

Freespace: The Great War

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Chapter 7: Deception

Joe was finally alone in his small quarters. He slid the door closed and sat in front of the terminal. He opened the cover to the keyboard and began typing feverishly. The words ACCESS DENIED appeared on the screen. Joe smiled and removed a disk from his flight suit pocket and slid it into the terminal's drive. After a few moments, the screen changed to ACCESS GRANTED.

Joe looked up. "Thanks bro." He returned to the screen and began shifting through the various files. "Now, where is it?" The screen changed as his fingers walked their way through the GTA's secure files. Finally he came to a file labeled LAZERUS, QUINN, 2/20/2334 under the court-martial section. "Gotcha," Joe said triumphantly. He opened the file and began reading.

Suddenly a loud noise blasted into the room. Joe startled back, only to realize that the door was still closed. He quickly closed the file, transferred it to the storage disk and returned the disk to his pocket. Then he threw open his door to a concussion of sound coming from across the hall. Joe walked over and looked into the open door. A Vasudan sat at his terminal, the blasting noise, coming from the terminal's speakers.

"Hey!" Joe shouted. The Vasudan looked at him for a moment. "Could you turn it down!"

The Vasudan obliged and looked at Joe again. "I am sorry, did I disturb you?"

"Well, you scared the shit out of me," Joe said, rubbing his ears.

The Vasudan looked at him curiously. "Then you should change your flight suit."

Joe stepped back, and laughed. "That was just a figure of speech." The Vasudan continued to stare at him. "Never mind," said Joe. "So, what were you listening to?"

"Terran opera," the translator said after a moment.

"That didn't sound like any opera I've ever heard." Joe leaned over and looked at the selection on the screen. "That's not opera, that's rock n' roll."

"Rock and roll?" the Vasudan said. The translator somehow managed to translate the alien's bewilderment.

"It's a kind of music on Earth," Joe said. "Very popular a long time ago. My grandparents listened to it when they were kids."

"It sounds like Vasudan opera," the Vasudan said. "Only with Terran voices."

Joe looked at the few selections on the list. "You know, this is one my grandparents always listened to. Bring it up." The Vasudan accessed the file and music began to fill the room.

"It is very nice," said the alien. "I wish I could understand the words."

"That's what most Terrans say about Terran opera," Joe laughed. The Vasudan began making the strange, deep throated noise that was the equivalent to Vasudan laughter.

"You are very funny Terran."

Joe suddenly realized what he was doing. The hatred that he had coveted for this strange species had boiled away with the strange laughter of the Vasudan. "I guess I am," he said.

The Vasudan suddenly shot his hand out to Joe. Joe stepped back, startled at the sudden movement. "I believe that this is a proper Terran greeting."

Joe chuckled at his own fear. "Yes it is," he said. "I'm Joe."

"I am called Ah'ma Mal'ahn," said the Vasudan. "You are the first Terran to speak to me in an unofficial capacity."

"Well, you're a second for me," said Joe. They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the music.

"This music is quite enjoyable," said Ah'ma.

"Yes, it is," said Joe. He looked at Ah'ma for a moment. "Do Vasudans use callsigns?"

Ah'ma cocked his head. "What is a callsign?"

"It's what pilots refer to each other during a mission."

"We do," said Ah'ma. "I am called Beta one."

Joe smiled. "No," he said. "It's more personal than wing assignment. Like, um, I'm called Player when I fly. Alpha two is called Babe and so on."

"To what purpose is this?"

"Well," said Joe. "It's quicker than saying Alpha one, and um," Joe thought for a moment. "It also gives us an idea of the pilots' personality and skills. It's more personal and helps keep our wingmates from becoming something less than human."

The Vasudan sat listening as his translator attempt to translate Joe's rambling. "It still does not make sense," he said finally. "However, if we were to have these callsigns, perhaps we could interact better with our Terran allies."

Joe thought about it for a moment. "That may not be a bad idea. We'll have to discuss it with Bull, uh, Captain Siepert and Captain La'roh."

The Vasudan bobbed his head. "Yes. However, I have a mission I must fly, so if you will excuse me." Ah'ma stood up and walked out of the room.

Joe reached over and turned off the music. He then returned to his own room, closing the door behind him. "Now for that file." Joe slid the storage disk back into the drive and reopened the court-martial file. Joe skipped the preliminary stuff and went straight to the verdict.

ON THE CHARGE OF TREASON TO THE GALACTIC TERRAN ALLIANCE, THE
DEFENDANT IS FOUND NOT GUILTY. ON THE CHARGE OF FALSIFYING OFFICIAL
GALACTIC TERRAN ALLIANCE DOCUMENTS, THE DEFENDANT IS FOUND
GUILTY AS
CHARGED.

"Falsifying official documents?" Joe said aloud. "What the hell does that mean?"

"It means just what it says," came a voice. Joe looked up to see the Eishtmo leaning against the door frame.

"Uh, hi," Joe said. "I didn't hear you come in."

Eishtmo closed the door behind him and closed the computer file. “You some sort of ace hacker or something?”

“Uh, no,” said Joe. “My brother was. Before he died, he sent me a program that cracked GTA security codes quicker than shit.” Joe smiled at the thought.

“You know if they catch you with that, they’ll court-martial your ass,” Eishtmo said.

“Not if they don’t find it,” Joe looked at Eishtmo. “You won’t turn me in, will you?”

“Nah,” said Eishtmo. “I’ve been through that myself, I won’t put anyone through it, not even you.” The two stood there for a moment. “So, do you want to know the truth, or are you just going to sneak a peak later.”

“I’d rather hear it from you.”

“Okay,” said Eishtmo. “But once I’m finished, you have to forget it, or else we’ll both go down, understand?” Joe nodded. “Alright, here’s what happened:

“About a year ago, I was involved in a raid on a Vasudan supply depot. When I got there, I opened a Vasudan wing channel and told them who I was and that if they valued their lives they would bug out. My squadron knew what I was doing, hell, the whole 9th Fleet knew what I was doing. So anyway, the Vasudans bug out and we capture or destroy the supplies. Well, damn it all, there was a hot shot Fenris captain who was listening in on Vasudan wing channels when I went on the air. He thought I was some sort of traitor and brought charges up on me. So I go to the court-martial and they read through my records, trying to find evidence. Instead they found out I was only 16 when I joined the service.”

“So what?” Joe interrupted.

“You don’t understand kid,” said Eishtmo. “When I joined, the minimum age to join up was 18. They only lowered it to 16 about six years ago.”

“Oh,” said Joe. “How did you manage that? I mean, with all the records they have, you shouldn’t have made it through.”

“In my youth, I was one hell of a hacker,” said Eishtmo. “It was nothing to change my records and join up.” Eishtmo leaned back against the closet door. “Well, they never found any evidence for a treason conviction. All they found out, was that the Vasudans were scared to death of me. But they couldn’t let the hacking thing go. So, instead of throwing me in the brig, like they should have, they stripped me of my rank, all command authority and shipped me here.”

“Why?”

“They just couldn’t let this old war horse go,” said Eishtmo. “But if they left me on the Reliant, it would be too easy for me to give orders that would be followed, even by the ships C.O.”

“I never would have guessed,” said Joe.

“Of course not,” said Eishtmo. “Now, forget everything I said. Command classified this information at the highest level, and I don’t want to hang for it.”

“No problem,” said Joe. “Your secret’s safe.”

“Good.”

* * *

“We are beginning our attack run,” said Ah’ma.

“We’ll cover ya, Rock,” said Joe. He shot out in front of Beta’s new Medusa bombers,

locking on to Arjuna one.

“Rock,” Roach chuckled. “What a name for a Vasudan.”

“You guys cover Beta, I’ll take care of Arjuna one,” said Joe.

“Copy that,” said Eishtmo.

Joe locked onto the Dragon’s engines and began firing with his Advanced Disrupters. The Dragon quickly realized that it was being attacked and shot away from Joe. “You’re not getting away that easy,” Joe said with a smile.

“Babe,” yelled Eishtmo. “Lay into the Shakti’s weapon subsystem, it will help the bombers.”

“Not a problem,” said Lucy.

Joe turned to follow the Dragon. Arjuna one dove away, almost hitting Beta two in the process. Joe stopped firing long enough for Beta two to get clear, and then began pounding on the Shivan fighter again. Suddenly Eishtmo’s Ulysses shot by, just inches above his canopy. “Shit!” Joe yelled.

“You okay kid?” said Eishtmo.

“I’m fine,” said Joe as he again lined up on the speedy Dragon.

“The Shakti has been disarmed,” said Beta three.

“Roach,” said Eishtmo. “Start cleaning up those sentry guns.”

“Already half way through,” said Roach.

Joe pulled his bat-shaped fighter up, and towards the Dragon. The Shivan weaved and dodged, but Joe followed a straighter path, turning only slightly to match his opponents general course.

“There she goes,” said Lucy. Joe turned to see the Cain-class Cruiser explode in a dramatic fireball.

“That is one beautiful sight,” said Roach.

“Almost as nice as when the Savior went down,” said Eishtmo.

“Give me a hand disabling Arjuna one,” said Joe.

“On my way,” said Roach.

“You saw the Savior go down?” asked Lucy.

“Saw it,” said Eishtmo. “I helped take it down.”

“I lost many friends on the Savior,” said Beta three.

“Take it easy, Rap,” said Joe. “That was a different time, a different war.”

“Just what I was going say,” said Eishtmo.

“Yes, let us forgive for past mistakes,” said Rock.

Joe fired off a few more disrupter shots, finally disabling Arjuna one. “Charon, target disabled, you can come pick him up now.”

A subspace portal opened and the Charon transport pulled up along side the disabled Dragon. “We have the fighter, jumping out now,” said the Charon’s pilot.

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“What do you call this?” said Rock.

“It’s called a Reliant Repellent,” said Eishtmo as he filled Rock’s glass.

“Are you sure that stuff’s good for Vasudans?” asked Roach.

“Trust me,” said Eishtmo. “A little Repellent doesn’t hurt anybody.”

“Only if you’re dead already,” said Lucy. Everyone laughed, even the Vasudans.

Rock took a sip from his glass. His head shot back as the greenish liquid hit the back of his throat. He began coughing, much to the amusement of everyone else. “What do you put in this?” he asked Eishtmo.

“Oh, a little of this, a little of that.”

“Perhaps you should put a little less of this and that.” Another round of laughter echoed through the rec room.

A howl came from the door. “The Dogs of Delta are back,” yelled Wolf.

“Hey,” Roach yelled.

“You know,” said Hound. “These Vasudans aren’t half bad.”

“We are much better than that,” said Ma’ka as he and the rest of Gamma wing followed the Terrans in.

“You want a Repellent?” asked Eishtmo.

“I might as well stick a gun in my mouth and end it now,” said Coyote. All the Terrans laughed.

“Is he serious?” asked Rock.

Joe looked at Rock. “No,” he laughed.

“Good,” Rock responded.

“So who are your Zod friends?” a voice came from the doorway. Joe turned to see a group of six pilots enter the rec room, each with a 21st Hell Bats patch on their shoulders. Ma’ka gave each the Vasudan equivalent of the evil eye.

“Shut up Vamp,” Wolf said.

“We just came to meet the new pilots, you got a problem with that,” said Vampire. Wolf rolled his eyes and took a sip from his glass. Vampire walked over to Ma’ka and looked the Vasudan straight in the eyes. “So, you’re the dirty Zod who thinks it can fly a Terran fighter, eh?”

Ma’ka glared at him. “I am not a Zod,” he growled through his translator.

“Yes you are,” said Vampire. “You and your whole race are just a group of damn dirty Zods.” The other five gave Vampire encouraging whoops. “In fact, we should just let the Shivans wipe out your whole fucking race. The universe would thank us for it later.” The group laughed at the remark and started cussing at all of the Vasudans, saying the foulest things they could think of. The Vasudans sat there and did nothing. Joe shook his head in disgust, until he remembered that he had, for all intensive purposes, said the same thing to Ma’ka.

“Vampire,” said Wolf. “I think it’s time for you and your friends to leave.”

Vampire smiled evilly at Wolf. “But we haven’t hazed these Zods yet.”

“Don’t you dare Nathan,” said Wolf.

Joe’s eyes widened with the suddenly realization of what Vampire had meant.

“I’m sorry Steven,” said Vampire. “But it’s for the good everybody.” Vampire turned toward Ma’ka and raised his hand. Wolf lunged forward to stop Vampire when one of the Hell Bats grabbed him. But none of them notice Joe standing next to Ma’ka.

“Excuse me,” said Joe.

“What do you want?” an irritated Vampire asked.

“I don’t think I can let you haze Ma’ka here.”

“Get out of my way Lieutenant,” Vampire said angrily.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that sir,” Joe said.

“Move, or you’ll spend the rest of the war in the brig.”

“If you’re going to send me to the brig, you might as well do it for something more substantial, sir,” Joe said.

“And what might that be?” asked Vampire.

“This,” and Joe hit him.

* * *

Joe’s face pulsed with pain. He wanted to rub it, to remove the pain, but Bull wasn’t allowing it. Joe reminded himself never to start a bar brawl again, it hurt too much.

“So let me get this straight,” Bull said as he paced up and down his line of Terran pilots. “Commander Roark and several members of the 21st Hell Bats entered the rec room and promptly began fighting with you. Is that correct?”

“No sir,” said Wolf. They all could sense that the brass was watching, somehow.

“Then what did happen Commander?”

“Well,” Wolf started. “Vampire, I mean Commander Roark came in and began saying, uh, rude things about our Vasudan guests. . .”

“And then he began hitting on you, right?” Bull interrupted. Coyote made a muffled chuckle. “Is there something funny Commander?”

“Sir, no sir,” said Coyote.

“Then would you care to tell me how this fight started.”

Joe stepped forward. “Sir, I threw the first punch,” he said.

Bull stepped in front of Joe. “Did you?” he said. “Would you care to tell me why?”

Joe gulped, his face still hurt from blows he had received. “He, uh, I mean Commander Roark was threatening to strike Lieutenant Vo’mon, uh sir.”

“So you hit him first, eh?” Bull asked. “Tell me, did the Commander have any reason to strike the Lieutenant?”

“Sir, if I may be frank.”

“No you may not,” Bull snapped. “Answer the question.”

“No sir, he did not.”

Bull looked at Joe, studying the purple splotch surrounding his eye. “Weren’t you involved in an incident with Lieutenant Vo’mon?”

Joe looked at Bull, trying to figure out how he had found out about that. “Sir, yes sir,” Joe said.

“Yet you come to his aid in this instance, why?”

Joe gulped again. “I, uh, had a change of heart sir.”

“Did you now?” Bull looked at Joe with a kind of pride.

“Captain Siepert,” a crewman said.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Sir, Admiral Wolfe wishes to speak to you.”

“Very well.” Bull turned to his pilots. “You are to stay here until I return, is that understood?”

“Sir, yes sir,” the group said in unison.

“Good,” said Bull. He then turned and left with the crewman.

The group stood at attention for a moment. Coyote then broke the silence. “And then he began hitting on you.” Everybody suddenly burst into laughter. Joe gringed as he laughed from the pain.

“Next time you decide to start a fight,” Fox said. “Make sure I’m not there.” More laughter erupted.

“Did you see Rock crack the bottle over Fruits’ head,” laughed Roach.

“I was to busy getting my face pounded in,” said Joe.

“I think they loosed a few of my teeth,” said Hound.

“Attention!” Bull yelled. The room dropped back into silence as the group returned to their line. “After discussing this situation with the Admiral, we have come to a decision on your fate.” Bull stared at them for a moment. “Normally, we would throw the lot of you in the brig, but we’re short on pilots, so you get to stay on duty. However, the cost of repairing all the destroyed goods from rec room will be coming out of your pay.” Joe sighed slightly. “Lieutenant Smith.”

“Yes sir,” Joe said.

“Because you threw the first punch, you will be reduced to the rank of Ensign and will report to a hearing on your conduct at the Admirals discretion. None of you are to speak of this incident again, understood?” There were no objections. “You are all dismissed.”

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“You are dismissed,” Bull said. The Freespaceers began making their way out of the Command Briefing. “Eishtmo, Player, stay here.” Joe and Eishtmo sat back down in the front row. “I’ll be back,” said Bull. “Stay put.” He then left.

“I wonder what Marky wants us to do,” Eishtmo said off-handily.

“Marky?” Joe asked.

Before Eishtmo could respond, Admiral Wolfe and Bull came back into the briefing room.

“Ensigns Lazerus and Smith, as you requested,” said Bull.

“Thank you Captain. You are dismissed,” Wolfe said to Bull. Bull saluted and exited again. “Computer,” the Admiral called out. “Lock down Briefing Room C.” All the doors sealed themselves shut. Wolfe looked at the two pilots. “What you are about to hear is top secret. Do not reveal it to anyone, understood?” Joe nodded his head. “Good,” the Admiral pulled up one of the portable chairs, turned it around and sat with the chair back in front of him. “I’m sure you all recall the Dragon you captured last week. Well, we’ve managed to get it working again.” The Admiral pressed a key on his touch pad. A picture of the captured Dragon appeared on the main screen. “Intel wants us to do something, dangerous with this fighter.” The image changed to icon representing a Shivan cargo depot. “We’ve been ordered to use the Dragon to scan a Shivan depot at Vega-Deneb jump node.”

“Whoa,” said Eishtmo. “Marky, I mean sir, I don’t do those kind of missions, you know that.”

Admiral Wolfe smiled. “I remember. Don’t worry, you’re not allowed to fly this mission, Ensign Smith will.”

“Excuse me,” said Joe. “I really rather not.”

“You don’t have a choice Ensign,” Admiral Wolfe said. “Remember, I still hold your life in my hands. You will fly the mission.” Joe rolled his eyes in despair. “Relax, if you do well, I might give you your cluster back.”

“So why am I here?” Eishtmo asked.

“This mission is of the highest secrecy,” said Wolfe. “As such, I can’t let just anyone talk to Smith during the mission. So, I’ve volunteered you.”

Eishtmo sighed. “Maybe I should have let War talk you back into the Reliant.”

“Then I wouldn’t have lived long enough to become an Admiral,” Wolfe laughed. “At any rate, Smith, your job will be to scan any transports, cargo containers and warships that come through the node. There have been problems with the Dragon. First of all, we couldn’t get the weapons to work, so we had to put standard Terran weapons on board. Also, the thrusters and afterburners aren’t up to par, so you won’t be moving at full tilt. Finally, the subspace drive has been giving us problems.”

“Great,” said Joe. “I might get stranded out there.”

The Admiral looked at Joe. “Don’t worry, the auto-repair systems should be able to fix the drive if it fails. You’ll just have to survive until the drive comes back online. Our long range scan detected only one wing of fighters guarding the depot. Just keep your distance and you should be fine. Suit up, you leave in 20 minutes.”

* * *

“You reading me,” said Joe.

“I hear you loud and clear,” Eishtmo responded.

“Hey, where’d your image go?”

“Deactivating the image pop-up reduces the signal strength,” said Eishtmo. “It’ll be harder to detect that way.”

Joe looked out toward the depot. “I hope it works.”

“It will,” said Eishtmo. “Now locate the each of the sentries.”

Joe began flipping through each of four sentry guns and the four fighters. "I got 'em."

"Alright, stay away from the sentry guns," Eishtmo said. "The fighters are probably on a set patrol pattern. Just sneak in while their backs are turned."

"I got it," said Joe. He kicked up his afterburners and headed into the cargo depot below.

"Start scanning the cargo containers."

"Is Command online up there?" asked Joe.

"Hell no," said Eishtmo. "It's that secrecy thing."

"Good." Joe pulled up to the first container. "Beginning scan now." In the targeting window, the scan lines moved their way across the image of the cargo container. "So, what did you mean by letting War talk the Admiral back in?" Joe finished his scan and moved on to the next target.

"That's a long story."

"It's not like I'm doing anything else." Joe moved on to his a third container.

"Well, the Admiral used to serve on the Reliant as part of the bridge crew," Eishtmo stopped. "Transports coming in."

"I'm done with the containers anyway." Joe pointed his fighter toward newly arrived Azrael transports.

"Anyways, Marky always wanted to be a fighter pilot, but he couldn't fly a fighter if his life depended on it."

"I got the transports," jump signatures appeared on Joe's radar. "More transports. Just what I need."

"Well, one day the Admiral was traveling between the Reliant and Tombaugh, back when the station was still under construction."

"Hold on a sec," said Joe. In front of him a pair of Lilith cruisers jumped in. "I got cap ships. Moving to intercept."

"Roger that," said Eishtmo. "As I was saying, on the way back from Tombaugh, a Vasudan strike force jumped the transport. During the battle, the pilot of the transport got killed, so Marky decides to try to fly the transport back himself." Eishtmo made a short laugh.

"I'm picking up a big jump signature," said Joe.

"Me too," said Eishtmo. "It's the Eva."

Joe watched the Demon-class destroyer slip out of a jump vortex. "That thing is ugly." Suddenly Joe was thrown forward by a jolt. "What the hell was that?"

"Looks like your subspace drives have malfunctioned," said Eishtmo. "Just hang tough, they'll repair themselves."

"I hope so," Joe throttled up and moved into scanning range of the Eva.

"One of the fighters is getting really close," said Eishtmo.

Joe looked over and hit the afterburners to get farther from the approaching fighter. "Beginning scan."

"You okay out there, kid?"

"I'm fine," Joe lied. It was taking all he had to keep his hand from jerking the control stick off in a random direction from its shaking.

"Where was I, oh yeah," Eishtmo said. "After we managed to wax the Vasudans, I had to talk the Admiral back into the Reliant's hanger bay. He still managed to crash into the side of the bay." Eishtmo chuckled again.

"I got the Eva scanned," said Joe. "Am I done here yet?"

"Just a sec," said Eishtmo. "I'm picking up a large subspace signature."

Joe watched a subspace vortex open up in front of him. "Oh my god," he said. "It's the Lucifer!"

"Holy shit," said Eishtmo. "Looks like you've got a chance to earn brownie points."

Joe closed his eyes. "Do I have too?"

"If you don't, Command will have both our asses."

Joe took a deep breath. "Here I go," he said finally. He activated his afterburners and moved as close as he could to the Lucifer. The scanner began ticking off. "Scanning begun."

"Take it easy kid," said Eishtmo. "They probably just think you're lost or something."

"This scan is taking forever," Joe complained.

"Big ships take a while, and the Lucifer is the biggest."

Joe waited, and watched the scan lines pass the targeting display. Finally the scan completed. "I'm done. I'm heading home," Joe activated his jump drive, but nothing happened. "The drive's still out," he moaned.

"Command doesn't want you to go anyways," said Eishtmo.

"I thought you said this wasn't a party line."

"It isn't, I just told them about the Lucifer," Eishtmo sighed. "They want you to go into the Lucifer's fighter bay."

"Are they crazy?" Joe yelled. "As soon as this drive comes back online, I am out of here!"

"Sorry kid, that's an order," said Eishtmo. "You don't have a choice."

Joe looked at the Lucifer, studding its black and red body. "Alright, but if I die, I'll kill you."

"Fair enough," said Eishtmo.

Joe pulled around to the side of the Lucifer, his targeting display locked on the ships' fighter bay. He slowly came around and moved toward it. His fighter stopped cold, a barrier keeping him out of the bay. "I can't get in." Suddenly a group of fighters leapt out of the fighter bay, guns blazing. "Shit!" Joe kicked up the afterburners and shot away from the Lucifer.

"What's going on?" yelled Eishtmo.

"I've been made!" Joe yelled. He pulled his fighter away from the Lucifer as fast as he could. After a few seconds, he was out of the Lucifer's weapon range. Joe retargeted the nearest Shivan fighter. "Prepare to die!" he yelled.

Joe began pounding on the Manticore with his guns. The Shivan pulled away from him, unfortunately, the Shivan's friends didn't. Joe's fighter was quickly pounced on, his shield dying

with every hit. Suddenly, a flashing message lit up.

“Your jump drives are back online, get the hell out of there!” Eishtmo yelled.

“Easier done than said,” Joe responded, hitting the jump button.