

Freespace: The Great War

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Chapter 3 The Arrival

“The 34th Poker Faces and 242nd Suicide Kings successfully apprehended Lt. McCarthy and reclaimed the stolen Avenger attack cannon prototype,” said the ships reporter. The small vid-screens above each table in the cafeteria showed a picture of McCarthy. “McCarthy will be tried on charges of treason. His Vasudan contact was also captured and is currently being interrogated.”

“I wonder what would cause someone to betray us like that?” said Lucy as she sat down. The Dogs were seated at the other side of the table.

“Who knows?” said Joe. He stuck his fork into the meat on the tray. “Maybe it was the food,” he said with a sigh.

Wolf laughed. “I wouldn’t be surprised.” The rest of the Dogs hollered with laughter.

Joe ate quietly, but a question he had since he had first arrived burned him. Finally he had to ask it. “Wolf.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Who the hell is Eishtmo?” The Dogs dropped into silence. “Uh, I mean, where does he come from, why is he the way he is?” Joe desperately grasped for a question that would end the silence.

“You don’t know about the Eishtmo,” Wolf said with disbelief. Joe shook his head. “Well, let me tell you.” He put his fork down and began to narrate the story of the Eishtmo.

“First of all, he is the best pilot to live. He has flown for the Alliance since the war began, and has the medals and kills to prove it. For ten years he gleefully fraged Zods by the hundreds, literally. During that time, a Zod ace managed to shake him and just as the Zod was set to leave, it sent a message to him calling him ‘The Eishtmo.’ Well, that’s what the translator said. It turns out Eishtmo means either Great Warrior or Great Peace Maker, depending on its use. Ever since then, he has carried the callsign of the Eishtmo.” Wolf took a sip of his drink. “Anyways, about four years ago, his kill rates dropped like a stone. He practically stopped killing. Instead, he would fly into a battle area, open a Vasudan wing channel and announce he was there, then every Zod in the area would split, usually. Command got suspicious and last year arrested him for treason.”

“Treason?” Joe said with shock.

“Yeah, but they never convicted him. Still, for some reason they stripped him of his rank and had him shipped here, don’t really know why.”

“Wow,” said Joe. He then remembered the book Eishtmo had been reading and realized that it must have been in Vasudan. “I would have never guessed.”

Just then Hound dropped a piece of meat onto the floor. He picked it up and put it on the napkin next to him.

“You gonna eat that?” asked Roach.

“Ewww!” said Fox.

“That is really gross, Roach,” said Joe with a chuckle as Roach proceeded to eat the meat.

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“Command has decided that the GTSC Plato will carry the blueprints for the Avenger Attack Cannon to the Ribos system where production will begin,” said Bull.

Joe shifted in his seat. Briefing room F was the smallest of the six briefing rooms. It also had the most uncomfortable seats.

“Intel has determined that only one Vasudan Cruiser, the Taurus, remains in the system.” The screen behind Bull showed a icon representing the Vasudan Cruiser and the Plato. “If the Vasduans decide to try something, the Taurus will most likely be involved.”

“How about fighters?” asked Coyote.

“There should be only two strike squads,” said Bull. He then returned to the briefing. “Alpha, you will take point in front of the Plato, Delta will hang behind. If something should happen, the Plato has been equipped with an escape pod that will take the blueprints to Ribos. Your mission is to protect the blueprints at all costs. Now get going.”

* * *

“I got Aries four!” Joe yelled as he dove onto the Osiris bomber. The Zod’s secondary turret wildly shot at Joe’s Apollo. The Vasudan made a sharp turn to the right, then left, desperately trying to avoid Joe, but to no avail. A bright yellow fireball signaled the bombers destruction.

“Looks like the last of them,” said Wolf.

“I hope so,” said Lucy.

Coyote piped up. “This ain’t nothin’ Babe, you should have been at the battle of Antares two. Now that was a furball.”

“Ain’t?” Joe said aloud. “What does ain’t mean?”

Eishtmo rolled his eyes. “Kids,” he said with a sigh.

“More bogeys coming in,” said Fox. “Crap, it’s the Taurus.”

Wolf switched to a command channel. “Command, this is Delta one, the PVC Taurus has entered the area, requesting backup.”

“What the hell are those?” said Roach.

Joe looked at his radar. Four purple dots blinked on and off as the radar lost and required the targets. “I can’t get a lock on them, whatever they are,” he said.

“I think they’re attacking the Taurus,” said Hound.

“Command, did you copy that?” Eishtmo asked, with a hint of worry in his voice.

“We are monitoring the situation,” Command responded. “All fighters, hold your position.”

Joe cycled through targets to the Taurus. The hull strength of the Taurus was falling, fast. In a few moments, it hit zero and the Taurus exploded with a dramatic light show.

“Holy shit, they wasted the Taurus!” Coyote yelled.

“Whoever they are, I want to shake their hands,” said Fox.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Lucy.

“You’re too young to be having bad feelings,” said Eishtmo. “That’s my job.”

Joe scanned the sky with quick, jerking motions. As he looked to port, he saw the blue glimmer of a subspace vortex. A black ship with red, glowing lines emerged from the vortex. As the vortex closed, the ship all but disappeared into the blackness of space. Joe followed it with his eyes as it turned toward him and immediately began firing. "Damn it!" Joe dove out of the black ship's way.

"All fighters, defend the Plato!" Wolf yelled. Joe didn't acknowledge the order and pulled up behind the first black ship.

"I can't get a lock on any of them," yelled Fox.

"It's all your fault, Fox," Roach called.

"My fault!"

"You were the one who wanted to shake hands."

Joe began firing away with his lasers. The enemy pilot was good, dodging most of the blasts. What few hit dissipated in a white flash, never hitting the ship. "The hell . . ." said Joe when a lock warning flashed. Joe pulled up and around, hoping to get behind his attacker. As he pulled up, the launch warning began flashing. He kicked in his afterburners and dropped a countermeasure. The missile took the bait and the launch warning vanished.

"Can any of you get a visual?" Command said with a desperate plea.

"Yeah, I got one," said Roach. "These ships are butt ugly."

Joe skimmed across the hull of the Plato, chasing another black ship, when an explosion came from the engine area of the Faustus science vessel.

"This is the Plato, our engines have been knocked out."

Joe glimpsed Wolf's fighter pulled around and fire on his attacker who dove away to dodge the shots. "Plato, launch your escape pod now, before it's too late," Wolf yelled.

"Copy that," said the Plato.

"Alpha wing, protect that escape pod, we'll keep the bogeys busy," Wolf tore around the Plato's hull trying to escape yet another attacker.

"Roger that," said Joe. "Let's go Alpha." Alpha wings four Apollo's pulled into formation around the escape pod as it made its way toward the green outline of the jump node.

"I don't think we're even hurting these things," Hound yelled.

"The MX-50's are worthless, that's for sure," said Coyote as he dove away from the alien attacker.

"I'm going back to help them," said Eishtmo.

"Our orders are to stay with the pod," Joe yelled.

"Not now kid," Eishtmo responded. "I know what I'm doing." Eishtmo's Apollo dropped out of formation and charged back into the furball.

"Command, we're taking heavy damage," yelled the Plato's communications officer. "Requesting immediate assistance. . . AHHHHHHHHHH. . ." Joe turned and watched the Plato explode as the ship's reactor hit critical. The Dogs and Eishtmo managed to get clear seconds before she went up, and so did the black fighters.

"Oh my god," said Fox.

“This is the escape pod, we are out of here.”

Joe watched as the pod jumped inside the subspace node. He then turned to take on the new enemy.

“All fighters, return to base,” Command said.

“You heard the man,” said Wolf. “Let’s go home.”

Joe looked at the black fighters again as he activated his jump drives.

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“Looks like the whole fucking crew showed up for this one,” said Coyote.

The Freespaceers took their seats in the front row of Briefing Room A. Joe turned and looked at the huge crowd. It reminded him of the all school assemblies back at Saturn.

“You think this is about those unknowns?” Roach asked.

“Probably,” said Lucy. “If not, I wanna go home.”

Eishtmo chuckled. “Don’t we all.”

“Admiral on deck!” called the XO. Everyone stood at attention as Admiral Wolfe stepped up to the podium up front.

“As you were,” the Admiral said. “All ship command briefing for January 18, 2335 commences now. Yesterday, during an escort mission, Alpha and Delta wings of the 6th Freespaceers encountered several unknown hostiles. Command has confirmed that these ships are neither Terran nor Vasudan in origin. As such, command has declared these to be a new sentient species and has dubbed them ‘Shivans’ until contact can be established.”

“Like that’s gonna happen,” whispered Roach. Lucy elbowed him. “What I do?”

“Shut up.”

“The Shivans have inflicted heavy casualties to both Terran and Vasudan forces in Beta Cygni and Vega, and appear to making a rapid push into other key systems along the Terran-Vasudan front.” Admiral Wolfe paused for a moment and swallowed. “All contact has been lost with our forces in Ikeya and Ross 128.” The crew began muttering with each other.

“Quite down people,” the XO ordered. The crowd responded.

“The Vasudan government has contacted the GTA and proposed a cease-fire. Considering reports of losses to both sides, this shouldn’t be a surprise. Command has yet to respond. However, command has ordered all operations against the Vasudans suspended and our focus shifted to the Shivans. As such, any Shivan vessel encountered is to be considered a greater threat and any Vasudan vessel.”

“The war’s over,” muttered Eishtmo.

“And a new one’s begun,” Joe whispered darkly.

Behind the Admiral a picture of a Shivan fighter appeared. The words ‘SF Scorpion’ were in the upper right hand corner. “Shivan technology is far and above both Terran and Vasudan technology. They possess a electromagnetic shielding system that makes them nearly impervious to our ML-16 Lasers. The Avenger cannon is now being modified to be more effective against the shielding, but it will be some time before we have an effective weapon to use against them. Also, due to lack of knowledge of Shivan electronic systems, we cannot target, or track with any certainty, Shivan vessels. Plans are

underway to remedy this situation.

“Until then, the Galatea will move to Beta Cygni to monitor Shivan activity. All crew members are to be on high alert, all pilots ready to scramble at a moments notice. The Shivans are, right now, the most dangerous foe we have ever faced. Dismissed.” Admiral Wolfe left the briefing room followed by the bulk of the crew.

“Alpha wing!” yelled Bull. “Stay here, you have a mission.”

Joe sat back down. After a few minutes, the crowd had dissipated and the room emptied.

“Two things,” said Bull. “First of all, your wing is need for a special ops mission, so you will be temporally re-assigned to the GTD Bastion.”

“The Bastion?” said Lucy.

“Do you have a problem with that Ensign,” Bull said, indignantly.

“No sir,” said Lucy, a smile working its way onto her lips.

“Good.” Bull turned to the screen. An icon of a jump node surrounded by asteroid icons appeared. “Secondly, with the reassignment of the Galatea, it has become necessary to take a risk. The Antares-Beta Cygni jump node lies at the heart of an asteroid field. Normally, we would bypass this node, but there isn’t time.” Bull looked at the pilots. “We need a couple of volunteers to help pave the way for the Galatea. Who’s up for it?”

“I’m sorry,” said Eishtmo. “I hate busting rocks. I’d rather save myself for the Shivans.”

“I’ll do it,” said Lucy. “But only if Player does it too.”

“What about me?” said Roach.

“If you fly, I might just shoot you down myself.”

Bull frowned at that. “Well Player, it looks like you don’t have much of a choice.”

Joe looked at his two wingmates. “Sure, what the hell.”

Bull smiled. “Okay then, go start packing. Eishtmo and Roach will ride a transport with your baggage, Babe, you and Player will help bust rocks. Now get going, we’re jumping to the node in one hour. You’ll be over on the Bastion for about a week, so pack accordingly.”

* * *

Joe kicked up his afterburner and charged the next asteroid, pounding it with laser fire. Within moments the rock split and exploded. “Nice shot,” said Lucy.

“They’re just rocks,” said Joe. “Just a little dumber than a drone.” Joe swung his Valkyrie around and laced the next asteroid.

“Just watch it, pilot,” Command said. “Even a drone can down an ace occasionally.”

The two fighters cut through the rocks, clearing a path for the Galatea to reach the distant node. Neither noticed the subspace vortexes of two black fighters open up.

“Alpha,” Command’s voice boomed. “We have detected two enemy fighters coming in fast, intercept them.”

“Copy that,” said Joe. He spun his fighter around, toward the blinking red blip on the radar and charged ahead. As he closed in, a white trail of light shot away from one of the black and red ships.

“That looks like a space bomb!” Lucy said with alarm.

“Alpha, don’t let those bombs hit the Galatea!” Command almost screamed the order.

“I’m on it,” said Joe. He let loose a barrage of fire at the bomb. A blue shock wave of the destroyed bomb shook Joe’s fighter. Joe grabbed the controls and pulled around to face the bombs launcher. “I got this one, you get the other one.”

“Not a problem,” said Lucy. Her fighter dove down onto the other bomber firing with all her might. The bomber shrugged off her shots with flashes of white.

Joe watched Lucy’s attack, then turned back to his target. Joe’s shots did the same as Lucy’s. Out of frustrations, Joe fired off several of Furies at the bomber. The first three hit with a flash, but the fourth one hit the bomber’s hull, startling it. “I think I hit him,” Joe said with disbelief.

“Say again, Alpha one?” said Command.

“Hang on a second,” said Joe. He whipped around an asteroid and began pounding on the Shivan bomber with Fury after Fury. “Come on you son of a bitch,” he said angrily. Suddenly, the bomber exploded in a fireball of light. “I got him!” he screamed.

“Alpha one,” Command said. “Did you say you downed one?”

“That’s an affirmative command, these bastards are killable,” Joe pulled the stick and came in line with the second bomber.

“Hot damn!” said Lucy. “How’d you do it?”

“Use your Furies, lots of Furies!” Joe was beyond excited, so excited he almost hit another asteroid.

“Great work, we’ll forward this to HQ,” Command responded, there was a hint of excitement in his voice. In the background a war whoop could be heard echoing through the bridge. “We’ll congratulate you when you get back, we’re jumping out now.”

As the Galatea jumped out, so did the remaining Shivan bomber, evading several Lucy’s Furies. “I almost had him,” yelled Lucy.

Joe was smiling so much he could barely speak. “You’ll get him next time. Let’s head for the Bastion.” And the two fighters slipped into subspace.