

Freespace: The Great War

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Chapter 6: Bad News Shivans

"I just went to bed," said Roach. "The Admiral better have a damn good reason for waking me up this early, or I'll kill him."

"And then they'll execute you," said Lucy.

"At least I could sleep," Roach whined.

"Ten Hut," yelled Bull. All the pilots stood at sharp attention as Admiral Wolfe walked in.

"Sorry to wake you up people, but some discouraging news from Terran Command. At 0300 this morning, after the Taranis was towed to Tombaugh station, the Shivan staged a major ambush." Behind the Admiral a grainy image of a strange, obviously Shivan, ship appeared. "There isn't a lot of confirmation from the footage yet, but it's clear that a destroyer of massive proportions jumped in and wasted Tombaugh, the GTD Reliant, and all of their defenses."

Joe turned to Eishtmo just in time to see his jaw drop to the floor.

"Were there any survivors from the Reliant, sir?" he asked. His hand, as it raised up, trembled.

Admiral Wolfe looked at him and then his data pad. "One, an Ensign Geoffery Teapul. It was because of him, we have the information we do. I'm sorry Quinn." A picture of the strange ship appeared with the words 'SD Lucifer' in the corner. "We have designated the new destroyer 'Lucifer.' Our forces engaged the Lucifer but were wiped out quickly. Footage suggest that the Lucifer is using some kind of shielding system that is impervious to all of our attacks. If this is true, it is only a matter of time before the Shivans wipe out our front-line installations and march through to our home systems."

The crowd of pilots muttered to each other. Admiral Wolfe let it go for a moment then raised his hand to quiet them. "Since all attempts to communicate with the Shivans have ended in violence, it appears unlikely that a diplomatic solution will work." A node map appeared behind the Admiral. "The Shivans now have control of Beta Cygni, Betelgeuse, Ross 128, Ikeya, and Regulus. The Vasudans are now gathering their forces in Vega for a counterstrike while we are preparing to recapture Ribos and Beta Cygni from Antares. Strangely, the Shivans seem to be concentrating on controlling individual nodes instead of planets or gathering natural resources." Wolfe rubbed his eyes and yawned. "We have received a few new weapons to help us including the Flail cannon and Interceptor missile. Your squadron commanders will give you more details. In the meantime, we need to help evacuate the survivors of the Tombaugh attack." The Admiral turned to Bull. "They're all yours Captain." The Admiral left, presumably to get more sleep.

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"Did you see what was left of Ribos?" said Roach.

"I've never seen anything like that before," said Lucy. "It's hard to believe that a single Shivan attack could level it."

"Let's pipe down, people. Some of us aren't in the mood to hear about it." Joe said. He

kicked up his afterburner to shoot ahead of the convoy. “Everybody take a transport, I’ll run point.”

“Copy that,” said Roach.

Joe cycled through the targeting display, getting a reading on each of the eight transports. Eventually he started going through the other fighters. He stopped when he came to Alpha four, Eishtmo’s fighter. He remembered the look on Eishtmo’s face when Wolfe announced the destruction of the Reliant. Joe simply couldn’t think of an adjective to describe the deep hurting in the great pilot’s eyes.

“I’m picking up a jump signature,” said Lucy.

“This is the GTFR Nelson requesting assistance. Shivan forces hit our wing. We have taken severe hull damage.” Joe toggled the target display to show the Nelson and then turned his fighter toward the wounded transport.

“Bogies coming in,” said Lucy. “They’re after the Nelson.”

“I’ll get them,” said Eishtmo in an unusually flat tone. Joe turned in time to see Eishtmo’s Valkyrie shoot past his own fighter.

“Get back here Eish, I’ll do it,” said Joe.

“Let him do it, Terran,” said Beta one. “It is what he wants.”

“AHHHHHHHH!” came a scream from the Nelson, quickly followed by static. In the distance, Joe could see an explosion signaling the end of the freighter.

Joe shook his head. “Roach, inform Command about the Nelson, I’ll go get Eishtmo.”

“Sure thing, Player,” said Roach.

“Why don’t I contact Command?” said Lucy.

“Because you’re suppose to be watching for more Shivans, Babe,” said Joe. He kicked in his afterburners and moved toward Eishtmo, who turned back as the Nelson’s attackers had departed. “Why don’t you join the convoy again, Eish?”

“I don’t need you to baby-sit me, kid,” Eishtmo said.

“Are you alright?” said Joe. “I know you lost a lot of friends on the Reliant, but getting yourself killed isn’t going to help.”

“More Shivans incoming,” said Lucy. Joe watched as Eishtmo’s fighter stopped, did an 90-degree turn, and blasted at full speed toward the Shaitan bombers.

“Protect the transports,” said Eishtmo. “I’ll kill the fuckers.”

“Eish,” started Joe, but he stopped when it was apparent he wasn’t going to stop him. Joe turned his fighter around, and headed over to cover Eishtmo’s transport.

“Aren’t you going after him?” said Lucy.

“If you want to try to stop him, go right ahead,” said Joe.

“Check your six!” yelled Roach.

Suddenly, the missile warning lit up on Joe’s HUD. Joe dove down, kicking up his afterburners and dropping a counter-measure. The missile hit the counter-measure and Joe flipped back around behind his attacker. Joe started firing the new Flail cannon along with his Avenger into the Basilisk fighter. The Shivan dove away, desperately trying to shake Joe. Joe didn’t lose a target

that easily, and within moments had the Basilisk on the ropes.

“Damn, look at Eishtmo go,” said Roach.

“Not at the moment,” said Joe.

“Alpha four is very skilled, for a Terran” said Gamma one.

“What are you guys talking about?” asked Joe as he wasted his target.

“He’s nearly wiped out the all of Indra, and is now going after Arjuna,” said Lucy.

Joe looked over to where Eishtmo was. Only the flashes of laser light and the streaks of missile trails were visible. “Let’s keep on task people,” said Joe. “Eishtmo will call us if he needs us.” Joe turned his fighter back toward the convoy.

“We may need his help,” said Roach.

“What do you mean?” asked Joe.

“Well, it looks like Arjuna doesn’t want to play with Eishtmo anymore!” Roach said with increasing alarm.

Joe look behind him in time to see a pair of Basilisk bearing down on him, guns a blazing. “Shit!” yelled Joe as he dove out of the way of the two Shivans. Joe looped up and behind his former attackers and began hacking away. One of the Shivans pulled away and began to dance with Joe.

“These bastards are good,” said Lucy.

“Too good,” said Beta two.

“Just hold out until. . . damn it!” Joe dropped a countermeasure as a missile warning began flashing. “Until the Pinnacle arrives.” Joe looked behind him only to see his attacker practically on top of him. The missile lock warning began to go off. Joe saw that his shields were virtually gone. He closed his eyes, and hoped for a quick death. Suddenly the warning went off. Joe looked back to see the Basilisk spin out of control and explode.

“Miss me kid,” Eishtmo said joyfully.

“Yeah, where were you?” said Joe as he dumped energy into his shields.

“Getting revenge,” Eishtmo said with a smile. “But I’m back, so let’s kick some ass.”

Joe smiled and turned his fighter back toward another Shivan.

“Team up on them,” said Eishtmo. “They’re good, but they can’t fight two of you at once.”

“I don’t need help,” said Joe as he pounded away at his target. One of his Interceptors locked onto the fighter but before he could launch it, a single Interceptor shot out of nowhere and wasted the Shivan. “Hey, I said I didn’t need help.”

“I was taking orders from a superior,” said Gamma one.

“I’m in charge of this mission,” Joe said angrily.

“But you are not fit to command,” Gamma one said through the cold translator.

“Hey Player,” said Roach. “You and Gamma one are starting to sound like me and Babe.”

“And what is that suppose to mean?” said Lucy.

“Just kill Shivans already,” said Eishtmo. “We’ll worry about who sounds like who later,

okay?”

Joe glared at Gamma one's fighter. "Alright," he said with a sigh. Joe then spun his fighter around and targeted another Shivan.

"These are the right coordinates, where is the PVD Pinnacle?" said Iota one.

"I'd check with Command," said Joe. "But I'm kind of busy at the moment."

"We will check," said Omega two through his translator.

"Remember me!" said Gamma two as a Shivan got the best of him.

Joe tried to stay behind his target, his guns blazing. The Shivan weaved and dodged, and then began pulling a high G turn to escape Joe. Joe let off an Interceptor just as the Basilisk pulled up. The Shivan didn't even know what hit him.

"Impressive, for a Terran," said Beta one.

"The Pinnacle is jumping in," said Lucy.

Joe looked up in time to see the massive vortex of the Pinnacle open. He looked at the dark purple shape of the Typhoon class destroyer in awe. "Wow," he said quietly.

"Sorry we were late," the Vasudan comm officer said. "We were assisting a convoy of freighters that were ambushed by the Hammer of Light."

"More Shivans incoming!" yelled Lucy.

"You may leave now, Terrans," said the Pinnacle.

"We are not all Terrans," Gamma one said. The translator did little to hide the disgust in his voice.

"We'll stick around to help knock out these buggers if its all the same to you," said Joe.

"Very well," said the Pinnacle.

With the destroyers help, the Shivans were quickly cleaned up. Joe took another look at the Pinnacle. "That's the lot," he said.

"Thank you for your assistance," said the Pinnacle. "We can take it from here. Return to base."

"Let's go home," said Joe.

"Your home," said Gamma one. "Not mine."

"Oh, shut up already," said Lucy as the fighters dropped into the subspace vortices.

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"There he is," yelled Roach. "The GTA's newest Lieutenant. How's it going, sir?"

Joe smiled. "Cut it out."

"Well you should be proud," said Lucy. "It took you a month to get promotion. That doesn't happen all the time."

Joe shrugged. "I guess so."

"I think," said Roach. "That all newly promoted pilots should buy a round of drinks for his wingmen."

“Ahem,” Lucy coughed.

“And women,” Roach quickly added.

Joe chuckled. “Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s only a field promotion. Command still has to approve it.”

“So what?” asked Roach. “It’s not like they’re gonna deny you. Besides, I’m a little short this week.”

“A little short what?” Lucy said.

Roach sneered at Lucy. “Watch it Babe.”

“Don’t get started, or I’ll have to pull rank,” Joe said. Lucy and Roach looked at him for a moment. “Just kidding.” The three pilots began to laugh. Joe looked around the rec room as he laughed. Sitting at the bar was Eishtmo, a glass of what Joe took to be a Repellant in his hand. “I’ll be back,” said Joe as he got up from the table. He turned and sat down on the stool next to the Eishtmo.

“Congratulations,” Eishtmo said.

“Thanks,” said Joe. He looked at his wingman for a moment. “How you doing?”

“Better.” Eishtmo took another sip of his drink. “I think I got it all out of my system.”

“You were all real close, eh?”

“Oh yeah,” said Eishtmo. “I served on the Reliant since the day she was commissioned. She was a great ship. Had a great crew.”

“I’m sorry,” Joe said.

“Not your fault, kid, not your fault.”

The two sat there in silence, while the rest of the room maintained its noisy recreation. And then it all stopped. Nearly every sound in the room ceased to be. Joe and Eishtmo looked toward the main entrance and there, stooping to get in, were four of the Vasudan pilots. Everyone watched as the Vasudans sat around one of the empty tables and ordered drinks. Eishtmo looked at the crowd. “It’s okay,” he said. “They’re just here to relax.” The great pilots’ words seemed to calm the crowd, and soon things were, more or less, back to normal.

Joe continued to look at the aliens. “That’s him,” he muttered.

“Um?” Eishtmo turned and looked at the group again.

“That’s Gamma one.”

“Are you sure?” said Eishtmo. “It’s usually kind of hard to tell them apart, even for me.”

Joe stood up. “I’ll be right back.”

“Don’t do anything stupid kid.”

Joe ignored him and walked over to the Vasudan’s table. “Excuse me,” he said to the one on the opposite side of the table.

The Vasudan looked at him. “May I help you?” the translator around his neck said.

“Do you fly Gamma one?” Joe tried to sound courteous, but he knew it wouldn’t last.

“I do.”

Joe looked at him. "I demand you apologize."

The Vasudan gave him a peculiar look. "Apologize, for what?"

"For disobeying orders and disrespecting me."

The Vasudan continued to look at Joe. Then, his mouth opened in a way that Joe interpreted to be a smile. "You are Alpha one, the boy who would be leader."

"Don't call me a boy," Joe said.

"I am sorry, Ensign."

"Look again pal." Joe grabbed his rank insignia and held it away from his uniform. "That's Lieutenant now."

The aliens all began to make a strange, deep throated noise. Gamma one looked at Joe. "Lieutenant or not, you are still not worthy to command."

"Listen you fucking Zod." The Vasudans leaned back at the word. "I don't give a damn whether you believe I'm worthy or not. When I'm put in charge of a mission, you will obey my orders."

"If you have problems with me, you are to see Captain La'roh," Gamma one's translator said flatly.

"I'm bringing it up with you," said Joe. "I demand you apologize."

The Vasudan stared at him. "Begone, Terran, before I am forced to use violence."

"Bring it on you Zod son-of-a-bitch." Joe raised his fist into the air. The other Vasudans stood up and allowed Gamma one to move next to Joe. Joe looked up into the eyes of his opponent.

"Very well Terran," Gamma one said. "I will miss you." The Vasudan stretched back his hand. Joe raised his arms up to stop the oncoming blow. Suddenly Eishtmo stepped between the two.

"That's enough," he said as he stretched his arms out to separate Joe and Gamma one. "Sit down kid."

"Get out of my way," said Joe.

Eishtmo shoved Joe back with his hand. "Damn it, I said sit down!"

Roach and Lucy grabbed Joe and sat him down in at their table. Joe glared at the Vasudan, and the Vasudan glared back. Eishtmo stepped directly between the two and faced Gamma one, stealing the gaze meant for Joe. Eishtmo stood there, and then, without taking his eyes away from the alien, reached into his fight suit pocket and removed a long strand with a two boxes every third along the strand.

"What is that?" said Roach.

"You idiot," said Lucy. "That's a squawk box."

Eishtmo put the translator around his neck, then removed two tiny knobs from each box and placed them in his ears. Then he began speaking to the Vasudan. Eishtmo spoke softly, so softly that Joe could only the sound of the translation. The murmured, throaty sounds of the Vasudan language came through loud and clear, at least clear to the Vasudans. The aliens stood listening to the Eishtmo.

“What’s he saying?” asked Lucy.

“Do I look like I speak Vasudan?” said Roach.

Gamma one said something to Eishtmo. The great pilot looked at him and sighed. Then, in a voice loud enough to be heard by everyone he said “Eishtmo.” All four Vasudans took a step back, their beady eyes were wide with awe, or fear, or perhaps both. Gamma one quietly said something to the other Vasudans. They bobbed their heads and the group left without another word. Eishtmo removed his ‘squawk box’ as he walked over to Joe. “Come with me,” he said bluntly.

“Excuse me,” said Joe.

“Come on,” Eishtmo said as he grabbed Joe by the arm and began dragging him.

“Hey, leggo.” Joe tried to release Eishtmo’s grip, but to no avail.

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Eishtmo practically threw Joe into desk chair of Alpha wings quarters. “What the hell were you trying to do, get yourself killed!” he yelled.

“I could of taken him,” Joe yelled back.

“The hell you could, Ma’ka would have ripped your fucking arms off.”

“Oh, you would know the damn Zods name wouldn’t you?” Joe said sarcastically.

“You would too if you actually paid attention during briefings.”

“The only thing I need to know about a Vasudan is were to aim the gun.”

“Are you crazy? We need the Vasudans to stop the Shivans.”

“And once we do, I’ll be more than happy to start fragging Zods, starting with your friend, Ma’ka or whatever the hell his name his.”

“Why?” Eishtmo practically screamed. “After all this time can’t we forgive the past.”

Joe stood up and looked right into Eishtmo’s face. “When you lose your father and brother to the Vasudans, ask yourself if you can forgive.”

Eishtmo looked at him with an angry look. “Listen you little shit, if you think that I haven’t lost loved ones, then you are sadly mistaken.” Joe watched as a tear began to form in Eishtmo’s eye. “I have lost more friends, friends I loved, then you will ever have.” He began to breath harder, his voice straining to release the words. “It took me a long time to learn to forgive, and I’ll be damned if I let you make the same mistake I did.” His hands began shaking as Eishtmo moved around Joe and fell into the chair. “So don’t presume that I don’t know what its like to lose everyone I love.” Eishtmo grabbed his forehead and looked away from Joe, his breathing rapid.

Joe starred at his friend, a realization slowly coming over him. “Are you okay?”

“I . . . I’m fine, I’m fine.” Eishtmo broke down into tears, crying like a small child. Years of pain and lose poured out in a single moment.

Joe simply watched, unable to decide what to do or say. “I guess all that fighting didn’t get it all out,” he said finally. For several agonizing minutes, the hum of ships systems and Quinn Lazerus’ sobs were the only sounds in the room.

The silence was broken by the sound of the paging signal from the computer terminal. Joe stood between the terminal and Eishtmo and opened the channel. “Yes,” he said.

“Lieutenant,” said the comm officer. “We have a priority one message for Ensign Lazerus, is

he there?"

Joe turned and looked at Eishtmo. The great pilot nodded as he wiped the last bit of water from his face.

"He's here, send it through."

The screen turned to a picture of an older person. "Hey Big D, how's it going?"

Eishtmo's eyes widened at the familiar voice. "Zombie?" he said as he pushed Joe out of the way.

"Geez D, you look like you've seen a ghost."

A smile began to spread across Eishtmo's face. "I think I have," he said with a laugh. "I thought you went down with the Reliant."

"Hell, no," said Zombie. "I was over on Tombaugh when the attack began. Managed to get off just in time, too."

"God damn, it's good to see you," Eishtmo said, his smile wanted to squeeze more tears from his eyes, but couldn't. "Oh, wait. I want to introduce you to somebody, come here kid." Joe had moved to the back half of the room and now, with his wingmates urging, moved into the viewers view. "This is Lieutenant Joe Smith. Joe, meet Admiral Richard Halkins, an old wingmate of mine."

"Sir," Joe said as he saluted.

"Cut that out," said Admiral Halkins. "Hey, I remember you. You were the first one to kill a Shivan. I didn't know you were flying with D."

"Well, it's an honor," Joe said.

"Of course it is," Zombie said. "And I should know. Anyways, D, I was calling to thank you for getting my ass out of Ribos. You guys did a bang up job."

"You were in the convoy?" asked Eishtmo.

"Yeah, in one of the Sigma transports. When one of the pilots said one of you was chewing up Shivans, I knew it had to be you." The Admiral smiled. "You're still as good as the day I met you."

"I've gotten better with age," Eishtmo responded.

"I bet you have," Zombie said. "Listen, I would talk longer, but I have work to do. I'll see you guys later."

"Bye," said Eishtmo. The screen returned to the GTA symbol.

Joe looked at Eishtmo again. The pain and anguish that had been there only a few minutes ago was gone replaced with a kind of joy he had never seen before. Then a thought came to him. "Big D?" Joe asked.

"My old callsign kid," said Eishtmo.

"Your old callsign was D?"

"That was just the shortened version, easier to say."

"What was the longer version?"

"Death."

