

A VETERAN OF THE GREAT WAR

by Brian M. Thomsen

A Descent: FreeSpace Story

Archer had stopped wondering what his father, the hero of the Great War, would have done in a given situation while he was still back in boot camp.

The answer had always been simple, his duty.

Somehow doubt not, delay not had lost its luster as a battle-hymn mantra after the treaty with the Vasudans had been announced. He always had a problem with unquestioningly following orders from those who now supported alliance with the inhuman bastards who had killed his father, even if every fiber of his conditioned body and implant-enhanced reflexes reminded him that such doubts and delays were in direct contradiction to his duty.

"Yo, Archer!" Athans hailed from the cockpit of his fighter that was subspacially moored on Archer's flank. "You awake?"

"That's an affirmative," Archer mentally v-mailed back to his comrade-in-arms of three months via the subspace communication implants, adding, "not that it's any of your business, lard-ass."

"Oooh, I love it when you v-mail dirty to me."

V-mail was one of the great blessings and curses of the life of subspace fighters. Talking interrupted breathing thus wasting mils of nano-liters of oxygen. Cerebral implants with senders and receivers made intra-thought communication at close proximity as easy as e-mail. It wasn't really practical in populated areas, but out here in an isolated outpost, stuck guarding a subspace node where vacuum and silence were understatement, everything worked just fine.

"How's it hanging with the friggin' new guys?"

"Pretty quiet, a bit v-shy if you know what I mean, but you know how it is being a FNG."

Archer and Athans were old friends and comrades-in-arms having served together for over two weeks now, though they had never met face-to-face to shake hands. All of the other members of the squadron had only logged in within the past forty-eight hours, having converged on this spot from all directions.

"Any idea when this party is supposed to start?"

"Whenever they get here," Archer replied, and in the back of his mind out of v-mail range, privately added, and they shall not pass.

Archer closed his eyes and retreated back into internal solitude and amused himself

with the revelation that he was actually wondering what his father would be thinking about in this situation...what did he think about as he prepared himself to meet death ... did he know it was coming the way Archer knew now?

Archer had just arrived home from school for his yearly three week academic-free period and was greeted by the sounds of his normally stoic mother's uncontrollable sobs. He rushed to her room in barely enough time to see the holo-gram from his father fade into the ether.

"He's not coming back," she cried. "He's dead! They send a stinking hologram of him to me to say that he is dead, with details to follow later."

Archer had heard rumors that some of his classmates knew about the holo-grams from first-hand experience since the Galactic Terran Alliance had decided that bad news was best conveyed to loved ones by a loved one and had thus adopted the absurd policy of having all warriors holographically record messages to their families concerning their own demise, dismemberment, or incapacitation, ... but he didn't really believe that their great leaders could be that stupid and inhuman.

They were and they were.

Archer put his arm around his mother and rocked her gently until she escaped into a catatonic ball on the bed that she had formerly shared with the love of her life. He drew a blanket over her and went downstairs to await the red-tape team who followed such announcements once the initial shock had been administered. There would be a Galactic Terran Alliance bureaucrat, a doctor, and supposedly someone who had actually known his dad to spend an allotted period with the "surviving kin."

"I don't know which I hate more - the waiting or the carnage," Archer v-mailed to no one in particular.

"What?" Athans answered back in incredulity.

"Maybe I've been out here too long."

"Yeah," Athans agreed with a sigh that suggested a hint of reassurance on Archer's own sanity, "all of us who survive are."

And the survivors shall inherit the red tape.

The red-tape team was late, and didn't arrive until after Archer had already called EMS for help with his mother. They said they would get back to him. That was two days ago.

The red-tape team arrived on the next day, five days after the holo-gram had brought the grim reaper to their family. They apologized for their tardiness but confessed that they were greatly overworked, an admission that no doubt would be denied if any of the media decided to make it public.

Archer was reassured by the three men that his mother was going to be alright. They

had drugs and implants to help you deal with grief and sorrow, and most people were able to bounce back to normal duty within a few days of the loss of a loved one, even if that person was the one who they believed gave their life meaning. Archer hoped that they were right.

Colonel Adkins, a pudgy and pale bureaucrat disguised as a warrior, put his arm around the shoulders of the now half-orphaned Archer and gave his heart-to-heart spiel that was probably 95% canned from previous errands of mercy and compassion, and said, "I know, son, that no words can possibly describe the sense of loss you are feeling right now."

Archer nodded, trying to ignore the discomfort and awkwardness of the sagging weight that felt like the paw of an out-of-shape albino yeti, that was draped around his shoulders and drawing him closer, hoping that this part of the grieving would be over soon.

"His death is a loss for all of us," Adkins continued (in a manner that Archer would later realize was probably a direct download from some data that had been impersonally programmed into this mouthpiece). "He was a great ... fighter pilot ... and a credit to his squadron. No one hated the Vasudan devils more, nor earned their fear ... uh ... more fearsomely. I assure you that he did not die in vein and took a few devils with him."

Archer nodded again, hoping that he was finished. The blubbery paw was beginning to make him sweat despite the clima-control sensors of the living room.

"His buddies always spoke well of him..."

Archer remembered that his father made fun of those losers that he was stationed with in the holos that he sent home.

"...and they send their condolences as well..."

Archer remembered that their feelings towards his father were mutual.

"...and they look forward to the day that you will be fighting with them side by side, kicking some alien butt."

Archer quickly sank to a sit on the floor, surprising Adkins and temporarily sending him off balance and mercifully curtailing his caterwauling of condolences.

"Archer," Athans v-mailed, "how did you get out here?"

"I turned right at the last asteroid belt."

"C'mon, I mean, how did you wind up as a fighter jock? I can sense from the edges of your v-mail that you have more cerebral potential than the average grunt."

One of the disadvantages of v-mail, Archer thought to himself, is that sometimes more can be given away than a sender might intend.

"I really don't know," Archer replied uneasily. "Maybe it was my father. Maybe it was

my mother. It was the only thing that made sense, or at least more sense than what I was doing before."

The drugs and the implants didn't work for Archer's mom. The doctors claimed that she must have been unbalanced prior to the trauma, and was apparently beyond reasonable limits of therapy as laid out by the conventions dictated for the surviving loved ones of the great war.

The Galactic Terran Alliance would cover all of the expenses for the duration of her husband's tour of duty (at least another nine months) and these benefits could be extended provided that another warrior was brought in to claim her as a dependent.

Still slightly numb from his father's death, and not quite finished with what would be his last three week academic-free period, Archer enlisted to follow in his father's footsteps as a fighter pilot, and kill the damned Vasudans who were responsible for the hijacking of his life.

All through basic training, he cursed the Vasudans. He claimed his motivations were to honor his father (to do his duty) and to protect his mother and the world that was his home, but in reality his motivation was one word : hatred.

Hatred of the Vasudans, the enemy that he had not yet met.

And with his graduation from bootcamp came an announcement.

They are now our allies?

"Yo, Athans."

"Yeah."

"How did you first hear about the Shivans?"

"Didn't hear about them. Saw them."

"Wow!"

"Yeah, wow. I was there that first time around outpost Riviera."

"So, you've been at this for awhile now," Archer asked, now trying to conceal his surprise that his v-mail buddy of the past weeks was probably old enough to be a contemporary of his father.

"You could say that."

"I already did, old timer."

Before his inaugural assignment came through, Archer put in a specific request to his temporary commanding officer that he be given a hardship dispensation that would limit his duty to non-Vasudan allied missions and assignments, given the obvious conflicts that he felt working with the inhuman murderers of his father.

The TCO (yet another pasty faced bureaucrat whose warrior fighter status had to have been obtained as a desk jockey) conveyed great empathy and sympathy, and offered him a place in the experimental bio-cyber-implant program which was, at the present time at least, off-limits to their alien allies.

Archer hesitated for a moment and waited for another choice. None was forthcoming.

He had heard about the BCI program and the rumors that more than a handful of fighter jocks had had their brains scrambled beyond therapy as part of pre-implementation testing, and that a few had even opted for 'the euth alternative' ... but those were just rumors, and the current reports gave every sign of the successful implementation of the program specifically in far flight combat programs.

Archer signed the release that would schedule him to be prepped for surgery immediately on that, his first day of active duty.

"Athans?"

"Yeah."

"How did an oldster like you get involved in the BCI program?"

"I was part of the gamma phase."

"The gamma phase?"

"Yeah."

"They never told any of my crew that there were different phase groups involved."

"They probably didn't tell you a lot of things."

Archer knew that was true, and sighed.

Archer made it through the surgery with nary a setback. The cysurgeon in charge of his case offered that his gray matter took to the filament mesh that networked the cybernetic implants like geezer geeks to a Trek convention.

All of the things he worried about in bootcamp, the stumbling blocks of average reflexes that got in the way of targeting and maneuvering and would probably have relegated him to, at best, the second seat of a two man fighter, had miraculously disappeared ... and it felt good.

Archer realized that the overwhelming sense of wellness that he felt upon being able to do his duty beyond his wildest dream was probably a direct result of hormones that were coursing through his system at the direct instigation of the implants to aid in its own assimilation into his being.

He didn't mind; he just wanted to get into a cockpit and go kill aliens, and if he had to settle for just Shivans that would be quite alright with him.

"Athans, you ever kill a Vasudan?"

"The Vasudans and the Galactic Terran Alliance are allies," he replied not answering the question.

"What about before the alliance?"

"No."

Archer paused in his thoughts for a minute, musing that if this had been a 20th century war movie he would probably be lighting up a nic-stick or something.

"They were bad for your health," Athans interrupted.

"What?" Archer asked, shaken back to the present and out of private thought mode.

"Nic-sticks," Athans replied. "Congress tried to outlaw them. Said they caused cancer."

"So what?" Archer replied, realizing that he was going to have to concentrate harder on blocking his private thoughts. "Everything did back then."

"I guess that's why it never got outlawed."

"I guess," Archer v-mailed, and then changing the subject back to the original topic. "How about those Hammer of Light Vasudans?"

"What about them?"

"Ever kill any?"

"Nope."

"Well, I did."

"Wow."

"My first time out, too."

Archer had been sent out on a typical long-range patrol mission around the apex point of the GIGAK node when all hell broke loose.

His head was immediately filled with sensation and data and he instinctively veered his cyber-enhanced GTF Valkyrie 50 degrees by 45 degrees geo-starboard towards the emanations of battle (the top of the line scientific researchers and advisors had discovered that the Shivans left high levels of negatively charged meson particles strewn through the areas of space that served as their battlegrounds and had adjusted the cyber-senses of the fighters and the pilots within to respond accordingly).

When he arrived at the scene of carnage, which turned out to be back towards the node from which his patrol had originally begun, a Shivan Superdestroyer was already retreating back into Freespace as a squadron of Vasudan fighters seemed to be strafing

a mortally wounded Terran Fenris Cruiser.

Yeah, they're our allies, the xenophobic young cyber pilot thought to himself as he lit into the alien squadron with both of his Prometheus lasers, and the battlecry, "Eat light!"

Two rebel Vasudan fighters burst into great balls of fire as the rest of their number regrouped against the interloper who had interrupted their final acts of deliverance for the crippled Fenris Cruiser.

"Valkyrie, can you hear me?" Archer heard in his head. "This is the GTF Cruiser Orsonscottcard."

"Affirmative," Archer v-mailed back. "How did you piss off the Vasudans? I thought they were our allies."

"Switch to stealth mode, now!"

Archer obeyed, narrowly missing a leftover proximity bomb, and temporarily confusing the attacking squadron who had almost drawn a bead on him.

"Thanks."

"Those fighters," the Terran contact on board the Orsonscottcard continued, "are renegades Vasudans, members of the Hammer of Light."

Immediately Archer's head was filled with all of the necessary data on his opponents. The accompanying rush however was not caused by the implants but rather by the overwhelming joy he felt about finally being able to kill some Vasudans.

Armed with the appropriate skills and training as well as the updated data on his opponent, Archer went to work, v-mailing, "We'll continue this conversation later. I got me some killin' to do."

Archer readjusted his weapon battery, maintaining one of the Prometheus lasers while replacing the other with an avenger cannon. Without his enhancements there would have been no way that he would have been able to maintain controlled and targeted fire with both weapons while maneuvering his ship in and out of enemy fire, but with them it was as easy as falling in a vortex.

His secondary systems were also armed at capacity though Archer knew that he would have to be exceptionally discriminating in his choices there to avoid further damaging the wounded cruiser, or any of its fighters who might have temporarily exited the theater of conflict. He decided to stick with the stilettos as they were made for melee combat.

Archer counted six Hammer of Light fighters remaining, all directing their efforts in search of him as he dropped out of stealth mode and back into combat form, christening an unwary opponent with a stiletto to announce his presence with an enemy ball of flame.

Three down, five to go, he thought to himself, odds almost even.

The element of surprise gone, the young fighter pilot took drastic evasive action, buzzing his prey at close quarters in hopes that his opponents would be reluctant to shoot out of fear of hitting one of their own.

The invasive and immediate presence of a fireball on his right proved this assumption to be wrong as a Vasudan laser ignited the enemy ship he had barely just cleared.

That's four with an assist, he noted, and all bets are off.

A partial barrel roll into an inverted loop-the-loop brought his fighter face-to-face with the enemy that he had left in his wake, as his cannons alternated shots across the expanse of space that was his battlefield. Hammer down in rapid fire, Archer cut a zig-zag path between his prey avoiding the deadly bolts of light that were aimed towards him, the Vasudans' reaction time downright sluggish in comparison to his faster-than-light reflexes.

Five in flames, another notch.

Blam Craaaaaak!

A heat splay spread across his canopy, almost cracking it's integrity.

No time to get cocky now. I'll keep score later.

The Vasudan fighter whose grazing shot had almost exposed Archer to the vacuums of space or the flames of laser fire was trying to retreat for a second, perhaps better targeted pass through the line of fire.

Archer's newly released stiletto was all the urging it needed to change its coarse marginally to the port and directly into the line of fire of his Prometheus and on into fiery oblivion.

Blam Rurrrk!

He was hit again but everything seemed fine. No structural damage ... but the weapons' banks didn't seem to respond.

Cripes, he thought, the system must be rebooting and I don't know if I have the room to wait for it to come back on line.

The remaining two Hammer of Light kamikazes had reached the apex of their loops and were now baring down on him from opposite directions, and the weapons were still off-line.

Here goes nothing, Archer thought, hoping that his reflexes (and those of his ship) were as good as he thought they were. Solely through his concentration and focus, the young pilot set his course directly between the two enemies who were just about ready to fire, charging ahead at full speed, and then reversing thruster in just enough time to

witness the midspace collision of his adversaries.

"Well done, Valkyrie," the Orsonscottcard hailed. "I'm glad a polished pro like you showed up in time to save our bacon."

"Old pro nothing," Archer replied. "I just popped my cherry."

"Regular war hero, huh?"

"Not really," Archer v-mailed, "they did register me for a medal though, although they never mentioned whether it was for saving the Orsonscottcard or for scattering Vasudan ass into space."

"You know the Hammer of Light don't speak for all Vasudans?"

"Yeah, I know, and that's fine by me. I don't really care about them except that they are authorized fodder for my kill list."

"How many you up to?"

"I lost count," Archer v-mailed absently. "After the first fifty or so, it didn't really seem to matter any more."

Now it was just doing his duty, though he sometimes wondered whether that was at the instigation of his implants as well.

Archer did a visual on all of his ship's sensors and determined that all was still quiet around the node. He tried to convince himself that perhaps the qualifier on his designated course of action had switched from "when they come" to "if they come" but also realized that such thoughts were just mind games to pass the time.

Just mind games.

Archer began to have second thoughts about his implants after a tabloid reporter for the galactic net asked him if he purposely always placed himself in danger in order to compete for the most dangerous missions. Verbally he dismissed such notions as just another way of referring to the duty of any warrior for the Galactic Terran Alliance, when he realized that he hadn't even taken a second to consider his response before he said it as if this action too was being enhanced by the implants.

Enhanced? ... maybe controlled.

After that he became more cautious in his accepting of assignments, fighting back the urge to volunteer in favor of just going with luck of the draw assignments. Eventually he was permanently assigned to duty on a supercarrier, the Pournelleniven. By that time the ranks of warrior fighter pilots had become homogenized enough that his being part of the BCI program no longer seemed to matter. He did manage, however, to avoid any close quarters with the Galactic Terran Alliance's alien allies, and that suited him just fine.

Each new assignment seemed to station him further and further from earth, not that

the distance from 'home' really mattered since he had learned that his mother had been diagnosed as terminally catatonic and now only eligible for maintenance rather than actual constructive treatment. Friends from the neighborhood, as well as family all had fallen out of contact, and with the exception of the memory of his place of birth, Earth was now just another place on the great list of places he had been.

The Pournelleniven came under heavy attack from two Shivan destroyers who had silently managed to slip out of Freespace and strategically box the supercarrier in. Squadrons of fighters and heavily armed Shivan commandoes managed to swarm the GTF vessel before the allied forces had managed to get off a single retaliatory wave. Archer and several others who were out on patrol managed to return in enough time to cause enough of a diversion to allow a few bombers and transports to get off before the entire carrier imploded under the strain of the Shivan attack, its shields finally going down in a synchronization with the blowing of the ship's reactor in a valiant command maneuver of boobytrap harikari that managed to mortally wound one of the two enemy destroyers and untold Shivan warriors.

The other destroyer blocked Archer and the remnants of the supercarrier's contingent from using the node as an escape to Freespace, and the young fighter pilot knew that it would only be a short time before he and his allies were destroyed by the Shivans in the course of normal attrition of an under-armed force against an enemy stronghold, but he also knew that he and his men would die trying to defy the odds against them.

In no time at all, the size of Archer's contingent was already halved, and his own ship was beginning to show signs of malfunction when the calvary, in the form of a rag-tag squadron of allied fighters who spewed forth from the remnants of a GTF carrier who barely managed to pass out from the node before self-destructing.

Athans was one of the surviving fighters from the ailing carrier whose swansong was to provide the necessary support to defeat the surviving Shivan destroyer and blow it to meson particle hell.

The Shivan destroyer destroyed, the combined surviving allied squadron was soon picked up by another supercarrier who escorted them through the node through freespace to yet another node further out where they were left as an advance guard. The pilots were briefed while in their cockpits as there was not sufficient time to allow the flyers to exit their crafts and undergo the transitional decompression that went with transferring from inspace to oncarrier environs. Less than a few hours had transpired in transit though Archer and the others still wished they had had the opportunity to stretch their legs, shower, and or relieve themselves in a manner that didn't involve the internal evacuation of a section of one's flightsuit.

As the supercarrier passed back through freespace, it send a message to all members of the guarding squadron that relief and transport back would arrive in due time.

None of the fighter pilots took this seriously as they all figured that they would probably be dead before it ever arrived if such a transport accommodation was really

planned.

"Yo, Athans"

"Yeah."

"Never asked you where you were coming from when you bailed my ass out two weeks ago. I mean like what happened with your carrier."

"It imploded."

"Duh."

"It was on its last legs and we knew that we wouldn't be able to accomplish our primary objective and settled for the secondary, namely rescuing your cruiser."

"What was your primary?"

"The Vasudan evacuation."

"The what?"

"The Vasudan evacuation. The entire home world was destroyed. Didn't you hear about it?"

"No. I guess Galactic Terran Alliance didn't think it was necessary. I mean what's a few more or less aliens after all."

"Heads up," Athans interrupted, "the perimeter's being breached!"

By the time Athans had finished his statement, Archer was already aware that endgame was in sight. Their duty was to defend this node or die trying.

A Shivan supercarrier armed to the gills loomed out of the darkness of space.

"It's going to try to make a run through the node and into Terran space," Athans announced to the squadron.

"Why isn't she launching her fighters against us?" Archer queried.

"She wants to make it through intact. She probably figures her defensive armor and weapons would be enough to handle us."

"Well here goes nothing," Archer instigated.

"No," Athans commanded, taking charge of the squadron, "there's bound to be more following her. We should wait until she is about to enter Freespace, and then set on her with everything we have."

Archer was taken aback by the no-nonsense control mode that his buddy of the past few weeks had assumed. Had he had a second or two to think about it, he might have realized that they had never exchanged ranks in any of their conversations, but now was

not the time for such frivolities.

Archer did his duty and assumed his position in the GTF semi-circle that framed the node.

"Archer, set your retros on automatic reverse shut-off."

The young fighter pilot complied without even thinking about it.

The carrier was on the node now as the flyers began their attack. Archer and Athans dogfought the stationary cannons, while Athans's comrades utilized their diversion to loop around to the rear of the supercarrier and seemed to dock on the rear end of the deck.

Archer was too busy with his flying to question their actions when an errant EMP wave disabled his core, leaving him defenseless and motionless as the carrier passed beneath him.

Athans maneuvered his ship to join the others, but then deviated from the course and headed towards the disabled Archer using secondary thrusters to propel both his ship and Archer's away from the carrier as it began to simultaneously slip into Freespace and erupt into flame as the GTF flyers on its hull ignited with the force of ten full payloads of N1 Harbingers ripping through the Shivan warship and destroying the node in mid-passage.

Archer was simultaneously blinded by the flash of the explosion and rocked back by the massive g-forces that were unimpeded by the vacuum of space as his ship now magnetically docked to Athans's turned nose over tail through space.

The son of the veteran of the great war knew he had done his duty and blacked out.

Archer came to in the second seat of the Vasudan named Athans's fighter cockpit, his own ship having sustained too much damage from the g-wave to maintain its own integrity.

Athans commanded him to relax against the oversized co-pilot section as he explained:

"Initially it didn't occur me to introduce myself as a Vasudan. The cerebral implants eliminated the normal syntactical communication problems, and when I realized your true feelings about my race, I was afraid it might get in the way, and since you were the only human in the squad..."

"The only human?"

"That is correct," he replied. "You were right about this being basically a suicide mission. I knew that if our reinforcements didn't pass through the node to assist us, we would have to destroy the node to avoid their forces from reaching Terran airspace and destroying the supercarrier in mid-passage was the only way. Originally that is what we were trying as an experiment with my original forces when we came to your rescue. The

problem was that the integrity of the ship's hold held until it had already made it through and as a result the node survived. That gave us the knowledge that the only way to destroy it was to literally blow it in mid-passage. Not before and not after, but during. That is why my comrades held their payloads until there was no turning back. They, as you say, knew their duty, and did it."

"Why did you pull out at the last moment?"

"I don't know," Athans conceded. "Maybe I didn't want you to die out here alone..."

Archer had already realized that with the node destroyed there was no going home.

"...or maybe I just didn't want you to die without knowing that I was a Vasudan."

Archer smiled and closed his eyes as the internal injuries of his body began to cause it to shut down. His last thoughts were that maybe not all Vasudans were bad, and that maybe he should have finished high school before becoming a veteran of the great war himself.

The End.