiled. “Also, you will not refer to them a Zods. They know what the term means and they don’t like it. They were also ordered not to refer to you by their slang.” Bull looked at Eishtmo. “If you hear it, report to me immediately. And don’t lie. I’ll know if you’re lying. Is that understood?” Bull looked down the line. “Okay then.” Bull walked over to the door. “Captain La’roh, you may come in now.”

Each Vasudan walked in, stooping over to avoid hitting their heads on the doorway. They lined up on the opposite side of the room from their Terran counterparts. The Vasudan Captain stood in front of the group. He looked over the Terrans. After a moment, he turned to Bull and bobbed his head. Then he turned back to the Freespaceers. “Greetings,” he said, the translator around his neck turning the officers’ murmurs into speech. “I am Captain Vo’lan La’roh. I will the Vasudan representative aboard the Galatea. I will also be taking over the second in command position for your squadron.” Wolf’s jaw dropped at the revelation. “My apologies Commander Dobbs,” the Vasudan added.

“You will still be at the top of the Terran half, Wolf,” injected Bull. “This came from the top. I had nothing to do with it.”

“I know many of you have adverse feelings toward my people,” said La’roh. “But, in the interest of victory, we must work together. As such, I have ordered my pilots not to engage in any altercation with Terran members of the crew. It is my hope we can all work together in peace.” La’roh almost sounded sincere through the translator. “If any of you have a problem with one of my pilots, please see me.”

Bull faced the Vasudan pilots. “The same goes for you. If any of you have a problem with anyone on this ship, do not hesitate to see me about it.” Bull turned to La’roh. “Thank you Captain.” The Vasudan bobbed his head and stepped back, away from the Terran pilots. “Some of our fighters have been modified so that the Vasudans can fly them. There will be a few Vasudan fighters on the deck, however you are to stay away from them. The Vasudans have sent several armed security guards to protect them, so don’t tempt them.” Bull waited as the group looked at each other. “Lt. Commander Coleman.”

“Sir,” said Coyote.

“You and Lieutenant King will escort the Vasudans to their quarters.” Bull pulled out a small slip of paper and handed it to Coyote. “Here are their quarter assignments.” Bull turned to the rest. “You are all dismissed to the rec room. You may leave when Coyote and Fox get back. Understood?” There were no complaints. “Get going,” Bull said to Coyote and Fox.

Captain La’roh spoke something in Vasudan to his pilots and they followed Fox and Coyote out.

* * *

Joe entered Briefing Room D and took a seat in the front row. He was early. Eishtmo and Lucy wandered in about three minutes before they were to report. All eight Vasudans entered only a minute before report time. They slid into seats in the back row, their massive bodies taking up the space of two Terrans. Joe sniffed the air. A strange odor began to fill the room. Roach soon entered, just on time.

“Damn Roach,” said Joe. “I thought you were going to take a shower.”

“Hey, its not me,” said Roach.

Joe now released where the smell was coming from. “Not only are they ugly, but they stink,” he muttered.

Eishtmo looked at Joe. He then shook his head as Bull and Admiral Wolfe entered.

“Admiral on deck,” yelled Bull. Everybody, including the Vasudans stood at attention.

“As you were,” said the Admiral. “Good morning pilots. I’m going to get right to it. The Shivan forces are sprouting up everywhere and its no secret that our front lines are taking a beating. As you probably know, no on has been able to communicate with them and Terran intelligence has no leads on their origins or their motives. On the upside, their shielding technology seems to be working just fine for us. By this afternoon all fighters stationed on the Galatea will have been fitted with them, so try to keep them intact, alright.”

“We’re on even ground now,” whispered Joe.

“I hope so,” Lucy responded.

Behind the Admiral, a node map appeared and centered on Ikeya. “The cruiser Taranis is suspected to be the source of command for the Shivans in this sector. Its here in the Ikeya system and we suspect its low on fighters and supplies due to recent attack runs. We have reason to believe it will soon jump to another system to resupply. We don’t know where it will jump to, but there is only one subspace node out of Ikeya, and we intend to blockade it. In the interest of learning more about the slippery bastard, we are going to attempt something bold: the capture of the Taranis.”

Everyone began to mutter to each other. Wolfe waited until it had calmed down. “If this goes off,” he continued, “it will give us an opportunity to study Shivan technology up close and bag a few live Shivans in the process. In order to do this, we have conducted a series of missions designed to take out the cruisers’ escorts and defenses. We’ve been chipping away at the boulder, and now is our time to strike. You have been tasked with the capture the Taranis. We’ve managed to chase it from Beta Cygni into Ikeya. It is now low on supplies and lightly guarded.” The screen centered on Ikeya and showed the jump node and an icon representing the Taranis. “It is now heading for Beta Cygni, probably to resupply. You will have a small opportunity to disable and disarm the ship so it can be captured. Captain Seipert.” Admiral Wolfe gestured toward Bull.

“Alpha wing,” started Bull. “You will fly Athena bombers equipped with the new Stiletto bomb. These bombs are to be used to destroy subsystems in a single hit. Use them well. Beta wing

will fly Vasudan modified Apollo's and will cover Alpha wing. Gamma wing, you will engage any enemy fighters or bombers in the area. Once the Taranis has been disarmed and disabled, a transport designated Omega one will dock and capture the ship. You will protect the transports until the capture procedure is complete. When the mission is accomplished, you may depart."

"Ensign Smith," said the Admiral.

"Sir," said Joe.

"You will be in command of this mission," Admiral Wolfe looked to the other pilots. "I expect you will follow his orders. Any questions?"

One of the Vasudans stood straight up. "Admiral," he said.

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Shouldn't command be given to someone of higher rank instead of this," the Vasudan paused. "Boy?" Even with the translator, some amount of disdain came through.

"Ensign Smith is one of our most skilled pilots and has proven himself an excellent commander. It is my judgement that he is the best for this job. If you have a problem with that, I can relieve you of your duties and you can spend the rest of the war in the brig, is that understood?" The Admiral glared at the Vasudan.

"Yes sir," the Vasudan said as he sat down.

"Good, you all leave in twenty minutes. Get going." Admiral Wolfe turned and left.

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"There she is," said Lucy. The black and red body of the SC Taranis glided toward the jump node.

"Alright people, lets get going." Joe pointed his fighter at the Cain class cruiser. "Babe, you and Roach take out the weapons. Eish, you and me will take the engines. Beta wing, cover us. Gamma take out those fighters."

"I do not take orders from a Terran," said Gamma one. The Vasudan and his wing dove onto the Shivan fighters any way.

"I'm on target," said Eishtmo. "You coming, kid?"

"Yeah," Joe said. He pulled up along side Eishtmo's fighter. The two Athena bombers closed in on the Shivan capital ship. As the ship grew larger in Joe's HUD, he began to feel his pulse race. In the last few days, this was the closest he had been to a Shivan capitol ship.

"Set your Stiletto launchers to double fire, we'll take the subsystem out faster," said Eishtmo.

"Right," said Joe. "We'll launch on my mark." Joe checked the distance reading: 700 meters. The ship continued to grow larger. Laser blasts began flashing around the two bombers.

"Dump shield strength to the forward quarter," said Eishtmo.

Joe tapped the new control panel shifting the new shield energy forward. A blast hit Joe's bomber square on, shaking it off its target.

"You okay, kid?" asked Eishtmo.

"Yup." In 500 meters they would be right on top of the ships engines. "Launch bombs!" he yelled. The bombs shot out of the launch bays and streaked toward the Taranis. Joe pulled away from the cruiser, hitting his afterburners to but some distance between the ships guns and his small

bomber.

“We took out the weapon subsystem,” said Roach. “How’d you do?”

Joe glanced at the Taranis damage indicator. “Engines disabled. Omega, you may begin your boarding operation.”

Joe looked out in time to see the blue vortex of Omega one appear and the Elysium slip into normal space. “Omega here. On approach to Taranis.”

“Gamma wing, cover Omega,” ordered Joe. There was nothing. “Gamma wing respond.”

“I don’t think they want to take orders from you,” said Lucy.

“Hey, give us some cover!” yelled Omega one.

“Beta, cover Omega,” Joe yelled.

“As you wish,” said Beta one.

“Alpha, break and attack,” Joe yelled. He pulled his fighter around and targeted the nearest Shivan fighter. The Scorpion turned and dodged, trying to avoid Joe’s shots. Joe launched a collection of Furies at the speedy fighter. Only a few hit, but the stunned fighter flew right into Joe’s gunsights and was quickly fried.

“Attempting to attach to the Taranis,” said Omega one.

“New fighters coming in,” said Lucy.

“Protect those transports!” yelled Command.

Joe spun his fighter around and faced the new comers. He charged towards the group, but the Basilisk fighters seemed to ignore Joe’s rush. He passed through the formation without even spooking the Shivan pilots. “Hey,” he said.

“They are firing on the Taranis,” said Beta two.

“All fighters, protect the Taranis until the capture operation is complete,” Command almost screamed.

“We’re having trouble penetrating the hull,” said Omega one.

“Keep at it Omega,” said Command.

Gamma one shot in front of Joe, barely missing him. “Damn it!” yelled Joe. “Watch where you’re going!”

“Perhaps you should watch where you are going, Terran,” said Gamma one.

“Whatever,” growled Joe. He lined his fighter up on Rama one as it made another attack run on the Taranis. “Not this time.” Joe began blasting away with his Avengers. The Basilisk pulled up and away from Joe. Joe pumped up his afterburners and gave chase. His fighter suddenly shook as another Shivan began hammering on Joe’s Athena. “Hey, get ‘em off me,” he yelled as he pulled away from his attacker.

“I got ‘em, kid,” said Eishtmo.

The pounding on Joe’s fighter stopped. Joe turned to see the Scorpion that had attacked him running for its life from Eishtmo. “Thanks,” Joe said as he turned back to his original target.

“It’s not working, the hull is too strong. We’ll need to tow it to Tombaugh,” said Omega one.

“Very well, Omega,” said Command. “We are sending in a freighter now.”

“Well hurry up, we can’t hold these bastards off forever,” said Roach.

Out of the Beta Cygni node came a Chronos class freighter. “Freighter Halkins here. Command said you needed some help.”

“Halkins, we need you to attach to that cruiser and tow it back to Tombaugh,” said Omega.

“Roger. Moving into position now,” said the Halkins.

Joe’s pokey Athena had a hard time keeping up with his Shivan opponent. He shifted energy from his guns to his engines, hoping to get a some extra speed out of the bucket of bolts. The extra speed helped, and soon the Shivan was meeting its maker.

“We’ve docked. We’re hauling it away,” said the Halkins.

“AHHHHHHHHH!” It was the unmistakable sound of a pilot going down.

“We have lost Gamma two,” said Gamma one.

“Well keep your heads up,” said Eishtmo. “We don’t want to lose anymore.”

Joe dove on an unsuspecting Scorpion and laced it with laser fire. The Shivan pulled up and away, the bright yellow flash of its afterburners glowed as the Scorpion sped up. Joe dropped his throttle and made a sharp turn to follow the slippery bastard. Finally, Joe let loose yet another volley of Furies with laser fire and wasted the fighter.

“Jumping out now. See you at Tombaugh,” said the Halkins.

“All fighters, you may depart now,” said Command.

“I’m out of here,” said Roach.

Joe fired a few more Furies at a Basilisk, and then hit the jump button.