

Freespace: The Great War

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Chapter 1 Learning the Basics

Joe glanced up at the mission clock. Fifteen minutes left until docking. He shifted his weight in the uncomfortable jump seat. There were no windows in the Elysium transport, no way to tell where they were, or if they were even moving. He looked at the other three people in the small transport, crammed in with the containers of supplies stuffed into the back. He had remember seeing all but one of the passengers at the Saturn Pilot Training Center, but who they were he didn't know.

Directly across from him was a young woman, maybe about 20. She was attractive, but her clean-cut uniform was a turn off. Her boots had a mirror shine. Each crease in her dress uniform was straight and crisp. The various tags and rank emblems were perfectly centered. Her hair was straight and clean as was her teeth. At least the teeth might have been straight if she smiled more so Joe could see them. She remind him of the officer brats he had met during boot camp, the kind that would do anything to please their superiors, especially their parents. Of course, she might not be one of those. He could only hope.

Siting next to her was her complete opposite. This man was the image of sloppiness. His uniform was unkept, his hair was tangled and greasy. When they had first entered the transport, there had been a distinct smell about him. Fortunately the ship came equipped with an odor eliminator. When Joe had asked rhetorically why the ship had one, the pilot said it was to cover up the smell of the corpses. The entire trip had been in silence since then.

Next to Joe was the most mysterious person on board. He was older, at least ten years older than everyone else, maybe more, yet he was only an Ensign. How he had skipped the draft to such an old age, Joe wasn't sure. Maybe he had been in the Galactic Guard or something. He was wearing a flight suit, a contrast to the dress uniforms of the others. He was reading some strange book with the corners cut off. The lettering was unfamiliar, maybe it was modern Chinese or something. What was most peculiar about him was the fact that he had no bags with him. Joe and the others had a duffel bag with most of their essentials in them, with more bags in the back, but this man had none, save a small carry-on pack.

The cockpit door slid open. "Two minutes until docking," the pilot said. "If you want to see your new home, come on up here."

Joe and two of the others unbuckled their belts and floated through the door into the cockpit. Joe stalled and looked back at the strange man reading the book. "You coming?" he asked.

The man didn't even look up. "I've seen it before." Joe shrugged and continued on into the cockpit.

"There she is," said the pilot. "The GTD Galatea, the most modern Orion in the fleet." Joe examined the ship with wide eyes. The Galatea was the most beautiful ship he had ever seen, even more beautiful than the GTD Gaia he had toured back in Sol. His eyes were drawn toward the bright light of Betelgeuse, the star at the center of the system the Galatea had been fighting the Vasudans for. Damn Zods. "Alright everybody, go get buckled in. Command will have a hissy fit if they knew I let you guys up here," the pilot said with a laugh.

Joe buckled himself back in and listened. There was a slow whirr echoed through the ship as it passed through the dock force field. Then a sudden clang as the grappling hook took hold of the

ship and pulled it into hanger bay. A final clang indicated that the ship had taken its place on the flight deck. With a hiss the side door of the transport opened and a Lieutenant poked his head inside.

“Fall in,” he yelled. The group climbed out and lined up in front of the ship. “I’m Lieutenant John Harbison of the 34th Poker Faces. I will be getting you settled in for your stay aboard the Galatea. When I call your name you will say ‘Present sir.’ Is that clear?” Harbison looked for an objection then continued. “Alright then. Ensign Joseph Smith.”

“Present, sir,” Joe said.

“Ensign Randal Kormak.”

“Present, sir,” the less than well kept man said.

“Ensign Lucille Shima.”

“Present, sir,” the young woman responded.

Harbison looked down at his list and stalled. He looked up at the older man.

“Ensign Quinn Lazerus?” he said with some amount of disbelief.

Lazerus took a deep, mournful breath. “Present, sir.”

“The Quinn Lazerus?” Harbison asked.

“The one and only, sir,” Lazerus responded.

Lt. Harbison walked over to Ensign Lazerus, and stuck out his hand. “It is an honor to meet you,” he said. Lazerus shook the man’s hand, then gave a sharp salute which the Lieutenant responded in kind. Harbison turned to the others. “The Admiral would like to meet all of you. Follow me.”

The group made its way through the long twisting corridors of the Galatea. After a short time they arrived at the ships’ central tram system. A small eight man car rolled up. “Get in,” Harbison said and one by one they did. Kormak and Shima settled into the back most seat, with Joe in the next seat toward the front. Joe shifted over to give Lazerus room, but instead of filling the back seats first, Lazerus sat down in the front seat. Harbison said nothing as he sat next to the mysterious Ensign. The car began to move, and was soon zooming along the shaft. Joe watched the various stations of the ship roll by, but he continued to refocus on Lazerus. Joe remembered when he had mistakenly sat in the front of a tram during his tour of the Gaia. That Lieutenant had chewed him up and spit him out for that infraction. It was part of the Regs, lower ranking personal were to fill the back of a tram first. But Harbison had said nothing when Lazerus had sat up front. Joe was about to contemplate this fact when the tram slowed and came to a stop.

“Everybody out,” Harbison ordered. They followed Harbison through another series of passages and soon reached the command deck. A few chairs sat in front of the office marked ‘Admiral Marcus Wolfe: Commanding Officer.’ “Have a seat, I’ll tell the Admiral you’re here.” Harbison gently knocked on the door. A voice behind the door gave him permission, and the Lieutenant entered, closing the door behind him.

Kormak leaned toward Joe. “I wonder why the Admiral wants to see us,” he said.

“Morale booster,” Lazerus said flatly. “He wants every member of the crew to think he knows them by name.” He said it with some amount of sarcasm, the rest with experience.

“Come on in,” Harbison said. The four of them filed into Admiral Wolfe’s office. The room was small, and cramped, both amplified by the wood-like paneling hung on the walls. The low ceiling showed the exposed pipes and wires that kept the great ship going. Wolfe sat behind an oak

like desk, a friendly smile stretched across his face.

“Welcome aboard the Galatea,” the Admiral stood up and saluted, and the group responded as trained. “I’m glad to see so many young people ready to join the cause. Saturn gave you three the highest of complements and I hope they are right.”

Joe casually looked across the line, recounting how many of them there were. Yes, there was four, but why had the Admiral said three?

“The four of you where going to be split among the 34th Poker Faces, the 21st Hell Bats, and the 6th Freespacers, however an incident two days ago has changed that.” There was regret in his voice. “All of you will be assigned to the Freespacers as Alpha wing. The Freespacers have a long history and I’m sure you will live up to it.” The Admiral examined the expression on each of the new pilots faces. “Lt. Harbison will take you to your quarters and get you adjusted. There is a Command Briefing at 0700, I expect you all to be there. Dismissed.” He gave another salute, and the group slowly moved out of the office and into the hall. “Ensign Lazerus,” the Admiral called after them. “I would like to see you in private.”

“Yes sir,” Lazerus said. Joe watched Lazerus reenter Admiral Wolfe’s office and the door close behind him.

“I wonder why the Admiral wants to see him,” said Kormak. Joe shrugged.

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The room was small, far smaller than Joe imagined. The beds were arranged as a pair of bunk beds on either side of the back half of the room with a desk and a single computer terminal next to door in the front. A large dresser took up the other side of the front of the room with a closet tucked in to the right of the door. It was almost the same as the quarters at Saturn, but those had been for two people, this one had to hold four. Shima wasn’t anywhere near happy with the arrangement and expressed her feelings to Harbison.

“Well, I’m sorry Ensign,” Harbison said. “Room is tight, even on a big ship like this one. Just feel lucky you’re not on a Fenris or a Leviathan, they have to share bunks,” he said with a snicker. He turned to Joe and Kormak. “If any of you have any complaints or concerns, take it up with your Squadron Commander. By the way there’s a Freespacer squadron meeting at 2030 in the rec room, deck 14, corridor 8. Make sure you are all there.” Harbison then left.

Shima threw down her bags. “Well this is just great.”

“Oh come on,” said Joe. “Like the Lieutenant said, it could be worse.”

Shima stared into space for a moment. “I suppose. . .”

“Which bunk you want, Sugar?” Kormak asked.

“Excuse me?” Shima glared at him in disgust.

“You want the top bunk or bottom,” said Kormak without skipping a beat. “I prefer the bottom one, but I’ll let you chose.”

Shima huffed in disbelief. “There is no way I am going to sleep in the same bunk with you.”

Joe realized that a fight was eminent and quickly stepped in. “How about if Kormak and I share a bunk, then you and Lazerus can work some thing out?”

Shima nodded and threw her bag on the bottom of the right bunk and sat down.

“You can call me Randy,” Kormak said as he stuck out his hand. “That last name shit never went well with me.”

Joe grabbed and shook Randy’s hand. “Joe,” he said simply.

Randy turned to Shima. “So do we just call you Shima or by your real name?”

“Lucy,” she said after a moment.

“Nice to meet you, Lucy,” Joe said as he stuck out his hand. She turned toward the wall without responding. “Okay.” Joe pulled his hand back.

“Well this is all fine and dandy,” Randy said. “Anyone know where the bathrooms are, I gotta piss like a racehorse.”

“Why don’t you take a shower at the same time?” Lucy muttered.

“Excuse me?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“Why I aughta. . .” Joe grabbed Randy as he moved toward Lucy.

“If this is the group I’m gonna have to live with, they can just shoot me now,” a voice came from the door. It was Lazerus, his arms folded across his chest as he leaned against the door frame. He walked into the quarters and tossed his small bag onto the top bunk above Lucy. “With quarters like these you either learn to get along, or wait until one of you is shot down.” Lazerus stood for a moment, examining the small group. “The bathrooms are down the hall, third door on the right.” He made a quick sniff of the air. “And I have to agree with her, you do need a shower.”

“Fuck.” muttered Randy as he headed out.

“We have about two hours before the Squadron meeting,” Lazerus said. “I’m going to take a nap. You can either go exploring or stay here and be real quite, it doesn’t matter to me.” With that he hopped up onto the bed, slid under the covers and went to sleep. Joe looked at Lucy, shrugged, and left.

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Joe was still playing the arcade machine when Lucy entered. There was at least another fifteen minutes until the meeting was suppose to start, but some of the squad members were already there watching the newest video release. Lucy slumped into one of the padded chairs, crossed her arms, and stared across the room. Randy wandered in and made a bee-line for the chair next to Lucy.

“Hey, how’s it goin’” he said as he sat down. Lucy glared at him, then turned away. “Okey

doeky,” he said as he got up and wandered over to Joe. “She’s an Ice Princess, isn’t she.”

“Eh,” muttered Joe. He was too busy concentrating on the game to pay attention to Randy. Randy turned toward the door and watched as another man entered. The man had a Captain’s insignia on his uniform and a squad patch on his left shoulder sleeve.

“I bet he’s the C.O.” Randy said.

“Eh,” Joe responded without looking up.

“Do you say anything else besides Eh?” Randy asked.

“Eh,” Joe said followed with a small laugh.

Suddenly a loud whoop bellowed through the rec room. “The Dogs are back!” someone yelled.

Randy turned and watched a group of four pilots stroll into the room. “I wonder who they think they are?” he asked Joe.

“Dogs,” said Joe as he tried to ignore the rowdy group.

“The Dogs of Delta have returned,” said the man in the lead of the group. “On a moments notice, we managed to save a bunch of scared rookies from Vasudan boogey men.” The other three gave a howl. “Okay people, who are the greatest reinforcements in the galaxy?”

“The Dogs of Delta!” the other three shouted together.

“Who could beat the whole fucking Vasudan navy by themselves?”

“The Dogs of Delta!”

“And who,” he stopped for a moment. He stared at Joe, who was still playing the arcade machine. “And who is this?” He and the other Dogs gathered around Joe. “So who are you?”

“Ensign Joe Smith,” Joe said off-handily.

“He’s one of the new pilots for Alpha wing, Wolf,” the captain stated.

Wolf looked evilly at Joe. “Goody, fresh meat.” He looked Joe over. “I know what you are.”

Joe smacked the controller panel as his last life was expended. He turned to Wolf. “And what might that be,” he said. Anger at losing the game spread over onto Wolf’s last comment.

“You’re one of those video game players,” Wolf said.

“Say what?”

Wolf gave a short laugh. “You’re one of those kids who sit at home and play flight simulators and think you’re hot shit. So you join the fleet and become a pilot so you can show off all your ‘skills.’” The rest of the group laughed as Wolf did the little quote fingers as he said skills. “You’re just a game player, nothing more,” Wolf thought for a moment. “Hey Bull!”

“Yeah,” said the captain.

“Mind if I give this pretender his callsign?”

“You could give them all their callsigns for all I care,” Bull responded.

“My callsign?” Joe asked shyly.

“Part of Freespacer tradition,” one of the Dogs said. “The senior members of the squadron

get to give the new members their callsigns until the new members earn a better one.”

“Glad to see that you keep up, Hound,” said Wolf. He then raised his hands up as if he were casting a spell on Joe. “I, Commander Steven “Wolf” Dobbs, place the callsign of,” Wolf thought a moment, “Of ‘The Player’ upon this young Ensign. All hail The Player.” All of the Dogs gave a howl and began slapping him on the back. “Who’s next?” Wolf cried and the group moved away from Joe and toward Randy.

“The Player?” Joe asked no one in particular.

“Don’t worry about it,” Bull put his hand on Joe’s shoulder. “All new pilots get rather humiliating callsigns. When you’ve earned a new one, you’ll get one.” Bull smiled. “Hell, one day you may give the same name to some young hot shot.”

Joe looked at Bull, and then at the clusters on his shoulders. “Uh, sir!” he said quickly as he saluted the captain. “I didn’t know. . .”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Bull. “We usually don’t worry about rank around here, unless the brass pays us a visit, of course.” Joe smiled just as a ear splitting scream ringed out.

“Oh my God,” yelled the female member of Delta. “Kill it, kill it, kill it!” With that, the rest of the Dogs began stomping around. Joe moved toward the group to see what was going on. Before Joe got there, Randy had managed to grab whatever it was the Dogs were trying to kill.

“Now that’s no way to treat your fellow creatures,” Randy said. He opened his hand and a cockroach crawled up onto the tip of his finger. “Now, how did you get aboard,” he said to the bug.

“That is so gross,” said the woman as she backed away from Randy, never taking her eyes off the insect.

“It’s not that bad, Fox,” Wolf said. “Though it is kind of unsanitary.”

Randy smiled evilly. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” Randy then pushed his finger, with the roach still posed on it, into his mouth. Everyone recoiled in horror as Randy removed his finger and began chewing on the insect.

“Ewwww,” said Fox as she tried to shield her eyes.

“Tasty roach,” Randy said between bites. “You guys must have some damn good food on board.”

“This is too much,” muttered Hound. “We should call you Roach Eater, or something.”

Randy swallowed the bug. “How about just Roach?” he said.

The rest of the Dogs agreed and Hound began the ritual Wolf had performed on Joe. “I, Lieutenant Commander Henry “Hound” Harris, place the callsign of ‘Roach’ upon this Ensign.” The Dogs followed this with a loud howl. Roach joined in, proud of his new name.

“I wish I had a say in my callsign,” Joe muttered.

“Looky over there, a babe,” said the last member of the Dogs said as he stared at Lucy.

“Babe?” Lucy said, insulted by the very concept. “Damn barbarian.”

“Coyote,” Bull called. “Don’t get to fresh with her. Her mom will make your life a living hell.”

Coyote ignored Bull and squeezed up against Lucy. “So, why is a babe like you doing in a place like this,” he said.

“Preparing to break your arm if you don’t get away from me,” Lucy said with disgust.

“Ah, come on babe, give Coyote a little kiss,” Coyote said as he pushed himself closer to Lucy.

“Get away from me,” she shouted

“Lay off already,” a voice rang out. Everyone turned to the source. It was Lazerus. “You know there are rules about sexual harassment.”

“Who do you think you are, coming in here and telling me what to do?” Coyote walked right up to Lazerus and stared into his eyes. The rest of the group gathered around the two.

“Me?” Lazerus said. “Oh, I’m just another lowly Ensign here for a squadron meeting.”

“Is that a fact,” Coyote continued to glare at him. “Then what’s your name, Ensign?”

Lazerus smiled slightly. “Quinn Lazerus.”

Just like Harbison, the whole group stood there in absolute silence, even Coyote, who backed away. “The Eishtmo?” he asked. Lazerus nodded.

Bull finally broke the silence. “Alright people, lets get to it.” He made his way over to the video display. Everyone gathered around, sitting in the chairs and coaches or standing up when there was no longer any room.

“Alright, I’m glad to see you all managed to drag your lazy asses out of bed to be here,” Bull started. “You can all welcome our new pilots to the Freespace. They will make up a new Alpha wing, so there will be some reassignments. Plato, you will join Beta and Bravo will move to Gamma. The rest of you will stay with your current wings. Okay, now let me introduce you to the new Alpha wing.” He looked down at his checklist. “First there is Ensign Randal Kormak.”

“Right here, sir,” Roach said.

“This is Roach everybody,” Hound announced, proud of the name he had bestowed. Everyone greeted Roach.

“Alright, next is,” Bull examined the next name. “Well, we’ll skip that one for a moment. Ensign Lucy Shima.”

“Yes sir,” Lucy said.

“Did anybody give you a callsign yet?” Bull asked.

“Let’s call her Babe,” Coyote called.

“What!?” Lucy glared at Coyote.

“Babe it is,” said Bull

“Wait a goddamn second,” Lucy protested.

“Like I was telling him earlier,” Bull pointed at Joe. “We all get stuck with unflattering callsigns early on, you’ll just have to wait until you earn a better one. Speaking of which, Ensign Joe Smith.” He stared at Joe. “Why don’t you stand up Player?”

Joe stood up, and the chair he was sitting in was quickly taken by another pilot. “Hey!” Joe said.

“You’ve got to be quick around here,” said the pilot, and everyone else began to laugh. Joe rolled his eyes.

“Why don’t you just have a seat on the floor, Player,” Bull said with a chuckle. “And last, but certainly not least, may I present,” Bull stretched his hand out toward Lazerus. “The Eishtmo.”

Lazerus, the Eishtmo, stood up with the hooting and hollering of the other pilots. He waved humbly and sat back down. Joe, Roach, and Lucy all watched, with some bewilderment, as this one man managed to calm the entire crowd with two words. “That’s enough,” Eishtmo said.

“For those of you who don’t know,” Bull began after the group had quieted. “Eishtmo is the best damn pilot ever to live. Alpha, you’re a bunch of lucky bastards.”

“Humph,” Lucy snorted.

“Alright,” Bull looked back at his clipboard. “There will be a Command Briefing at 0700, you’ll get your flight assignments then.” He then looked up. “And finally, in honor of having such a well respected pilot on board, the Admiral has authorized me to open the bar.” A cheer rose up. “Remember, only three drinks per person. That is all.”

The last thing Bull said was ignored since most everybody had already gathered around the bar on the far side of the rec room. Lucy got up and walked out of the room, apparently back to their quarters. Eishtmo had also vanished, while Roach was already with the Dogs ordering his first drink. Joe shook his head and turned to follow Lucy.

“Don’t you want a drink, Player?” Bull said.

“Can’t drink,” Joe said. “I’m only seventeen.”

Bull shook his head. “They’re drafting ‘em younger and younger these days.”

“Actually,” Joe said. “I enlisted.”

“Well, we all make mistakes,” Bull said. “Now go get some sleep, you’re gonna need it.”