

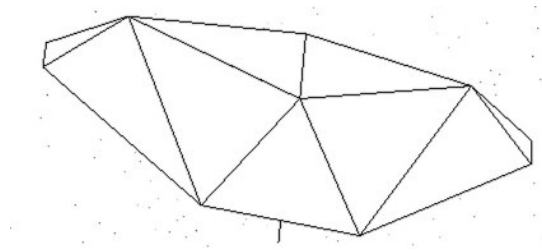


# ELITE

THE TARKLIN LEGACY

## GALAXY OF BROKEN DREAMS

by Dave Hughes



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Tarklin locked the hatch and checked the status light, which glowed a bright, comforting green. Satisfied, he walked back into the bridge and took his seat at the pilot's console. "That's it," he said, "we're secure and on our way." He switched view to the rear screen and watched the planet Ausis slowly recede. The gleaming silver shape that was the planet's only Coriolis station spun slowly as the Cobra Mk 3 tradeship headed to the stars. "It's about time," came a female voice from behind Tarklin. "We should have left long ago," she said curtly.

Tarklin smiled. "You only had to ask, hon," he said. He turned to see his wife, Riana, lounging on the co-pilot's seat. Her coppery hair was unkempt and straggly as usual, and she looked at her husband through the strands of her fringe as a small smile formed on her lips.

"I'm only kidding," she said lightly, "It was home for a long time. It's just that..."

Tarklin nodded. "I know," he said darkly, "The invasion changed everything." Riana nodded sadly as Tarklin remembered the last few weeks on Ausis. The Thargoids had come out of nowhere, laying siege to the planet with frightening efficiency. They overthrew the planet's main Coriolis station in a matter of hours and turned it into a base of operations despite constant opposition from the planet's defence and police forces. They then carried the war to the planet's surface, as invasion ships plunged into the atmosphere and began systematically devastating the main population centres. Tarklin, commanding a squadron of planetary defence fighters, could do little to stop the huge warships with their powerful Thargoid lasers, and he had commanded his fighters to concentrate fire on the remote Thargon craft, who were bent on taking out smaller targets, including people.

He shuddered with the memory - those tiny, five-sided fighters lancing the people he had lived with and worked alongside with their foul green lasers. He shook his head and cleared the images away. That was the past - he had to live for the present, and Ausis was no longer his - or their - home.

"Are you there again, Lewis?" asked Riana with concern in her voice. He nodded, running his hand through his hair and sitting upright in the pilot's chair. "Yeah, it's been on my mind a lot," he admitted. Almost immediately, he felt her hands on his shoulders, encircling him as her head pressed against the back of his neck. He closed his eyes and smiled, feeling her breath on his neck and her smell in his nostrils. "Thanks, Ree," he said softly. "I needed that."

Riana's voice was soft in his ear "I know. I'll always be here for you, Lewis."

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Their departure from Ausis orbitalspace was uneventful. Tarklin flew the Cobra to the sun to take on fuel and then hyperspaced out. Since the invasion, Ausis was a dead system - trade had been suspended and piracy was non-existent: what could pirates steal if there were no tradeships in the system? Hence, Tarklin decided that they would be better leaving. Riana, who had been assigned to Ausis as a geological surveyor, agreed that the time to leave was now, since there was nothing more she could do on the world. Now, as Lewis tried to remember, the details of their departure were fuzzy: they had made the arrangements so fast once the decision had been made.

"So," said Riana, appearing by the gravity well that led down to the living quarters, "what's the plan?"

Tarklin had been giving this some thought. "We could trade again," he started, "or there are a few hot systems round here that need cleaning out." He checked his star map. "Here. The Lemaed system has been getting a lot of attention from pirates lately - it might be that pirates from Ausis have joined up with the existing fleets.

No reply came from Riana. When Tarklin turned, she was shaking where she stood, still near the well. Tears glistened in her eyes. "Do you know what I really want to do?" she said as Tarklin stood and went to her. "I want to get revenge for what those insect bastards did to Ausis. For what they did to us!"

Tarklin held his wife in his arms as sobs racked her frame. In that moment, his resolve hardened, and he knew that she was right. Hundreds of thousands had died during the invasion, and Tarklin had survived - he owed it to those who died to spend every waking moment making sure there were less of those filthy alien scum to do the same to another world. "We'll make a start, babe," he said gently, caressing her head and holding her tight. He remembered again that feeling of helplessness as the lasers cut into the people of Ausis, and how the motherships had cut the cities apart. He remembered the helplessness as he watched his fighter's lasers bounce harmlessly off the superior shielding of the Thargoid motherships.

"They'll pay."

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Tarklin wheeled the ship around and pulled the stick towards him, throwing the Cobra into a relative climb. The two Thargoid ships banked away and Riana called to him, "They're banking off to starboard! Come around 20 degrees for a strafing run!"

Tarklin hammered the viewscreen toggle and watched as the green monstrosities came into range. As they came into the targeting grid, he thumbed the fire button, and red laser energy lanced out, scoring a hit on the closest enemy ship. Instantly, he wheeled around to bring the front guns to bear and switched back to the fore view. The octagonal ship banked and jinked, but Tarklin's aim was keen, and before long the first ship was nothing but a cloud of expanding gas. The second ship, amazingly, was making a run for the planet! "Look," said Riana, "They must be scared witless to run for the planet!" Tarklin grinned and lined up behind the alien ship, raking his military laser across its rear in short, controlled bursts. Soon, debris began floating off, and seconds after that, the ship blew apart. Neither ship had even had a chance to launch the annoying remote fighters.

Two less alien scum in the universe. Tarklin rolled and aimed the ship at the system's sun, accelerating to full speed. He wouldn't be able to engage the jump drive until they had cleared the debris field from their latest battle.

Four months had passed since they had left Ausis, and Tarklin felt as if he had never left space. He was one of the revered few: an Elite combateer who had proven himself to be a formidable pilot and combat pilot. Nearly three years ago he had finally attained the hallowed rank. Even at that point, looking back, he had known there was something missing. Then, out of the blue, a message had arrived from Riana Freidmann, a woman who he had not seen since he left Lave on his long journey as a space trader, and a woman he had never really stopped loving. He travelled to Ausis, a planet only recently granted GalCop membership, to see her, hoping that there would still be something there. On his arrival, she had met him at Ausis' spaceport, with her hair in disarray, wearing her working clothes and with a bag of tools on her back. He had asked if she was single, she had replied in the affirmative and asked the same back. His answer had been to take her in his arms and hold her for nearly ten minutes.

Five months later, they were married. Tarklin put his Cobra in storage, took a job as a flight trainer for the newly commissioned planetary defence air force and settled happily into married life. For a year and a half, they lived happily on Ausis. Until the invasion destroyed everything.

Now, though, his life felt on track once again. He knew that the stars were his home, and the deck plates of a tradeship were where his feet belonged. Only now everything was complete – his soul had found its home in Riana, and they had a mission in life.

They had chosen to dedicate their time to the pursuit of Thargoids. They rarely visited stations now, preferring instead to sunskim for fuel. They patrolled the outer fringes of a planet's orbital space, waiting for the lone marauder Thargoids to appear. Occasionally, they would strike it lucky and find two or three ships flying together. Tarklin's experience and skill made them easy targets.

On a few occasions there had been unfortunate incidents. Sometimes other ships would descend on the fight and join in, only to turn on Tarklin when the Thargoids had been eliminated. There had even been one incident with a police fleet that had aided him until a stray laser shot must have struck the wrong hull, and they turned on him too. It was regrettable, but these things happened. The most recent event had been a lone Thargoid ship that had

been making a run on the planet when Tarklin attacked. A squadron of police Vipers had joined the fray, and Tarklin assumed that he must have strafed at the wrong time, since when he came out of an evasive manoeuvre he found that the Vipers had turned on him too. It was a sad state of affairs when the comms channels were jammed by the people you were trying to protect!!

For a time after that incident, Tarklin's ship was a target for every bounty hunter in the allied systems. It had been Riana who came up with the solution only a few days ago: retuning the IFF transponder to a neutral frequency. Tarklin had hunted for another Cobra trader and disabled it, shooting it until the pilot ejected. He then docked, boarded the hull and changed his ship's code to that of the disabled ship. He then retuned the derelict ship's transponder to his old signal and left it in space. From then on, their legal rating had been wiped clean.

Riana had been a godsend – she didn't have much flight experience, but she had been right on the money with her help during dogfights. Her shouted commands and advice had echoed his own intuition every time. Had she not decided to become a geologist, she would have been a fearsome combat pilot. She had shown amazing knowledge about the Cobra's systems, and had been fascinated by the questionably legal modifications that Tarklin had made to the ship over the years. She had been amazed to learn about the energy cannon that had been responsible for destroying the Thargoid station over Ausis – a rechargeable version of the energy bomb. Sadly, that piece of equipment had burned out during Tarklin's final assault on the Thargoids.

Tarklin's mood darkened as he remembered that run. Driven by anger and grief at the destruction and loss, he had retrieved his Cobra from the spacedock in polar orbit and had taken one last, suicide attack run at the station. It took the use of most of his cunning and non-standard equipment to reach the station, including his cloaking device. Once there, he disengaged the cloak and charged up the energy cannon. As soon as the cloak dropped, the Thargoids swarmed around him. One discharge from the energy cannon had destroyed or crippled most of the ships in range of the Cobra, as well as overloading the Thargoid station's shields. Whilst the cannon recharged, Tarklin looped into the docking slit and discharged the cannon again, before it had cooled from the previous firing. The cannon overloaded and blew its coolant chamber, but the discharge was enough to cut a hole straight through the station and penetrate the power core. The chain reaction had been swift and deadly, and Tarklin had barely manoeuvred his ship out of the bay in time.

The Ausis authorities had praised Tarklin for his role in saving the planet. Had they known the method he used to do it, by using an outlawed weapon of mass destruction, their praise may not have been so easy in coming. Fortunately, the government hadn't asked many questions about the way he had destroyed the station, and neither had GalCop. Admittedly the cannon was just a piece of melted slag in the forward ventral bay of the ship, but there were other items that Tarklin would rather not have to explain. Tarklin had no regrets about breaking the law in regards to the equipment fitted to his ship – his modifications had helped him become Elite, and had helped him save Riana.

Tarklin looked down at his hands and realised they were shaking again. Since the invasion, he had been having night terrors – images of Riana screaming, images of her being torn apart by Thargoids, images of her lying dead on a hospital bed. Sometimes, when he wasn't expecting it, the images came when he was awake, and he would start trembling. He worried sometimes that the terrors were affecting him in a different way. The lack of sleep was playing tricks on his mind. Sometimes, briefly, when in the midst of battle, he could see other ships: different designs and colours than the Thargoid warships he was hunting. Then, in the blink of an eye, his true enemy would be back on the screen. He did everything he could to hide this from Riana, and so far she was none the wiser. When he held her, the fear receded, and he rededicated himself every night to keeping her safe and blowing as many of those alien scum from the stars as he could.

Tarklin glanced at the scanner and saw another group of contacts coming into range. "Lewis," said Riana's voice, "we're getting more contacts." He hit the IFF control and rolled the ship to bring the closest onto the screen. The red blip on the scanner cycled through blue to the flashing purple of a hostile contact just as the contacts came into the viewscreen's range. The red alert klaxon sounded. "Thargoids!" exclaimed Riana.

The elite commander yanked the stick back to climb as he accelerated to full speed, arming a missile as he rolled and pitched down again to bring the ships into view. This sharp manoeuvre would bring him into a slightly different attack angle than the insects were expecting, and would give him more time to rake their hulls with laser fire before they could bring their weapons to bear.

"By the lady," exclaimed Riana, appearing by his shoulder as he started to fire. "Look how many of them there are!" There was no need to glance at the scanner: Tarklin could see them on his screen. Eight contacts. All Thargoid. Green laser energy started to lance out towards the Cobra, even as one Thargoid fell to the pounding of Tarklin's military laser. "This system must be teeming with bugs!"

Tarklin stared at the seven remaining octagonal ships as they peeled off in a perfect split; four to one side, and three to the other. Tarklin decelerated the Cobra as he spun the ship, falling perfectly in behind the closest. As it appeared on the screen, Tarklin blinked – the ship looked like an Asp from this angle. He blinked and shook his head then looked again – no, it was definitely a green-tinged, octagonal Thargoid. Anger coursed through the commander's body as frustration and fatigue took their toll. With seven Thargoids out there baying for his blood, this was no time to start hallucinating.

“Lewis, what’s wrong?” asked Riana. Tarklin glanced at her as he opened fire again. Her eyes were full of concern and panic. He obviously hadn’t hidden his frustration as well as normal.

“Nothing, babe.”

“Good! We need to get rid of this fleet – it’s the biggest we’ve seen!”

Tarklin nodded, smiling as another Thargoid blew apart. “Don’t worry – they’re not going to get you. I’ll make sure of that.” He glanced at the scanner as he decelerated and spun again, and noted that there were four more contacts coming into range. He also noted that the six remaining Thargoids had split into pairs and were surrounding his ship on three axes of attack. “Damn,” he swore, “these bugs are smart!”. He lined up his attack vector on one pair and accelerated. The ships were trying to roll above him and attack from his topside – he had seen this any number of times. He opened fire again, and saw a Thargon remote craft launch from the ship. This was a new thing he had only see recently – normally Thargoids launched a fleet of the things at the same time, but now they seemed to be launching them individually. As he banked to fire at it, he heard Riana shout a warning about it. He smiled at her and launched a volley, cutting the craft in half before banking back up to continue his volley. The second ship banked away and reversed direction, cutting below Tarklin’s angle of view. Suddenly, the Cobra rocked and screeched with incoming fire. The commander noted that numerous beams were cutting into his ship and decided to use one of his advantages. He thumbed the control for the cloaking device and flicked it on. Immediately, the screen washed over in a blue haze as the energy field formed around the ship. Tarklin pitched down and rolled, accelerating for a few seconds to put distance between him and the vector he had originally been on, then he slowed to quarter speed.

His shock and surprise was complete as again lasers began cutting into the hull. He accelerated again and switched to the rear view to see two ships behind him firing as if they could see him clearly! He accelerated and banked up, only to see the Thargoids follow suit. The alien scum could see through the cloak!

Tarklin cursed loudly, de-activated the cloak and accelerated to full speed, rolling and pitching out of the way. Still the beams cut into his ship’s shields, and he watched the aft shield drop completely away and energy begin to drop from the lead energy bank. He cursed again and reversed the roll angle, watching as the forward shield began to take hits. It dropped to a quarter strength before the screeching stopped and the energy banks started to recharge. Tarklin knew that the modifications to the shield and energy coils would allow both to charge simultaneously – the aft shield was already back to an eights of its charge. Glancing again at the scanner, he saw with a sinking heart that the four new contacts had also began flashing purple. More Thargoids come to join their friends!

“Where are they coming from?” cried Riana as she also saw the new contacts. “This system is infested!” Her voice was high and seemed on the verge of panic. Tarklin took a deep breath as he saw that the four contacts were splitting into pairs too. These bugs were better than the average – they were using tactics more in line with wolves than insects! He fervently wished that the energy cannon was still working. If ever they needed it, now was the time.

Knowing it was futile, he armed one of the ship’s two missiles. He knew that the Thargoids would just countermeasure it as soon as it launched, but it might give him a few valuable seconds of distraction. He rolled and pitched down to bring another pair of invasion ships into view, and accelerated after them. They were banking off to the right, and he rolled and followed, closing on them as they tried to circle him. A few seconds passed, with green laser light criss-crossing in front of him, then the surface markings of the Thargoid ship were visible. He hit the launch button and a missile streaked out, detonating on the alien ship! To his shock, the octagonal warship began venting atmosphere, and debris began falling from it as it spun out of control. Tarklin focused on the other ship of the pair as it banked away from its stricken partner and tried to reform with the other ships. Tarklin let loose with the laser again and watched with satisfaction as the enemy’s shields flared and died. At that moment, the military laser’s temperature maxed out and a warning message flashed up. Immediately, he flicked to the rear view and tried to see anything to follow – a blue glint revealed another ship just as a foul green laser spat from it, and he lined it up in the rear targetting reticule and opened fire. The rear-mounted beam laser found its mark, but the enemy ship also shot true, and again the screeching of laser on shield coursed through the bridge. Just as the rear shield died again, Tarklin rolled away and ramped the speed to maximum until the top of the loop. At that point he decelerated, switched to front view and watched the enemy glide into view as he completed the loop, opening fire with the now cool forward laser – another ship destroyed. Four down and eight to go.

The scanner showed that the four new ships had now joined in the formation, and the Cobra was in a contracting spiral of enemy vessels. For the first time, Tarklin felt the beginnings of fear. They were too well-organised. Thargoids were never this organised! For one thing, the marauders in system space were rarely found in fleets of more than two!

“What’s happening?” cried Riana, her voice laced with the same panic Tarklin was starting to feel.

“They’re too organised,” he started.

“What do you mean?” she said quietly. “No-one’s better than you! You’re Elite! You’re my Elite commander!”

Tarklin shook his head as he looked at the spinning scanner blips, "I know, but there's something different. They're too organised. This isn't how Thargoids fight!!"

"They're vermin!" screamed Riana. "They don't know how to work together!"

Tarklin knew this was wrong. Thargoids often worked together, especially when a planetary invasion was the goal. The difference was that the lone marauders were just that – single, lone marauders. The biggest fleet involving a Thargoid had been a single invasion ship with a trio of Sidewinder escorts. It was unheard of to see a fleet of them like this. All Tarklin could assume was that the defeat at Ausis had introduced a new element to their strategy. Maybe these ships were remnants of the failed Ausis invasion, banding together for safety. He had to admit that if that was the case, it seemed to be a successful tactic.

Whilst thinking, Tarklin had taken a position behind another Thargoid and opened fire – the mark of experience allowing his mind to wander whilst doing the job that had become second nature to him. Riana whooped as the ship spun off. Oddly, a new contact blossomed as the mother ship died. "What's that?" he wondered aloud.

"It's a Thargon!" called Riana. "It'll be helpless now that the mother ship is gone." Tarklin made a mental note to collect it later – it would be a good bit of profit for this battle, and would replace the missile he had used. If he survived.

As the thought formed, the screeching began again, and this time the aft shield dropped like a stone. Flicking to the rear view, Tarklin saw that three ships had dropped in behind him, and a fourth was just coming into range – all four were pelting him with laser fire. He pitched down and rolled left, spiralling around the cannon fire area, but these combaters were too good. As he watched, each ship tilted their angle of fire slightly on four poles to cover the area. Only one beam was hitting at a time now, but the fire was constant. The second energy bank died away, and damage reports began to appear – the missile bay was damaged, the rear and starboard lasers were damaged and the cloak was offline. Another round of hits and the third bank was half depleted and the ECM registered as disabled.

Tarklin rolled and pitched for his very life, using every evasive manoeuvre in his book. "Riana," he said, "Get in the escape pod."

"No!" cried Riana Tarklin. "I'm not leaving you!"

"I made you a promise," Tarklin shouted back, his eyes fixed on the scanner as he jinked and turned, "I will NOT let these bastards kill you! Now get in the pod!"

Riana shook her head and stalked to the rear of the bridge, leaning against the emergency cryo pod nestled to the left of the gravity well. "I can't leave you, Lewis. I won't."

At that moment, the lights on the bridge died as another screeching thump hammered the ship and knocked Tarklin forward. He looked up at the viewscreen and the words that spelt their doom: SYSTEM DRIVE DISABLED. The ship coasted forward. Tarklin moved the controls up and down, but the ship carried straight on in a straight line. Even the velocity controls were offline. The screeching stopped, and Tarklin could hear the eerie quiet of the ship, with only the hum of the life support systems breaking the silence.

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Long moments passed. Tarklin rose from his chair and took Riana in his arms, waiting for the final laser bolts to find their home. The fire never came.

Tarklin, confused, looked to the viewscreen, which showed a fuzzy, indistinct view of the space outside. As he watched, he saw a green hull become visible just as he felt a new vibration through the ship. A Thargoid vessel had taken position directly above the ship. With a jolt of fear, he knew what was going to happen. The alien scum were preparing to board the ship! An image rose unbidden to the surface of Tarklin's mind: Riana being torn apart by Thargoids: Riana dead on a cold hospital bed, her bloody, burned face empty of life.

No! It was not going to happen. He could hear the mating collar being clamped in place on the dorsal access hatch. He looked up and saw the red indicator light begin to flash as the atmosphere normalised. Panic stricken, and hearing Riana begin to scream as she realised what was happening, Tarklin looked furtively around him for a weapon to use. He had no personal weaponry aboard the ship now. When it had been dry-docked he had taken the equipment to the planet where it had been destroyed along with the rest of his possessions. He ran to the medical bay and threw open the drawers on the cabinet – there was nothing useful there. He heard a noise over Riana's screaming and the roaring in his ears and looked to see the hatch's indicator turning green. The atmosphere was normalised – the hatch would open any minute. He looked at the gravity well, where the descending platform had a grab rail – he raced to it and pulled at the grab rail. It resisted for precious seconds then came away from the mounting pole. The hatch was opening, and Riana was screaming, backing away in terror as the first of the aliens started to descend feet first.

It was horrible to behold, its alien chitin shining and glistening and its head jerking around on its stunted neck. Tarklin swung the rail around with all of his strength and connected with the middle of the alien's torso with a gratifying crunch. He swung again, this time at the insect's head, but an arm rose to protect its head, and another

crunch signified the breaking of the arm's carapace. The alien fell to the ground with a loud thud just as another jumped down from the hatch above. Again Tarklin swung the rail and again it connected. Another alien dropped down right next to Lewis, and he heard Riana scream his name in warning and panic. He flailed the rail behind him and felt it bite into the alien. He stepped out to the left just in time to avoid a flailing limb as it tried to grab at him. Yet another alien jumped down, and Tarklin took a step back as all four faced him – the first still prone on the floor and cradling its shattered arm.

"I don't know if you insect scum can understand me, but I will not let you take us without a fight." He hefted the rail again and launched at the nearest alien, swinging the metal bar straight for its head. The alien sidestepped with amazing agility for a creature its size, and Tarklin stumbled before catching his balance and sidestepping a fast blow aimed at his head. He kicked out and connected with the creature's knee, which cracked back, bringing a scream of pain from the Thargoid. Tarklin stepped back as another insectoid descended from the hatch and took up a position in front of the others. Five pairs of multifaceted eyes stared back at Tarklin as he studied them, sidling round towards Riana. He felt her hands on his shoulders as she held him, her panicked breath hot on the back of his neck. "Don't let them tear us apart," she sobbed quietly.

Tarklin shook his head rapidly, trying to clear the roaring of his blood in his ears. He felt sick and panicked himself. His heart hammered in his chest and he could feel sweat in his palm where he held the rail. His head pounded too, and he was finding it hard to focus on the aliens: their outlines were blurred, and nothing seemed clear. The lead Thargoid was standing slightly in front of the others, and its middle limbs were stretched in front in what Tarklin could swear was a gesture of caution or supplication. "They'll take you away from me," Riana said breathlessly in his ear.

Tarklin's eyes darkened and fury overtook him. The roaring in his ears reached a deafening crescendo. "They'll have to kill me first," he growled as he hefted the rail in his hands. The lead Thargoid backed away one step then two as Tarklin let loose a cry of rage and hate and flew at it. The rail came crashing down on the Thargoid's raised arms, which twisted to deflected the rail and tear it from Tarklin's grip as a bellow of pain came from its maw. Suddenly, Riana screamed his name, and Tarklin looked up to see two of the creatures launching for him. He felt their filthy clawed hands scrabbling at him as they sought to hold him. He lashed out with any limb that would reach. He felt feet and fists connect with their bodies but there were too many of them. Eventually they held him down and he screamed in rage, struggling to free himself. Riana screamed his name again, but Tarklin couldn't see her. All he could see were insectoid faces, their greasy mandibles clicking and their faceted eyes glinting in the bridge's lighting. He half screamed and half sobbed her name as he realised he had failed her at the last: the aliens would finally win. He felt a stabbing pain as they struck him with something. He struggled again, arching his back and neck to see her, tears streaming down his face, trying to see what was happening to her. He screamed her name over and over. "I'm sorry!" he cried out. She was nowhere to be seen. He could feel his body becoming numb. The roaring in his ears was beginning to fade and the room was starting to go dark: he wondered what they had done to him. He finally stopped struggling as his body refused to respond to his commands and he rested, looking up at the bridge roof and seeing the open hatch through which his death had been delivered. Suddenly he felt a hand on his cheek and heard her voice.

Riana's face slowly appeared, blurred and dark against the light of the room. She was smiling, he thought to himself, concentrating on her face and on the touch on his cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I love you."

"I know," she said. "We'll always be together, my love."

With that, Tarklin's world darkened.

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The screen showed the pilot's struggles slow as the sedative took effect. He was arching his neck, looking around the bridge for something. Soon his body relaxed and just before his eyes finally closed, a small smile appeared on his face, ravaged by pain, anger and tears.

The image froze as William Henderick paused the playback with a single voice command. He looked around at the two people with him and met each of their gazes. "No-one's tampered with this recording?" he asked the woman seated directly opposite.

"No, sir," replied the woman, whose embroidered name tag revealed her to be Lt. Commander Susanna Leyton of the Galactic Navy. "This is the ship's bridge recorder log exactly as it was found. The crew of the recovery team forwarded it to us straight after they finally apprehended Commander Tarklin.

Henderick looked back at the screen. Tarklin's unconscious face was surrounded by the figures of the Naval team that had sedated him then led him back into their ship. Henderick knew that Tarklin was currently being held in a secure facility somewhere near the system in which he had been apprehended awaiting transport back to Lave.

Henderick, the deputy liaison officer for GalCop's justice department, rubbed his eyes as he thought. "Commander, could you give me an overview of what happened here?" He held up a hand to interrupt as Leyton began to object. "I know I have the written reports, but I want to hear it from you."

Leyton nodded. "We were tipped off when an escape pod was recovered in the Isusle system. The pilot's ship was recovered not far from it, and its IFF signature was one that the police had been looking out for as a dangerous pirate. The IFF system had been tampered with, and the assumption was made that the real pirate was still out there using this transponder code. The pilot gave a good description of the markings on the Cobra that shot him up, so that was circulated to all stations in galaxy 2. It happened to match the description of a ship belonging to a Lewis Tarklin, who had been in the media a couple of months before as being a hero on Ausis after helping save that world from a Thargoid invasion.

"This pirate, who by now was being assumed to be Tarklin, had been terrorising systems in the area since not long after that invasion. Anything that approached him was fair game. A police patrol caught him in the act and he blew all four ships out of space without blinking."

Leyton took a breath. "At about this time, the navy received a call from Ambassador Freidmann, the GCW representative on Ausis. He informed us that this Tarklin was his daughter's husband and was a hero on the world. He also informed us that his daughter, Riana Tarklin, had been killed in the invasion, and that Tarklin had taken the matter of the invasion into his own hands after her death. He added that Tarklin had recently disappeared from the planet, and that his daughter's body had vanished with him."

Henderick sighed, once more glancing at the screen. "Tarklin didn't accept her death, did he?" He felt a sense of pity for the man on the screen. "He certainly loved her. It would seem that her death unhinged him."

Leyton nodded, unamused at the interruption to her flow. "The ambassador guessed the same. He ordered the Navy to get involved and to ensure that Tarklin and his ship were captured and not destroyed. When the team recovered Tarklin, they found his wife's body in the cryo capsule at the rear of the bridge."

Henderick sighed, trying to understand the level of pain and suffering that Tarklin must have endured. He turned to an older man sitting to Leyton's right. "What about the medical opinion, doctor?" he asked.

"There are a lot of possibilities here," said the doctor, whose visitor's badge declared him to be Jorgen Fuller. "Post traumatic stress syndrome, psychosis, pathological hallucination or whatever other label you want to give it. It's just too soon to tell." He opened a plasfilm file on the table in front of him. "Tarklin is currently heavily sedated. He is still completely convinced that his wife is alive and waiting for him on the ship. My review of the bridge visual logs showed that he conversed with her daily as if she were really with him. I also saw that he was probably unaware of the actual ships he was attacking – he continuously makes reference to them as if they were Thargoid ships. For whatever reason, from the point where he puts his wife's body in the cryo chamber, I don't think one thing that he saw in his mind was real. His mind created a fantasy world for him in which he was avenging his wife at her own bidding. His hallucination of Riana may have been his psyche giving physical form to his desire to kill those who caused her death."

Henderick raised a hand, and Dr. Fuller paused in his analysis. "It sounds to me like you are saying Tarklin may not have been responsible for his actions."

Fuller nodded. "That's a very likely scenario. I'd have to examine him myself to be sure."

"The audio feed from the Naval team's arrival would probably corroborate that," chipped in Leyton. "You heard yourself that Tarklin repeatedly referred to the Naval team as aliens and insects. The commanding officer's report does state that Tarklin seemed to be talking to someone who wasn't present, and that he seemed more scared that they would get past him to someone else."

Henderick nodded and looked at both of his advisors. "OK then, thanks for your honesty. Arrange for Mr Tarklin to be brought back to Lave. I want you to thoroughly study him and find out for certain how deep his mental troubles are, doctor. He'll have to stand trial for the piracy and the lives he took." He dismissed the pair and looked back to the screen as the door hissed close behind them. Tarklin looked oddly serene in the image, in stark contrast to the mindless violence he had created in the minutes before. The commander of the naval team was still in medical care, and the first officer that had dropped into the bridge had two broken arms and three broken ribs when the medical team had scanned him.

Henderick switched the monitor off and rose as the faintly smiling image faded to black.

## **Technical Documentation**

### **Energy Cannon**

Unique weapon designed and integrated into a space vessel by its designer, Lewis Tarklin. The energy cannon is based on the technology found in an energy bomb, and uses a great many parts from one of these weapons. Instead of discharging the energy explosively through a shielded casing, the cannon collects the energy and emits it outwards from the source vessel in a conical blast wave. This wave can be focused by adjusting lenses and the variable aperture port on the end of the cannon's emitter, thus allowing a wide cone of effect or a narrow beam. Given the power of an energy bomb, the focused beam is theorised to be able to cut deep into a planet's surface if fired from within the atmosphere. Most importantly, the energy cells can be recharged from the source ship's hyperdrive chambers and energy banks, making it a multi-shot weapon.

*Author's note: this weapon was inspired by the Spectrum version of Elite's cheat code that allowed the player to always have an energy bomb.*

### **Cloaking Device**

Experimental device thought to be under testing with the Galactic Navy. A test ship design, codenamed the Constrictor, was rumoured to be fitted with this device. Although further rumours state that a civilian vessel has been sighted using one of these devices on numerous occasions, no proof has been found.

*Author's note: the use of this device is a result of my Elite pilot completing the Constrictor mission on Spectrum Elite.*