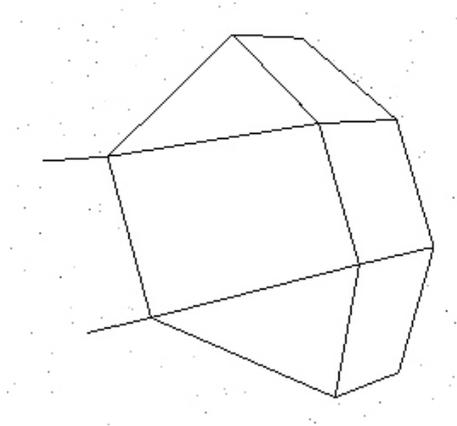# ELITE
THE TARKLIN LEGACY

CHAPTER
3

FRIENDS IN DEED
by Dave Hughes

Prologue

The caretaker wiped the rainwater from his eyes and swore as he repacked the earth around the newly planted bush. The gardens of Holdstock Plaza, the headquarters of the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds, were his charge, and one that he took very seriously. Come rain, hail, snow or shine, he was there, making sure that the planet's single busiest tourist attraction was looking its best. He was currently preparing the Remembrance Clock for the start of the summer season, replacing the spring flowers for summer blooms. This year he had a marvellous red, black and gold display planned to grace the entrance path, and he was having difficulty lining up the rows in this downpour.

A deeper shadow fell over him, and he looked up to see a man standing on the path behind him, looking into the garden. He was of medium build, slightly taller than average, with short dark brown hair plastered to his head with the rain. The caretaker stood and saw that the man's azure blue eyes were gazing sadly into the garden. He wore simple black trousers and a dark brown jacket over a black shirt covered his lean frame. The jacket bore the simple white metal badge of a GalCop spacer. In his hand he carried a white plasfilm envelope with the blue caduceus of the GCW Medical Division emblazoned on it. "You looking for something?" he asked the stranger.

The man glanced across sharply, meeting the gardener's gaze with a stern, firm look. "I was just visiting a marker," he said, referring to the plethora of remembrance markers or all shapes and sizes in the gardens.

The caretaker looked closer at the man and recognised him. He had been a regular visitor to the gardens over the last few months, but had only ever been there with other people – usually medical staff – and normally in the morning. "Hey, I know you," he said in a moderately friendly tone. "They finally let you out?"

The figure was silent for a long moment. "Yes," he eventually said. "I'm free to go."

"You going to go anywhere in particular?"

Again, there was a silence. "Back out there, I suppose," the man murmured, flicking his head upwards towards the heavens and the vast reaches of the space beyond. "There's not much left for me anywhere else."

The caretaker knew this man's history – not many people on Lave hadn't heard the story, especially since the news stations had covered his capture and trial. Former Elite combateer Lewis Tarklin, who saved the planet Ausis from a Thargoid invasion then lost his mind, embarking on a killing spree, imagining that the ships he was destroying were all Thargoids and imagining that his dead wife was beside him all the way.

When he had been captured, he had been tried for piracy and murder, only to be acquitted due to his mental state and given a relatively light sentence thanks to testimony from the Ausis government. Many had spoken out about the reduced sentence, citing that murder was murder, and the criminally insane should be subject to the same treatment as the rest of the 'killers' out there. William Henderick, the counsellor tasked with presenting the case against Tarklin, had led the charge.

All that had been six months ago, and the public outcry had died down after only a few weeks. Now, no-one really cared much about Tarklin and what he was doing. No-one would much care what happened to him from now on either. The caretaker himself felt that no punishment could have been as bad as what the man had already gone through. Now, looking at him face to face at the end of his treatment, the caretaker could see very little evidence of anything resembling happiness. His eyes were haunted and empty. He watched as, without another word, Tarklin walked on into the garden. Carrying on his work, the caretaker watched as Tarklin knelt down before a holomarker, his head bowed. He stayed there, practically immobile, for nearly half an hour before rising and walking out of the garden, passing the caretaker without a word.

The caretaker continued to work for nearly ten minutes before curiosity overcame him and he stood to walk over to the marker. It was a simple, small marker, dwarfed by some of the others around it. It projected a single angel in flight, flying in a circle around the emitter in the oblong base. On the base was a brass plate engraved with a simple message:

RIANA FREIDMANN TARKLIN

YOU LOVED LIFE

BUT DIED FOR NOTHING

I MISS YOU

A small receptacle was build into the base, and in there were two shining objects. The caretaker lifted them out and studied them. One was a golden depiction of the GalCop symbol, the Robotic Avian, with the word ELITE emblazoned across the widest arms. It was given only to Elite combateers, and was a record of their achievements. Each badge was unique, made by artisans to reflect the career and personality of the pilot who had earned it, and within was a chip containing the service and kill record of that pilot. Disposing of the badge was an offence, but in Tarklin's case it meant only one thing – he had been stripped of his Elite status. The other item was a white metal finger ring, plain and unadorned: a wedding ring.

Part 1

The plain stonewall façade of the Cowell & MgRath office in Lave's capital city belies the sheer volume of operations that are centred there. From this small Ashoria-based office turn the wheels that propel the manufacture and distribution of spaceships to all corners of the Co-operative. Tarklin stepped into the doorway, out of the pounding rain, and beheld the hub of activity within: a single curved desk with a middle-aged woman perched behind it. The air reeked of anticlimax.

Tarklin approached the desk and handed the woman the envelope he was carrying. "My name's Tarklin," he said. "I'm here to collect a ship."

The woman opened the envelope and drew out the document inside. It was a copy of Tarklin's qualification certificate as a pilot and combateer. With it, Tarklin was starting again as a rookie pilot with a combat rating of Harmless. No longer was he an Elite combateer or a respected pilot. He was Commander Lewis Tarklin, lunatic and murderer of children. The woman glanced up at him, no doubt comparing his face to the holopic on the certificate, and in her eyes was the look that he was so accustomed to. Disdain. Disapproval of the psychopath that can walk so coolly amongst decent people. She passed the certificate back to Tarklin and motioned to a door set into the rear wall of the office. "Mr Hendry is expecting you," she said coldly. "Through there then first door on the left."

Tarklin strode to the door, which hissed open in front of him. A couple of metres down the hall was a door bearing a name plate: SIMMON HENDRY: DEPUTY OPERATIONS MANAGER. He pushed the buzzer and the door immediately hissed open. The familiar red-haired figure of Simmon Hendry sat behind a small wooden desk that was covered in sheets of plasfilm. As soon as he saw Tarklin enter, he grinned and turned quickly to the small

videocomm screen on his desk. "Sorry, Drew, someone important just came in – I'll call you back later," he said before slamming the lid down. "Lewis!" he exclaimed, standing and greeting Tarklin enthusiastically in the doorway. Tarklin had to admit that in the decade or so he had known Hendry the man very rarely did anything with less than his full enthusiasm. To Tarklin's surprise, Hendry pushed him back out of the door and into the main reception again. "Carlene," he called to the receptionist, "call the spaceport and have my shuttle prepared for launch, please."

Hendry took Tarklin to the back of the building, where he practically bundled him into his car. "Would you like to let me in on where we're going?" he asked.

Hendry grinned again, "Of course! We're going to get you kitted out with a nice new ship." Hendry thought for a moment. "Actually, it's more of a second hand ship, but I'm sure you'll like it."

"You're taking me personally?"

"Only the best service for the best customers!" Hendry laughed, smoothing down his beard, "You've had a bad time of it recently, so it's the least I can do for an old friend."

The ride to the spaceport was frustration exemplified. Hendry would say nothing about the ship, dismissing all questions with a dismissive wave and a sly chuckle. Instead, he talked about how his career in Cowell & MgRath had progressed (he was now supervising Cobra hull manufacture teams) and how things on Lave had changed since Tarklin left for the stars. He mentioned how impressed he had been to hear that Tarklin had made Elite, and how distressed he had been to hear that he had been accused of piracy.

"I read what you did for me at the tribunal," Tarklin said quietly. "I wanted to thank you for it."

Hendry shook his head. "No need – I've known you longer than anyone in this city and someone needed to fight your corner. It was worth it to score some cheap points against that sanctimonious bastard Hendrick. Mind you, if I'd known that you had the support of the entire Ausis government, I might have stayed at home!" Hendry glanced sidelong at Tarklin, his face now more serious. "How are you now anyway?"

"I'm apparently as good as any hospital treatment is going to get me. The psychologists say that getting back into the outside world is the next step."

"That's good progress, Lewis. You were pretty ill there for a while – you had a lot of us worried."

"I was seeing Thargoids everywhere, Simmon," Tarklin said sharply. "I was more than 'pretty ill'!"

Hendry asked about Tarklin's family and if he had been to see them since he returned. Tarklin replied that he had seen them a few times, both at his mother's home in New South and at the hospital. Four months after an initial visit to the hospital following the trial, his father had even spared a few more precious hours of leave from the Navy to visit his wayward son in hospital and tell him how disappointed he was in him. General Aaron Tarklin had, however, wished his son a good recovery and even embraced him before departing.

"You see," Hendry had said, "the thing about your dad has always been that he can't relate to anyone not in uniform. You stick your flight suit on, it would make him more at ease with you!"

"Did you hear about what he did after the tribunal?"

Hendry nodded seriously, "Yeah, that was...deep."

They referred to the fact that as soon as the good General had heard that his son was suffering delusions, he had made the trip back from the front line to see what he could do. He had risked a lot by entering the same room as his son and just standing there. Tarklin remembered the oddity of that encounter, when his brain had been screaming at him to run or rend the carapace from the Thargoid who he could see before him, but then a memory overwhelmed that image and suddenly he thought he could see his father. There were smells assaulting his senses, telling his mind that this was no ordinary Thargoid in front of him. For the briefest of seconds, Tarklin saw his father before him in uniform, then the image became stronger, and for the first time, doubt came into his mind about what he was seeing. He had called for his father, and his father was there – tentatively reaching out to his son. Lewis responded, and his recovery had begun in earnest from that point on.

They sat in companionable silence for the last few minutes of the journey, bringing them to the terminal building for the Ashoria Spaceport. He didn't have much of a chance to appreciate the building, since the car descended almost immediately into the underground parking bays. They parked up and rode the elevator to the terminal. Hendry strode to the main desk and flashed a card at a staff member who nodded and buzzed them through a door behind him. On the way, Hendry explained to Tarklin that the shipyard had a private contract for transport from planet to space, and had their own shuttle. True enough, the passageway ended at a windowed door which showed an orbit shuttle beyond. They embarked, and Hendry fired up the little ship. Only minutes later, after clearance had been granted, Hendry powered the shuttle through the atmosphere. Once the rich blue of the sky had darkened to the blackness of space, Hendry wheeled the ship around and hit the acceleration thrusters. "That's us on the way – just a few minutes to the station."

Sure enough, it felt like no time before the slowly spinning shape of a Coriolis station appeared on the screen. Cowell & MgRath's main shipyard was in a Coriolis station in position far above Lave's northern polar icecap. It was here that the company's main Cobra manufacturing plant was located, and it was here that they were headed. Hendry deftly piloted the little shuttle towards it, lining it up with the docking slit and matching roll perfectly as they passed through the egress. To Tarklin's surprise there was no transit to a docking bay – the shuttle simply passed into the spacious interior of the station. "Welcome," Hendry said, "to the construction yard."

Part 2

Inside the station there were dozens of construction frames. Most of them contained ships in various stages of being built and all of them were lit by powerful lights. Construction modules zipped around like fireflies, some carrying components in their claw-like arms. Hendry weaved through the network with a practiced hand. "Lewis, we had a fair bit of notice that you would be wanting a ship, you know," he said. "That gave me time to put a few things into motion. I pulled a few strings and managed to source you something special."

Hendry grinned as he wheeled the shuttle around to face a nearby construction frame which held a Cobra Mk III in its arms. "I had to do a lot of the work myself and make sure that the original specification was met, but I think you will find this ship somewhat...familiar."

As they closed, he began to make out the features of the ship. It lurked there, low and wide, with the front facet reflecting the lights from the construction frame. The tapered shape of the 'wings' gave it more an impression of a bird in flight than the serpentine creature it had been named for. Tarklin had always loved the shape of the Cobra. It was a sleek, graceful looking ship, hiding a deadly combat effectiveness under its low slung profile. The last decade of his life had been spent flying one of them and pursuing many others in combat, so he knew every line and facet of the hull. There was the spine of the ship, the central hump beneath which lay the cargo bay. There was the front panel, with the forward laser assembly barely visible above the sensor tube. The shuttle angled round to the Cobra's port side, and the ship's nameplate was just visible on the rearmost panel. Tarklin could see writing on the panel, which was strange – most new ships were nameless until the pilot boarded and decided on a name. Tarklin looked over at Hendry, who had a small, quiet smile on his face. "It took a lot of fast talking, Lewis," he said. Tarklin turned back to the sight through the front viewport, and could now read the nameplate: LEGACY.

Silence commanded the cabin for a long moment, then Tarklin spoke. "That must have taken a lot of work."

Hendry nodded, "She was under a strict decommissioning order. It took weeks to convince the Judicial department that I could strip the ship clean within budget. They checked *everything*."

A wide range of emotions were coursing through Tarklin at seeing this ship. It was the ship he had reached Elite status in – the ship he had equipped with all manner of illegal and dangerous items. It was the ship in which he had flown to Ausis to find Riana, and it was the ship he had taken to after her death, still convinced she was alive and well despite her cryo-suspended body being sealed in one of the cryopods to the rear of the bridge. The TradeShip *Legacy* held a lot of memories, not all of which were good ones. "I appreciate it, Simmon," he said, laying a hand on his friend's shoulder, "I really do."

Hendry turned to look at Tarklin. His face looked drawn and tight, and his eyes were glassy. "Lewis, was this not a good idea?"

Tarklin sighed and shook his head. "It's just that there are a few...bad memories...on that ship." He stopped as he saw Hendry's face pale. "No, it's nothing important – there are far more good memories than bad." He took a breath and collected his thoughts, pushing the memories to the back of his mind. "So, Simmon, what did you leave me in the girl?"

Simmon smiled. "Well, obviously I had to rip out all of the junk that you installed. It took some doing to get rid of that frenium cooling booster you installed – you must have wired that into just about every single component. It was quite a piece of work too."

Tarklin shrugged non-committally, "It's a simple concept," he said.

Hendry stared at his friend in shock. "Simple? You managed to install a storage bottle and flow regulator to pipe frenium – a radioactive liquid – safely around your conduit system! Without damaging the lining of the pipework *or* exposing yourself to a fatal dose in the process!"

"All I did was to flush the whole system with heptapolymer and allutium so that none of the liquid would ever touch the pipe joints. It protected the metal against the corrosion that frenium can cause."

Simmon threw his hands up in mock frustration. "See? This is why I hated living with you during university. You actually paid attention to the stuff you were being taught!! I bet you went and learned all this on your own, didn't you?" Tarklin shrugged and nodded. Hendry had to laugh. "Well, at least you're consistent – even after all you've been through." Hendry went on to outline that he had stripped most of the equipment out of the ship, including the entire weapons control system once it was found that the energy cannon assembly had melted most of the control circuits. Even the cloaking device, a piece of technology that Tarklin had received from the Navy as a reward, had been stripped. Simmon explained that the version in Tarklin's possession was obsolete anyway, and that new scanner tech had beaten it whilst he had been living on Ausis.

As Hendry spoke, he brought the shuttle to a perfect dock with the dorsal airlock and powered down the systems. He shut down the systems and beckoned Tarklin to the airlock door. "After you, Commander," he said.

Tarklin took a deep breath and keyed the lock open. Both doors hissed apart, and air from the Cobra's bridge rushed into the central space in the airlock. Tarklin stepped through, using the pivot bar to align himself with the bigger ship's gravity field before dropping down. He took a hesitant breath. The air was sterile and clean – there was no hint of the air he remembered from the last time he had been on this bridge. *Why would there be?* he thought to himself. It had been over six months since he had last been here.

He looked around as Hendry dropped to the floor behind him. The bridge layout was familiar: the central console, the co-pilot's station, the command chair, the door to the living areas at the rear. The co-pilot's seat was nowhere to be seen, presumably stored in the equipment lockers. The actual machinery was different. The viewscreen was larger and the main console was easier to read and see. The controls on the command chair were laid out differently, and the cover on the cushions was blue, not the brown he remembered. "I take it the systems have been upgraded?" he asked.

Simmon smiled as he strode over to the command console. "Yes, they have. Any new ship coming off the line must have the latest hardware," he explained. "Just because the Legacy is a refit doesn't mean she gets excepted from that rule." He flicked a switch and there was a flicker of the lights and a rising hum from the ship. "She's on internal power now," he reported. "All new systems for you, including 32-bit hi-res viewscreens, hi-definition A500 cameras on all angles, advanced power management systems and a more advanced flight control computer. All of the engineering systems are now controllable from the bridge, and all systems now receive voice print commands from any location on board ship. You'll also notice that the default viewscreen image is now computer enhanced realtime instead of augmented outlines. Not before time, if you ask me."

"Is that it?" asked Tarklin.

"Pretty much," Hendry replied. "Most of the rest of the systems are outlined in the flight training manual. There is one thing I have to mention though. The AI circuit on your ship's computer is fitted with a tamper switch. The judicial department have ordered that your ship must have an active AI until you've completed your probation."

"You're kidding," Tarklin sighed. He had never been fond of AI circuits. The Artificial Intelligence was supposed to provide company for lone pilots, but Tarklin had never liked the idea of a programmed personality sharing his life. It seemed false somehow. He had to admit, though, that an active AI would have prevented the rampage he had embarked upon nearly a year ago. "Fair enough then."

Hendry smiled, "Oh, but you'll like this one," he said. "Lewis Tarklin, meet Adelie."

There was a silence, then a quiet feminine voice made a sound like the clearing of a throat. "Hello, Lewis."

"Give me a status report on the ship, Adelie." Tarklin said.

Simmon chuckled to himself as the computer gave its new owner the lowdown on the ship's condition. When it had finished, Tarklin turned to his mirth-ridden friend. "What's so funny?"

"You are. Straight to business. You and synthetic lifeforms have never seen eye to eye."

"Would you rather I developed a relationship with a computer, Simmon?" asked Tarklin hotly. "Should I form a bond? Love my ship? Maybe use it to replace the relationships with real people I have lost?"

"Whoa, Lew," said Hendry quickly, holding up both hands in supplication, "I take your point. I didn't mean anything by it."

"I know," said Tarklin, taking a deep breath. "I've always disabled AIs for a reason, just in case they grow on me just as I have to abandon ship. Plus, I've never been very keen on my ship telling me how it wants to be flown. It's always seemed somehow...wrong."

Hendry sighed. "Well, sorry, old friend, but GalCop orders stand with this one – it's programmed to keep an eye on you and stop you from making any 'unauthorised modifications' to your ship. I should warn you too, it's programmed to intervene if it thinks you are putting lives at risks with your actions."

Tarklin frowned. "Even if I defend myself?"

"No, just if you put friendly ships under the laser."

"So GalCop is watching me, huh?"

Hendry gave an apologetic smile. "I'm afraid so." He put a friendly hand on Tarklin's shoulder. "Look, it's only for a couple of years max," he said. "Once you get the medical all clear, the locks will be lifted."

Tarklin frowned. "So what else is new on this crate then?"

Hendry punched his friend on the shoulder, "This 'crate' is all that stands between you and a lonely death in space, Lew, treat her with respect. He led the pilot to the cargo section of the ship and showed off the new layout of the bay. The new model autoshuttles were stowed in a recessed bay to each side of the huge bay, and allowed the pilot access to the cockpit through the top of the hull instead of the side, maximising the available space for cargo. The shuttles were designed for transfer between ships sitting close to each other in space, sparing the need for docking clamps and mating airlocks. However, recent developments in universal airlocks had made vast improvements in those areas, making them both viable as ship-ship transfer methods. Many Cobra pilots removed one or both autoshuttles, leaving more room for cargo or equipment – the Legacy's original number 2 shuttle had been removed when he added the energy cannon, the space being used for the weapon's huge recharge capacitors.

From the cargo bay, Hendry took his friend to the engineering section, where the manual controls for the engines were located. The long bulkhead hid the compartment where the hyperdrive and system drive components were located, as were the shield generators and the fuel tanks. A bulge in the middle of the section, complete with steps over, showed where the siphons for a fuel scoop would be housed once fitted. A single viewscreen showed an image of the interior, overlaid with status information. At the moment it showed very little save temperature and containment information since the drives were powered down, but when the ship was in operation the screen would

show a wealth of data about the ship's performance. Hendry told him that he could now control the navigational computer from here too, as well as control the ship's life support and weapons systems. With a bit of practice it would be possible to fly the ship from here as long as there was a feed from the main navigational viewscreen matrix.

Hendry's tour concluded with the living section, where not much had changed: the RelaxaPads were the newest model incorporating exercise programs, the comms array now had an interface to in the sleeping area and the holotainment system was now total immersion, with cutouts for safety and ship business. From there they headed back to the bridge, where Hendry prepared to head back to his shuttle. "It's all yours, Lewis," he said, handing over the access key, logbook and manuals. "What's your next move?"

Tarklin looked over the bridge once more and shrugged, "Start over again, I suppose," he said. "Fly the LDL Triangle for a while and build up some cash, then head further out." The LDL Triangle was the Lave-Diso-Leesti trade run: pilots ran food and wine from Lave to Diso, then machinery or computers to Leesti then minerals from Leesti to Lave then do it all over again. It was the fastest way of accruing cash in the safest area of space. Diso was the most dangerous world to navigate, but a half-decent pilot could make the run with care, and make a bit of bounty hunting cash in the process. "Once I've made enough to pay off the lease on the ship, then I'll see where the stars take me."

Hendry nodded and held a hand out to his friend, "Well, you take care of yourself, and keep an eye on your rear screens." Tarklin took the hand, and was pulled into an unexpected embrace. He patted Simmon on the back and they released. Hendry looked once more at his friend, "If you need anything, let me know. You know where I'll be."

Tarklin nodded. "How about a large cargo bay?"

Hendry laughed as he stepped into the gravity well leading to the top of the ship, "Stop by when you're ready and I'll fit it myself for cost!" he said.

Tarklin smiled and waved as Hendry ascended into the ceiling and back into his own ship. "Adelie, close the top airlock," he said sharply.

"Done, Lewis," said the computer's feminine tones as the portal hissed closed.

"Power us up for launch," he commanded, taking his seat. As the computer powered up the Kruger Lightfast engines, Tarklin used the main terminal to connect to the CorCom system and connect his ship to his old communications accounts. The viewscreen flickered to life, showing the dimly lit interior of the station. Tarklin requested launch clearance and sat back as the launch systems of the station undocked him from the maintenance arm and started moving him towards the dock. A few minutes later the Cobra was exiting the station's docking bay.

"Cobra LV-251T," came the voice of the launch controller, "You are free and clear to navigate. Mr Hendry sends his regards."

Tarklin smiled, "Thank you control, over and out," he said as he took over the controls. He wheeled the ship over and set a course for the nearest main station, arcing round the atmosphere of Lave. As he did, a sense of well-being drifted over him for the first time in months. Lave spun below him, the first planet he had seen from space since being captured, and that familiar sight told him that he was home again:

Space.

Part 3

By the time Tarklin docked at Lave Coriolis One soon after, the comms logs had finished updating, showing Tarklin had one thousand, eight hundred and ninety one messages. After deleting messages marked as news items, random information and advertising, he had eight hundred left. After deleting any messages with offensive or abusive content, he was left with seventy-two, a fact he noted with a wry snort: more evidence of the galaxy's opinion of him. He deleted any with sending dates between the Ausis invasion and his capture four months later, finally leaving twenty-six. The rest he began reading through once the docking procedure had completed.

A fair number of them were queries to how he was and where he was. Some offered support. There was even one from his uncle out at Zadies, letting him know that if he needed anything to make his way there after he was released. There were several from old friends dated just after the news of the tribunal broke, wishing him well and wishing him a speedy recovery. One, however, caught his eye:

From   : Sereeni, Agind (sereeni_a_34098.di309s.cgw)

Date   : 10-02-3133

Subject   : <NONE>

Message   :

Lewis, sorry to hear about your misfortune. Hope you recover soon. When you're back in the black, drop me a line. Frankly, my friend, I need your help. I may have made one mistake too many and I need someone I can trust to help me get out of the mess I'm in. Talk soon.

Agind Sereeni, a felinoid from Diso, had been a classmate of Tarklin's during his time learning to be a space pilot at the GalCop Academy. They had developed a close relationship, staying friends even after going their separate ways. Sereeni had never really had the makings of a combat pilot – his reactions just didn't make the grade, but his diplomatic and trading skills had been amazing. Whilst Tarklin had gone into the mercenary business with a little trading to make some cash, Sereeni had dived feet first into commerce, trading in the safe zones. It was troubling that he had managed to get himself embroiled in something that seemed to be scaring him. Frowning, Tarklin checked the rest of the messages from Sereeni, finding three more in all. As he read each one, he grew more concerned.

From   : Sereeni, Agind (sereeni_a_34098.di309s.gcw)
Date   : 08-04-3133
Subject   : <NONE>
Message   :
Look, I'm sorry to load this on you, but when you get back in space, I am definitely going to need your assistance. I've had to scrap my Cobra. I'm lying low for now in the Sorace system. Look me up. I'll let you know if anything changes.

From   : Sereeni, Agind (sereeni_a_34098.di309s.gcw)
Date   : 17-06-3133
Subject   : <NONE>
Message   :
I had to leave Sorace in a hurry. I don't know where I'm headed and I don't know if this message can be intercepted. I'll contact you when I can.

From   : Sereeni, Agind (sereeni_a_34098.di309s.gcw)
Date   : 16-06-3133
Subject   : <NONE>
Message   :
I'm in Inus. I'm sending this as an encrypted comms stream, and the record will be deleted once I've sent it. I'm flying passengers between Inus and Isanlequ for the time being, under the name of Rek Wheylan. I'd go into why I'm doing this, but I don't have long on this station – let's just say that I can't go to the police with this, it has to be you. Hope to see you soon.

Another message, sent only three days before, caught his eye too.

From   : <unnamed> (temp_33822_216.cori1.xeoner.gcw)
Date   : 22-08-3133
Subject   : <NONE>
Message   :
I hear on the grapevine you might be getting released soon. I'm now in Xeoner. I have quarters on Coriolis One. Look me up. Rek says hi. I've dumped some cash in your account – by reading this you should trigger the transaction. It should help you get to me a bit faster.

Tarklin wondered what Sereeni had gotten himself into in order to be skipping all over the galaxy under an assumed name. The last message was obviously from him too, and he was taking great pains to keep his whereabouts secret. He checked his credit balance, finding he was richer by the sum of a thousand credits – enough to get him a decent laser and get him to Xeoner, plus do a fair bit of trading on the way. "Adelie," commanded Tarklin, "calculate a course for Xeoner."

"Aye, sir," replied the computer, "course plotted, Zaonce is the first stop. Should be a couple of days travel if we don't get distracted."

Tarklin nodded. First thing to do was to upgrade the front laser. Tarklin called up the shipyard and ordered a beam laser to be fitted to the front mounting, stripping off the old pulse laser. The fitting took just over three hours, during which time Tarklin ordered a few containers of Lavian spice wine and smoked Paluberion monkfish to take to Zaonce.

Part 4

The witchspace tunnel disgorged the *Legacy* into Xeoner just over two galactic standard days later, and no sooner had it stabilised, it rolled towards the planet and leapt into jumpdrive. During the trip, Tarklin had made a few choice trade runs, and as a result he now had a ship bristling with a full complement of missiles, a front mounted military laser and pulse lasers on the other three axes. His new fuel scoop and military laser, fitted before departing Xexedi to jump here, were untested – Tarklin was looking forward to testing the latter out on the way to Xeoner's station zone.

It wasn't long before the jump drive cut out and Tarklin was greeted by a flight of three small ships. He slowed, recognising the formation of a hunter group, and waited for the blips on the scanner to turn towards him. As soon as they did, he rolled to face them and hit the accelerator, lining up the lead ship in his reticule. Adelie identified them as Sidewinders, all listed as Offenders. Tarklin smiled and pulled the trigger, sending the laser lancing out ahead of him. Mere seconds later, the centre ship exploded, and the other two peeled off to each side of the expanding cloud of debris and burning air. Tarklin wheeled the ship round and pursued the ship that had rolled to starboard. He harried it constantly, wondering (not for the first time) whether the pirate had expected a pilot listed as Poor to be on his tail so quickly. He sent quick, expert lances of laser fire out, each one impacting on the smaller ship's hull. Before long, another expanding cloud of gas marked the death of another lawbreaker. The third ship was trying to run. Tarklin smiled a grim smile, accelerated after it and targeted a missile. Soon, when he could make out the ship's markings on his screen, he launched the missile and wheeled away – he knew that Sidewinders generally were not armed with ECM systems, so he didn't need to see the ship destroyed. He turned back to face the planet and accelerated to full speed, flicking back the cover on the jump drive initiator as he watched the missile's blue blip close on the flashing blip of the pirate. Sure enough, seconds later they were replaced by two white blips as sections of the hull were all that remained of the ship. Tarklin hit the control and once more the *Legacy* leapt towards the planet.

Four more small skirmishes were swept aside in a similar way, one of them being more of a rescue, since a group of Geckos were attacking a Python freighter before Tarklin evened up the odds. Tarklin reached Xeoner Coriolis One with only minor damage to his ship and another 300 credits of bounty in his account. The station's exterior was plain and functional, reflecting the standards of the communist regime that ruled the unremarkable planet below. As he prepared to leave the ship, he retrieved his sidearm from the equipment locker. The squat, boxy laser pistol was cased in a discrete shoulder holster, which Tarklin slung across his body before putting his jacket on over it. It may have been overcaution, but Sereeni's messages had troubled him both in tone and content, and he wasn't taking any chances.

It was a low tech place, and that was again reflected by the interior of the docking bay that welcomed Tarklin as he stepped out of the airlock. It was dark, lit only by the bare minimum lighting required for most species to see. Tarklin could see why Sereeni would have chosen this station to hide on whilst he awaited Tarklin's arrival. The main access concourse between station and docking bays was adorned with propaganda for the planet below. Slogans like "Coriolis One: By the People and For the People" or "On Xeoner, government votes for YOU" were emblazoned on colourful banners depicting various statuesque men and women looking either proud or constipated, depending on one's own point of view. The station staff, all citizens of the world below as was GalCop's staffing policy, were dressed in severe grey uniforms bearing only a rectangular badge pinned to the left breast with the person's name and position. Tarklin noted with distaste that none of the staff stations had a chair – either a sign of budget constraints or the government's attitude towards staff care.

Tarklin approached the staff member standing to near-military attention at the information desk near where the concourse joined with the main station corridors. She raised an eyebrow, which was her only sign of acknowledgement. "I'm looking for Rek Wheylan," he said, "He has quarters on this station."

"Of course, sir," she snapped importantly, in a fair impression of a drill instructor's clipped voice. "Please insert your identification into the reader." Tarklin fished out his ID card and slid it into the reader, keeping hold of the card's DNA reader as the machine processed his identity and ensured his DNA matched the pattern stored on the card. "Mr…Tarklin," she read as the information appeared on her screen. "What is your business with Mr Wheylan?"

"He's an old acquaintance from my days in flight training," Tarklin answered truthfully.

The woman nodded, smiling at him for the first time, "Yes, Mr Wheylan left instructions that you were to be given his address when you arrived. He is in Apartment 14, Red Flag Apartments on this facet," she informed him, passing over a sheet of plasfilm. "Here are the directions. Enjoy your stay!"

The Red Flag Apartments were as disappointing as the amount of thought that had gone into the name. They were comprised of a row of squat, square blocks set back some yards from the main street in one of the less appealing areas of the station. Looking at the state of them, he could only guess that they were maintained in the loosest sense of the word. He walked down the line of houses until he saw number 14, then approached the door and raised his hand to press the bell. As he did, he noticed that the door was slightly ajar. He cast his eyes down to the low-tech mechanical handle and saw that it was hanging loose from the door itself. A quick glance to the door's frame revealed that it had split from the main wall with some force – clear signs that this door had been forced.

Tarklin reached under his jacket and drew his pistol, now glad that he had brought it. He thumbed the safety and felt the slight thrum of the energy coils charging. He listened carefully at the door, trying to discern if anyone was still inside. He stood to the side of the door and pushed it gently open, making sure he was well hidden from view as it creaked open. Quickly, he poked his head around the corner, glanced around and drew his head back – he saw no-one. Slower this time, he looked around. The other side of the door held a simple living area, badly decorated some time in the distant past and with worn out furniture just visible inside. A door opposite this one was half closed, and Tarklin could see nothing else beyond.

Slowly, he edged inside, stepping very softly on the textured floor covering. He checked behind the door as he rounded it, but there was no-one there: the sight of the room, however, gave him pause. The living room was a mess, with furniture overturned and belongings strewn everywhere. Tarklin carefully made his way to the opposing door and decided to take a more direct approach – he kicked the door hard enough to open it quickly and fired two shots from his gun through the doorway. Only the hiss of the charge hitting the opposing wall was heard, nothing else. The apartment seemed to be empty. Still carrying his pistol, Tarklin passed through the door into a short corridor, opposite which was a bedroom. He shoved open a third door to his left to see a tiny kitchen, and another door on the left showed a bathroom, with a small bag on the sinktop counter.

Tarklin took a deep breath and holstered the gun. Whatever had happened here, he had missed. He went to the bedroom and looked around. The bed was unmade, and an open holdall rested at the side, visible in which were several items of clothing. Next he checked the bathroom, which had only the bag on the counter, containing grooming equipment. The kitchen had nothing in it at all that could have been Sereeni's. That left only the living room. Tarklin headed back in there, surveying the mess. It looked like there had been a struggle here. Tarklin scanned the room thoroughly, looking for any traces of blood or injury. Sure enough, by the door was a splash of blood. Tarklin moved the debris around a bit with his foot and saw a severed claw, dried blood crusted around the torn knuckle. He knelt down to look closer at it, seeing that the sever was a ragged cut. Either a blunt knife or...teeth?

Tarklin took his comm pad out of his pocket and called the station police. This was beyond his knowledge. Once the call had been made he went back to the bedroom and checked the bag, removing the clothing and containers. One small box, about halfway down the contents, caught his eye. Opening it, Tarklin found three datachips inside, of a type compatible with most datapads and ships' computers. Pocketing the box, Tarklin looked through the rest of the bag and found nothing. He was just finishing replacing the stuff in the bag when the sound of commotion outside warned him that the police had just arrived.

Part 5

An hour later, Tarklin watched from the station's street as the police forensic teams got to work inside the apartment. He had given his statement and his word that he hadn't touched anything. He had been searched and examined by the forensic teams when they arrived. They hadn't asked about the little box of chips in his pocket, assuming them to be his. The police had apparently been notified by an anonymous caller a few hours before that there had been some commotion in the street outside this apartment but hadn't had anyone available – since Tarklin's call and the subsequent investigation, they were now wishing they had taken the first call more seriously.

They were calling it 'disappearance in suspicious circumstances'. A call had gone out to the station security to find Sereeni, and his likeness was being circulated to all terminals. The security cameras in this section had failed the previous day and had yet to be checked – the People's Money had more important priorities than security in a run down station area. Tarklin had his own suspicions about what had happened, but kept his mouth shut. He had no proof.

Finally, Tarklin decided that there was nothing else he could do here and headed back to his ship. When he arrived, he took the three datachips from his pocket and laid them on the astrogation console before removing his jacket and holster. Sitting down at the console, he slotted the ships into a reader card and inserted the assembly into the reader slot. "Adelie," he said, "scan those chips for anything interesting."

Adelie's response was instant. "One is blank, one has a few recorded comms messages, and one has a message for you on it."

His suspicions had been right on the money. He'd had a feeling that Sereeni would have left him a message. He commanded the computer to play the message. The image on the viewscreen changed to the face of a rather worried looking felinoid, his dark orange bur bristling along the top of his head.

"Lewis," began Sereeni, "I'm not sure how long I have. I think I was spotted docking here earlier, and I think they're here too. I have to explain what's been going on.

"I got myself involved in something about a year ago that has come back to bite me. I need your help." The image of the cat sighed. "I took on an assassination mission, and it's kind of blown up in my face. I won't go into who offered me the contract or why I took it, but it was a simple enough assignment – I had to trace a ship and kill the commander whilst he was docked, leaving the ship intact. All they gave me was a registry number and the ship type – a Wolf Mk II.

"I tracked him down easily enough, he docked in Maxeedso in late December last year. I docked soon after and waited in the ship's docking bay and, sure enough, a human male came into the bay and headed straight for the ship. He was wearing all the right gear, the jacket, the badge, the ID for the ship, so I was certain I had the right

guy. There was no-one else in the bay, so I took my shot. I shouldered the silenced gun as he started towards the airlock and pulled the trigger. I had to do it quickly before I lost my nerve. I got him right in the chest, and he called out as he went down – I'd only wounded him. I ran over and put the gun to his head to finish it. He was calling something as I ran over – I don't know what it was, and I didn't wait to find out – I pulled the trigger and finished it.

"I wanted to make sure I had the right guy, so I took his ID card to take back to my contact. I'd made a real mess of his head and it was not a pleasant task – especially the scent of so much blood." Sereeni paused, his face bearing an uncomfortable expression, no doubt remembering the instincts that would have arisen with the smells the body would be emanating. Felines were renowned as being a race particularly affected by scent, hence the training prospective traders received in masking their body odours for face to face transactions. "The ship's airlock opened," continued Sereeni. "What came out of that Wolf froze me in fear, I don't mind telling you.

"Thargoids."

Part 6

Tarklin blinked in disbelief, his mood darkening at the mention of that hated species as Sereeni continued speaking on the screen. "It had two Thargoid warriors in it. They were both standing at the top of the egress ramp looking down at me as I crouched over the body of their pilot. I don't know who was in charge, whether I'd just killed a crewman or a captain. All I knew was that I was leaning over his mutilated corpse with a silenced laser in one hand and his ID card in my other."

"I did the only thing I could do: I pocketed the ID and ran for it. I've been running from them ever since. That's why I had to scrap my Cobra. It wasn't enough though, they seem to be able to track me wherever I go. Every time I move on, a few months later that Wolf arrives and it's time for me to leave." Sereeni smiled a rueful smile. "Since that first encounter, I haven't been able to get near the crew for a decent shot again - they never come out of their ship when they're docked anywhere."

Sereeni glanced to one side of the frame nervously. "I've been trying to get hold of you since the news reports came out about you being arrested. I can't handle this situation on my own, especially not in space. You know I'm not the galaxy's best pilot or combateer, so I need a hand to get out of this, and I can't go to the police and explain the situation. I need your help, Lewis. I need someone who can take these bugs out in space.

"I don't know what's going to happen in the next few hours – I'm going to finish this recording and stash it somewhere. If they come for me here, then they're not really likely to be looking for a datachip. I'm not leaving until you get here. I know you're on your way – the notification that you read my last message confirms that. If anything happens to me before you get here, this message is appended with the registration of the Wolf and my will. Make sure that Kadora and the kittens get the will and use the registration to avenge me.

"Thanks, Lewis. I hope you don't have to see this."

With that, Sereeni glanced again to the right as the recording ended. Tarklin sighed. The trail ended here. Sereeni was gone, and it was likely that he was dead or in the company of the bugs. All he had to go on was the registration of the Wolf, and that on its own wasn't enough. Had he still been Elite, he would have been able to request the location of the ship's witchjump, but Station Control wouldn't give that to a Mostly Harmless combateer, no matter what rank he had held before. His relationship with the Navy and the Police was strained to say the least, given that he had killed or injured a fair few of their officers during his illness.

Which left only one option. He would have to go outside the law to find out what he needed.

Atrabiin was a fairly quiet system. Not many trade routes went through here, since the poor industrial status of the world was similar to most of the other planets around, and there were far more profitable routes to the galactic north. Its multi-governmental political state meant that policing was erratic and as long as one kept one's nose clean one would be left alone.

In short, the perfect place for a secret base.

Tarklin knew that the ship he was looking for would make an appearance eventually, so he waited near the witchspace beacon for its arrival. Adelie was curious as to what his intentions were, so he claimed that he was trying to make some bounty income and keep an eye on the pirate activity to see if it was worth an extended stay. By the fourth day of their stay, this excuse was beginning to wear a bit thin, especially as Tarklin had made relatively little in the way of bounty. However, just as the chronometer was beginning to show lunchtime approaching, Adelie summoned Tarklin from the living quarters to see a new arrival. As Tarklin ascended the gravity well, he could see that the viewscreen showed exactly what he had been looking for. A dark green Anaconda class cruiser drifted gracefully towards their port quadrant, the shimmering hyperspace tunnel just starting to close behind it.

Tarklin suppressed the satisfaction he was feeling at finally seeing his quarry. "That's a very odd colour scheme," he commented.

"Indeed," replied the computer. "low visibility, especially to some of the amphibian races."

"Open a comms channel," he ordered. Adelie did just that. "Hailing Green Boa. We are looking for six tonnes of Oresrian antennae warmers. Would you happen to be carrying any? I only have one set of red ears to offer in exchange, and they're badly machined."

Tarklin waited, ignoring Adelie's confused questions about the fact they didn't have any red ears. A response was not long in coming. "Tradeship *Legacy*, we might have what you need, and should be able to handle your own cargo. What's the urgency?"

The commander breathed out in relief. They had accepted his coded message. He had been worried that they might have rescinded his access when he lost Elite status. "Thank you, Boa. We need to make an important rendezvous. Can we dock?"

"Affirmative, *Legacy*. We're engaging the navigation computer."

Tarklin gently manoeuvred the Cobra towards the Boa, keeping an eye on the glowing airlock door on the underside of the ship. As the two ships almost touched, the docking mechanisms engaged and the computers mated the airlocks using the standard universal hard-dock. Tarklin was dimly aware of Adelie's voice in the background as he checked the airlock status. "I don't understand this, it's all very irregular. We don't need Oresrian antennae warmers! We also aren't carrying any body parts, let alone ears."

The airlock status indicator blinked green, indicating that atmospheres had been equalised. The door opened, and a single male human dropped into the gravity well and out onto the bridge. He wore a black uniform jacket bearing a golden Robotic Avian badge with the word ELITE emblazoned across the widest area of the body. In his hand he carried a short, fat rod with a hollow end. "Where's the computer interface?" he asked. Tarklin pointed to the interface terminal at the left of the command chair. The man pointed the rod at it and thumbed a button. There was a beeping sound and Adelie's increasingly concerned voice cut off in mid sentence.

The man returned the rod to the inside of his jacket and turned to Tarklin again. "Lewis Tarklin?" he asked. Tarklin confirmed his identity with a curt nod. "We've been jamming the area since your first sent the code," he said, "so none of your computer's signals will have been heard. Your code is out of date and you aren't an Elite pilot any more. Is there a particular reason why you think we should allow you on board?"

"I may not carry the rank and badge any more," replied Tarklin, "but I'm still an Elite combateer."

The man in black looked him over. "That's a flimsy argument. You lost your rank for a reason. You used illegal weapons to get where you did. You cheated."

"Don't we all?" countered Tarklin. "I'm alive. That's what matters. I lived through it. I saved a world from the Thargoids, and that's why you'll help me now."

The stranger bristled. "You're certainly more arrogant than your profile lets on."

Tarklin met the stranger's look with a steely one of his own. "Losing everything does that to a person."

After a long moment, the stranger allowed a smile to show. "You'll do," he said, extending a hand. "Welcome to the Dark Wheel cruiser *Zetter*."

Part 7

The ship looked much the same as Tarklin remembered it from his inaugural meeting with the Dark Wheel a few years ago. At that time, he had been Elite for only a week or so, and had responded to a request to rendezvous in Atrabiin and meet up with this ship. Once on board, he had been offered agent status as a member of an organisation many considered to be a myth. Much to their chagrin, Tarklin had declined their offer, since he had been set on finding Riana. Now, a small part of Tarklin wished he had taken up the offer – it would have been a path of much less suffering.

Contrary to the name of the organisation it was part of, the cruiser *Zetter* was brightly lit and well-decorated. Although not quite a luxury liner, the Anaconda was definitely a nice place to work. The stranger, who had introduced himself as Payne, led Tarklin through the walkways to the audience room, where the ship's commander would be waiting. On the way, he explained that Adelie's memory would be purged of the visit and a false record would be put in place. They were fully aware of Tarklin's sentence and conditions, and would make sure that this visit remained known only to themselves.

Soon enough, they arrived at the door of the audience room. The door hissed open to reveal a room containing only two upholstered armchairs. In one of those chairs sat a moderately built man of middle years – the same man who had once offered Tarklin a place in the Dark Wheel. He motioned Tarklin to sit in the other armchair and waited until the door had closed again before speaking. "What changed your mind?" asked the operative.

"Pardon?" asked a nonplussed Tarklin.

"I assume you are here to take up our offer of membership?"

Tarklin shook his head. "No, I came here to ask for help."

At that, the operative raised an eyebrow. "Help? *You* want help? Why would we help you?"

"You have no reason to help me."

The operative laughed. "Well, at least you're honest. What's your problem?"

"A friend of mine is missing, and I think he's been taken by Thargoids. I'd like some help in finding them."

The operative's smile faded as the import of this sank in. "Taken by Thargoids, you say?" He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "That's unusual. It's not unheard of for Thargoids to disguise themselves and kill face to face, but this is the first time I've heard of them abducting someone. I can see why you thought we might be interested."

"Do you think he has actually been taken?"

The operative shrugged, "It's possible. Describe exactly what you saw."

Tarklin explained everything that had happened, from the receipt of the comms messages to the state of the apartment Agind had been living in, finishing with the message that had been left. When Tarklin had finished, the operative sat pensively stroking his chin. "From the sound of it, there was quite a struggle. You didn't see any blood?"

"Other than the severed claw, no, none."

"Was the claw Agind's?"

"The fur near the tear was the same colour as Agind's, so I assume so."

"It's hard to tell what's happened to your friend, to be honest. Thargoids are omnivorous, as far as we know, so he may have ended up on the dinner table. Either that or his body has been dumped somewhere on the Xeoner station. Gods, he might even have been spaced for trying to kill them. Given that he tried to assassinate them, he's probably been killed in return."

Tarklin sighed, "That's the conclusion I came to."

"It's the most logical one," the operative said sadly.

"I have the registration of the Wolf Mk II that the Thargoids were using. I want your help to trace its flight path."

"Ah," said the operative in satisfaction, "at last we come to what you actually want from us. You could trace the ship yourself, surely," began the operative. When Tarklin opened his mouth to speak, he was interrupted by the continuing flow of the operative's speech, "But of course you're not Elite any more, and our friends in the Elite Federation were quick to strip you of your privileges." The operative watched Tarklin for a few seconds over the top of steepled fingers: the pilot simply sat and stared back. Eventually, the operative nodded once. "Yes, I think we'll help you. The only thing I'll ask is that if you capture the Thargoids, you bring them to us."

"And if I can't capture them?" asked Tarklin.

The operative smiled, "Then nothing. If you kill them, you kill them. To be honest, I don't hold out much hope that you'd be able to capture them – they have a habit of killing themselves rather than being captured. As you said to Mr Payne, you averted a Thargoid invasion. Many are grateful for that, and even more are impressed, including myself. Think of this as a thank you from the more secretive areas of the galactic community."

Tarklin was shown back out of the audience room into a waiting area by Payne, who took the registration from him and disappeared. When he came back twenty minutes later, he passed a datachip to Tarklin. "This is the record of the Wolf's travels for the last year, going back to before the cat tried to kill the crew. It's up to date and will even update itself from the GCW records. Don't worry, your computer spy won't notice. We've encrypted the chip with a stealth protector, so the computer won't even know that it's there. Information will be piggy backed from the data stream to your ship and filtered to the chip." As they approached the airlock door, Tarklin took the chip and thanked Payne. "Don't thank me," replied the black-clad operative. "Thank the guy in charge. One thing though: don't ask again. Your code has been deleted. Oh, and your computer is in sleep mode. When you're out of sensor and visual range of the ship, she'll come back online automatically. She won't remember a thing about being here."

With that, Payne shook Tarklin's hand and motioned him to board his ship.

Part 8

After detaching from the Dark Wheel ship, Tarklin pointed his ship towards the planet Atrabiin and accelerated whilst loading up the datachip's contents. The Wolf seemed to run the Ara - Orgetibe trade run on a regular basis. Not a good run for profits, but both systems were politically unstable and as a result were rich pickings for hunters or pirates. The trace went from there straight to Sorace, then meandered around that area for a while before heading to Inus, where the ship then sat for a few days before making its way back across the galaxy to Xeoner. On the morning that Tarklin had arrived, the ship had hyperspaced to Esveor, and now the ship seemed to be making a fair few jumps between Raale and Esredice. A profitable run and a dangerous one, with both planets embroiled in political unrest and their system space rife with pirates. With luck, they would keep plying that route until he got there.

After refuelling at Atrabiin station, Tarklin jumped to Biorle to begin the run to Raale. Four days later, a slightly better-equipped *Legacy* hyperspaced into Raale orbitspace. The six-jump route had included a few profitable runs, and the planet Ororqu had a shipyard with more high-tech equipment. Tarklin had equipped his ship with a laser cooling booster and an extra energy unit: vital pieces of equipment when taking on a ship like the Wolf Mk II, especially if it was flown by Thargoid warriors. He had also fitted a mining laser to the rear mount just for the hell of it.

Raale was a small, troubled world. The Information on Systems page vaunted its edible 'poets', a medium sized rodent with a distinctive cry that sounded for all the world like 'rhyme-time' (hence the name), but Raale had far more going for it than just noisy animals. It was a hub for weapons trade in the northern sector of the galaxy, which

was no doubt what the crew of the Wolf were involved with. As such, the system space was pretty dangerous. Tarklin pointed the Legacy's nose at the small world and engaged the Torus drive, eager to find if the Wolf was in space.

Tarklin reached the station with another six kills under his belt, none of which were the prey he had been looking for. On the way to the station he updated his datachip with the last known movements of the Wolf. It had apparently hyperspaced to Raale late the previous day, which had been the ship's last recorded jump. This meant that the Wolf and its crew was still somewhere in the Raale system.

Raale's station was a dirty, unkempt beast. The front face was pitted with collision scars and laser blasts, and the whole thing had somehow managed to take on a grubby look in the vacuum of space. The docking bay doors were jammed open, and the topmost bay door was slanted a few degrees, making docking a slightly more careful process. To be on the safe side, Tarklin docked manually, wishing that the planet had another station to choose from.

The interior was no better. There were no officials checking pilots in or out or even checking credentials. The gangs vying for control of the world below had better things to do than worrying about staffing a space station. Tarklin walked from his docking bay to the main concourse without encountering a single station officer. The ground was littered with anything from plasfilm fragments to what looked like bloodstained clothing. Tarklin looked around for an access terminal, and eventually found a working one, swiping his ID card through the reader. All it would tell him about the station was that three bays were occupied. Tarklin logged it out and resigned himself to checking each bay manually.

Coriolis class space stations, as well as the more modern Dodec designs, have three tiers of four docking bays each able to hold from one to five ships depending on their size. Intelligent docking management computers determine the best location for a ship depending on the current visitors and sent the ship there. With only three ships docked, Tarklin felt it safe to assume that all of the ships would be on the lowest tier, nearest the outer surface of the station. He walked back into the docking area and began looking through the duraglass windows of each bay, looking for the sleek shape of the Wolf. In the third bay, he saw the quarry he was after for the first time. The Wolf class ship was a dark brown colour, pitted and scarred from numerous battles. Hastily applied patches to the hull were evident all over the ship, and it carried nothing in the way of markings or registration information. Now that he had found the ship, he had to find some way to get inside it and find if Agind was in there, or make the crew tell him where he was.

After a quick look around to ensure he was alone, Tarklin reached inside his jacket, drew his pistol from the shoulder holster and concealed it in his jacket pocket before touching the control panel for the door. The door buzzed and slid slowly open, grating against badly maintained bearings. He stepped gingerly through and looked around at the wide, roughly rectangular bay, its high roof lost in the dim light. The wall opposite the entrance held a huge double door, large enough to admit an Anaconda cruiser with plenty of room to spare. This door led connected to a manoeuvring crane that would transfer an arriving or departing ship between the docking bays and the main docking slit at the front opening of the station. The Wolf sat in a marked zone near the left side of the bay adjacent to the entranceway's wall. There looked to be no activity, and the ship seemed to be powered down: there was no noise from its generators. As Tarklin approached the ship, he could see that the main ramp on the ship's midsection was down, but the inner airlock door was closed. He ascended the ramp and, taking a deep breath, pressed the comms panel mounted on the inner wall. After a few seconds there was no answer. He tried again to no avail. He studied the lock. It looked like a standard airlock – electronically controlled from the bridge or by using an ID card to open it. Getting in that way would be difficult. He walked back down the ramp and around to the rear of the ship. The engine vents were recessed into the body of the ship slightly, meaning that the vent's lower sill was closer to the ground than the rest of the ship.

After another look around, Tarklin jumped and grabbed the lower sill and hauled himself up onto the engine vent. From there he climbed the engine's exhaust screen and scrambled onto the top of the hull. On the topmost facet, like many ships of this size, there was an emergency airlock mounted fairly close to the release plate of the escape pod. On the Wolf, it was a square portal with a small control panel mounted onto the door itself. Since it was intended for emergency access, it was generally easy to gain access to a ship from this airlock, as Tarklin had found out when the Navy had boarded his ship through the equivalent airlock on the Legacy to take him into custody.

Tarklin ran his fingers along the control panel and found the access slot, pulling it open. Inside was a green circuit block with tracks and tracers running from left to right. A series of three green lights on the top of the panel showed that it was functioning and locked, and a transparent section showed a safety breaker switch. Taking his pistol from his pocket, Tarklin used the handle to smash the breaker, and the lights immediately flashed amber. Closing the panel, Tarklin stowed his pistol again and grabbed the airlock door's manual handle. It turned easily in his hands, and the airlock hissed open. Tarklin sat still for a moment listening to the sounds from inside. Again, he could hear nothing. Gingerly, he sat and swung his legs into the airlock, letting himself drop through the portal. This particular airlock had a vertical ladder leading up to it from the inside, and Tarklin climbed down that to the area below. Tarklin found himself in a short accessway that opened up into the bridge towards the front of the ship. On the right and left of the rearwards end, the accessway split in a T-junction. Tarklin headed for the bridge first, listening out for any sounds.

As Tarklin approached the bridge entryway, he heard a quiet shuffling sound from just beyond the door. Someone was waiting for him. Cautiously, he edged up to the doorway, palming his pistol and waiting for whoever it was to show themselves. A human hand appeared at the edge, gripping the door surround, and a head slowly peered around. Tarklin grabbed the hand and pulled the body around as he entered the bridge. The slightly built male who catapulted around the doorway and fell to the floor was dressed in dirty, unkempt clothes and looked like he hadn't washed for weeks. As Tarklin levelled his pistol at him, the musky smell of an unwashed body hit his senses.

A slave. No doubt the replacement for the slave Agind had killed so many months ago. "Prisoners. Where are they?" Tarklin hissed, going for the direct approach.   The slave looked scared witless. Maybe as a result, he could not answer, simple looking at Tarklin with wide, panicked eyes. Tarklin aimed his pistol at the young man's head and thumbed the charger. The whine of the energy cell powering up resulted in the poor wretch starting to tremble. "Where?" Tarklin asked again.

"I...I don't know what you mean," whimpered the slave. "What prisoners?"

"The prisoners that get kept on this ship," Tarklin clarified.

"There aren't any now."

At last. Tarklin now knew that this ship did keep prisoners. "There was a felinoid, brown and white fur. Where is he?"

The slave trembled again. "He was...was...weeks ago... He...isn't here now..."

A clanking sound from the rear of the accessway alerted Tarklin to newcomers on the bridge. He released the slave and rolled towards the front of the bridge just as a bolt of energy lanced across his previous location. Tarklin glanced up to see the figure of a tall, angular insectoid creature looming in the doorway. Its black chitin glistened in the overhead lights of the bridge in an oddly familiar way. The last time Tarklin had seen something like this, it had been in the fevered hallucinations of his psychosis on the Legacy. Now, the figure was all too real.

A Thargoid.

Part 9

The human and the insect watched each other, motionless, their respective sidearms levelled at each other. As the moment stretched on in adrenaline-fuelled slow motion, Tarklin took in the characteristic features of the race: the triangular head with its small, twin-mandibled mouth, the narrow, tapered body, the sheen of lights on the blue-black thorax, and the three pairs of delicate, armoured limbs. It moved with an easy grace as it came further into the bridge, its movements flowing and deadly. The three-fingered right hand of the creature's middle set of limbs was gripping the handle of a gun obviously designed for a human, and its grip did not look secure. Tarklin filed this piece of information away as another Thargoid appeared in the doorway. This new Thargoid looked down at the remains of the slave, who Tarklin noticed had obviously received the laser bolt meant for him. A neat hole had been drilled straight through his left eye. The first Thargoid's mandibles clicked as it spoke, and Tarklin heard his subdermal translator try to make sense of their alien tongue. "Standing sharp go, poet large cheese," was the translation. Tarklin knew that his translator wouldn't be able to understand the Thargoid language, and that any idea of it that the tiny device had was based on Oresrian speech patterns, seeing as they were the closest physiological match to the Thargoid race. Tarklin motioned for both the Thargoids to stand still, knowing that vocal communication would be useless. The lead insect titled its head at him and continued to advance. Tarklin pulled the trigger of his pistol and a lance of light connected with the Thargoid.

Nothing happened. Tarklin's pistol did not have enough power to penetrate the insect's chitin. The Thargoid raised its own gun, and Tarklin had to move fast – he feinted to the right then rolled to the left as the charge lanced out. Scrambling to his feet he ran straight at the first insect, shoulder charging it out of the way. The impact on his body was like running into a wall! He staggered on, dropping and rolling again towards the doorway as two more bolts hissed over his body. Tarklin weaved down the accessway and veered to the right down towards the cargo section's gravity well. He dropped down it as another bolt seared the air to his left.

As Tarklin landed on the cargo bay floor, he looked around to see a bay full of containers. As he looked for a place to hide, he saw that they all contained firearms, no doubt destined for Esredice. This was good news – it meant that the Thargoids would be less likely to start firing blindly in a room full of volatile goods. He ducked behind a row of cargo containers, feeling an odd vibration through the floor. They were powering up the ship's engines. He had to get off this ship before it launched. A clattering of deck plates told Tarklin that the Thargoid was in the cargo bay with him. He glanced around the canisters to see the insectoid standing by the gravity well and scanning the bay, its torso twisting around at an impossible angle for a human. It still carried its pistol awkwardly in its right hand.

Tarklin fought to keep his breathing quiet as the insect began to walk round the cargo bay. During its search it stood up to its full 7 foot height to check the high areas, and dropped down to four limbs to check the low areas. As it started to approach Tarklin's hiding position, Tarklin prepared himself to make his move. The insect drew level with him on the other side of the canisters, and it began to stand to its full height. Tarklin leapt to his feet, bolted round the edge of the canisters and swung his arm around, impacting on the creature's gun arm. The weapon flew out of its grasp and skittered across the floor. Tarklin rolled away after the gun, but a blunt object connected with his midriff as he rolled. Tarklin gasped, realising that the Thargoid had managed to kick him as he passed. He

came to a stop and forced himself to his feet. The gun was still a few metres away – too far to reach before the insect intercepted him. The creature was now on four legs, its upper two arms snapping out at him. The arms were the thickest of the upper limbs, connected at the shoulders and jointed the opposite way to human arms in a way very reminiscent of the Lavian preying mantis, which had been seeded there from old Earth stock. They looked powerful, and the inner surface was slightly barbed. Tarklin backed away slightly as the Thargoid advanced, his translator still giving him garbled phrases as the thing spoke. Tarklin circled to the left and quickly launched a kick at his adversary's foreleg. The limb bent in place, but did not break – not as brittle as it looked. The Thargoid clicked its mandibles quickly as it lanced out with one of the uppermost limbs. Tarklin tried to dodge it, but it caught him high on his back with a sensation like tearing cloth. Immediately, it started to throb in pain. He dodged around to the right and ran towards the Thargoid. It raised an arm to intercept him, but Tarklin rolled underneath it and came to his feet next to the upper torso. He put both hands together and brought them down had on the thing's back. Its head came up with the impact, and Tarklin raised his hands again and brought them down once more on the triangular head. The mouth opened wide in what Tarklin hoped was a cry of pain, and Tarklin heaved himself around the insect and made for the gun. He just got to it as he heard the clattering of chitin-covered feet begin. He rolled to pick it up, and when he finished the roll, the Thargoid was bearing down on him. In a flash, he raised the pistol and fired. A bolt of light impacted in the centre of the Thargoid's body and exited from its back. The Thargoid was stopped in its tracks by the impact, only half a metre from Tarklin. The pilot fired again, and another bolt tore into the upper thorax. Dark red ichor started to flow from the wounds, spattering to the ground as the shocked creature stood there. Tarklin raised the pistol and shot the creature in the head. Its body fell to the ground.

The vibration in the deck plates told Tarklin that the ship was readying for launch. He had to make a choice: he could try and take the bridge or he could get the hell off this ship. He checked the gun in his hand, and noticed that the charge was almost drained – he couldn't guarantee that the remaining charge would be enough to penetrate the armour. Angrily, he discarded the weapon and looked around. The port side of the cargo bay held a doorway that Tarklin assumed would lead towards the access ramp. He ran to it and it hissed open, leading to a short accessway. The inner airlock door was there, straight in front of him. Through the window he could see the closed outer door, and through the window in that he could see the floor of the docking bay. It was moving. The ship was turning in the bay. Tarklin hit the door control and nothing happened. He tried the manual locking wheel, and it refused to turn. He was trapped! He ran back into the cargo bay and desperately looked around for anything that might help. His eyes fell on the midsection of the bay, where a three-meter door was marked out with caution symbols. The inner cargo scoop door! If he could open that, it should give him access to the fuel scoop. A way out!

Tarklin knelt on the door and prised open the maintenance panel. The locking mechanism for the door was tied into the sensors in the scoop, and was usually opened when it detected a bulky item in the scoop's mouth. Tarklin studied the circuitry, looking for anything that looked like a control chip. There were three possibilities, but only one of them looked like it had any tracks leading off to the centre of the door mechanism. Tarklin grabbed that one and pulled. To his relief, he heard the muffled clunking of the door releasing. It slid back, jolting him as he sat on it, then it tilted down, revealing the interior of the cargo scoop. Tarklin ducked under the lip of the floor and headed down into the scoop's mouth. From here he could see the bay outside, the walls rotating around as the ship turned towards the exit doors. Quickly, Tarklin ran down to the lip of the scoop and looked over the edge, just as the ship finished rotating and started moving forwards. It was only a couple of meters above the ground and was starting to rise. Tarklin jumped from the edge and hit the floor rolling, the ship passing over his head as it rose.

Tarklin got to his feet and, ignoring the pain from his midriff and his lacerated back, ran to the docking bay entrance. He pounded through the corridor and keyed himself quickly into the *Legacy*'s docking bay, heading straight up the ramp into his ship. "Adelie," he called, "launch the ship!"

"We haven't got clearance!" the ship complained.

"Screw the clearance!" exclaimed Tarklin as he took his seat at the astrogation console. "Just launch! I'll pay the fine!"

Adelie wisely decided not to voice any other objections and launched, using the ship's thrusters to align it with the docking doors. The station's automatic systems catapulted the ship out of the docking bay just in time for Tarklin to see the Wolf arcing off to the right. He wheeled after it and accelerated to full speed. The Wolf was suddenly enveloped in blue light as the crackling hyperspace field enveloped it, and it vanished, leaving only the blue entry field. Tarklin nosed the Cobra straight for it, following the Wolf into hyperspace. In the hypertunnel, the coruscating energy cast an eldritch light across everything. Tarklin could just make out the shape of the Wolf in the distance, but there was nothing he could do – he had entered hyperspace at maximum realspace speed, and the ship's lasers wouldn't work in a hyperspace wormhole. After a few minutes, the Wolf vanished, and less than a second later the *Legacy* was dumped back into realspace.

After the normal few seconds of disorientation that followed a jump like that, Tarklin checked the scanner – the Wolf was to his starboard. The HUD showed that they had arrived in Esredice. He immediately accelerated to full power and wheeled after the Wolf. It was turning to intercept, its laser lancing out. Tarklin rolled his ship so that it was 90 degrees out of alignment with the Wolf's z-axis and depressed the trigger. The military laser lanced out, and Tarklin saw the energy dissipate on the shields of his adversary. Meantime, the harsh screeching noise of the energy being drained from his ship's energy banks rattled in his ears. As they approached each other in this traditional jousting contest that opened most ship to ship combat, Tarklin knew that if he didn't alter course first, this Thargoid would just plough straight into him. They knew no fear, and Tarklin knew that the Wolf's hull was just as

resilient as the Cobra's. He waited until the collision detection alarm sounded then began to pull on the stick to alter course when the Wolf banked away to the right! It seemed that the Thargoid's confidence in his ship was shakeable after all.

Tarklin wheeled around and cut speed to two thirds, watching the scanner for changes in the Wolf's course as he came around. When the ship appeared back on the viewscreen, it was banking away again. Tarklin lined it up and fired a quick burst from the military laser. The Wolf dramatically changed course, practically reversing its course and heading back the way it came. It jinked and dived as Tarklin tried to bring it back into his crosshair. It wheeled around suddenly and ran straight for him, laser fire preceding it. Tarklin fired another short burst before making his own evasive manoeuvres, trying to keep his ship out of the insect's line of fire. He rolled the ship around in a complete 360 turn as he pulsed his speed up and down. At the end of that movement, the Wolf was in front of him again, heading relatively upwards on the screen. Tarklin let fly a long barrage of laser fire, noting with satisfaction that the shields were down as hull fragments flew off. The Wolf barrel rolled then arced off at full speed, skimming past Tarklin's ship at close range. Tarklin tried to roll round in time, but laser fire screeched through his bridge, draining the forwards shield and reducing the rear to sixty percent. By now, Tarklin's laser was reaching the overheat mark, and both ships danced around the stars for a few moments, trying to buy time until their lasers cooled and their shields recharged. As they looped and rolled around each other, Tarklin locked a missile onto the Wolf but didn't fire. The next time that the Wolf passed into his crosshairs, Tarklin cancelled his roll and accelerated to full, closing the distance with the surprised adversary quickly and with his laser cutting into the hull al the way. The Wolf rolled to face the Legacy and began firing in response, but had less than a second of contact before Tarklin was on top of it. He launched the missile just as the Wolf's hull vanished from the bottom of the viewscreen. He immediately switched to the rear view, and saw the Wolf desperately trying to race away from the close-range warhead, which was gaining on its tail. As Tarklin watched, the warhead detonated, and the Wolf spun out of control, fatally damaged but still in one piece. The engine was venting plasma in great plumes, and fires were visible on the hull. Tarklin rolled his ship around and switched to front view just in time to see an escape capsule launch from the wreck. As the pyramid shaped pod ignited its engines, the Wolf began to break apart, and then exploded. Tarklin watched the pod begin its journey to Esredice with its alien occupant and turned the *Legacy* towards it to give chase. He manoeuvred alongside it, lining it up with his starboard viewscreen, and looked inside, through the small viewpoint. Looking back at him from there was the triangular face of the Thargoid. A small part of Tarklin had hoped that Sereeni might have been in there. Accepting the fact now that his friend was likely dead, Tarklin decelerated and fell in behind the Thargoid's escape capsule, pacing it as he watched the blue flare of the pod's thrusters. He lined it up with his crosshair and, with an expression devoid of all emotion, pulled the trigger. The laser cut the pod in half but there was no explosion. The two halves simply drifted apart, and the exhaust plumes faded away. Tarklin watched them for a few moments as he decelerated the *Legacy* to a standstill. "Well," he said, "haven't you got something to say about my shooting an escape capsule?"

"No," responded Adelie. "It was a Thargoid in there."

"Yes," responded Tarklin sadly, "just another Thargoid."

Epilogue

The early evening sun was trying its best to shine down on Holdstock Plaza despite the efforts of the clouds to obscure it. At least it wasn't raining, reflected the caretaker. The Remembrance Clock was blooming nicely, and the golden flowers were picking up the sun's rays spectacularly, shining like real metal in the light.

The gardens were busy again, with tourists everywhere. It was a sign of how much respect was accorded those remembered here that the caretaker had very little cleaning to do even during a busy afternoon like this one. Even so, he had a job to do, so he patrolled the pathways to make sure that everything was just right.

It was on this patrol that he saw again the figure of Lewis Tarklin bent over the marker for his wife. "Back so soon?" quipped the caretaker. Tarklin looked up at him with an expression of irritation. The caretaker took a step back. "Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to offend. I'll leave you alone now." He started to head on along the pathway.

"Wait," came Tarklin's voice. The caretaker stopped and looked back at the pilot, who was now standing up. "You look after these markers, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. I look after the entire garden, sir."

"There was a badge and a ring in my wife's marker," said Tarklin. "They've gone."

The caretaker nodded. "Yes, sir, I took them out myself. It's not a good idea to leave stuff like that lying unprotected like that, especially with so many tourists around. Don't worry though, I kept them safe."

"Where are they?"

"They're in the exhibit locker in the museum," he said, indicating the main GCW building, inside which was a small museum of GalCop history. "Quite a few people leave trinkets and things on the markers, but they always get taken eventually, especially if they're valuable. After you left the other month I made sure they were put somewhere safe.

Tarklin nodded. "Fair enough then. Do markers ever get stolen?"

"No, sir. I won't allow that. If anyone moves a marker from its place it's a finable offence. There's security in place to make sure that doesn't happen."

Tarklin nodded, apparently satisfied, and turned back to looking at his wife's marker. The caretaker noticed that another, smaller marker was next to it, shaped like a Cobra Mk III carved in black stone. It was placed with the rear face on the ground, so that the nose was pointed to the sky, and the bottom face has a plaque attached. It bore simply a name and a single line of text.

Agind Sereeni
A Friend In Need

"Have you ever lost anyone?" asked Tarklin.

"A fair few friends and relatives, sir," answered the caretaker. "I'm getting on a bit now."

"Was there anything you could have done to save them?"

"Oh, maybe, maybe," replied the caretaker quietly. "but there's one thing I always remember when I think about those who have passed on."

"And what's that?"

"They're never entirely dead until we stop remembering them."

Tarklin stood quietly looking into the approaching sunset for a few moments, then looked over at the caretaker with a slight smile on his face. "Thank you," he said simply.

Author's Notes

God, this was hard to write. I was getting on fine up until the search for the Thargoid, then all hell broke loose in my personal life, and suddenly it's much harder to concentrate. If only there was some faster way of getting what's in my head onto paper rather than typing it. Mmm. Thought controlled word-processing.

I struggled with writer's block throughout most of the last quarter of this story, and I'm not sure it's my best work. I battled with a dilemma too – I wasn't sure whether to have the last battle be a ship-ship fight or put Tarklin in a hand to hand fight with a Thargoid. I think I made the right choice for this story, but I might use the fight scene in another story.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed it. And thanks to the guys at the Oolite Forums for their proofreading help.

Technical Notes

Ship leasing is mentioned on page 6. This refers to the fact that GalCop gives players ships at the start of their careers. This doesn't make much financial sense, so I came up with the idea that a percentage of profits are deducted from each transaction the commander makes until the lease price is paid off, which is a fraction of the gross price of a Cobra Mk III.

The knockdown is generous because pilots sign an agreement that they will respond to a call for military service if required during the period until the lease is paid, basically ensuring that GalCop has a sizeable reserve navy if it's needed.

The deductions from pay are invisible to the commander (and the player) and don't affect overall profits too much.

GalCop ID Cards: these are the universal method of identification at the time Tarklin was poddling about the galaxy. There were many designs, many of them available on request, but the basic standard one was plain semi-transparent polymer, basically white in colour, looking rather like the diagram below.

GALACTIC CO-OPERATIVE OF WORLDS
NAME   : TARKLIN, Lewis
IMAGE
HOMEWORLD : Lave
BIRTHDATE   : 11-09-3106
CURRENT SCR: LV-251-T

It was updateable in real-time, meaning that updates could be sent directly to the card and stored there. The area in the bottom left quadrant was a reader that could analyse DNA if bare skin was in contact with it, confirming that the holder was indeed the person described on the card. The main area could show many different types of information, including a brief biography, a legal record and medical details. The image area could show a mugshot of the bearer and a retinal scan.

The card was used for a great many things, including access to the bearer's ship and financial transactions.

Station Administration: Space stations are generally managed and administrated by a crew employed from the planet the station orbits. Although the property of GalCop and subject to GalCop laws and regulations, the station is manned by citizens of the world below, and as such are usually subject to the state of the world below.

In the story above, for example, we see two very different stations: Xeoner and Raale. Xeoner is a communist world, and the station Tarklin visits is run on very similar lines to the planet below, and is the picture of enforced efficiency. Raale, however, is an anarchy world, and as such there is no fixed government or ruling body. Gangs compete for power on a daily basis, and as such the administration of the station is up to basically whoever remembers. On other anarchy worlds, the situation can be better, as occasionally a faction or organisation will take overall responsibility for the station and thus improve the orbital situation slightly.

For further comparison, around a corporate state world, the stations are very well maintained and are replete with shopping areas, residential areas and bars, all of which bring revenue to the world through commerce. On a feudal world the stations are usually jointly ran by a committee of the ruling classes, and are usually a hodge-podge of styles and business models.

Subdermal Translators: every GalCop registered employee has to have a subdermal translator. It is a tiny implant attached to the inner ear assembly that receives incoming sounds and translates them into the wearer's primary language. The beauty of this piece of equipment is that it only does this on a subconscious level, so the wearer can actually hear the language being spoken but understand the speech being spoken. In this way, pilots who have been in extended contact with a particular language can understand and speak that language fluently, even without the translator.

These translators are commercially available, and in 3130 it was estimated that 98% of the galactic population wore one.