



# E L I T E

THE TARKLIN LEGACY

## CHAPTER

2

# JUSTICE FOR ALL

by Dave Hughes

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The courtroom was a small one, perhaps one of the smallest in the Galactic Co-operative of World HQ in Holdstock Plaza on Lave. The hearing to be heard was a private one, and thus an audience gallery was not required, hence the use of this tiny chamber of law. The three judges walked from the rear door of the courtroom and took their places behind the long bench, ascending the low steps to its level. Once they were seated, the Court Clerk stood and addressed the courtroom. "This is the tribenary hearing of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds versus Lewis Tarklin. Presiding are the honourable triumvirate of the Judicial Division, being Judge Marvin Quint, Judge Carla DeSont and the honourable Judge Marilyn Kerah. The charges being brought are being presented by Counsellor William Henderick, and counsel for the defence is Counsellor Jaycen Manning. This hearing is being conducted without the defendant's presence in the court."

Judge Marilyn Kerah, seated in the centre of the trio of judges, looked out over the assembled members of the proceedings. There were four people seated on each side of the room, on either side of the aisle that bisected the room all the way from the judges' bench and the main door. To the left were the counsel and witnesses for the prosecution case, and to the right were those of the defence. The only other people present were the clerk, seated directly to the left of the judges' bench, a judicial by the stand who would take the oaths and a single guard on the main door to the room. "Let the record state," Kerah began, her voice deep and commanding, "that this hearing is not to establish guilt or innocence. Mr Tarklin has been proven guilty of the charges being brought. This hearing has been called to clarify the extenuating circumstances surrounding the events, decide the extent of that guilt and to impose, if necessary, a sentence fitting with the level of the crime committed when these circumstances are taken into account. Upon hearing the evidence and testimony, the triumvirate will cast their votes in judgement of the defendant. Mr Henderick, would you please list the charges?"

William Henderick, a thin, balding man with the beginnings of a stoop from years of leaning over lecterns, stood and made his way to the four-foot tall stand that was to the right of the judges' bench. "The charges brought against Mr Tarklin are as follows: twenty-seven individual counts of piracy; one hundred and seventeen counts of second degree murder through the aforementioned acts of piracy; thirteen counts of attempted murder; two counts of possession of outlawed combat equipment; five counts of possession of illegal equipment fitted to a space vessel; one count of kidnapping; three counts of deliberate physical abuse of Galactic Navy personnel; seven counts of resisting arrest by Police Interceptors; one count of resisting arrest by Naval personnel and one count of theft.

"As noted, these charges are fact, and have been proven as true by records and by testimony. The main charges to be noted are those of murder and piracy, since they have the strongest penalties under normal circumstances. Piracy, as you are aware, is punishable by marooning. Murder is punishable by life imprisonment on a penal colony. The other charges carry prison terms and fines, and will be counted in the final verdict and sentence.

Kerah nodded, "We will take testimony from both sides of this case, then will pass judgement. Mr. Henderick, may we please hear the opening statement for the prosecution?"

"Thank you, your honour," Henderick said with a nod. "We are here to discuss fact, pure and simple. Mr Tarklin was responsible for the deaths of over one hundred innocent people in unprovoked attacks on their ships and their persons. Our word for this is piracy. The other charges here are supplementary to these primary concerns. I am representing not on the Galactic Co-operative's justice system here, but the right of the families of those murdered souls to see the killer of their loved ones given the sentence he deserves. Mr Tarklin, no matter what his mental state, is singularly responsible for their deaths, and deserves nothing less than the full penalty that our law can prescribe.

"That is what the prosecution will strive for in this courtroom today. Thank you." Henderick returned to his seat.

"Can the case for the defence be heard?" asked Kerah.

The counsel for the defence, Jaycen Manning, stood and took the stand. He was younger and obviously less experienced than Henderick, since his demeanour was one of nervousness. His eyes, however, held a confidence that belied a man of his years and his voice when it spoke was steady and sure. "Your honour, members of the court, the crimes committed by my client are a matter of record. The issues that bring this matter to a hearing are the circumstances surrounding those crimes.

"It will be noted that Mr Tarklin is not in this courtroom today. The reason for this is that he has been deemed 'mentally and intellectually unable to contribute to the hearing'. My client is under the care of a special mental health facility, where he has been since his return to this world two weeks ago.

"I have no doubt that this is an accurate assessment. Mr Tarklin has no place in a courtroom given his current mental state. It has been noted through statements that Mr Tarklin's present condition was also a factor during the time he perpetrated the crimes he is accused of. In that case, it is clear to the defence that Mr Tarklin was in considerable mental distress during this time, and that the state of his mental health should be a large factor in deciding what punishment would be suitable for him. It is this particular fact that the defence will be basing its case on."

"Thank you, Mr Manning," said Kerah as Manning returned to his seat. "Will the prosecution please call their first witness?"

"Call Philip Mace," said Henderick. A young, square-jawed man in Galactic Navy dress blues stood from Henderick's side of the room and took the stand. Henderick also stood and took up a standing position in front of the squat lectern. The judicial handed the Naval officer a leather-bound book and swore him in with an oath of truth. Once complete, Henderick asked him to identify himself for the court.

The officer replied, "Lieutenant Commander Philip Mace, Galactic Navy."

"Commander Mace," he started, "what is your current posting?"

"I am commander of one of the defence wings attached to Ausis."

"How long have you held that post?"

"Since I was sent to Ausis to replace the pilots who died during the invasion.."

Henderick nodded, "Can you tell me when you first heard the name of Lewis Tarklin, please?"

Mace took a deep breath before replying, "I first heard of Commander Tarklin through station gossip when I arrived. He blew the Thargoid base up and ended the occupation."

"Excluding the gossip, what was the next you heard of him?"

"About nine weeks after I arrived, my commanding officer briefed me on a pirate situation that had been brewing in the space around Ausis. He stated that there was a possibility that Tarklin was responsible for a good amount of that activity and told me that we had orders to capture him."

"Can I just clarify that?" interrupted the counsellor, "Your orders were to capture him?"

Mace nodded, "Yes, sir."

"Were the reasons for capturing him made clear?"

"No, just that the authorities wanted him to be captured alive and unharmed."

"Thank you. Now, your deposition states that you were the commander of the naval squadron sent to intercept Tarklin's ship when it was detected next. Can you go through the chain of events for us please?"

Mace nodded and leaned forward on the podium. "The police alerted us to his presence during a routine patrol, and we mobilised immediately. I split my Asp squadron into two flights – one of eight ships and one reserve force of four to come round in a flanking manoeuvre."

"Why so many ships?" asked Henderick.

"After seeing some of the footage of Tarklin's fighting style, it was clear that he was an exceptional pilot. We knew he was an Elite combateer and that he was single-handedly responsible for taking out a Thargoid invasion force and a whole space station, as well as the civilian and police ships he had already beaten.

"Anyway, I led the main fleet into the attack after giving the reserve formation orders to loop around our position on afterburner and join the battle from the solar vector if the main force was having trouble. We then engaged Tarklin's Cobra and began to press the attack.

"I gave orders to attack only the rear section of the ship, targeting the engines only in order to disable the ship. Tarklin took out two of the formation in short order before we even scored a hit. Eventually, though some of us slipped in on his six and took a chunk out of his shields before he got away. He took out another Asp before the reserve formation came into range. When that happened, his ship started to flicker from view. We had heard reports that he might have a cloaking device, but it must have been an old model – our systems were upgraded just over a year ago to beat that particular technology, so we pressed the advantage.

"By this point we had encircled his ship, and had a pair of ships on all escape vectors with a laser each trained on him. Any ship that Tarklin presented his engine vents to was ordered to fire as soon as the exhaust vents were visible, and using that tactic, we blew his system drive, at which point I gave the order to cease fire."

"How did you know the primary drive had been disabled?" asked Henderick.

"Normally, sir, when the system drive is damaged, the main exhaust starts venting coolant which changes the colour of the exhaust plume from blue to orange. If it's badly damaged it starts venting red plasma fireballs. As soon as the plume changed to an orange tint, I gave the order."

"Thank you," said Henderick. "What happened next?"

"I gave the order for my crew to prepare for boarding and lined up my ship with the docking hatch on top of the Cobra. Once locked on, my crew popped the hatch and descended into the Cobra to make the arrest.

"The first officer down there was attacked on sight by Commander Tarklin. I could hear the screams from the bridge. I locked the controls and ordered the rest of the crew down to the ship, joining them myself when I had made the ship secure. Tarklin was like a wild animal. The first crewman, Lt. Harser, was on the ground. He was covered in blood and his arms were a mess. He was doubled over in pain. Lt. Devero was injured too. Tarklin had backed up to the rear of the bridge, and had a panicked look on his face. His eyes kept darting over his left shoulder and he was muttering to himself. I tried to placate him, but he roared something and lunched himself at me. I raised my arms to block the metal bar he had swung and managed to deflect it enough to wrench it out of his hands.

"He went crazy at that point, lashing out with his arms and legs. It took three of my crew to restrain him and pin him whilst Lt. Kenner to the ship's medical bay, found a sedative hypo then injected him with it. In the few seconds it took for the drug to take effect, Tarklin was livid. His face was purple and contorted in anger. He kept twisting to look over at the back of the ship.

"That's about it, sir."

Henderick nodded dourly, "Thank you, Commander. Can you outline for me the extent of the damage Tarklin did to your squadron?"

"In total, Commander Tarklin destroyed four of the squadron's ships, killing the crew on all ships."

"How many crew?" asked Henderick quietly.

"Two flight crew on each. My ship carried three support officers to help with making the arrest if necessary."

"Were any injuries sustained by your crew?"

The officer nodded once, "Yes. I suffered from a broken forearm and fractures to my other elbow as well as a dislocated knee joint and a fractured femur. Lt. Harser had two broken arms, a dislocated shoulder, four broken ribs and internal damage to his stomach and spleen. Other injuries were just basic cuts and bruises from the scrap."

“So in summary, Commander, was Mr Tarklin in a rational state?”

Manning stood sharply, “Objection, your honour,” he called. “A Naval officer doesn’t have the experience to make that judgement.”

Henderick smiled: a smile that did not reach his eyes, “I disagree. As a pilot and combateer, a naval officer understands the mindset of a spacer in any role.”

Kerah raised a hand for silence, “Objection overruled. Please answer the question, Commander.”

Mace replied, “In my opinion, no. Commander Tarklin was not acting rationally.”

Henderick smiled again, “Thank you, Commander. No more questions.”

As Henderick took his seat, Manning stood and approached the stand, “Commander Mace, can you tell me what state Mr Tarklin was in when you boarded his ship?”

“Mr Tarklin was extremely agitated, sir. By the time I boarded he had already injured two officers with a metal railing. One of them was severely injured.”

“At the time, did you have any idea why this would be?”

“At the time I wasn’t sure why he should be as agitated as he was,” replied the Navy man, “Public opinion of the Navy has always been positive, and this guy was acting as if we were all a bunch of crazy killers.”

“I take it you are aware of the current state of mind that Mr Tarklin is in?”

“Yes, I am.”

Manning leaned closer to Mace, “In hindsight then, do you understand Mr Tarklin’s reaction?”

Mace nodded, “Yes, I think I do.”

“In that case, would you tell the court your opinion of the reasoning behind Mr Tarklin’s actions when you boarded the ship?”

The officer took a short breath, collecting his thoughts, “Well, Commander Tarklin may have been delusional, maybe seeing us as something else.”

“Would you like to take a guess as to what Mr Tarklin may have seen you as?”

Henderick stood, “Objection, the counsel is asking the witness to make a supposition.”

Manning bristled, “With all due respect, my question is just as valid as Mr Henderick’s query as to Commander Mace’s opinion of the defendant’s mental state.”

Kerah shook her head, “Mr Henderick’s question was related more to the witness’ evaluation of Mr Tarklin’s mental state – you are asking for a guess. The objection is sustained. Mr Manning, please strike that question.”

Manning frowned at the judge before returning his gaze to the officer before him. “Yes, your honour. No more questions.”

“Thank you, Commander Mace,” said Kerah, “you may step down.” She looked at Henderick. “Call your next witness, Mr Henderick.”

“Call Commander Sedoni Baris,” he said.

A portly man wearing a suit that had probably seen much better days walked slowly to the stand and was sworn in. Kerah asked him to identify himself.

“I am Sedoni Tulan Baris,” he said.

Henderick rose and approached, “Mr Baris, can you please tell us what your current career is?”

“I am a freelance trader. My family manufacture sound equipment on Zaragete.”

“And what do you know of Lewis Tarklin?”

Baris spread his arms in a shrug, “Up until last week, nothing at all as far as I knew, then you told me it was he that blew me out of the stars.”

Henderick cast a roving eye across the whole room, including the door guard, who returned the look with an impassive stare, “Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Commander Baris did not know Lewis Tarklin until the latter took it upon himself to open fire on him in a blatant act of piracy. He...”

Manning stood once more, glaring at the older counsellor, “Objection, your honour! Mr Henderick hasn’t questioned the witness to ascertain the train of events here! He is leading the tribunal!”

Kerah nodded, “I have to agree with the counsel for the defence, Mr Henderick. Your questioning is incomplete.”

Henderick gave a slight bow to the bench, “My apologies, your honour, Mr Manning. In this sort of situation, where the evidence is so clear, I sometimes forget myself and want nothing more than to bring this unpleasant hearing to an end.”

Manning snorted, “Even at the expense of true justice, Mr Henderick?”

“Mr Manning, your outburst is out of turn,” admonished the judge.

“Apologies,” muttered Manning.

Henderick glanced in amusement from Manning to Kerah and back again before returning his attention to the witness. “I will be brief. Commander Baris, can you outline what happened when you encountered the Cobra Mk 3 belonging to Mr Tarklin?”

Baris leaned on the podium as he spoke, “I was flying the trade run to Aratusza when all of a sudden this Cobra 3 comes barrelling into my space. I didn’t have much time to do anything, since he was carrying a military laser and cut through my shields before I knew what was going on. It was only a few seconds before I had to jettison the escape pod and get out of there. I lost my whole cargo of amplifiers.”

“After you ejected, what did you see?” asked Henderick.

“Well, my pod was accelerating, but I saw this other Cobra nestle right up to the hull of my old ship. I didn’t know what it was doing.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” called Henderick theatrically, “the pod’s flight recorder does show this manoeuvre by Mr Tarklin’s ship, and from the timestamp we can lock this down to the instance where Mr Tarklin replaces the transponder codes of his ship with the ones from Commander Baris’ vessel. The fact that for the next few weeks following this encounter, this Cobra was registered as being active is proof positive of the fact.” Henderick glanced at Baris, “Thank you, Commander. No more questions.”

Manning half rose, “I have no questions for this witness,” he said before sitting down again.

“Thank you, Commander Baris,” said Kerah, “You may step down. Mr Henderick, please call your last witness.”

“Call Leela to the stand please,” said Henderick.

A bipedal android, its surface brushed metal, rose and headed for the podium. The android was a very basic model, only superficially similar to a humanoid. The body was a simple tapered cylinder on top of the jointed legs, and two manipulator arms hung down a foot from the shoulder area. The head was an elongated oval with twin optical sensors mounted above a simple slit mouth. The design was an old one, and was generally used for AIs or android systems awaiting replacement bodies. It limped slowly to the podium and almost clambered up the small step.

Once the android Leela had taken its place, Kerah spoke, “Can you state your identity for the court please?”

“I am Leela,” said the soft, feminine voice that came from this ugly shell, “I was the Artificial Intelligence programmed into the Python-class passenger liner *Sushan*.”

Henderick raised a hand, “For the records, your honour, I arranged for the recovered AI program to be installed into a robotic body for the duration of the tribunal.”

Kerah nodded, "So noted, carry on."

Henderick again addressed the android before him, "Do you understand that you are making testimony to a court of law, and Directive Thirty-Two applies?"

"Yes I do," said Leela, "my testimony will be an accurate recount of events."

"Leela, can you outline the events of 18<sup>th</sup> December 3132 for us please?"

"At 1543 my sensors picked up the arrival of a ship into the scanning area. It dropped out of jump drive and took a course for the planet Erlage before changing course to begin an approach. As it came into weapons range it began to fire on me. The crew began evasive manoeuvres and returned fire, but my weapons loadout was not sufficient to repel the attack. Our hyperdrive was engaged, but the drive was damaged by laser strikes. The captain gave the order to abandon ship, but only half of the pods were ejected before my hull received enough damage to compromise the structural integrity. When my hull exploded, 82 people were still on board, including the crew, and three pods were caught in the explosion. The Cobra then resumed jump drive towards Erlage."

"How many people survived?" asked Henderick.

"The pods carried 63 people away from the blast in time," said Leela.

"After the explosion, what did you do?"

"I broadcast the visual record of the assault to the Elite Federation and to GalCop central before shutting down to conserve battery power until I was recovered."

Henderick once again addressed the bench and the others present. Manning bristled as he did this – in a tribunal such as this, only the bench should be addressed. These sort of theatrics were the norm for high profile murder cases. "Ladies and gentlemen, Leela's record was the first time that footage of one of Tarklin's attacks had survived. It was this record that resulted in Mr Tarklin being listed as a pirate and a fugitive. We are as yet unsure how many died before his ship's logs were tapped, but archival information from the Elite Federation estimates that as many as twenty innocent ships may have been attacked by him in the one-month period between his departure from Ausis and the destruction of Leela's mother ship. So far the confirmed deaths by his hands are over two hundred in number."

Once he had finished his statement, Henderick retook his seat without stating he had finished his questions.

Manning looked in concern at the judge. Kerah glared at Henderick then nodded at Manning to continue. He approached the stand, "Leela, do you have any processing ability for empathy?"

Leela turned slightly to face the defence counsel, "No, I have a simple AI algorithm that calculates estimated emotional response to a given stimulus."

"Do you have the ability to learn from your experiences?"

"Yes, I do."

"In that case," Manning smiled, "what did you learn from the destruction of your ship?"

Leela pause for a second before the reply came, "One must not be too trusting of apparently innocent spacecraft."

"Do you regret the deaths of your crew and passengers?" asked Manning softly.

"Objection, your honour..." began Henderick.

Kerah raised a hand again, "Overruled, Mr Henderick. I want to see where this is going. Be careful, Mr. Manning."

"Thank you, your honour," acknowledged Manning, "Leela?"

"Yes, I very much regret their deaths," replied the android, "I feel inadequate to the job of protecting my crew and passengers."

"How do you feel about the pilot who was flying the Cobra that destroyed you?" asked Manning.

Again, the android paused, her blue-tinted optical sensors fixed on the counsellor, "I wish I had never encountered him."

Manning leaned in closer to the podium and its metallic occupant, "Do you hate him?"

"Inasmuch as I understand the concept, yes, I do."

Manning smiled sympathetically, "If you had another ship, would you open fire on that pilot again if you encountered him?"

"If my crew and mission allowed it, yes I would."

Manning briskly walked back to the desk he had been sitting at and lifted a datapad, flicking through some pages of information, "My records show that you opened fire on, and destroyed, a Mamba class escort ship that was part of your fleet in 3119. Is this true?"

Henderick, predictably, shot to his feet, "Objection! What relevance does this AI's history have..."

"Overruled," Kerah replied simply.

Manning glanced gratefully at the judge before returning his attention to the witness. "Sorry, Leela. Is it true?"

Leela met Manning's gaze, blue sensor to green eye, "Regrettably, yes, this is true."

"Regrettably?" Manning inquired, cocking his head.

"Yes."

"Explain what you mean by 'regrettably', please."

"I had suffered degradation of my processors following an extended period in a corrosive atmosphere prior to that mission. My connections were corroded and data flow was not at full capacity. A bad data packet informed my logic processors that the crew had been compromised and that the Mamba escort was a hostile craft. I opened fire on it and destroyed it."

Manning nodded slowly, "So due to a malfunction in your, for want of a better word, 'brain', you killed an innocent party?"

"Yes."

Manning slowly returned the datapad to his desk before approaching the stand again, "In your consultations with your brief, has he explained Commander Tarklin's mental state?"

"I am aware that the commander is in the care of a medical facility."

Manning blinked, "Is that all?"

"Yes."

"Objection!" cried Henderick again.

Kerah once again silenced him, "Overruled! Mr Henderick, this is relevant testimony, and it is also interesting to me that you have not fully briefed your witness before her appearance here. Continue, Mr Manning."

If Manning felt any smugness, he hid it well, "Leela, Commander Tarklin is suffering from a breakdown of his mental ability. That means that his perceptions are altered. In the same way that your corrupt data packet gave you the wrong information, Tarklin's brain was telling him he was seeing something he wasn't."

Leela's silvery head inclined slightly, "In that case, he must be repaired."

"Would you attempt to destroy Commander Tarklin's ship if you knew that he was broken in the way I have just described?" continued Manning.

For the first time, Leela's optical sensors turned away from Manning, in a fair approximation of indecision, "I...don't... No, I don't think I would."

“What would you do?”

Leela’s sensors again fixed on Manning, “I would try to help him. I would try to disable his ship and ensure that repairs could be made to his brain.”

“Why?” asked Manning softly, leaning down to rest his elbows on the podium and bringing his face closer to the android’s expressionless features.

“I’m sorry?” asked Leela.

“Why would you prefer that Commander Tarklin should be repaired?”

“Because it was not his fault.”

Manning smiled and pushed himself back to a full standing position before returning to his seat, “Thank you, Leela. No more questions.”

Kerah beckoned to Leela to stand down, “You may step down, Leela.” The android thanked her before stomping back to her seat. “Mr. Henderick, do you have any more witnesses?”

Henderick, his face betraying a little of the anger inside, replied curtly, “No.”

Kerah blinked at this display of bad protocol, “Pardon?”

The prosecution counsellor sighed, trying once more to contain his ire, “I mean no, your honour. The prosecution case has been made.”

Kerah nodded sharply, “Thank you, Mr Henderick. Mr Manning, the case for the defence will now be heard. Call your first witness.”

Manning raised his voice to let the name be heard clearly, exactly as his elder colleague had done, “Please call Doctor Jorgen Fuller.” An ageing man of slim, athletic build rose and strode confidently to the stand. He ran a hand through his greying hair as he was sworn in. “Please state your name and relationship to the defendant,” asked the defence counsel.

“I am Doctor Jorgen Fuller, Mental Health Specialist adviser to GalCop,” the man replied. “I am currently supervising the care and treatment of Commander Lewis Tarklin.”

Manning paused for a second, “Your honour, may I make a statement at this point?”

“What sort of statement?” replied Kerah.

“Regarding the content of the prosecution testimonies.”

The lead judge shook her head, “No, you may not. Save it for the summation, Mr Manning.”

Manning nodded, “As you wish. Dr. Fuller, could you tell us the current medical condition of Commander Tarklin please?”

Fuller explained, “When I first took Commander Tarklin into my care, he was displaying signs of paranoia and delusions. Once I had a chance to examine him fully, I diagnosed him with a number of severe mental conditions that have altered his perceptions of reality.”

“Could you be more specific, please?”

“His clinical conditions are dissociative fugue, delusional psychosis and early-stage schizophrenia.”

Manning tilted his head quizzically at the doctor, “Dissociative fugue? I don’t think I’ve heard of that one.”

“Fugue is a state of altered perceptions, often creating a ‘fantasy’ world for the sufferer,” Fuller explained. “It is often found in patients who have suffered a severe trauma or a series of traumas that have changed their lives in some way. In Tarklin’s case, he ‘dissociated’ himself from the fact of his wife’s death and created the fantasy that she was alive and well. This led into the delusional psychosis that she was talking to him on his ship and suggesting courses of action to him.”

“And the schizophrenia?” asked Manning

Fuller replied, “The conflict of reality with Tarklin’s carefully constructed fantasy was beginning to create a schism in his mind. His perceptions were beginning to realise that the world was not exactly as he was seeing it, but he was not ready to accept that.”

“In your opinion, doctor, did Tarklin have any idea of what he was doing when he destroyed the ships he encountered?”

The doctor shook his head, “I think it’s highly unlikely. Up until very recently, Tarklin was still agitated to the point of nervous collapse at the sight of any staff member at the hospital, still believing them to be Thargoids. Now, he is finally starting to accept that he may not be a prisoner at all and that the beings he is seeing are trying to help him.

“You used the term ‘beings’ there?”

“Yes, I did,” Fuller answered, “Myself and my team are not convinced that Tarklin is perceiving us as our real selves yet. The medication he is on should start to make a difference by the start of next week and hopefully reconcile the differences between his fantasy world and the real world.”

“So, in your opinion, what did Tarklin ‘see’ during his rampage?”

“Objection, your honour!” called Henderick, “The opinions of witnesses have no place in a court of fact!”

Kerah sighed, “Mr Henderick. May I remind you that this is *not* a trial by jury. It may use a lot of the same terminology, but this is a hearing to establish the circumstances that led Commander Tarklin to the acts he perpetrated. Doctor Fuller is listed as a medical expert and is here to provide testimony as to the medical status of the defendant. In that case, his ‘opinions’ not only have a place here, they are required!”

“But...” began the older counsellor.

Kerah interrupted sharply, “But nothing. If I remember rightly, you used the same line of questioning with your first witness, establishing a professional opinion, so the precedent has been set. Now sit down, and try to remember what sort of hearing this is! Objection overruled. Dr. Fuller, please answer the question.”

Fuller glanced at the judge, then at Manning, then resumed his statement, “Commander Tarklin sees Thargoids everywhere. In the tests we have run, Thargoid imagery seems to be imprinting itself over any space-related imagery that he is exposed to. From this, and from the fact that he reacts to hospital staff as if they are Thargoids, I believe that Tarklin’s fugue led him to the belief that the ships he attacked were Thargoids.”

“All of them?” inquired Manning.

“Yes. I believe the bridge log recordings bear this out.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said Manning, smiling, “Given the nature of the delusional state Commander Tarklin is in, can he be treated?”

“Yes,” replied the doctor, “there’s no reason why the usual treatments for these conditions shouldn’t be effective. A course of lithodol should ease the transition from the fugue state back to the real world, and azaprem infusions should help with the psychosis and schizophrenia. If the schizoid state had advanced much further than it was, it may have been more difficult, but at the early state it should be simple enough to treat. Counselling will be necessary to help Tarklin deal with the grief and the trauma of the loss of his wife and home. It will also help him to come to terms with the results of his illness.”

“You mean the deaths that resulted from his actions?”

“Yes. Yes, I do.”

Manning nodded once, “Thank you again. No more questions.”

Henderick stood and made his way to the fore, throwing a look full of contempt at Manning before turning his attention to the witness at the podium. “Doctor, you stated that subconsciously Tarklin may have been aware of the real world through this fugue state that you describe?”

“Yes, it’s possible,” replied the doctor.

“Can you expand on that for me?”

“Of course. Any dissociative personality is aware of the real world, it is just that the brain’s perceptions are changed on a subconscious level. The eyes still see the real world, and they pass this information to the brain. It is the brain that then misinterprets what is happening and sends the wrong instinctual responses. To put it in a more concise way, the eyes will see an Asp, for example, and the brain will send out the same sort of response as would be engendered by seeing a Thargoid ship, hence the brain believes the eyes have seen a Thargoid.”

“You are saying that the eyes see the correct thing, whilst the brain tells lies?”

“Essentially, yes.”

“How would a situation like this begin?” asked Henderick.

“Well, in Tarklin’s case it could have been through external suggestion. His wife told him that he was seeing a Thargoid-“

”His wife?” interrupted Henderick, “But his wife was dead, lying in a cryotube at the back of the bridge!”

“In Tarklin’s mind, she was alive,” explained Fuller, “That’s what the fugue state is.”

“So Tarklin’s mind told Tarklin’s mind that there were Thargoids attacking him?” Henderick frowned.

“That’s one way of putting it, yes,” replied Fuller, smiling slightly.

Henderick pointedly ignored the half smile playing about the face of the man behind the stand, “You say that this can be treated?”

“In the majority of cases, yes.”

“The majority?” pressed Henderick.

“Yes. Not all cases can be cured comprehensively-“

Henderick raised an eyebrow and leaned in closer to the doctor, “You are saying that this state of mind may be permanent?”

Fuller shifted uneasily, “In some cases-“

“Yes or no, Doctor,” interrupted Henderick brusquely.

“Yes, but it isn’t as simple-“ began the doctor, glancing at Manning.

Henderick interrupted once more, his voice rising in volume, “Yes or no!”

Fuller sighed, “Yes, it can be permanent.”

Henderick smiled nastily, “Thank you. No further-“

This time, it was Fuller’s turn to interrupt as he addressed the bench, “Your honour, since this is a tribunal and not a trial, may I address you directly?”

Kerah glanced at Henderick’s face, noting the tell-tale reddening of the older counsellor’s cheeks as anger mounted. She therefore may have taken slight pleasure at her next words, “Of course.”

“Thank you,” sighed the doctor, a hint of relief evident in his tone, “Tarklin’s state of mind has a very low percentage chance of being permanent. The conditions were caught at a relatively early stage in their development, and the onset of early-stage schizophrenia is a good sign. It showed that Tarklin’s own perception of reality was beginning to reassert itself. If left unchecked, Tarklin would probably have developed full blown schizoid tendencies and would never have recovered, but in this case he will recover from the schizophrenia with treatment and counselling. The psychosis and fugue should be easier to deal with in the knowledge that Tarklin has a strong mind. I would state my career on the fact that Tarklin will recover, probably quicker than most.”

“Is that all?” inquired the lead judge.

Fuller nodded, "Yes, thank you."

Kerah smiled, glancing sidelong at Henderick as she spoke, "No, thank *you*, Doctor Fuller, for remembering the decorum of this tribunal. You may step down." Henderick's face was stony as she continued, "Mr Manning, call your next witness."

Henderick wheeled and slowly walked back to his seat as Manning spoke, "Please call Simmon Hendry to the stand." The man who rose and approached the bench with a rapid, sure gait was of moderate height and had the look of a man comfortable in his life. His stomach was on the verge of developing a slight bulge, and his handsome, red-bearded face was calm and friendly. As he was being sworn in, he smiled and nodded his thanks to the judicial. "Please state your name and your relationship to the defendant," said Manning.

"My name is Simmon Hendry," he said in a confident, easy-going tone, "I'm a close personal friend of Lewis Tarklin."

"I've called you as a character witness. It is my belief that you are probably the closest friend that Commander Tarklin has. Would that be correct?"

Hendry smiled and nodded once, "I'd say there's a good chance it's correct. I've been friends with him for many years."

"How did the two of you meet?"

"We shared a house during Lewis' time at the flight training school in Ashoria. I was serving my apprenticeship with Cowell & MgRath and needed a housemate," replied Hendry with a slight shrug as he concluded, "I advertised, and Lewis responded."

"How long did you live together?" asked the defence counsel.

"Lewis lived with me for just over a year."

Maning frowned, "That doesn't seem very long to develop such a close friendship."

Again, Hendry smiled that easy smile, "It was long enough. Lewis has a very easy-going personality, especially in those days. He helped me out of some tricky situations and I helped him out in return. Without him, I wouldn't be where I am today. Similarly, without me, Lewis probably would have failed his flight engineering exam."

"What else did you commonly do together?"

"We raced skimmers. We both have a love for racing, and we formed a team and entered that year's Low Atmosphere Grand Prix. I came fourth and he came second." The expression on Hendry's face turned serious, "If it hadn't been for the shunt in the Paluberion Summer challenge, who knows where he-"

Manning held a hand up to silence Hendry, a slight smile appearing to take the heat out of the gesture, "So it was a busy, intense year?"

"You can say that again!" enthused Hendry.

Manning's smile dropped, "In your opinion, is Lewis Tarklin the sort of man who would turn to piracy?"

"No, definitely not," replied Hendry shaking his head, "He has a high regard for life of all kinds. He's always been mindful of the law and has a healthy respect for the judicial system on both Lave and in GalCop."

"What were Commander Tarklin's goals in life?"

The witness took a breath, "Well, he always wanted to be a trader – live in space, make a difference, achieve Elite status, you know. The biggest regret he had was that he had to leave his girlfriend of the time behind in New South. The pull of space was too strong, though, and he chose space. She wouldn't come with him."

"Who was his girlfriend?"

"Riana Freidmann. He told me once that one day he would try and find her again, and hoped she would forgive him."

"This is the same Riana Freidmann that he married later on Ausis?"

Hendry nodded, "Yep, the very same. He tracked her down when he got to Elite. She was working as a geological surveyor on Ausis at the time, and he found her. They started a relationship again and got married not long after. It was like a fairy tale for him!"

"Your honour, I object," came the voice of Henderick, "Is this relevant to the case?"

Manning sighed, "It's relevant in that it gives us some idea of the real person behind Lewis Tarklin. All this court knows of is the public face of the man following his illness, when his mind was broken. This testimony will give us focus on what the real person was like."

Kerah shook her head sadly, "Objection sustained, Mr Manning. I appreciate that it is necessary for a court to be aware of the nature of a defendant's personality, but we don't need a blow-by-blow account of it."

"Understood, your honour," acquiesced Manning with a slight nod of his head, "Mr Hendry, were you surprised by the charges brought against Commander Tarklin?"

"Yes, I was," replied Hendry immediately, "Very surprised. I've kept in touch with Lewis over the years since he left, and he's always sounded fine. Same as always."

"When was the last time you heard from him?"

"A couple of days before the invasion, he sent me a voice-only message saying hello and wishing me a happy birthday."

"Did you contact him afterwards?" asked the defence counsellor.

"Yes, I sent a thank you response for the message, then I tried to contact him when I heard about the invasion. I saw him on the news reports after he made his run on the station and tried to contact him then too, but he never replied."

"What did you think of his appearance on the news?"

Hendry sighed, "To be honest, I thought he looked tired. He looked like a man who had just flown through the fires of hell. Pretty normal for a man who just flew a ship through a Thargoid occupied space station and detonated an energy bomb."

"Did you think at that point he was suffering from mental difficulties?"

"No, not at all!" he replied vehemently, "Looking back now, there may have been a few hints, like the look in his eye or something, but at the time I thought he just looked tired. It was the next day that I found out Riana had died."

"And what did you do then?" asked Manning.

"I tried to call him again, but there was no reply. I left a holoFac message telling him if he needed somewhere to go for a while, my spare room was still empty. He never replied," Hendry finished sadly.

"What about the illegal weaponry?"

"I didn't know about that until the press release about Lewis' capture the other week."

"Does it surprise you that Lewis fitted illegal weaponry to his ship?"

Hendry contemplated that for a moment, "To be honest, no, it doesn't. Lewis always was a brilliant engineer, I'd assume that he made most of the modifications himself."

"Does this worry you?"

"Not overly, no. I think there's a chance that he'll be punished for it through this court, but that's his own fault. He knew what he was doing when he installed them. Knowing what he was like, I'd assume he fitted them to boost the odds in his favour."

"This sounds very flippant towards such a close friend."

Hendry laughed at that statement, "It's not flippancy, it's reality." He looked at the judges, his face becoming serious again, "Lewis is a grown man, and he knew what he was doing. Whether I approve or not doesn't really matter. The changes he made to his ship kept him alive, and I'm happy that I have a living friend as opposed to a dead memory."

"But what about the punishment he will incur from this?"

Hendry shrugged, "There are thousands of pilots out there breaking the law. Pirates are just the tip of the iceberg. Tarklin was one of those pilots who broke one law to help him enforce others. Look at his kill record. How many pirates or smugglers or assassins did he kill to get to Elite? How many lives did he save by using his illegal equipment to bring down the people who would cut an innocent life down? He broke one law. Punish him for it if you like, but personally I'll applaud him for it."

"What about when he used that illegal weaponry to kill innocents during his illness?"

"He was ill, as you say. The doc over there said that his mind was making him see things that weren't there. Even when he was killing innocents, he thought he was doing GalCop's work for them."

"You say that Commander Tarklin's illness gives him an excuse for the murders he committed?" asked Manning.

Hendry bristled, "No, I am saying that Lewis didn't know he was murdering innocents. His perceptions were altered. He thought he was killing Thargoids. It wasn't his fault."

Manning smiled and nodded once at Hendry, "Thank you, Mr Hendry. No further questions."

"You put across many interesting points, Mr Hendry," stated Henderick as he rose lazily from his chair.

"Thanks!" grinned Hendry, to a slight murmur of laughter from those assembled.

Henderick smiled one of his mirthless smiles again, "One of those points was that you describe your friend as a man who 'has a high regard for life of all kinds'. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Yet he chose a career path that would require him to carry out acts of violence against others, did he not?"

Hendry paused before replying, "Well, I suppose so."

Henderick raised his arms in a gesture of confusion, "How can the two statements be true? How can a man who loves living things so much live with himself when he kills a sentient being with his laser cannon?"

Hendry stood quite still for a few seconds, staring straight into the eyes of the prosecuting counsellor, "Can I ask you a few things, Mr Henderick?" he asked quietly.

Henderick looked nonplussed, "Er..yes, of course."

"Have you ever been in space?"

Henderick's eyes narrowed, "No, I haven't as a matter of fact."

"Can I ask why not?"

"I have no need to go into space – my family and my job are here."

Hendry folded his arms across his chest, still staring straight at Henderick, "Do you think space is safe?"

Henderick sighed and turned to the bench, "Your honour, is this appropriate?"

Kerah waved a hand at him, "You gave the witness permission to question you, Mr Henderick. Answer his questions."

Henderick's face clouded again as anger threatened to surface, "Fine, as a matter of fact, no: I do not think space is safe."

Hendry smiled, giving a fair imitation of Henderick's own unfriendly expression, "Why?"

"It's not safe because there are threats out there to freedom and one's very life."

Hendry gestured condescendingly at Henderick and addressed the bench, "There it is, you see? The very essence of one who doesn't understand what it is to be a spacer: to just want to be out there making a difference in whatever way you can." He turned to face Henderick again, leaning on the inside of the podium as he spoke, "Yes, you're right, space is dangerous, but spacers, including Lewis, want to be out there despite the danger. Lewis doesn't kill people because he is a murderer or has a criminal nature. He kills people in self-defence: when put in a them-or-us situation, so would anyone. Even you, Mr Henderick. Lewis kills pirates and smugglers who shoot at him first. By doing this he makes the galaxy that bit safer for everyone else, including me and you and everyone in this court, Mr Henderick."

Silence descended on the room as the echoes of Hendry's voice died away. During the last couple of sentences, the volume of Hendry's voice had risen to a reasonable level as he used it to beat Henderick about the ears. The prosecutor merely stood there, his eyes unblinking as he met the glare of the witness in the stand. "Do you not agree that the act of killing is wrong?" Henderick finally asked, breaking the lock.

Hendry refolded his arms across himself, "I agree that killing is wrong if it is done for its own sake."

"Would Tarklin believe the same thing?"

"Probably, yes."

"In that case," Henderick began, his voice taking on a more confident tone, "is it feasible that someone who loves life would find it abhorrent to kill people?"

Hendry paused to contemplate this question, "No."

Henderick blinked. This had obviously not been the answer he was expecting. "Explain."

"I can't," Hendry shrugged, "Not very well, anyway."

The prosecutor leaned in closer across the podium, "Try."

[Pause]

"OK, look at it this way: I could never hold a gun to your head in cold blood and pull the trigger. I'm not a murderer. If you were pointing a gun at me then I'd kill you first if I could."

"Would you feel remorse?"

Hendry nodded, "Probably. But I'd also feel relieved that I was still alive. And I'd probably feel justified in killing you if I thought you were going to kill others after me."

Henderick again paused, meeting Hendry's glare head on. Something was passing through the air between them, like two predators sizing each other up. "No further questions," Henderick muttered before turning and heading back to his seat.

Manning blinked in surprise, "Are you sure?" he asked incredulously. As soon as the words were out, his eyes closed as he anticipated the response.

Sure enough, Judge Kerah spoke next, "Mr Manning, if the counsel for the prosecution declares he has no further questions, then that is most likely the case."

Manning nodded, his smile self-deprecating, "Of course, Apologies."

As Kerah nodded, the faintest ghost of a smile passed her lips, "Call your next witness please."

"I call Ambassador Heinrich Freidmann to the stand," he said. Freidmann was a tall, powerfully built man of roughly the same age as Doctor Fuller. His grey hair was close cropped and crowned a strong but open face – the face of a diplomat. It was easy to see the bags under his eyes and the slightly haunted look of a man who had recently lost someone close to him – Riana Friedman-Tarklin, his daughter.

Once he had been sworn in, Kerah asked him to identify himself. "I am Heinrich Freidmann, diplomatic liaison to Ausis and father in law of Lewis Tarklin," he said in a surprisingly quiet voice.

Manning stood before him and met the older man's gaze, "First, permit me to offer the condolences of this court on the loss of your daughter and our regret that this tribunal has been necessary."

Freidmann met the gaze for a few moments, then replied with a hint of steel, "Fine. Get on with it."

Manning began the questioning, "You are listed as being one of the last people to see Commander Tarklin before he departed Ausis. Is this true?"

Freidmann nodded, "I'd assume that to be an accurate preposition."

"Would you please recall that last meeting for us?"

"It was in the funeral home," replied Freidmann quietly, "Riana's body was in a stasis casket ready to be prepared for burial. Lewis came in as I was leaving."

"How did he seem to you?" asked Manning.

"He seemed excited somehow. I had expected him to feel the same as I was feeling, but there was something strange about his demeanour that I couldn't put my finger on."

"Did you talk to him?"

"Our conversation is in the police report," came the ambassador's curt reply.

"I know, but would you repeat it for us here please?"

Freidmann sighed, "Very well. We talked about Riana, how she had been before the invasion. Lewis didn't want to talk about how she had died. He said it wasn't right. He patted me on the shoulder and gave me one of the oddest looks anyone had given me and told me it would all be fine soon. That she'd be far away from this place soon."

"Looking back now, do you understand what he meant?"

"Oh yes, very well. He was literally taking her away from that place."

"You lived and worked quite closely with Commander Tarklin during his stay on Ausis. How did his last few days compare with the previous years?"

Freidmann took a long breath before answering, "His moods were changeable. Before, he had always been a steady, friendly type. He was a good husband to Riana and I couldn't have asked for a better son in law. He cared deeply for her and had a healthy respect for her independence, which was something he taught me early on in our relationship.

"The days after the invasion were different. He wouldn't talk about her. He was reluctant to talk to anyone and on one occasion refused to permit me entry to the rooms in the consulate where he was staying. I put it down to grief, but looking back there may have been something more fundamental going on there."

"In your opinion, was there any way to tell what was happening to Lewis?" asked Manning.

"At that time, no," Freidmann replied, "With hindsight it might be possible to work it out, but at the time he seemed to be grieving. The only warning bell was that last conversation, but by then it was too late."

"Thank you for your testimony. No more questions."

Manning turned and made his way back to his seat, glancing at Henderick as he passed. The prosecution counsellor was making no move to rise and question the ambassador, but nor was he stating that he had no questions. Instead, he was furiously writing on a datapad.

Kerah finally broached the question after a few moments, "Mr Henderick, do you wish to cross-examine?"

Henderick looked up from his writing and glanced around the court, "No, your honour. I feel that this witness' testimony is largely irrelevant. I do not wish to cross-examine."

Kerah raised a finely sculpted eyebrow, "You feel that the testimony is irrelevant? In what way?"

Henderick laid his datapad down before replying, "Ambassador Henderick is no more than another character witness who has been paraded out to tell us how wonderful Tarklin was: the doting son in law and his healthy respect for his wife. I feel that this tribunal would better be served by looking at the crimes he committed both before, during and after his marriage to the ambassador's daughter. Simply my humble opinion, your honour."

Freidmann's face was red in anger, "You sanctimonious son of a—"

"*Silence!*" roared Kerah, hammering her gavel for the first time during this tribunal. "Order in the court please! Ambassador, outbursts of that fashion are not welcome in this court, thank you."

Freidmann, however, was still furious, "That man, with all due respect, your honour, is an overambitious weasel—"

Again, the judge hammered the gavel down onto the bench, "*Enough!* Your opinion of the counsellor is duly noted and logged. It is, however, irrelevant to the course of this tribunal! Now silence yourself or I will have you removed!"

Freidmann, still glowering under his heavy brows, gained the upper hand on his emotions and visibly calmed himself, "Understood. My apologies."

"Thank you. Ambassador, you may stand down," stated Kerah coldly, watching as the grieving ambassador thanked her and returned stiffly to his seat, studiously ignoring the smug glance that Henderick threw his way. "Are there any more witnesses?" she asked. Both counsellors replied that there were not. "In that case we shall proceed to the summations. Mr Henderick, present your summary."

Henderick again lifted his datapad and took the stand himself, "There is a simple outcome to this tribunal. The facts are clear for all to see. Tarklin destroyed twenty-seven innocent ships and killed over a hundred innocent lives. To do this he used illegal weaponry. Those are the facts."

"Yes, Tarklin is suffering from a mental illness. No proof has been brought to this court that this illness is the cause of the rampage that Tarklin embarked on. The origins of the mental illness cannot be clarified. In any case, the illness or cause is not at issue. Illness or no, Tarklin pulled the trigger that snuffed out these lives. In addition, the fitting of illegal weaponry was done before the illness took hold – in the case of the majority of the weaponry many years prior to the events being blamed on the illness. His best friend claims that he was justified in fitting this weaponry because then he could kill more efficiently. How wide is the line between killing through necessity and killing for desire? "Maybe that should be taken into account before deciding how severely Commander Tarklin should be punished." He leaned forward on the podium and addressed the bench and the assembled witnesses, "The prosecution presses for the severest penalty that can be meted out for piracy. Commander Tarklin should be stripped of all possessions and status and marooned. There he should be left to his own devices to survive or die as is his right."

"The prosecution rests."

Kerah nodded once, making a note on her own datapad, "And the case for the defence?"

Manning now took the stand, "Thank you, your honour. My colleague here talks about the facts. There are many aspects of the facts that are glossed over by his summation."

"Fact: Lewis Tarklin was mentally incapable of telling the difference between what was real and what was fantasy during the time the so-called murders were committed."

"Fact: Whether those killings were committed with illegal weaponry is beside the point. The penalty would be the same no matter what weaponry was used."

"Fact: Tarklin's friends and family testify, both here and in the written depositions, that acts of piracy and murder are not in his nature."

"Thus I put it to you that the defendant's actions were not his own during the time when the murders were committed. The matter of the illegal weapons is a different case, and should be judged independently, but I move that the crime of murder is not one that was committed knowingly or willingly."

"The defence requests that the charges of murder be set aside in this case. We also request that the service record of Commander Tarklin and the services he has rendered to GalCop be considered when considering the charges brought regarding illegal weaponry."

"The defence rests."

As Manning stood down from the podium, Kerah looked up from her notes, "Thank you, counsellors. Are there any other statements that should be heard?"

Ambassador Freidmann stood, "Yes, your honour. I have been asked to present the case of a party that could not be heard here today."

At this, Henderick spun to look at the ambassador, his face once more stony with suppressed emotion. Kerah nodded and motioned for Freidmann to approach, "Very well, please retake the stand, Ambassador, and remember you are still under oath."

Freidmann nodded as he once again took the stand, "Noted. I bring a prepared statement from the government of the planet Ausis, which I will now read." He took a datapad from a pocket inside his jacket. "Members of the court, greetings. We are greatly interested in the future of Commander Lewis Tarklin, who we understand is to be tried for various counts of murder and possession of illegal hardware. Although we respect and understand the laws and mandates of the Galactic Co-operative, we cannot in all good conscience, stand by and abandon one who has done so much for our world.

"GalCop brings stability to our economy and aids us in many ways during this time, when we are rebuilding after this attack on our world. However, if it were not for the intervention of one man, this planet would likely now be a wasted lump of rock, blasted clean by the Thargoids. Commander Tarklin played an unforgettable part in minimising the damage to Ausis. Indeed, many on our world and in our government are stating that he single-handedly changed the course of the invasion by destroying the annexed Coriolis and cutting the size of the Thargoid invasion force to a fraction of its former power, allowing our forces to deal with the remnant without fear of reinforcement.

"In this spirit we request that this be taken into account when sentence is passed over Commander Tarklin in regards to the possession of the weaponry that allowed him to perform the heroic acts which were here witnessed. It would be regrettable that his life be cut short or impaired as a punishment for actions which indirectly resulted in the saving of our world, and overly harsh punishment for this would necessitate a review of our world's position regarding membership of such a severe body.

"We hope that these words will reach the ears of an understanding and sympathetic organisation.

"In peace we bid you farewell."

"The document is signed by the five members of Ausis' ruling council."

The close of this statement heralded the start of murmured comments from everyone in the room. Even the judges were looking at each other with expressions of surprise at the content of this message. Through it all, Freidmann stood calmly at the podium, replacing the pad in his jacket and glancing at Henderick to return the smug look from earlier.

This glance brought action to Henderick's anger, "I object to this!" he roared at the diplomat as he shot to his feet.

"You *can't* object to this," spat the ambassador, "It is a diplomatic message sent via the diplomatic corps to this courtroom. It is non-negotiable and *must* be submitted as a deposition. Its content must also be taken into consideration."

"This court does not take kindly to threats, Mr Freidmann," said Judge Kerah.

Freidmann shook his head, "It is not a threat. It is a diplomatic request."

Kerah and Freidmann, both civil servants in GalCop, each met each other's gaze for a long moment. Many things may have passed between them in that look, but neither one of them looked away. It was Kerah who broke the silence, "Thank you, Mr. Freidmann. You may step down. Please present the message to the clerk before returning to your seat." Freidmann nodded once and obliged, "Has all evidence and testimony now been made?" asked Kerah.

"Yes, your honour," replied Manning.

"Yes," said Henderick curtly, his expression still one of rage. Kerah said nothing and did not move, her icy glare directed straight at the prosecution counsel. Eventually, Henderick gave the proper response, "Yes, your honour." Kerah kept his gaze a few moments longer, leaving him in no doubt as to her opinion of his defiance. Again she addressed the court at large, "Does anyone here present have any further testimony to make?" When no-one replied, she raised her gavel again, "I call this tribunal closed pending a verdict," she said, hammering it once on the bench before rising and leading the other two judges out.

The Clerk stood and addressed the remnants, "This court is now in recess. All parties please retire to the waiting chamber, where you will be called once a verdict has been reached." With that, he sat down again and resumed his recordkeeping as the participants in the tribunal filed out past the guard on the door.

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One hour and thirty-six minutes after the recess began, the members of the tribunal retook their seats as the judges filed in and took their places behind the bench. Henderick's face was still a picture of anger, but it seemed he had managed to regain the majority of his composure. Judge Kerah carried a datapad which she carefully set

down on the bench before seating herself, sparing a single, brief glare for Henderick to ensure that he was behaving appropriately. The clerk, still standing, announced, "This court is now in session, Judges Quint, DeSont and Kerah presiding."

Kerah was the first to speak, "As designated spokesperson of this court, I am authorised to pass the verdict of this tribunal. This verdict is final and binding." She took a deep breath before continuing, "I would describe this tribunal as an emotional one. Many aspects of it are difficult to judge. The individual involved is one who is mentally ill as a result of acts on those around him and on his place of residence. This makes it difficult to ascertain motive, if indeed there is any. The medical evidence states clearly that Commander Tarklin was not capable of rational thought or deed during his reign of terror, and that he should be deemed not responsible for his actions.

"In other matters there is far more clarity. He was found in possession of illegal and outlawed equipment in direct contravention to the GalCop charter for independent pilots. The intervention of the Ausis government is not appreciated at the stage it was introduced, and it has been noted that the wording of the 'request' reads more like a demand, and this also is unappreciated.

"As a result, the following verdict has been reached. It should be here noted that the verdict was not unanimous.

"The charges have been broken down for the purpose of assignation of guilt and sentencing. The counts of murder, piracy, theft, kidnapping, resisting arrest and abuse of Navy personnel will be counted as one charge, since they deal with all of Commander Tarklin's acts whilst allegedly mentally unstable. The counts of possession of illegal weaponry and equipment will be counted as one charge and dealt with outside the remit of Tarklin's mental abilities.

"For the charges of possession of illegal equipment, it is the judgement of this triumvirate that Commander Tarklin's guilt is inviolate. The equipment was fitted with the fullness of his knowledge and willingness. Sentence will be passed on this charge.

"For the remaining charges of murder, piracy and related acts, it is the judgement of this triumvirate that Commander Lewis Tarklin was mentally incapacitated during this time, and as such is not guilty of the crimes as put forward. However, questions raised as to the future mental competence of Commander Tarklin have been noted, and a sentence will be passed on this charge.

"In considering sentencing, a number of issues have to be taken into account. Not least of these is that Tarklin's actions have saved millions on the planet Ausis, and that without the equipment he possessed this would not have been possible. This court cannot condone the possession of illegal equipment and it must be noted here that any sentence passed here will *not* set a precedent. The 'request' made by the Ausis government has also been taken into account. Testimony and written deposition by the medical team caring for Commander Tarklin has been considered carefully, particularly where it refers to the likelihood of Commander Tarklin's full recovery.

"As such, the following sentence has been levied: Commander Tarklin will be stripped of all assets and financial gain from his career, including his ship and all fitments inside. These will be scrapped and sold, and the profits will be distributed amongst those affected by his actions during the events of October 3132 to January 3133.

"Commander Tarklin will be stripped of all rights and privileges granted to a pilot and combateer of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds and the Elite Federation of Pilots. His Elite status is hereby revoked as is his flight status.

"Commander Tarklin will be grounded on Lave for an indeterminate period of time until the medical team declare that he is fit to return to citizenship on this world. At that time he will be permitted to retake his flight and combat exams and, if passed, be eligible to return to space."

Henderick, incensed, shot to his feet, "Your honour, I object! This is a travesty!"

Kerah brought her gavel down heavily on the table, her expression far angrier than Henderick's, "*Silence!*" she screamed, a noise so loud and intense that Henderick's eyes widened in shock and the clerk swore he heard the walls creak – he idly wondered how many exclamation points to put after that outburst in the transcript. "Lest you forget, Mr Henderick," continued Kerah in a more reasonable tone, but still one laced with fire, "this judgement is *final*, and you have *no* say in the outcome! You have made your case, as has Mr Manning. This judgement is based on both of your presentations and the witness presentations. Now kindly allow me to present the verdict of the triumvirate. Any further interruptions and you will be removed. Is that clear?"

"Crystal clear, your honour. My apologies," replied Henderick in a relatively subdued voice.

With one final glare at the prosecutor, Kerah continued, "Once declared mentally fit and fully recovered, Mr Tarklin will be eligible to take the flight and combat exams again and, if passed, be eligible to return to his career with the status of a new graduate. That is, he will be granted a GalCop trade ship and insurance contract, 100 Credits and the Elite Federation status of Harmless.

"Mr Tarklin will be required to report to Dr. Fuller every three months for two years for an evaluation of his condition whether or not he is spaceborne. Failure to fulfil this requirement will result in capture and incarceration. Any resistance will be met with a dead-or-alive warrant being issued both on Lave and in GalCop space.

"If Mr Tarklin does resume his life in space, certain equipment requirements will be made, which will be listed in a supplementary document that the clerk will issue once it has been completed. Amongst the conditions will be a

mandate that any ship being used will have a fully functioning AI system and that any modifications to the hull or equipment should be requested and authorised with the GalCop Judicial Office before being implemented.

"If, after two years, Mr Tarklin is given a clean bill of health, these restrictions will be lifted, but the fitting of further illegal equipment will be subject to the same legal treatment as any other infringement of this law." Kerah cast her eye over those present. Henderick was livid, his face rapidly approaching purple. He was a capable counsel, and had a good record in criminal cases on a bigger scale to this one, but his style was unsuitable for this sort of tribunal. He was not taking this result well. Manning, however, was a picture of calm, with only a small smile betraying the fact that he obviously felt the result was better than expected. Manning was a new face to the Judicial Department, and he had a decorum about him that would be an asset to him once a bit of experience was gained.

Kerah hammered her gavel one more time to close the proceedings. "This is the judgement of this tribenary hearing. Court is adjourned."

As the judges filed out once more, the clerk got to his feet and made the last announcement. "This tribunal is adjourned. Documentation and transcripts will be made available in two standard days, and copies will be available on GalNet one week later. Thank you for your co-operation and attendance." With that, he once again took his seat as the assembled participants left. The clerk took his seat again to finish the transcript, and once done, he closed the administration console and made to stand. He was taken by surprise by the sight of Ambassador Freidmann still seated where he had been for the duration of the day's events. "Ambassador," he said softly, "you must leave now, the next case will be here in an hour."

Freidmann lifted his heavy eyes to meet the soft brown ones of the clerk. "He saved her, you know," he said softly. "She died, but still he saved her. He took her away from it all and in a strange way, whilst he was out there with her, she was still alive to him."

The clerk put a companionable hand on the ambassador's shoulder. "She's still alive in your heart, sir," said the clerk gently, "Maybe your son in law took that a bit further than the norm."

Heinrich Freidmann, the man who had negotiated the joining of Ausis into GalCop, and had brought peace to warring factions in space and planetside, began to weep like a child as he slowly fell into the arms of the non-plussed clerk.

\* \* \*

### **Jameson Memorial Hospital, Ashoria, Lave, 9<sup>th</sup> February 3133**

The hospital room was a fair size, with a large bay window overlooking the hospital grounds. A figure stood alone by the window, looking out over a vista that probably only he could see. Due to the nature of his illness, the emerald fields of the plains beyond Ashoria City were probably perceived as a blasted alien plain infested with insectoid life. That said, the doctors were hopeful that his perceptions were slowly coming back.

The outer door to the room hissed open and a man entered. He was tall and dark, with a closely cropped shock of dark hair crowning a face with one line for each man he had sent into battle against the enemy he shared with the patient in that room.

To General Aaron Tarklin, commander of the Galactic Navy forces currently engaged with the Thargoid Fleet in Sectors 40 to 43, his son looked gaunt and frail.

The doctors had told him that he must stay outside the inner glassteel partition. His son looked so close, yet so far away. "Lewis," he called.

Lewis Tarklin's head snapped up at the sound and he began to turn. His eyes were rimmed with darkness and seemed to be sunken into his head – an effect of the sleepless nights waiting for something to come for him as they had come for his wife. His mouth was twisted into a mocking grin. "So, you've come back. I knew you would."

Aaron sighed. So it was true then, his son no longer recognised even his family. "Son, I'm sorry I took so long to get here. The bugs just..." He tailed off as the sneer began to widen on his son's face – a face that the General was accustomed to seeing as happy, or excited or even angry, but never twisted in hate like this. He turned to leave and reached his arm out for the plate to open the outer door.

"Wait," came a softer voice from the other side of the partition.

Aaron lowered his hand and turned. Lewis was shuffling closer to the partition, the twisted expression fading into something else. The sunken eyes blinked as he came closer. "You're...different to the rest of those scum, aren't you?" said Lewis haltingly.

Aaron's heart skipped a beat. *He recognises me!* He thought. "Yes, Lewis, I'm different. I'm not one of them, I'm one of me."

Lewis' head snapped up again and he blinked at the man opposite him. Aaron could see...something in the eyes in front of him as they darted from side to side and danced over the general's body and uniform.

Aaron touched a control panel on the wall and spoke a simple command to the staff member on the other side of the comms link, "Open the inner door."

The orderly's voice sounded softly through the tiny speaker, "Err, no, general, you shouldn't..."

"Dammit, man, do as I'm damn well telling you," he said, his voice getting no louder but becoming as hard as duralium.

After a pause, the inner door hissed and retracted inside the pocket set in the wall for it. Aaron stepped slowly through and stood before his son for the first time in years. When his wife, Cara, Lewis' mother, had contacted him, he knew that he had to be here. Lewis and he had always been close. Oh, not as close as he and his mother, but close enough for each to have a healthy respect and love for each other and their chosen careers. Now, Aaron felt a shiver go through his spine as he stood exposed to a man who had tried to kill every other person who had stood this close to him

Lewis turned to face his father, his eyes still searching, his hands clenching and unclenching as his brain told him to fight or fly. Aaron could not tell what was going through his son's mind, but he hoped he knew him well enough to guess. "Lewis, you know I'm not your enemy. Your mind knows who I am."

Lewis' nostrils flared as scents assailed them – smells that were as familiar as his own, scents that the younger man had known since he was a baby. The scent of his father. Aaron hoped that these were firing neurons in his son's head that would bring back memories of his father arriving home on leave, smelling of reconditioned air, Quirium coolant, laser ozone and the like – smells that eventually became part of you in the navy.

"Wwh...ww.." mumbled Lewis Tarklin, as conflicting messages flew around his mind. "Who...?"

"Dammit, Lewis, you know who I am! Put it together!" hissed the general.

Lewis took a step closer, his eyes darting again over the uniform and the face of his father. His eyes widened and his mouth opened.

"D...d..dad?" he said haltingly.

Aaron grinned, his heart leaping for joy. "Yes, son, it's me..."

Lewis Tarklin had taken the first step back into the real world.

\* \* \*

### **Zaonce Coriolis 1, 10<sup>th</sup> February 3133**

Agind Sereeni read the transcript again and rubbed his whiskered chin thoughtfully. His situation was desperate, he knew, and the only person he could turn to for help had just landed himself with a grounding which could last for years. He had been running for weeks now since the encounter on Zaonce Coriolis 1, and he knew he could keep running for as long as he had to, but his adversary only had to be lucky once.

Sereeni opened a comm channel and sent a quick voice message to Tarklin's public mailbox. He only hoped that GalCop didn't close his mailbox and reset it when (and if) he re-qualified. Once that was done, he checked the charge in his hand gun and stepped gingerly out of the comms suite and headed back to his ship, checking over his shoulder every step of the way...

### ***Author's notes***

Yeah, I know. It's not nearly as exciting as Broken Dreams. Sorry about that.

This story is an expansion and ground up rewrite of the first Elite story I ever wrote. It was called (imaginatively enough) The Tribunal, was written in 1989, and dealt with Tarklin's trial for possession of illegal weaponry and for attempted suicide through the grief over his wife's death in the Ausis invasion.

The result of that tribunal was that Tarklin was mindwiped, erasing all knowledge of his piloting ability and was given the same counselling mandate that he received in this version of the story, but in this case to ensure he didn't try to kill himself again.

Since then, I've gone off the idea of mindwiping – it's a bit extreme and scientifically dodgy, and so many more character traits are available without it. With the writing of Broken Dreams, which was the first time I ever tried to characterise Tarklin before the tribunal, I introduced the concept of severe mental illness, so Tarklin would probably not be fit to be present at his tribunal in this rewrite. This never presented a problem, since during the original story he said about two words, hence the format of this version was put together.

It's very wordy. It's all exposition, and that worried me – nearly the whole thing is speech. The tribunal is a pivotal point in Tarklin's life, though, and introduces a few characters that will be important later in Tarklin's life, so the story was important to tell.

Hey, if you like courtroom drama, then you might like this – I don't think it's my best work, but it'll do. It's definitely better than the original version!

The next instalment, Eyes in the Dark, will be more action packed, I promise.