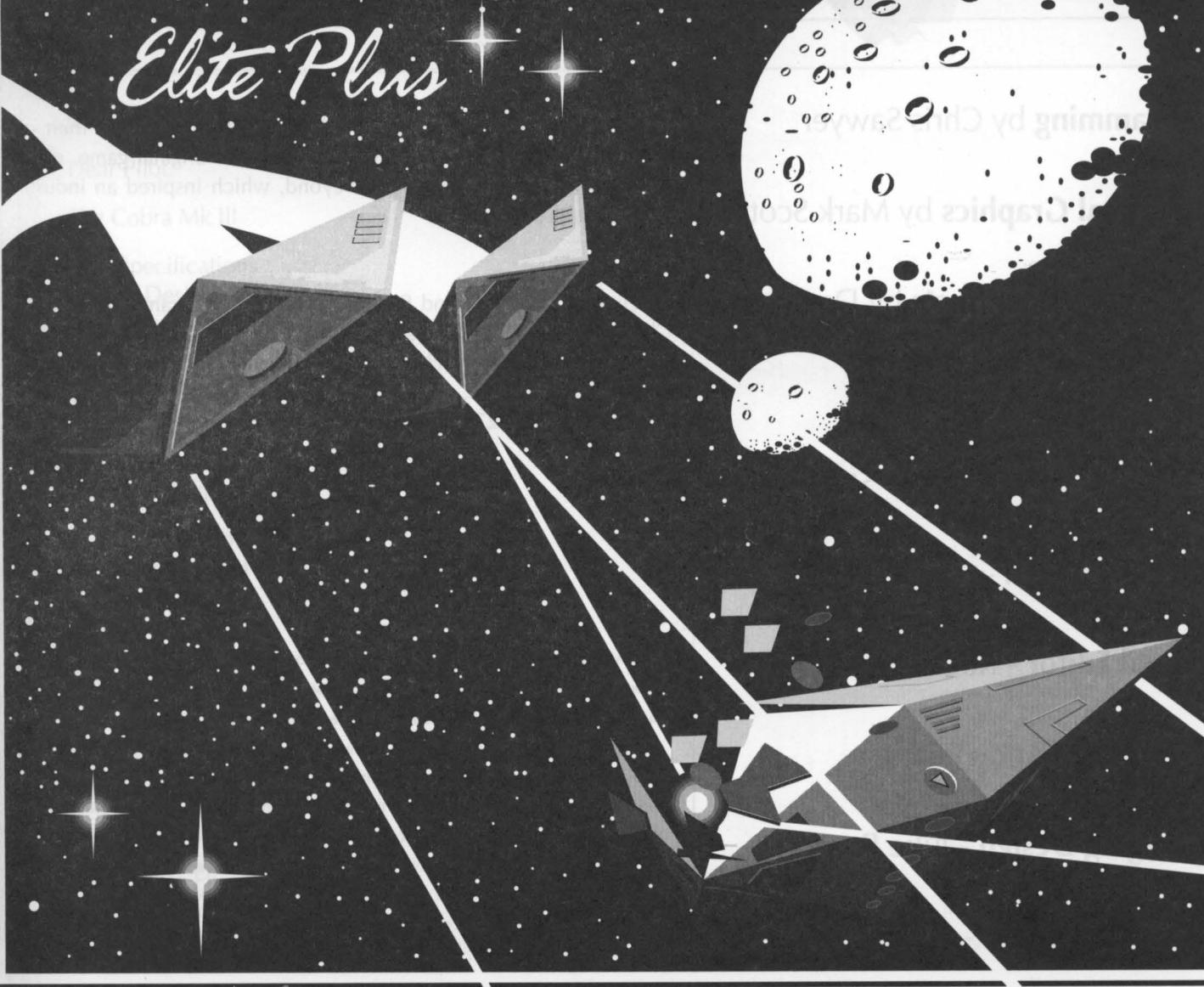
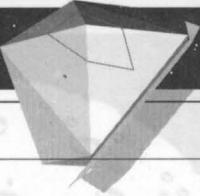


Elite Plus



Elite Plus





CREDITS

Programming by Chris Sawyer

Additional Graphics by Mark Scott

Music & Sound Effects by Dave Lowe

Publisher - Paul Hibbard

Development Manager - Steve Perry

Quality Control - Andrew Luckett

Manual Editor - Rob Davies

"Imprint" by Andy Redman

Packaging Design - Julie Burness

Manual Graphics - Artistix

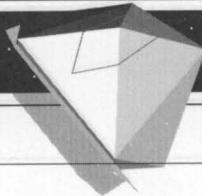
Special thanks go to Ian Bell and David Braben for all their co-operation in producing Elite Plus....and for their original game, now a legend from Lave to Xeesti and beyond, which inspired an industry. Everything else is history...

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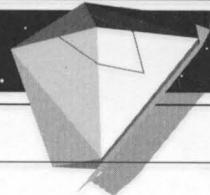
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Manual Graphics - Artistix		

ELITE PLUS

LOADING INSTRUCTIONS FOR IBM PC & COMPATIBLE COMPUTERS

Versions of Elite for computers with 3.5" disk drives are supplied on one disk, marked Disk 1. Versions for 5.25" disk drives are supplied on two disks, labelled Disk 1 and Disk 2.

Computer: This program requires a machine 100% compatible with the IBM PC. The machine must have at least 640K of RAM and DOS 3.11 or higher. Using higher versions of DOS more RAM may be necessary.

Controls: The program can be run entirely from the keyboard, using the keys and keyboard, or with a mouse and keyboard.

Display: The program requires a color monitor which is 100% compatible with a CGA graphics system. CGA systems must have 256K of memory (except for the very earliest releases). The program will not run on 3D systems, or on monochrome monitors, or with a VGA graphics system. If you are using a compatible card/monitor, it must be 100% hardware compatible to one of the above.

DOS: You must have IBM or Microsoft DOS, version 3.0 or higher. A version between 3.11 and 4.1 is recommended.

Elite is not copy-protected. This means you can copy the game files from the original disks however you prefer -- to other floppy disks, or to a hard disk. These files are normal in all respects, and should not cause special problems when backing up, restoring, or optimizing a hard disk. However, keep the original disks handy.

Elite has been left unprotected for your convenience in making back-up copies for personal use and when playing from a hard drive. However, making additional copies to give away or sell is a Copyright Violation. See the Copyright Notice at the front of the game manual.



Supplied Disks

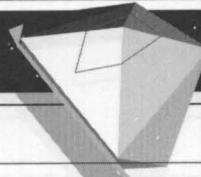
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INSTALLATION CONCEPTS

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Alien Races	65
Observer's Guide to Ships in Service	67

ELITE PLUS



LOADING INSTRUCTIONS FOR IBM PC & COMPATIBLE COMPUTERS

Versions of Elite for computers with 3.5" disk drives are supplied on one disk, marked Disk 1. Versions for 5.25" disk drives are supplied on two disks, labelled Disk 1 and Disk 2.

Supplied Disks

Computer: This program requires a machine 100% compatible with IBM PC's. The machine must have at least 640K of RAM and DOS 2.11 or higher. When using higher versions of DOS, more RAM may be necessary.

Required Equipment

Controls: The program can be run entirely from the keyboard, or with a joystick and keyboard, or with a mouse and keyboard.

Loading from a Hard Disk

Display: The program requires a color monitor with an IBM EGA, VGA or MCGA, graphics system. EGA systems must have 256K on the graphics card (standard on all but the earliest releases). The program will not run on a system with a monochrome monitor, or via a CGA graphics system. If you are using a compatible graphics card/monitor, it must be 100% hardware compatible to one of the above.

DOS: You must have IBM or Microsoft DOS, version 2.0 or higher. A version between 2.11 and 4.1 is recommended.

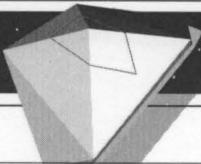
INSTALLATION CONCEPTS

Elite is not copy-protected. This means you can copy the game files from the original disks however you prefer — to other floppy disks, or to a hard disk. These files are normal in all respects, and should not cause special problems when backing up, restoring, or optimizing a hard disk. However, keep the original disks handy.

Graphics Options

Elite has been left unprotected for your convenience in making back-up copies for personal use and when playing from a hard drive. However, making additional copies to give away or sell is a Copyright Violation. See the Copyright Notice at the front of the game manual.

For example, insert Disk 1 into Drive A and type "Copy A:.*". Once Disk 1 has copied



INSTALLATION CONCEPTS

Installation on Floppy Disks

This program is designed to run using copies of the original (distribution) disks supplied in the box. You can run the game using the distribution disks, but no information should be saved to them. We suggest making back-up copies and using those to play from. A description of how to make back-up copies follows. Also, format destination disks before doing any copying — to make sure the disk is "clean" and in good operating condition.

Format a Floppy Disk: Formatting a disk requires that you boot your computer with DOS, and at the ">" prompt type the appropriate format command. For example, on most machines this is "FORMAT A:" to format a floppy disk in the A: floppy drive. For details, consult the description of "FORMAT" in your DOS manual.

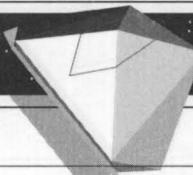
If you're using 5.25" 360K drives (standard for PCs and XT's) format three disks: one for the Disk 1, one for the Disk 2 and one for your save-game files.

If you're using 3.5" 720K drives (standard for PS2 models 25 and 30), format two disks: one for Disk 1 and one for your save-game files.

Copy to Newly Formatted Disks: After formatting your disk(s), now use the DOS "COPY" command to copy the disks with *.* as the file designators. Typically this command is entered as "COPY A:.* B:.*", even if you just have one floppy drive. For details, consult the description of "COPY" in your DOS manual.

You can copy the original (distribution) disks onto a hard disk. The files copied are standard DOS files. They can be copied, erased, and optimized as desired.

Return to the root directory with the "CD" DOS command. For example, if your hard disk is C: then "cd C:\\" does this. Then create a named directory to hold the game files. For example, type "MD Elite". Enter that directory. For example, type "CD Elite". Then, for example, insert Disk 1 into Drive A and type "Copy A:.*". Once Disk 1 has copied,



repeat the last Copy command for Disk 2, if necessary.

- (1) **Boot your machine** using DOS (version 2.11 to 3.31 is recommended).
- (2) **Insert Disks:** When the "A:>" prompt appears, remove the DOS disk and insert the Elite Disk 1. Thereafter during play if prompted you must remove Disk 1 to insert Disk 2.
- (3) **Set Speed:** If you have a "turbo" or multi-speed computer, use your normal speed setting.
- (4) **Load Program:** Type the following: "Elite" and press return. The program will begin loading.

This assumes your machine runs under DOS when it boots, which is true of 99% of all IBM and compatible machines with hard disks.

- (1) **Turn on your machine.** If it is already on, exit all programs and return to the root directory with the "CD" DOS command. For example, if your hard disk is C: then "cd C:\>" does this.
- (2) **Set Speed:** If you have a "turbo" or multi-speed computer, use your normal speed setting.
- (3) **Load Program:** Type the following: "Elite" and press return. The program will begin loading.

Once Elite loads it will ask you to select a graphics option;

M - MCGA: Select this option if you have an MCGA graphics board. This option provides 256 colours.

V - VGA: Select this option if you have a VGA graphics board

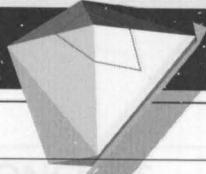
E - EGA: Select this option if you have an EGA graphics board. This option provides 16 colours.

Loading from Floppy Disks

Saving Games To a Hard Drive

Loading from a Hard Disk

Graphics Options



INSTALLATION CONCEPTS

Sound Driver Options

When Elite loads it asks you to select a sound option. The current options include the following:

- P- PC Sound:** This sound setting is appropriate to all IBM PC, XT, AT and PS/2 machines with no special sound hardware.
- A- Ad Lib Sound Board:** Only use this option if you've added to your computer the Ad Lib music board.
- R- Roland MT-32 MIDI Board:** Only use this option if you've added to your computer this sound board produced by Roland.

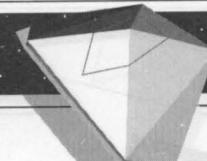
Loading Problems?

If the program does not load or run correctly, turn off your entire machine and restart it. Make sure DOS and Elite are the only programs loading into memory. Certain RAM-resident programs or tools can conflict with Elite.

If you continue to have trouble, try the original Elite disks. Your copies may be bad. If the original doesn't work, try the original Elite disks in another PC. If the disks work in another machine, then your machine has compatibility problems (i.e., some aspect is not entirely IBM compatible). Try a different machine speed, or a keyboard/mouse, graphics, or sound option. Sometimes an alternate setting will work.

If you have trouble loading on other machines as well as your own, you may be one of the tiny percentage with a defective disk. In such cases, contact MicroProse Customer Service at UK (0666) 504399 Monday through Friday, 9am-5pm. Please have a pencil and paper handy when you call.

You may save games currently under way and recontinue them at a later date. Games may be saved onto your hard drive or onto a previously formatted saved game disk. You should not save games onto your original game disks or back-up game disks.



INSTALLATION CONCEPTS

Delivery Advice:

Before selecting the "Save/Load Game" icon, place your previously formatted save game disk in drive A; then select the save/load game icon. Once the save/load is complete, return the "Graphics" disk to drive A. More information on saving and loading games can be found on page 17.

Saving/Loading Games To a Floppy Drive

When the save/load game icon is selected save/load files will be saved to the "Elite" directory on your hard drive. More information on saving and loading games can be found on page 17.

Saving Games To a Hard Drive

Your Cobra Mk III is a rapid fire fighter with a long range, medium capacity fighter/trader, the Cobra Mk III has the intent on building the most effective combatants who will cost the cost of both armaments development.

The Cobra Mk III
incorporates Zienian plasma pulse lasers, a rapid fire system, a HoloLinker 3D Space GravDistor system, and provision for a cargo bay extension.

N.B. Once the game has loaded, the title screen will be displayed for a short time, followed by a view of the bridge of the ship. A message inviting you to "Press Space Bar to start the Game" will be displayed, whilst the Scanner Screen runs, in demo mode, through the ship types found in the game. Via this screen, you may configure the game according to your preferences, so DO NOT press the Space Bar before coming to Page 15 of the manual, where you will be told about "Configuring the Game". You may skip to page 15 immediately, if you do not wish to read fully, at this time, the specifications of your craft.



"THE NUMBER ONE NAME IN SPACE"

Dear Pilot,

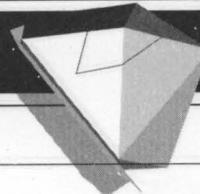
Welcome aboard this Cobra Mk III trading and combat craft. The ship has been supplied to you by Faulcon deLacy Spaceways, by arrangement with the Galactic Co-operative of Worlds whose Space and Interstellar Pilot's Exams you have just successfully completed. The basic flight manual supplied with the craft is designed to familiarise you with all aspects of space flight, combat and trading, and we hope that it will be of use to you.

Taking delivery of your first interplanetary craft is a huge responsibility. With it come the dreams and aspirations of many who have gone before you. Combine your sense of adventure with great skill and boundless patience. The path to financial success and recognition as an elite combateer is long and rocky. Tread it carefully. Look after your craft, and it will serve you well.

President
Galactic Co-operative of Worlds

Commander
Pilot's Licensing Centre, Lave GalCop Federal Patrol

Secretary



THE COBRA MKIII

Delivery Advice:

Your ship awaits collection from the docking bay of a Coriolis space station in orbit around the planet Lave. Pilot licences are issued only at the planet Lave. Receipt of this manual is only authorised on production of your licence. We trust that you own an original copy. Space piracy may be tolerated at certain times during the game. Documentation (or software) piracy will cost you dearly.

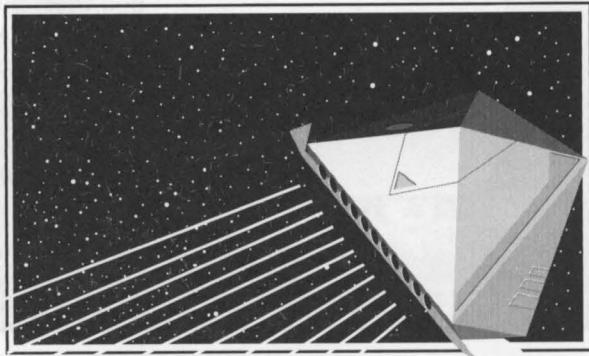
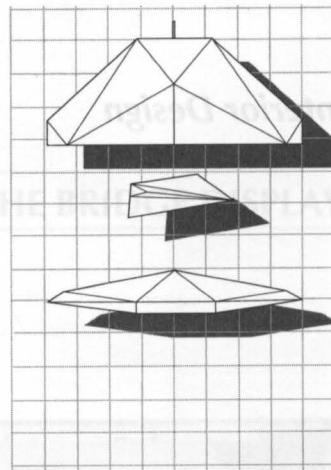
Ship Specifications

Your Cobra Mk III is equipped with a single forward-firing pulse laser, three homing missiles, 7 light years of fuel, and the sum of 100 Credits (CR). The best of the medium-range, medium capacity fighter-traders, the Cobra Mk III is an ideal ship for new traders intent on building their fortunes, or new combateers who will constantly need to finance the cost of both armaments and non-combative equipment.

The Cobra Mk III

incorporates Zieman Deflection Shields, fore and aft, 4 hull mountings for Ingram 'rapid-fire' pulse lasers, a Lance & Ferman 'seek & kill' missile system, a Holodirect & ThruSpace GravDistort communications system, and provision for a cargo bay extension.

The ship is highly manoeuvrable, has a good C-holding factor during hyperspace transit, can hold sufficient Quirium H-fuel for a 7-light-year single jump and has full AutoTrading Systems Link for use at space stations. Further, it is protected by dual Zieman Deflection Shields, powered by four energy banks, and has a powerful, rapid-fire pulse laser mounted on the forward hull segment. Flight controls are elegant and simple, and the bridge is equipped with both HoloDirect and ThruSpace GravDistort communications systems. Its life support



THE COBRA MKIII

Interior Design

functions are varied and flexible to ensure maximum comfort during hunting or trading expeditions.

The Cobra is essentially a single-pilot trade-ship, but has been designed to support a second person, provided that person is of ordinary human or humanoid dimensions and physiology. The ship itself consists of five main areas;

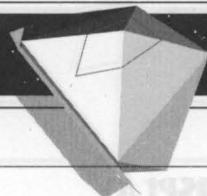
The Cargo Hold fills the bulk of the mid-space area, and the cargo bay doors open downwards. The capacity in an unmodified Cobra is 20 1-tonne canisters. Extra cargo space may be acquired by extending the cargo bay, which does not affect manoeuvrability. Tonne Cannisters (TC) attach magnetically to the cargo arms within the bay, and two AutoShuttles occupy the central space.

The Bridge has seats for pilot and co-pilot, a MedStim Centre, entrance to the escape pod, descent well to living quarters, communications console, special suit locker, RemLock supply case, attachment facilities for AutoDock system and a hand-weapons locker. The main wall is occupied by the scanner screen, astrogation console and main systems monitors.

The Drive Sector houses the directional thrusts, the System Space Kruger 'lightfast' motors, and the Irrikon Thru-Space Drives. Also here are the rear laser housings, the ECM capsule, the Zieman shield generators, the energy banks, and the Witch-Space fuel condensors (Quirium). There are both internal and external access panels. Radiation level is high.

The living and hygiene section is below the main bridge, and is reached through a descending gravity well. Two bunks, food dispensing facilities, waste disposal (including high-tox copper exudate for Aonians), SynPleasure relaxapads, and videos.

ELITE PLUS



THE COBRA MKIII

The equipment level runs throughout the ship, and houses all energy banks for the lasers, plus the missile rests, with dispatch shafts to the lower hull. The communications centre is here, and the escape pod (with a separate entrance from the bridge) life support systems, cryogen tanks (two) and forty cubic metres of FacsEnvironment for emergency use.

Are you sitting comfortably? (This is your last chance to adjust your seat and get to hand any stimulants you feel may be necessary for your journey) If so, we will begin. When the title screen is displayed, simply wait a few seconds. Music will greet

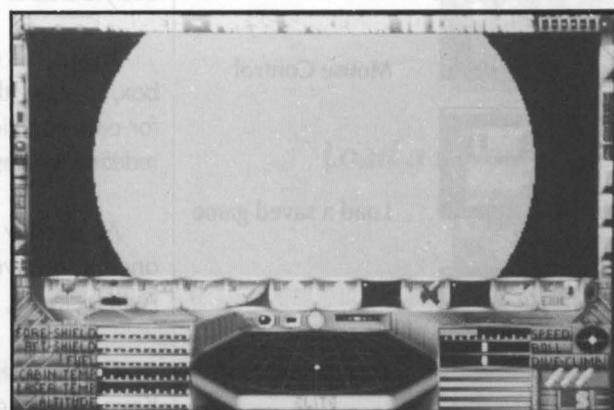
your ears as you are placed into the cockpit of your Cobra Mk III. Once done, the icon will be flicked and an overlay will appear asking you to define key controls. You have to define key controls before you can start the game.

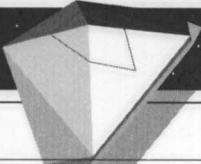
In front of you, you should be able to see the scanner screen, which, after running the credits for about twenty seconds, will run through the game craft in demo mode. Do not press the space bar yet. Below the scanner screen are the game configuration icons and main systems monitors.

"Saving and Loading Games" on page 11 for more information.

The Control Icons displayed before the game is started, (by you pressing the Space Bar), allow you to configure the game according to your preferences.

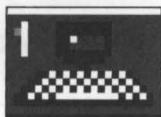
Please read the section on "Game Configuration" before returning to the main text at "The Status Screen", which should be done when you are ready to press the Space Bar and start the game!





THE BRIDGE DISPLAY

Game Configuration



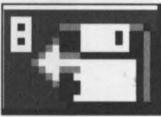
Keyboard Control



Joystick Control



Mouse Control



Load a saved game



Turn Sound On/Off



Exit to DOS

The 6 icons displayed allow you to choose your preferred method of control, load a saved game, turn the sound on or off, or quit to DOS.

The icons are each given a number, shown in the upper-left-hand corner of each icon. These numbers correspond to the Function Key, or Number Key, which must be pressed on the keyboard to select the function of that icon. The Number Keys which should be used are those above the letter keys on the main section of the keyboard. For number icons, '10', '11', and '12', the keys which must be used are '0', '-(minus)', and '='(equals)', respectively. The number keys on the numeric keypad may also be used to select icons, but you must first activate "Number Lock" by pressing the "Number Lock" key.

Keyboard Control



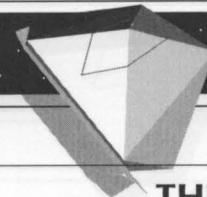
This is the default method of control, and a 'tick' will be present in the corner of this box, to show that this is the currently selected option. Default keys are already designated for each function. A full list of these keys may be found on page 29. You may, however, redefine the keys according to your preferences, by pressing numeric "11" or "F1".

An overlay will appear inviting you to select a key for each of the following functions, once you have confirmed your desire to redefine the control keys; Dive, Climb, Roll Anticlockwise, Roll Clockwise, Fire Laser, Increase Speed and Decrease Speed.

Once done, the overlay will clear. You may wish to designate the keys on the Numeric Keypad as flight control keys. If you do, ensure that "Number Lock" is deactivated. Whenever "Number Lock" is active, pressing numeric keys will select an icon.

The living and hygiene section includes the main bridge, and is searched through descending gravity levels, two bunk beds, food dispensing facilities, waste disposal, including high-tox copper mounds for Aonians!, Syntheleisure relaxpads, and videos.

ELITE PLUS



THE BRIDGE DISPLAY

Selecting icon 2 will allow you to control the game by joystick. Once done, the icon will be 'ticked' and an overlay will appear, inviting you to:

"Centre joystick, then press Space Bar to calibrate...."

Once done, a further prompt will appear inviting you to "Select your choice of key to....Increase Speed.....Decrease Speed".

Once done, the overlay will clear. A full list of joystick movement functions can be found on page 29.

Selecting icon 3 will allow you to control the game by mouse. Once done, the icon will be 'ticked' and an overlay will appear, inviting you to define keys to "Increase Speed", and "Decrease Speed". Once done, the overlay will clear.

A full list of mouse movement functions can be found on page 30.

Selecting icon 8 will allow you to load a previously saved game. Please see the section "Saving and Loading Games" on page 11 for more information.

Selecting icon 9 allows you to toggle the sound on or off. The sound will be on when the game first loads. When it is turned off, the icon is overlaid by a red cross.

Joystick Control



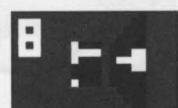
Mouse Control

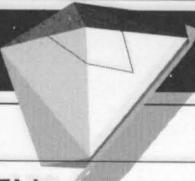


Load a saved game



Sound On/Off





THE STATUS SCREEN

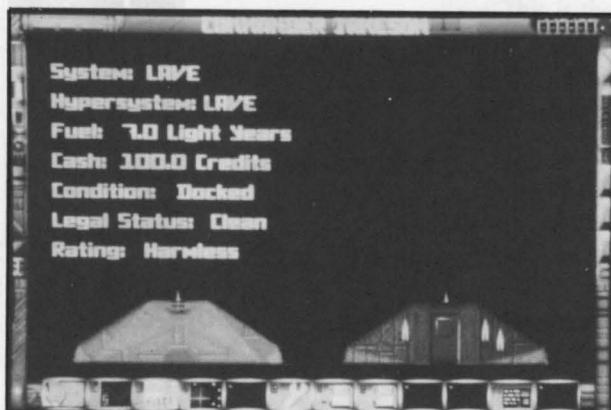
Quit to DOS



Keyboard Control

Joystick Control

The Status Screen



Exit to DOS

Selecting icon 12 allows you to quit to DOS, once you have confirmed this choice via an overlay screen.

Unless you choose to quit to DOS, a message inviting you to "Press Space Bar to start game" will still be displayed on the Scanner Screen. It would be wise to now do so.

If you perform this first manouevre of pressing the Space Bar correctly (they taught you well at Training School, obviously), you will be able to see your Status Screen.

The number keys on the numeric keypad may also be used to select icons, ~~and they must be pressed to activate "Number Lock" by pressing the "Number Lock" key.~~

The Status Screen tells you vital up-to-the-minute information about yourself and your ship.

Cobra Mk III ships are mass-produced, and it is not possible to customise your ship, at manufacture, to include your name.

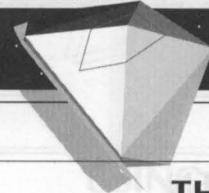
All ships are supplied with a default name, under which you may wish to trade and fight. But, be warned, you may come across a few Commander Jamesons on your travels. Your name will be automatically changed when you save the game.

Every other item of information is guaranteed 100 % correct. (Unless, of course, you bought a cheap second-hand model from an unscrupulous trader).

The "System" refers to the planetary system which your ship is currently in; and you're currently in Lave.

The "Hypersystem" refers to the system onto which the Hyperspace is locked; also currently Lave.

ELITE PLUS



THE STATUS SCREEN

There are four possible "Conditions": Docked means that you are docked in a space station at the Present System; you are currently docked at Lave. Green means that there is no immediate danger; Yellow indicates enemy ships in the vicinity; Condition Red signals a high-risk on-going death-type combat situation.

"Legal Status" refers to your Galactic Police record. If this is Clean you have nothing to worry about, but as an Offender or, still worse, a Fugitive you are likely to be attacked by police ships.

The "Rating" is a dispassionate assessment of your performance in combat so far.

Current **fuel** and **cash** are also displayed, along with a graphical display of both top and under-side of your craft, detailing ship fittings.

At the base of the Status Screen are a row of control icons. The icon row also appears on the Bridge Display, located just below the Scanner Screen.

There is room for twelve control icons to be on display during normal play.

The icons will always appear in the same "window", but if the choice represented by an icon is, or becomes, unavailable, the window will appear blank. Icons which share the same window are mutually exclusive. i.e. they never become selectable at the same time.

The icons are each given a number, shown in the upper-left-hand corner of each icon. These numbers correspond to the Function Key, or Numeric Key, which must be pressed on the keyboard to select the function of that icon. The Number Keys which should be used are those above the letter keys on the main section of the keyboard. For number icons, '10', '11', and '12', the keys which must be used are '0', '-(minus)', and '==(equals)', respectively.

Navigational Controls

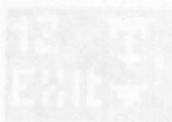


The Status Screen Icons



THE STATUS SCREEN

Quit to DOS



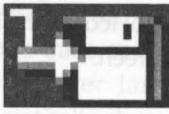
1. Initiate automatic take-off or docking procedure (Page 26)



6. Equip Ship (Page 44)



2. Access Prices/Trade display (Page 55)



7. Save Game (Page 11)



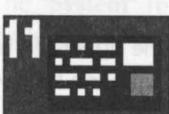
3. Access Status Screen (Page 18)



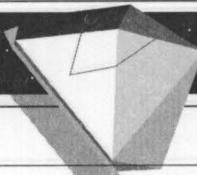
8. Load Game (Page 11)



4. Access Maps (Page 22)



11. Access System Data (Page 23)



USING THE SHIP'S DATA

Your Cobra Mk III is equipped with sophisticated data storage and retrieval systems, allowing you to speedily assimilate information relating to the planets in the Galactic Co-operative. The Galactic Co-operative is only one - although the largest - of several planetary federations, and maintains trade and diplomatic links with over 2000 planets spread throughout 8 galaxies. The political profile of a planet is an important navigational consideration as many are in a state of anarchy and are unsafe to visit in poorly equipped ships. Important too is its economic profile, as will be discussed in the section about trading.

displays its name and distance from the current planet system.

second auto? adT - te gniplool vltneum eirr uoy rldirw nseS eft cycleib t noo!

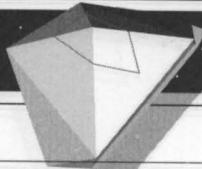
Navigational strategy depends of course upon your aims in life. If you think you have what it takes to become elite, you will need to chart your path through the galaxies with care and great precision. You will wish to equip your ship as fully and as early as possible. You will, therefore need to study the trading section of this manual so that you can work out a profitable trading route in order to be able to afford the weaponry you will require. You will have to make decisions about how dangerous a life you wish to lead; in general, the more risks you take (travelling to dangerous planets or trading in contraband goods), the faster you may equip your ship but the quicker you will be killed. You will discover that life in the 8 galaxies is a question of fine balance. Although it may seem, at first, that indiscriminate carnage is a soft option (kills improve your rating, after all), as your skills and experience of living in space mature, you will quickly discover that piracy is a short-lived career.

Success in this context is a mosaic of talents: combative, certainly, but thinking and decision-making talents too.

Here you are introduced to some of the controls which will eventually be useful to you in developing a route through the 8 galaxies.

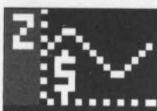
Navigational Controls

Ship's Database
The Worldata Link



ELITE PLUS

USING THE SHIP'S DATA



Short Range Chart.

3. Access Status

4. Access Maps

Icon 1 initiates the auto launch and docking procedure. It is important that you do not select icon 1 for the moment, unless you wish to be jettisoned into space without a clue as to how to read a map or get home.

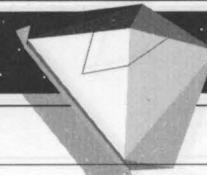
Icon 2 accesses the Trade Display, allowing you to check on market prices, buy, or sell goods, and generally plot your financial success. More information about Trading can be found on page 55.

Icon 3 displays the Screen which you are currently looking at - The Status Screen. Therefore, pressing it will have no effect at the moment (bar letting the computer know that you are stupid or nosy), but can be used to call up the Status Screen at any other time during the game.

Icon 4 accesses the Cobra's Map and Chart Databank. When initially selected, it will display the Short Range Chart. Subsequently, selecting icon 4 will toggle between the Short Range Chart and the Galactic Chart.

This is a local navigation chart showing planets (grey circles) in the immediate vicinity of your docking world, on which it is centred. The shaded red circle indicates your current fuel range. Any planet within the red circle may be travelled to without refuelling. At the start of the game, this is also the overall maximum distance the Cobra is able to travel, since the fuel tanks are full. The Cobra ship has a maximum single H-jump range of 7 light years.

There are eight galactic charts, each showing all the planets in one particular galaxy. Transfer from one galaxy to another is facilitated by the purchase of an Intergalactic



USING THE SHIP'S DATA

Hyperdive (more information on page 38), and you may only view the Galactic Chart of the galaxy which you are currently in.

The green cross-hair cursor may be moved around the charts (by whichever control method you have selected), and is used in conjunction with icons 8, 9, 10, and 11.

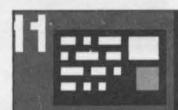
Icon 8 activates the Distance Gauge. When selected, it will centre the cross-hair on the nearest planet, and displays its name and distance from the current planet system.

Icon 9 activates the System Search. When selected, the prompt: "FIND: Which System ?..." will appear. Type in the name of the system/planet you wish to find, press <Return>, and the cross-hair will re-centre on the selected system/planet. This function is used primarily in conjunction with the Galactic Chart, as all planets on the Short Range Map are always named.

Icon 10, when selected, resets the cursor to the current system/planet.

Icon 11, when selected, activates the Worldata link.

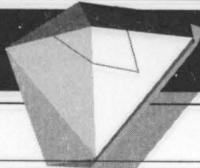
By centering the cross-hair on a planet system, and selecting Icon 11, you may access any information held in central galactic data banks. The Orbit Space Authority takes no responsibility for the accuracy of the information registered here, but the trader may gain some idea of the relative wisdom of trading with the world whose data is displayed. The information shown is distance, type of main life form, degree of agricultural or industrial development, with industrial and technological level displayed on a scale of 1-12. The government type, ranging from Corporate State to Anarchy, will be a strong indication of the danger of trading with the system.



The Worldata link.

Space Bureaus are cargo transhipment points for interplanetary trading vehicles and shuttle craft.

They also provide entertainment and lodging facilities for pilots not wishing to go 'plane-side'.



USING THE SHIP'S DATA

Whether you choose to amass kills by bounty hunting or take the less dangerous course of the traditional trader and defensive combateer, the political and economic infrastructure should influence the route you take through a galaxy. More information can be found in *Interplanetary Travel and Trade* on page 38.

Before leaving Lave, you are strongly advised to familiarise yourself with the chart and planet system databanks, by selecting a range of planets and perusing the data held on them.

Icon 1 displays the screen which you are currently looking at - the Status screen. This is a continually updating interface showing sensor data, current location, fuel level, current speed, and other vital information. It also displays the current status of your ship's systems, such as shields, engines, and weapons.

Icon 4 accesses the Cobral's Map and Chart Database. Subsequently, selecting icon 4 will toggle between the Short Range Chart and the Galactic Chart.

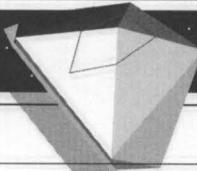
The Short Range Chart displays the local area around the ship's current position.

This is a local navigation chart showing planets (grey circles) in the immediate vicinity. The distance from the player's location to the nearest odd gravitational field is displayed in light grey text. A red starburst indicates the direction of the nearest gravitational field. The chart also displays the current speed of the player's ship, the current fuel level, and the current shield strength.

There are eight galactic charts with their own unique features and capabilities.

*Short Range Chart.
The Short Range Chart*

Galactic Chart.



CORIOLIS SPACE STATIONS

Every world registered with the Galactic Co-operative has several Coriolis space stations in orbit at various altitudes. Coriolis stations are 'neutral' territory, controlled equally by GalCop and the Planetary Government.

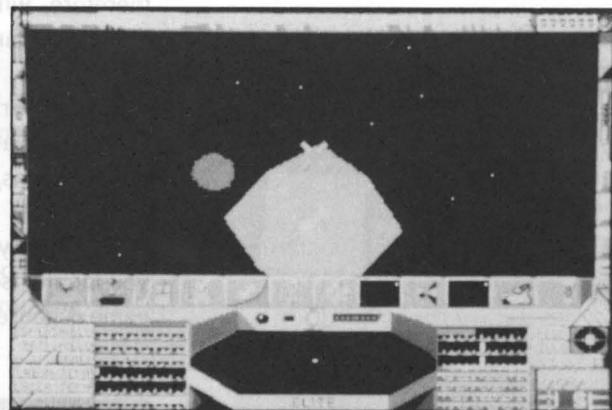
A new dodecahedral design (the so-called 'Dodo' stations) is replacing the Coriolis design in the more advanced systems. Coriolis stations are hexagonal in approximate shape. They spin along a single axis running vertically from the planet below. One side of the station always faces the planet, and it is on this facet that the access tunnel is located.

Coriolis stations were designed at the GASEC (Galactic Astronautic and Space Exploration Centre) Laboratories on the planet Vetiice. The first station was in orbit around the world Lave in 2752.

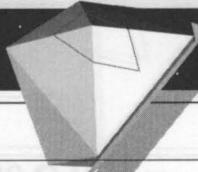
Coriolis stations have powerful defensive shields (against pirate attack and inept docking) and a large fleet of Viper fighters, and several larger types of ship. The inside of the station is free-space, and on each inner facet of the station there are berthing and refuelling facilities, as well as cities, hospitals, farmlands and leisurescapes.

Each Coriolis station has a diameter of 1 standard kilometre. They can berth 2000 ships, and support a fair-sized colonial life development of humanoids.

Launching from a Coriolis Space Station is facilitated by filing request with the Planetary docking authorities by selecting icon 1. Response is instantaneous.



Space Stations are cargo transition points for interplanetary trading vessels and shuttle craft. They also provide entertainment and lodging facilities for pilots not wishing to go 'planet-side'.



LEAVING THE SPACE STATION.

Leaving the Space Station.

On coding for Station Depart the pilot is advised to accept a 10-second MemnSomn to dispense with subjective experience of the passage from docking bay to Coriolis Station egress. The screen will then show a break-pattern, which is the passage through the protective field over the Coriolis entrance tunnel, before you emerge into space to begin your voyage.

Ahead of you is the planet in whose system you are orbiting - initially Lave. Remember that the Coriolis Station access tunnel faces the planet which it serves; therefore, whenever you launch from a Coriolis Station, you will be flying directly towards a planet.

Basic Manouevres

The Cobra trade ship is a highly manoeuvrable, very fast combat vessel. It accelerates and decelerates rapidly using fingertip control. But like all craft of such specifications, demands practice before being mastered.

Flight may be paused at any time by pressing the "ESC" key, which is advisable whilst you familiarise yourself with the Bridge Display (page 15). The icons displayed whilst the game is paused are;

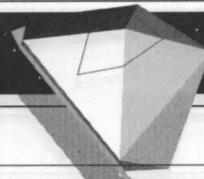


Icon 1 selects Keyboard control. (See page 16 for more information)



Icon 2 selects Joystick control. (See page 17 for more information)

ELITE PLUS



LEAVING THE SPACE STATION



Icon 3 selects Mouse control. (See page 17 for more information)



"4" on the numeric keypad



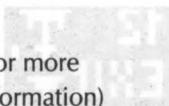
"5" on the numeric keypad

"2" on the numeric keypad

* Ensure that "Number Lock" is inactive unless you wish to select an icon!



Icon 4 toggles Recentering on and off. (See page 28 for more information)



Icon 5 toggles Damping on and off. (See page 28 for more information)



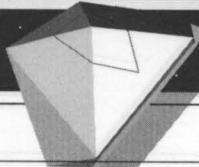
Icon 6 reverses the dive/climb controls.



Icon 7 reverses both roll and dive/climb controls.



Icon 8 selects Fire control. (See page 28 for more information)



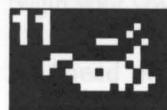
ELITE PLUS

LEAVING THE SPACE STATION

Leaving the Space Station.



Icon 9 toggles the Sound on and off.



Icon 11, when selected, allows you to quit the current game



Icon 12, when selected, will return you to DOS.

Basic Manoeuvres

Damping

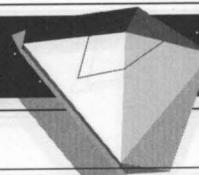
Whenever the game is paused, it may be restarted by pressing the Space Bar.

When 'Damping' is activated, directional controls will be softened to make flying easier. Pressing the cursor keys or moving joystick or mouse will therefore not produce as large a response as anticipated, but should prevent you constantly oversteering whilst learning to fly.

Recentering

When 'Re-centering' is activated, the directional controls will return to their central position on release. That is to say, whenever a cursor key, or joystick or mouse, are released, the craft will not continue to bank, but will fly in a straight line on its new path.

ELITE PLUS



LEAVING THE SPACE STATION

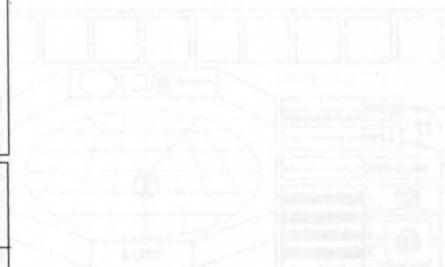
Keyboard

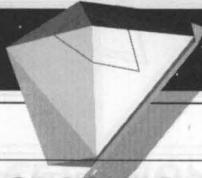
Anticlockwise roll	'4' on the numeric keypad.
Clockwise Roll	'6' on the numeric keypad.
Dive	'8' on the numeric keypad.
Climb	'2' on the numeric keypad. <i>* Ensure that "Number Lock" is deactivated, unless you wish to select an icon !</i>
Increase speed	'>' on the keyboard.
Decrease speed	'<' on the keyboard.
Fire	Space Bar

Joystick

Anticlockwise roll	Move Joystick Left, above it. The joystick should be held firmly, but move on the stick itself, and minimal for final locking.
Clockwise Roll	Move Joystick Right.
Dive	Push Joystick Forwards.
Climb	Pull Joystick Backwards
Increase speed	'>' on the keyboard.
Decrease speed	'<' on the keyboard.
Fire	Fire Button.

Flight Controls





ELITE PLUS

LEAVING THE SPACE STATION

Elight Controls

Mouse	Key/Posing
Anticlockwise roll	Move Mouse Left.
Clockwise Roll	Move Mouse Right.
Dive	Push Mouse Forwards.
Climb	Pull Mouse Backwards
Increase speed	'>' on the keyboard, or hold right mouse button and move mouse back.
Decrease speed	'<' on the keyboard, or hold right mouse button and move mouse forward.
Fire	Space Bar

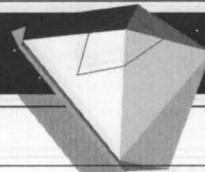
Damping

When 'Damping' is activated, directional controls will be softened to make flying easier. Pressing the cursor keys, or holding down a mouse button, will increase the speed of movement, as large a response as anticipated. This allows you to fly more easily without constantly learning to fly.

Recentering

When 'Re-centering' is activated, the directional controls will return to their central position on release. That is to say, when you press a cursor key, or jolt the mouse, on release, the craft will not continue to fly in a straight line, but will return to its original orientation.

ELITE PLUS



THE ASTROGATION CONSOLE

1. Defensive shields, take power from two energy banks, fore and aft.

2. Fuel Level

3. Cabin Temperature will increase when your ship flies too close to a sun.

4. Laser temperature will rise during continuous firing of the ship's laser(s). As the central housing overheats, the laser will temporarily cut out rather than destroy the system.

5. Your Altitude above your destination planet can be crucial. Flying too close to its surface can be fatal.

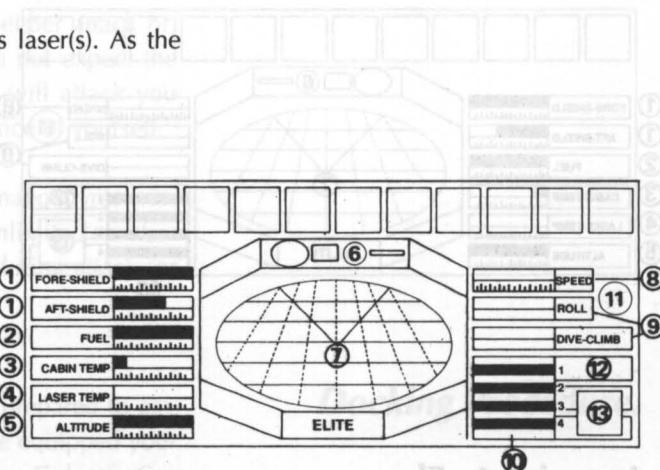
6. The Condition Indicator will display your current condition, as explained on page 19; Green, Yellow or Red.

7. The Flight Grid Scanner is a sophisticated instrument displaying a three-dimensional view of space in the immediate vicinity of your ship, seen from a point behind and above it. The precise position of any ship within its range can be pinpointed.

8. Forward velocity should be maintained at maximum on planetary approach. Keep it low during space station approach, and minimal for final docking.

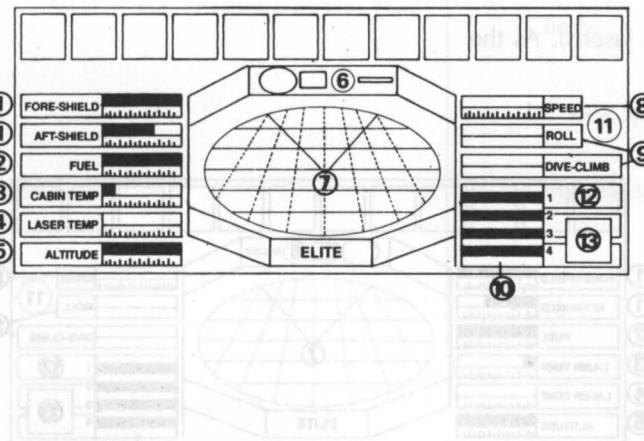
9. Gyro orientation bar indicators show right/left roll and dive/climb status.

10. Energy banks will rapidly drain if defensive shields are taking excessive fire. Using lasers or an ECM System will also drain their resources. When the fourth Energy



Manual Docking

THE BRIDGE DISPLAY



Learning to Fly

Once you have left the Coriolis Space Station, and are flying towards the planet Lave, decrease your velocity to a minimum. It is not possible to land on the planet, and flying into planets or space stations is fatal. The altimeter shows your height above the planet's surface, and you should not let it fall too low.

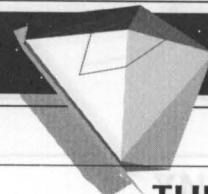
Notice the small dot moving around inside the large circle on the dials. This is your compass; the dot corresponds to the position of the space station. If the dot is small then the station is behind you (as it is currently). When the dot is large and in the centre of the circle, you should be able to see the space station directly in front of you.

11. The compass first picks up a target planet while it remains out of range of the main flight-path scanner. When the planet's space station nearest you comes within range of it, the compass picks up that instead. When the dot is small, the object is behind you; when large and in the centre of the compass circle, it should be visible through your front viewfinder.

12. The Missile Status Indicator depicts the number of missiles on board, and whether they are 'untargetted', 'targetted' or 'locked and ready to fire'.

13. The "S" refers to the Space Station, and indicates that you are on target for it and within its protective range.

ELITE PLUS



THE BRIDGE DISPLAY

Without using any roll, climb up and over, so that you are facing in the opposite direction. You should now be able to see the Space Station in the Main Scanner Window. Practise rotating the space station off the screen and using the compass to find it again.

You might see some Cobra Class ships. These are other traders like yourself, and will not harm you unless you shoot at them. If you do this they will either attack or, alternatively, run away. Should you use them for combat practice, do not expect the space station to turn a blind eye to such unruly behaviour. Nothing will attack you while you are within sight of the space station - unless you make a nuisance of yourself.

If you are a new pilot, now is your best chance to practise docking manoeuvres with the space station at Lave. The Lave Orbit Space Authority permits an unlimited number of practise runs by newly appointed pilots. This facility is suspended during attack, or when the Coriolis station has no free docking space.

Docking with a Coriolis space station is never easy, unless you are prepared to pay the automatic docking fee levied by the space station authorities, or have equipped your ship with an automatic docking computer. The docking fee set by the Galactic Co-operative is 50 credits. As you set out to tread the long road towards attainment of your elite status, your pockets are relatively empty, and you need all the spare cash you have for trading and equipping your ship. It is wise to learn, practise and perfect Manual Docking. It is a skill which will serve you well throughout your career.

The Navy Training Manual recommends the following approach and dock sequence.

Locate the Coriolis station and approach it. The entrance tunnels to all these stations

Docking Procedure.

Manual Docking



THE BRIDGE DISPLAY

face the mother planet. Fly near to the station and then on towards the planet (monitoring altitude carefully). By turning a half circle you will now find your ship orientated towards the entrance.

Approach the final moments of docking at DEAD SLOW SPEED. Failure to dock cleanly can be fatal but may simply result in your scraping the sides of the aperture, with consequent loss of defensive shield(s) and quite possibly your cargo. Manually control the Cobra's roll motion to match the rotation of the Coriolis station. The entry port must be as nearly horizontal as possible, and you must pass through its centre to avoid potentially fatal damage.

If docking is successful, the protective field across the station entrance is penetrated, and a break pattern appears on the screen. Berthing is handled automatically.

Docking protocol, and Orbit Space Regulations, are numerous, and are available in the GC Orbit and System Space Code, published by Federation Planet Bureau.

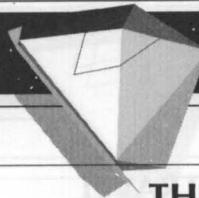
Automatic Docking

Learning to Fly

There are two methods of automatic docking available to you. Each space station has high-powered SLADE (Ship lock and dock entry) computers which were originally designed to rescue stranded ships, by interfacing with the on-board chips to override manual control and automatically steer the ships into the space station entrance port. Privatisation of these facilities has led to their promotion as a luxury service for use by wealthy travellers. For payment of 50 credits, the SLADE computer will dock your ship safely with the space station whilst you gather your things to go planet-side.

Alternatively, you may purchase and use a SinCorn RemLock D&A system, which is a sophisticated and expensive piece of gadgetry fitted to your on-board computers which will, like the SLADE system, facilitate safe docking. On-board docking computers are

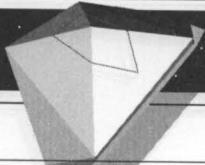
ELITE PLUS



THE BRIDGE DISPLAY

available from all Tech level 9 planets.

Either of the computerised docking procedures are activated in flight by pressed icon 1. You must be within range of the space station to allow the proper functioning of these systems.



INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL

During flight, icon 5 may be used to see to the rear, left, right and front views, in turn, on the main scanner. Icon 7 will prime a missile for firing, activating, as it does so, the lock-on targetting sequence. More information on missiles may be found in the section "Aggresive Weaponry", on page 45. Icon 11 activates the Jump Drive, but will initially be 'mass-locked' due to your ships proximity to Lave. The Jump Drive will become usable once you have travelled to another planet system.

Hyperspace and related controls.

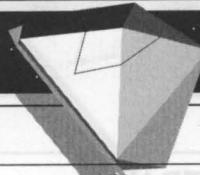
Having left the space station you will be in low orbit above the planet Lave, moving at low velocity. Decrease your velocity to absolute minimum before coding the astrogation console for Hyperspace Jump.

This is done by accessing the Local Chart (icon 4) and then selecting a planet within Hyperspace range, (shown by the red shaded area), by moving the green cross-hairs and selecting icon 8 to lock-on. The astrogation console is now coded.

Icon 6 will now initiate the Hyperspace Jump. There will be a short ten second delay whilst the engines are powered up, before you are launched through hyperspace transit to emerge some distance from your target world. This conforms with GC Flight Law.

Even in the safest systems there can be unseen dangers, and you will be well advised to approach orbit space, and the safety of the space station, as quickly as possible. At this point you can take full advantage of the space-skip facility, the Jump Drive (icon 11). Inter-space jumping does not function (because of interference patterns) if there is another ship, a planet or a sun in the immediate vicinity, or if velocity is not set to maximum. The messages "Jump Drive is Mass Locked" indicate the presence of another mass too proximal for safe jumping, and "Jump Drive is Velocity Locked" indicates that your ship's velocity has not been maximised.

ELITE PLUS



INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL

The proximity of other objects may be observed via the Flight grid scanner, located centrally on the main console. Objects within range are colour coded for identification;

Space Stations White

All Space Ships Yellow

Space Debris (asteroids,
boulders, splinter plates) Dark Blue

Cargo or Escape Pods Light Blue

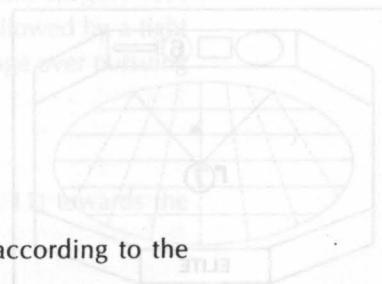
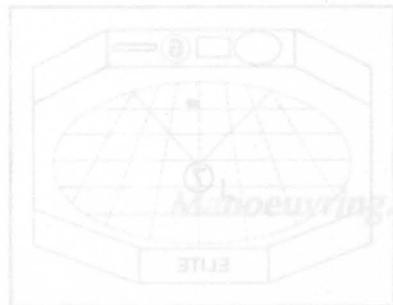
Missiles Grey

Thargons or Thargoids Magenta

Their positions can be pinpointed if the scanner grid is read according to the following rules;

1. The centre of the grid marks the position of your ship
2. The "V" with no cross-lines shows your line of sight directly ahead.
3. The remainder of the circle represents the area to the sides and behind your ship.
4. The plane of the grid moves as the angle of climb or dive of your ship moves.

Combat Protocol.



Signs of Danger.

Hypothetical Space Sector.



INTERPLANETARY TRAVEL

5. Lines joining other objects to the plane of the grid show their height above or below you.

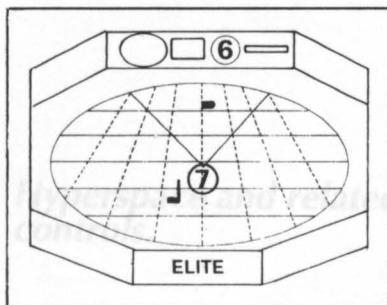
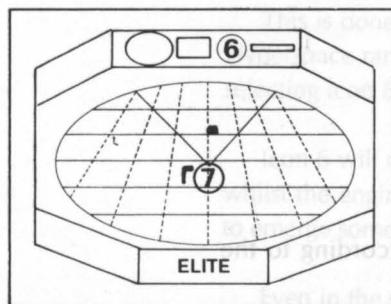


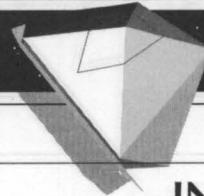
Diagram 1; Ship A is directly in front of you, but not visible through the main view scanner as it is above you. Ship B is slightly below you, behind you, and to the left of you.

Diagram 2; As you climb, Ship A comes into view. Ship B is now slightly above you, behind you and to the left of you.



Hyperdrive across galaxies.

The intergalactic hyperdrive is expensive and can be obtained only from planets at Tech level 10 or higher. It can only be used once, and will take you to a system in a whole new galaxy. Selecting Icon 4 will then access the new galactic chart. There are 8 such galaxies and making 8 jumps will return you to your starting galaxy. The Inter-Galactic Hyperdrive is engaged by selecting icon 7 once purchased. Unlike the normal inter-planetary hyperdrive, a system does not need to be selected before engagement. You will automatically pass to the next galaxy.



Not all ships in deep space, even small fighters, are pirates. Most ships will respond to hostile action with hostile action. If you attack a police ship or trade in contraband goods (see Trading on page 55), your legal status will be changed to OFFENDER, or even higher. If you destroy pirate ships, or Thargoid invaders, (or asteroids) you will receive a bounty payment. If you shoot at the Coriolis space station, its own defensive ships (Viper Class Fighters) will attack you.

The Cobra tradeship is fast, and has a very tight turning circle (though less tight at full speed); it is an ideal combat ship against small packs of enemy vessels. It will outrun many attack craft by speed alone, but it will not outrun a missile. Spinning, fast-slow, and duck-and-weave manoeuvres are very effective against the larger, less manoeuvrable ships when they attack. A sudden decrease in speed followed by a tight 180° turn and an increase in velocity will often give you a big advantage over pursuing enemy craft.

If you cannot engage your Jump Drive for rapid movement (icon 11) towards the planet, there is a ship in the vicinity. It could be dangerous.

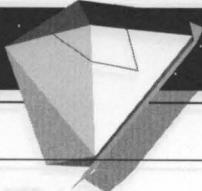
If the status indicator on the main console, during flight, shows YELLOW or RED, prepare to engage in combat.

Most enemy ships will initially attack with laser fire, as a warning that they are not happy with your presence. It is your decision as to whether to heed their warning or match their aggression. But make that decision quickly, and if you'd rather be certain of living to fight another day, move away quickly. Laser fire striking the defensive shields makes a light screeching sound. Listen for laser fire striking the hull direct. Through damaged screens it makes a low, screeching sound. Your energy banks will be tapped

Combat Protocol.

Manoeuvring.

Signs of Danger.



LIKELY ENEMIES.

Coupe! Piloter!



Likely Enemies.

Bounty Hunters.

Hyperdrive across galaxies.

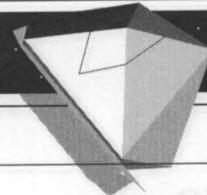
directly. Spend your last few seconds of life wisely.

Enemy ships may resort to a missile attack, in which case a message will flash on-screen warning you of an 'incoming missile'. The Cobra's missile tracking facilities are well-developed. You will know of your impending doom well before its arrival.

Space combat is often as much a test of nerve as reflexes. Some star pilots are braver than others and pirate ships may break off and run in the face of stiff resistance. Some appear to know no fear - in particular Thargoid vessels, whose captains have had their fear glands surgically removed.

Lone-wolf traders - such as Cobra pilots - are constantly at risk from other Spacefaring types. An understanding of other loners, packhunters and bounty killers is essential.

Unless you have achieved FUGITIVE status, and especially if you are highly ranked as a combateer as well as being a criminal, bounty hunters will not bother a ship as insignificant as a Cobra Mk3. In fact, many bounty hunters favour Cobra trade-ships themselves as they make an excellent disguise. But the real killers star-ride in the sleek, and highly efficient, Fer-de-Lance Lightspeeder, in which they live for months at a time. Bounty hunters can always be found outside Orbit Space, especially around worlds classified as 'dangerous'. They are invariably of combat rating: DEADLY or ELITE. Bounty hunters rarely identify themselves to passing ships, and if pestered too closely will usually kill.



LIKELY ENEMIES.

Pirate Vessels.

There are several ways of identifying a space-going ship as 'pirate occupied', and this is essential since pirates and renegades will take any ship for their purpose, from a Worm to a massive Python. Pirates exist everywhere in the galaxy, but cluster mainly around unstable GalCop worlds, especially worlds run on a feudal or anarchic system.

Small ships hovering very distant from a planet are pirates. Large ships accompanied by a mixture of small fighter types are pirates. Ships that refuse to acknowledge identification signals are pirates. Around worlds run by autocracies, or clans, pirates will very often have been paid to leave trade ships alone. Piracy is a huge, and complex, business, and any life-respecting trader will learn the tell-tale signs of pirate presence.

In a Co-operative of Worlds as complex as the 2040 planets of the Gal Cop, the police can be as menacing as they can be helpful. The typical police vessel is a Viper GH Class PulseShip, which is very fast, and very manoeuvrable. They are on constant standby on every Coriolis and Dodec space station, and will attack - a pirate, or a fugitive trader - within seconds. They do not make arrests, they destroy. There are different police departments serving different purposes - narcotics, space-drunkenness, psychotic shooting, piracy, slave trading etc. - but all have small fleets of these very fast Viper patrol craft.

The Thargoids are humankind's deadly enemy, and throughout the 8 galaxies there are at least 50 war zones between humanity and Thargoid. This highly technologically advanced insectoid race is also at war with 17 other space-going life-forms.

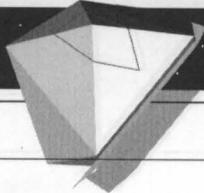
All Thargoid combateers are ruthless in combat, and some may be comparable with elite-status human combat pilots.

Police.

OTHER SPACE TYPES

Rock Habitats

Thargoid invasion ships and thargons.



LIKELY ENEMIES.

Though most of the Thargoid Space Fleet is currently engaged by the Galactic Navy in InterGalactic Space, a few of the smaller battle ships make occasional destructor-raids into human space. These ships are extremely fast for their size and invariably have anti-missile (ECM) systems.

Additionally, most Thargoid battle ships carry several small, remote-controlled 'thargons', killer-craft each equipped with a single, but highly advanced, pulse-laser. The Galactic Navy are developing their own deep-space RemCraft, and pay a large bounty for any thargon craft that are brought to them.

(N.B. Bounty on Thargoid invasion craft destroyed is very high. Thargoid battle-cruisers believed to be able to 'hover' in Witch-Space (hyperspace) and destroy forthcoming craft).

OTHER SPACE TYPES

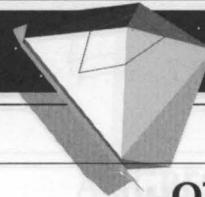
Rock Hermits.

Pirates, ageing bounty hunters, or planetary outcasts, who create living space out of asteroids. They usually choose large asteroids, and set up signal beacons to warn off miners. GalCop Law protects Rock Hermits, but since most of the asteroid is hollowed-out, there is little advantage to be gained by 'mining' them anyway.

Generation Ships.

Before the development of the WS Thru-Space drive, in all its various forms, interstellar travel occurred in large, self-sustaining environment ships - Generation Ships - most of which have now been logged and their progress monitored. There are more than seventy thousand of these immense vessels ploughing their way through the galaxy, some of them into their 30th generation. The penalty for interference with such a vessel is marooning.

ELITE PLUS



OTHER SPACE TYPES

These immense factory ships are to be found wherever there has been a war, or a Thargoid invasion, or a natural catastrophe. More than forty miles long, the dredgers are a life-form to themselves. The Dredgers are huge cities in space, feeding off debris and ruination. Heavily armed, and with fleets of reconditioned fighter ships, they are to be avoided at all cost.

Power Systems	1000
Pulse Laser	1000
10% bonus to all other ship systems for a period of time after a successful battle	1000
10% bonus to all other ship systems for a period of time after a successful battle	525
Escape Capsule	1000
Free Trade	900
Decking Components	1500
Galactic Hyperspace	1500
Galactic Hyperspace	5000

Microlasers
Pulse Lasers
Beam Lasers
Laser Cannons
Lasers are the principal armament of all space fighters, designed for sudden combat situations. Firing is facilitated by pressing the Space Bar (keyboard control), Fire button (joystick control) or Left Mouse button (mouse control).

Pulse lasers are initially housed only in the front of the ship, and so no sights appear across rear or side views (when accessed by selecting icon 5) until such time as you have sufficient credits (from combat and trading) to afford lasers for these mountings. With sufficient cash you will also be able to upgrade any of the four laser mountings from Pulse to more powerful Beam lasers.

Space Dredgers.





EQUIPPING YOUR SHIP

...and base defence?

Once docked at a Space Station, you may equip your ship with the additional weapons, gadgetry and general equipment you will require on the long haul towards financial fulfilment, galactic notoriety and elite status. Selecting icon 6 will bring local mechanics to your beck and call. All equipment is bought from the Space Station authorities direct and fitted automatically to your ship at your request. You may also sell equipment from your ship to the Space Station.

EQUIPMENT	BUY PRICE	SELL PRICE
Missile	32.5	32.5
Cargo Bay Extension	325.0	325.0
ECM System	505.0	505.0
Pulse Laser	606.0	606.0
Beam Laser	1020.0	1020.0
Fuel Scopgs	511.0	511.0
Escape Capsule	1015.0	1015.0

...on Thargoid invasion craft destroyed is very high. Thargoid battle

...to be

100.0 Credits

Some items are only available at planets of a certain tech level or higher, as lesser developed worlds cannot manufacture some of the more sophisticated equipment.

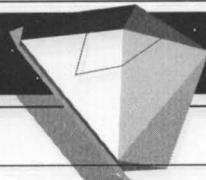
The items available for purchase or sale will appear, along with their 'buy' and 'sell' prices. Note that the 'buy' price refers to the price at which you may buy from the planet, and the 'sell' is the price being offered to you for equipment you already hold.

Use the cursor keys, joystick or mouse (depending on your chosen method of control) to move the highlighter bar over the item you wish to purchase or sell, and then select icon 9 to "Buy" it, or icon 10 to "Sell" it. The money spent or earned will be automatically deducted or added to your credit rating.

Generation Ships.

Before the development of the WS Thru-Space drive, in all its various forms, interstellar travel occurred in large, self-sustaining environment ships - Generation Ships - most of which have now been flagged and their progress monitored. There are more than seventy thousand of these immense vessels ploughing their way through the galaxy, some of them into their 30th generation. The penalty for interference with such a vessel is marooning.

ELITE PLUS



AGGRESSIVE WEAPONRY

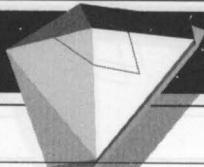
ITEM	TECH LEVEL	PRICE/CR
Fuel	Always	Varies
Missile	Always	30
Large Cargo Bay	Always	400
ECM System	2	600
Pulse Laser	3	400
Beam Laser	4	1000
Fuel Scoops	5	525
Escape Capsule	6	1000
Energy Bomb	7	900
Extra Energy Unit	8	1500
Docking Computers	9	1500
Galactic Hyperdrive	10	5000
Mining Lasers	10	800
Military Lasers	10	6000

Missiles

Lasers

Lasers are the principal armament of all space fighters, designed for rapid use in sudden combat situations. Firing is facilitated by pressing the Space Bar (keyboard control), Fire button (joystick control) or Left Mouse button (mouse control).

Pulse lasers are initially housed only in the front of the ship, and so no sights appear across rear or side views (when accessed by selecting icon 5) until such time as you have sufficient credits (from combat and trading) to afford lasers for these mountings. With sufficient cash you will also be able to upgrade any of the four laser mountings from Pulse to more powerful Beam lasers.



AGGRESSIVE WEAPONRY

Even when the ship is fully equipped, only one directional laser may be fired at a time. You must first select the view required (icon 5).

As the laser is fired, heat is generated and registered on the laser temperature bar. If the laser overheats, it will temporarily cut out rather than destroy the system.

Pulse lasers will be offered for sale at planets of Tech level 3 or above. *Beam Lasers* will be offered at Tech level 4 or above. If a Beam laser replaces a Pulse laser the price of the Pulse laser is refunded after the Beam one has been fitted.

Military lasers are the very height of sophistication. Costing fifteen times the price of a Pulse laser and available only on planets at Tech level 10, they are an extremely effective piece of hardware.

Pulse laser specification

Pulse laser specification: Ingram Model 1919A4 Pulse Laser is recommended for all positional laser mountings, but is especially effective for rear-shooting. Fires intermittent laser 'rods' 610mm in length, with a cycle rate of 1500 RoPM. The barrel is of high grade Allutium fibre, lined with tempered QuQorian Silica. Power provided directly from inverse energy banks contained in main ship's drive. Each rod is capable of piercing 267mm of Flux-Locked metal.

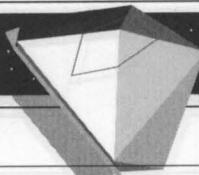
Beam laser specification

Beam laser specification: Ingram Model M1928A2 is highly recommended for front shooting. Beam lasers fire continuous laser strands, up to 150 in parallel. Barrel is Allutium + lined with tensioned plastiglass, and as with the 1919A4 Pulse laser, power is provided by main drive link. Beam lasers are capable of slicing through 410mm FL metal.

Military laser specification

Military laser specification: Range and penetration twice as effective as the Ingram Model M1928A2 Beam laser. This is Lance & Ferman's entry into the laser market. Hitherto known for their highly effective and relatively cheap missile systems, in the military laser

ELITE PLUS



AGGRESSIVE WEAPONRY

they have in effect created a whole new laser market. The LF90 is the current computer-aided model and comes with x4SUSAT sights.

(See also Mining lasers under **Non-combative Equipment**).

Missiles are always available, whatever the nature of your destination world, though no more than four may be carried at any one time. Their destructive capabilities make them an essential weapon for those pilots intent on amassing kills, but their cost dictates that they only be used when using laser fire would be difficult. Credit accrued by the destruction of ships is unlikely to offset the cost of the missile.

The missile information display is located on the right hand side of the main astrogation console. The number of missiles available is shown, along with their 'status'

Before a missile can be fired it must be locked onto a target. When fired, it will home in on that target and destroy it, unless your enemy successfully evades it by manoeuvre, laser fire or use of Electronic Counter Measures. The missile launch mechanism is very reliable and hardly ever jams. Missiles can be locked onto targets in any view. (Views are switched by selecting icon 5).

The targeting sequence is engaged by selecting icon 7. The message "missle primed" will appear, and a blue cross will start to flash over one missile on the missile display, indicating that the missile mechanism is primed for lock-on.

Move the cross-hair sights on the Main Scanner over your target, and the missile will lock-on, identifying the target simultaneously.

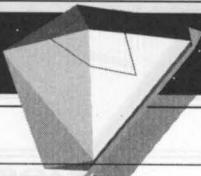
Icon 8, the "Launch Missile" icon will appear, and this should be selected to launch the missile.

Safety Zone

Missiles

Defensive shield specification





AGGRESSIVE WEAPONRY

Icon 7 may be re-selected to unarm the missile once it has locked on to a target.

Missile specification

missile

As the lance & ferman homing missiles have now been removed from the game, the lance & ferman homing missiles have now been removed from the game. Lance & Ferman Homing Missiles (4x4) are now recommended for all small class trade-combat ships, but can be fitted as part of a mixed design weapon rack. LF missiles have 2IL-135 guidance systems, and optional manual directional control overrides. Warhead packed with Terminal 9 explosive, and the 4 x 4 is invulnerable to all known counteraction, except ECM systems. Capable of Megazon Destruct Force 7. Prototype first used in 2987, during Ineran Wars.

Missiles are extremely effective weapons and are carried by the larger star ships. Your ship's computer will warn you when one is fired at you with a message on-screen. Unless your ship is fitted with ECM (see below) you will have to outmanoeuvre the missile, which will home in on you relentlessly. If a missile hits you, it can almost completely exhaust a fully charged shield and, if your shields and energy are low, may well be fatal.

Pulse laser specification

Energy Bombs



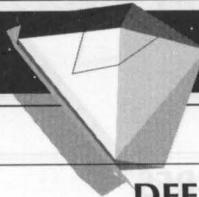
Energy bomb specification:

specification

Energy bombs will be offered for sale at a planet of Tech Level 7 or higher, and can be used only once. Once purchased, they will appear as icon 9 on the main astrogation display, which should be selected to initiate their launch. Energy bombs possess devastating powers, destroying all other ships, asteroids, and missiles in the vicinity at launch.

Energy bomb specification: Medusa Pandora Self Homing Energy Bomb is a tactical weapon capable of Megazon Destruct Force 13. Has heat radius of 9000 km. Developed by Klaus Kline laboratories for multi-role combat using 'launch-and-leave' techniques.

ELITE PLUS



DEFENSIVE MEASURES

The Orbit Space around any Coriolis Space Station is safe. The Station's own defences will come to your immediate assistance in times of emergency. Entry to the safety zone is signalled with a large 'S' on the astragation console.

The Cobra Mk III comes equipped with fore and aft shields, designed to protect your ship from aggressive fire. As the shields absorb enemy fire, or when your ship collides with another ship or space station, they lose energy, and will be recharged from the energy banks.

Once a shield is depleted, enemy lasers and missiles striking that shield will take energy directly from the energy banks and may even destroy items of cargo or ship fittings. If your energy banks are drained to empty your ship will be destroyed.

Using lasers or an ECM system will also take energy from, and deplete, your energy banks.

The ship's computer will keep you informed of any damage to your ship and will also warn you when energy levels are dangerously low.

An Extra Energy Unit may be fitted at planets of Tech Level 8 or higher, and doubles the energy bank replenishment rate.

Defensive shield specification: The shields consist of hi-tense flux webs of Zieman-charged sub-particles. They are weakest where the laser and missile tubes pass through the ship's hull, and along the central ship band where the two shields overlap, and cause a stress zone.

Safety Zone

Shields and Energy Banks

Defensive shield specification

DEFENSIVE MEASURES

Electronic Counter Measures



Anti-missile (ECM) system specification

An ECM System is offered for sale at Tech level 2, and may be used any number of times given sufficient energy replacement. Once purchased, icon 6 will appear and may be selected to activate the ECM. When activated, it destroys all missiles in your vicinity - including any that you have fired. Some enemy ships, especially traders, will have ECM systems themselves, and may use them against your missiles. Coriolis Space Stations also have their own high-powered ECM systems to prevent damage from psychopathic spacetravellers. Your ship's computer displays an E on the astrogation console when it detects ECM broadcasts.

Created in 1987 during InterWar

Anti-missile (ECM) system specification: Radiant-Magnetic 'wipe-out' using ion-saturation theory developed by Bell and Braben on Riedquat 359. Electronic Counter Measures System use minute charged particles of InterSpac Heavy Element dust, releasing their radiant energy and setting up expanding nuclear flux chains.

Escape Capsule

Energy Bombs



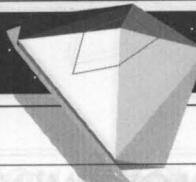
Energy bomb specification:

An escape capsule can be fitted to your ship at any world of Tech level 6 or higher. Once purchased, icon 10 will appear, which may be selected to launch the capsule in times of dire emergency. If your energy banks are close to exhaustion at the time of launch initiation, the capsule will be jettisoned immediately. However, if your ship can hold out for long enough, a five second countdown will precede launch, allowing you time to deselect the Escape Capsule if you wish. This feature is designed to prevent accidents caused by unwanted ejections.

The capsule, once launched from the ship, will be automatically tracked by the nearest world and will travel safely to a Coriolis space station. Your cash will be preserved but all your cargo will be lost.

However, the Escape Capsule comes with widely recognised insurance cover which will guarantee you a Cobra Class ship, equipped as your last one was at the time of its

ELITE PLUS



DEFENSIVE MEASURES

loss. The contents of the cargo hold are exempt from this protection.

Since the unique IR signature of a ship's hull is used to file police records, abandoning your ship in this way will have the effect (unfortunately exploited as much by galactic brigands as trader victims) of clearing your police record.

You may see an escape capsule leaving an enemy ship. This will not harm you unless you crash into it.

Escape capsule specification: Recommended model is the Xeeslan FastJet LSC 7, which can support two human life-forms for seven weeks, in moderate Suspended An.state.

Escape capsule specification

NON-COMBATIVE EQUIPMENT

Fuel Counter Measures

Fuel Scoops

specification

Fuel scoop specification

Cargo bay extension

Cargo bay extension specification

Fuel is available at every Space Station. You can refill your tanks to full (7 light-year) capacity - no less is permitted. Fuel is only used whilst Hyperspacing.

Fuel Scoops may be fitted to the hull of your ship at a planet of Tech level 5 or higher. These enable a ship to obtain free hyperspace fuel by 'skimming the sun' - flying close to it at high velocity.

Since fuel scoops utilise powerful electro-magnetic fields to guide the solar wind into their converters, they may also be used to pick up miscellaneous space debris. Almost all pirate vessels are fitted with these so that they can blast their prey apart and sift amongst the wreckage, rather than attempt to dock with a hostile craft.

Once fuel scoops are installed, you can scoop up an object (such as a cargo canister) by keeping it in the lower half of the Main Scanner view while flying right up to it.

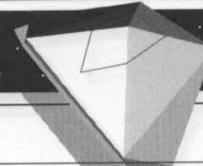
An escape capsule can be fitted to your ship at a world of Tech level 5 or higher. Fuel scoop specification: Fuel scoops are considered an essential for Deep Space, and dangerous zone trading. They have a standard design, and a standard fitment. They use powerful electromagnetic fields to guide solar wind or small space debris into their ReQax convertors.

One cargo bay extension can be bought, increasing the hold space from 20 to 35 tonnes.

Cargo bay extension specification: Standard model is the Mariner Freight Chamber.

However, the Escape Capsule comes with widely recommended insurance cover which will guarantee you a Cobra Class ship, equipped as your fast one-way arm's length of a

ELITE PLUS



NON-COMBATIVE EQUIPMENT

Docking Computers are available from all Tech level 9 planets; they are fitted to the ship's flight control system and enable it to dock the ship automatically. They negate the necessity of paying 50 credits to the Space Station authorities for auto-docking rights. The auto-docking sequence is triggered by selecting icon 1.

Docking computer specification: The SinCorn Remlock D & A System is a sophisticated and expensive piece of gadgetry. It comes with MemnSomm pilot interaction to induce hi-cram sleep during the manoeuvre. Make profit, invest profit in more goods, make more end-up on next trip, and so on.

The intergalactic hyperdrive is obtainable only from planets at Tech Level 10 or higher, and can only be used once. Transfer is facilitated from the current galaxy to the next in the sequence of eight. Once you reach galaxy eight, utilising the hyperdrive returns you to galaxy one. The Inter-Galactic Hyperdrive is engaged by selecting icon 7, which will appear on purchase.

IGH specification: Although a number of manufacturers have supported a whole range of IGH motors, it is recommended you remain loyal to Xexor/Hikan who provide the standard hyperspace transit drives.

Once docked you are linked directly with the CorCom comms package. Asteroid mining involves the fitting of fuel scoops and special mining lasers to your ship. Ships which always carry them are known as 'Belters'. They search for asteroids and, on finding one, use the laser to fragment it into pieces sufficiently small to be taken into the cargo bay.

Mining lasers specification: Kruger Model ARM64 Sp. Mining laser is highly recommended as both a trade and combat addition. Uses variable frequency laser rods of 200mm length, fired in wide beam, 100 channels/beam. Automatic debris-pattern lock ensures no

Docking Computer



Docking computer specification

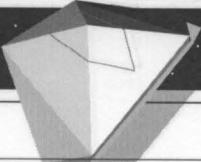
Intergalactic hyperdrive



IGH specification

Asteroid mining lasers

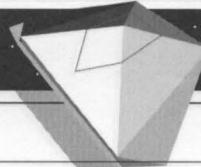
Mining lasers specification



ELITE PLUS

NON-COMBATIVE EQUIPMENT

fragments of large size of target asteroid impinge on ship space. Can destroy asteroids of up to 2KtHH durable Mass. Must be fitted with a fuel and matter scoop.



Knowing which hardware is available to aid combat is, unfortunately, no more than abstract knowledge unless your credit rating facilitates the conversion of your dreams into reality by allowing the purchase of said kit.

Or, in other words, there's no bash without cash.

The primary route to increasing your meagre 100 starting credits is by skillful interplanetary trading. Goods are cheap on Planet A. Same goods are expensive on Planet B. Ship goods from A to B. Make profit. Invest profit in more goods, make more mark up on next trip, and so on.

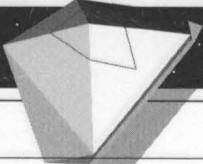
All that sounds very simple, and the mechanics of it are. Trading is easy. Trading to maximise profits is not, and involves an understanding of the complex socio-political and economic profiles of both vending and purchasing planets.

Most space stations have made the process of trading very simple, in order to facilitate a fast turnover in goods and ships. Import and export tariffs - which are high on some worlds - are automatically added or deducted and this is reflected in the prices shown. The auto-trader system, employed by the Cobra, does not allow for more specific trading deals to be performed.

Once docked you are lined directly with the CorCom Trade System. At your request you can obtain a list of basic trade items available for purchase, by selecting icon 2.

The trade display shows buy and sell prices for each product and both quantity available and quantity already bought and held in your ship's hold for each product.

The capacity of the Cobra's hold is for 20 Tonne Cannisters, and all items except Minerals, Gold, Platinum and Gem-Stones are measured by the tonne. Slaves are also measured by the tonne, which may seem a little strange, but it includes the cryogenic



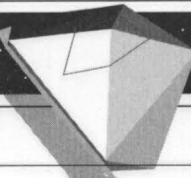
INTERGALACTIC TRADING

suspension system necessary to keep them alive during space travel. The slave trade, once almost eliminated the Galactic Government is now returning, despite the efforts of the Galactic Police Force to suppress it.

The alien items which appear on the market prices display cannot be purchased by humans. However, you may find that alien items come into your possession after destroying an alien-piloted craft. You may then sell them.

ITEM	AVERAGE PRICE/CR
Food	(Simple organic products) 4.4 tonne
Textiles	(Unprocessed fabrics) 6.4 "
Radioactives	(Ores and by-products) 21.2 "
*Slaves	(Usually humanoid) 8.0 "
Liquor/Wines	(Exotic spirits from unearthly floral) 25.2 "
Luxuries	(Perfumes, Spices, Coffee) 91.2 "
*Narcotics	(Tobacco, Arcturan Megaweed) 114.8 "
Computers	(Intelligent machinery) 84.0 "
Machinery	(Factory and farm equipment) 56.4 "
Alloys	(Industrial Metals) 32.8 "
*Firearms	(Small-scale artillery, sidearms etc.) 70.4 "
Furs	(Includes leathers, Millennium Wompom Pelts) 56.0 "
Minerals	(Unrefined rock containing trace elements) 8. Tonnes

ELITE PLUS



INTERGALACTIC TRADING

Gold	65.2 kg
Gem-Stones (include jewellery)	16.4 g
Alien Items (Artefacts, Weapons etc.)	27.0 tonne

Agricultural Worlds

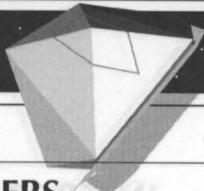
Industrial worlds

*These items are defined as illegal by the Galactic Government, so trading in them is risky.

Shown on this list are the quantities of each item available, and the current market price per unit. Most CorCom Trade Systems deal exclusively under blanket categories, including FOOD, MACHINERY, MINERALS and GEMSTONES.

The prices shown at the time of trading represent an offer to you and will be guaranteed while you are in Trading Mode.

The purchasing of items is almost instantaneous. Use the cursor keys, joystick or mouse (depending on your chosen method of control) to move the highlighter bar over the item you wish to purchase or sell, and then select icon 9 to "Buy" it, or icon 10 to "Sell" it. The money spent or earned will be automatically deducted or added to your credit rating.



ELITE PLUS

ADVICE TO TRADERS

The Cobra trade ship can be fitted with four lasers, four missiles and one energy bomb. This should be sufficient to make trade possible within the System Space of even heavily piratised worlds. But it is strongly recommended that pilots achieve a combat of at least 'Deadly' before any worlds designated 'Anarchy' or 'Feudal' are approached, especially if the cargo is high tech machinery or luxury goods.

To make money as a trader is no easy task. Unless you have backing capital you would be well advised to start with foodstuffs, textiles, minerals and luxuries.

Demand for goods varies widely and prices within planets fluctuate, but GalCop regulations prohibit planets from advertising their requirements or announcing their market prices beyond their own System Space. Any trader, therefore, approaches all transactions with a certain financial risk.

Trade depends upon demand, and selling prices depend upon the level of demand on the planet, and its available money. None of these factors can be assessed before docking.

Agricultural planets invariably have excess produce at reasonable purchase prices, and such food sells well at industrialised, middle to high-technology worlds. Raw materials, and ores, will sell well to middle-tech worlds, which are usually able to refine them, and the refined product can fetch excellent prices at worlds of very high tech status.

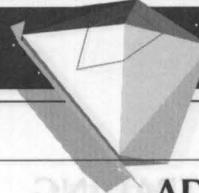
The rules are complex, and anarchy and piracy has its effect on causing the rules to change.

Minerals

(Unrefined rock containing trace

In trading with a planet, consider its economic profile.

R. Tonnes



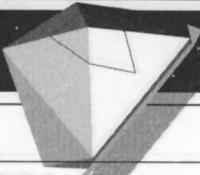
Agricultural worlds need specialist food and raw materials, but mostly basic machinery and spare parts. If they are rich they need luxuries and high tech industrial machines. They produce food in quantity, raw materials and specialised 'organic' items, like some textiles. They often destroy (by natural catastrophe or enemy action) and their cargo is ungathered. Using a fuel scoop such 'free bounty' can be collected. The Industrial worlds need agricultural produce; raw materials (for refining); resource exploitation machinery; (if rich) high tech goods. They produce basic items of need for civilised worlds: beds, seals and gaskets, power storage units, basic weapons, mass produced fertiliser, mass produced medicines etc.

(Note: Pressurised cargo canisters are the universal means of interplanetary transport.)
Think about a planet's needs. Made of HiFlux Chromer-alloy, they hold one Galileo unit of mass per cubic metre. Developed every 100 years.
Think what might make the society function.
such as...
Don't trade expensive trivia to a hungry world.

IF THE PROFIT ISN'T WORTH IT, TRADE IT SOMEWHERE ELSE.

Agricultural Worlds

Industrial worlds



ALTERNATIVES TO TRADING

Bounty Hunting

Since the Cobra craft is equipped as a fighter as well as a trader, with in-built capacity for strengthening its armaments, there are alternative life-styles to trading which may prove profitable, but which are excessively dangerous.

at least "deadly" before any worlds designated "Anarchic" or "Feudal". especially if the cargo is high tech machinery or luxury goods.

Galactic banks, which insure the larger trading convoys, will pay a large bounty for each pirate ship destroyed. A ship's computer will transmit photographic evidence of any kill to the GalCop Bank Federation Monitoring Authority. The IR signature of the destroyed ship is then tallied with all known pirate vessels, and the bounty hunter pilot credited accordingly.

Bounty hunters commonly have Cobra Class ships in order to masquerade as traders. They simply hyper-space into a system (anarchic and feudal worlds especially) and wait to be attacked, ensuring that they have sufficient hyperface fuel for a quick escape.

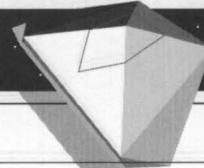
Piracy is widespread throughout the 8 galaxies, and many pirates are not hardened criminals at all, but failed traders who have turned to this way of life in desperation. To survive as a pirate, looting freighter convoys and small ships, requires a high degree of combat experience, since not just Police Vipers will pursue them, but other pirate ships and Bounty Hunters, too, will prey upon them.

But the rewards are high. Provided the pirate ship is equipped with a fuel scoop, the jettisoned tonne-cannisters of attacked cargo ships can be scooped up and traded.

There is money in rock, but to make the most of it a Cobra ship must be fitted with a fuel scoop and a MinReduc 15 Mining Laser (or some equivalent type). The mining laser will blast very large asteroids into very small fragments and the scoop can rapidly

Piracy

Asteroid Mining



swallow this tradeable ore.

Trade ships are often destroyed (by natural catastrophe or enemy action) and their cargo left ungathered. Using a fuel scoop such 'free bounty' can be collected. The contents of the cannisters will be unknown until they are taken aboard and examined, and may be worthless or worth a fortune. If their contents are illegal goods, they cannot be traded or sold without legal risk.

(NB: Pressurised cargo canisters are the Universal means of storing cargo for Interplanetary Space Voyaging. Made of HiFlux Chromon-alloy, they hold one Gal Tonne of goods, under variable pressure and temperture conditions. Tales have been told of such barrels being discovered after over five hundred years on barren moons, and such 'Moon salvage' is a remarkable source of historical artefact material.)

It is surprising how many planetary systems will allow the purchasing of illegal trade items, notably firearms, narcotics (especially Arcturan Megaweed) and slaves. Slaves are supplied in cryosuspension in transporter coffins, and often turn out to be old and sick specimens of vaguely humanoid life forms. Nonetheless, few systems will allow the selling of these items without taking recriminatory action.

Free Space Cargo

Dictatorship

Illegal Trading

Corporate States

POLITICAL PROFILE OF THE UNIVERSE

To trade successfully, and profitably, will almost certainly require you to fly the Cobra trade ship into politically unstable planetary systems. Pirate and free-booter activity is high in many solar systems, and adequate ship defences are essential if the rewards of higher selling prices are to be reaped.

Consequences for Trade

POLITICAL PROFILE OF THE UNIVERSE

For the benefit of new traders, a brief political summary is given below, but reference should be made to Kroweki & Carr's PsychoHistory and Economic Theory in the GalFederation, 2845.

Planetary governments, or federations, determine the relative safety of their Solarspace. Ranked in decreasing order of safety, the 2040 officially registered worlds of the Galactic Federation can be classified as.

CORPORATE STATES

DEMOCRACIES

CONFEDERACIES

COMMUNIST STATES

DICTATORSHIPS

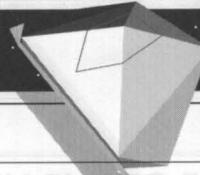
MULTI-GOVERNMENTS

FEUDAL WORLDS

ANARCHIES

Like ENGEMA and ZAATXE, these are well-ordered worlds, which have usually developed from settlers who practised a free trade form of competition. Taxation is high on such worlds, but the living standards are high also. Corporate planets wish to protect their trade, so goods are expensive, but luxuries are welcomed. Import licences are often necessary.

Engema is an agricultural world, run as a single farming co-operative. Farmers receive a fixed payment for their crops, whether or not the harvest is good, and selling prices do not vary greatly. It is a dependable market, and customer relations are good. Luxuries, machinery and raw materials sell well here.



POLITICAL PROFILE OF THE UNIVERSE

Zaatxe is an example of a rich, industrial state (Tech level 12). It produces luxury goods, elaborate and innovative machine systems, and specialises in Prototype design. Prices fluctuate depending upon the level of inter-state competition, but it is always a safe bet to buy recently-developed machine items which have not yet spread very far across the galaxy.

Dictatorships such as the worlds LAVE and ENZAER, are only moderately safe to trade with, but are well worth the risk (provided the trader is well defended and combat trained). Very often pirate attack will not occur because of an agreement between pirate fleets and the world itself. A proportion of all incoming trade is 'allowed' to be stolen by pirates, who will then leave the world alone, and protect its ships from aliens or rogue traders. It is an uneasy liaison, which often breaks down.

Lave is an agricultural world, and Enzaer an industrial planet, but a similar principle operates on both surfaces. These are two trading standards, that of the People and that of the Aristocracy. Standards of living are artificially generated, a veneer of progress, and luxury goods, machinery and textiles sell well - usually. The great demand, however, is for basic commodities, especially foodstuffs, clothing and raw materials. These will sell well when the voice of the People has been raised in protest.

A trader can make his biggest profits here and reach his grave the quickest. Worlds like Onisou and Xeesenri have vast wreck-yards in far orbit, the dead places of ships that came to trade honestly, and fell prey to trickery.

These are lawless places, and have usually become so because the original settlers competed too hard when there was too little resource material.

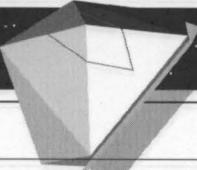
Those worlds which survived holocaust did so because of uneasy and bloody

Dictatorship

Bird-forms

Amphiboids

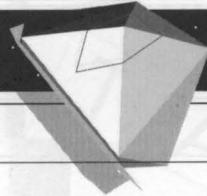
Anarchy Planets



POLITICAL PROFILE OF THE UNIVERSE

alliances between clan families. Pirates and mercenaries were hired for protection and assassination purposes. Anarchic worlds will trade readily in narcotics, slaves, firearms and exotica, and the price will be good ... if you get a price at all. These worlds are almost always supplying invisible Masters, usually elite trader/combatants who have turned to crime as the most profitable way of life. Such form loose federations, and trade on the black market extensively throughout the galaxies.

These worlds pay highly for goods they cannot produce themselves, because they know that traders avoid them. Their own products need specialised, illegal outlets: weaponry, narcotics, eavesdropping devices ... if it's covert, then anarchic worlds are producing it. Trade in these items and you will get rich quick, or at least become a 'Fugitive'.



Of the 2040 officially registered planets in the Gal Cop, all but 45 support human colonies only, that is to say, human presence elsewhere is restricted to settlements in under-populated parts of the land surface.

Trading at such worlds depends, for its success, very much upon the existant state of co-operation between human and alien. Humans control the Coriolis stations in orbit, but the availability of items for trade, and their relative expense, can be affected by the controlling life forms.

Most alien life forms are either too primitive, or too glad of off-World trade, to interfere. Some, such as the Reptiloid life form of Esanbe or the Amphibioids of Anbeen, can make a trader's life very difficult, by haggling at the point of a laser.

The available planetary information on all worlds will indicate the nature of the inhabiting life form.

Bird-forms. Dealing in alien artefacts on such worlds often involves forming a close liaison with Flight Elders, or Nest Elders, and this is very much a job for the specialist. Bird-forms are, on the whole, a delight to trade with, and the highest form of honour (fairly universally) that an off-worlder can receive is an invitation to 'keep the eggs warm for a moment'.

Bird-forms

Amphibioids are usually a lot sharper than their wet, sluggish appearance would suggest. They are usually keen to trade in narcotics, or exotic foodstuffs. Skin creams are always well received. Technologically they tend to be backward, but will pay high prices for such middle-range items as automated ponds, croak metres, spawn freezers and swamp purifiers.

Amphibioids

ALIEN RACES

Felines

Felines are dangerous in the extreme. No matter what sort of political structures the world may have, feline aliens are pack orientated, and feudal, and very unpredictable. All traders are advised to wear body suits, to prevent secretions of sweat from triggering a feeding response among these hostile and enigmatic life forms.

To win the confidence of a feline alien is almost invariably to be invited to mate, so a certain aloofness is recommended.

Insectoids

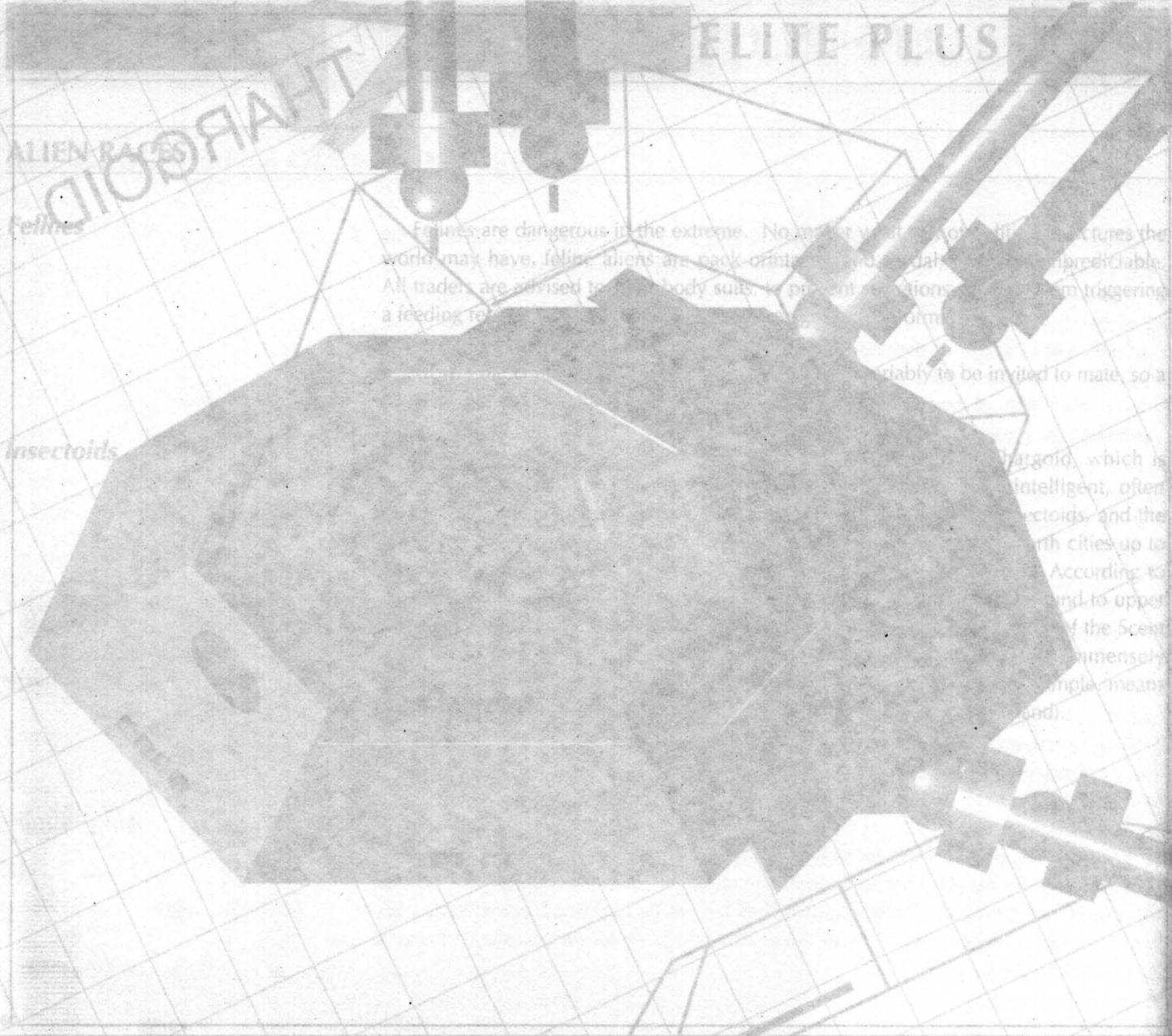
Insectoids. The most dangerous insectoidal life form is the Thargoid, which is mentioned in the Combat section. Insectoids are usually highly intelligent, often existing as a group mind. There is rarely any individuality among insectoids, and the trader must beware making deals in such a way. One life form builds earth cities up to four miles high, and over four million drones live in the middle levels. According to legend, any trader who voluntarily ascends the earth passageway from ground to upper surfaces of these immense mounds is honoured with the rare title Ascender of the Scent City. And then consumed alive. But trading with insectoids can be immensely profitable, as there are so many of them (to trade in wrist watches, for example, means two to four watches per individual in a clone-group of perhaps ten thousand).

Amorphous

Amorphous life forms are usually a lot sharper than most when it comes to dealing with spacefaring species. However, they are usually keen to trade in resources, or exotic foodstuffs. They often have a very low tolerance for anything that might be considered unsanitary. Technologically they tend to be primitive, but will buy just about anything that comes their way.

THARGOID

1111



Felines are dangerous in the extreme. No matter what planet or what structures the world may have, feline aliens are pack-oriented and territorial. They are unpredictable. All traders are advised to wear body suits to prevent scratches. It is recommended to bring a feeding toy.

insectoids

The insectoid race is the most common in the galaxy. They are small, fast, and intelligent, often serving as laborers or as food for other species. Insectoids are found throughout cities up to the outer reaches of the galaxy.

According to legend, the insectoids were once the dominant race in the galaxy. According to legend, they were wiped out by a powerful alien race called the Scorpion. According to legend, the Scorpion race was immensely powerful (for example, their army was said to be invincible).

ADDER

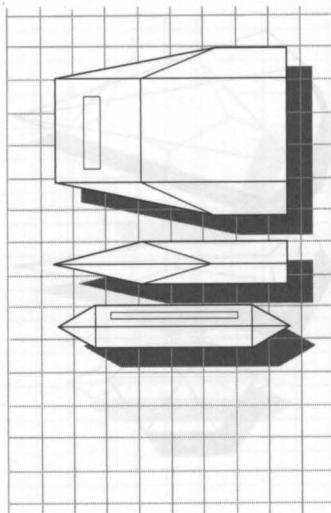
ASP MK II

Galactic Navy vessel designed and manufactured by Advanced

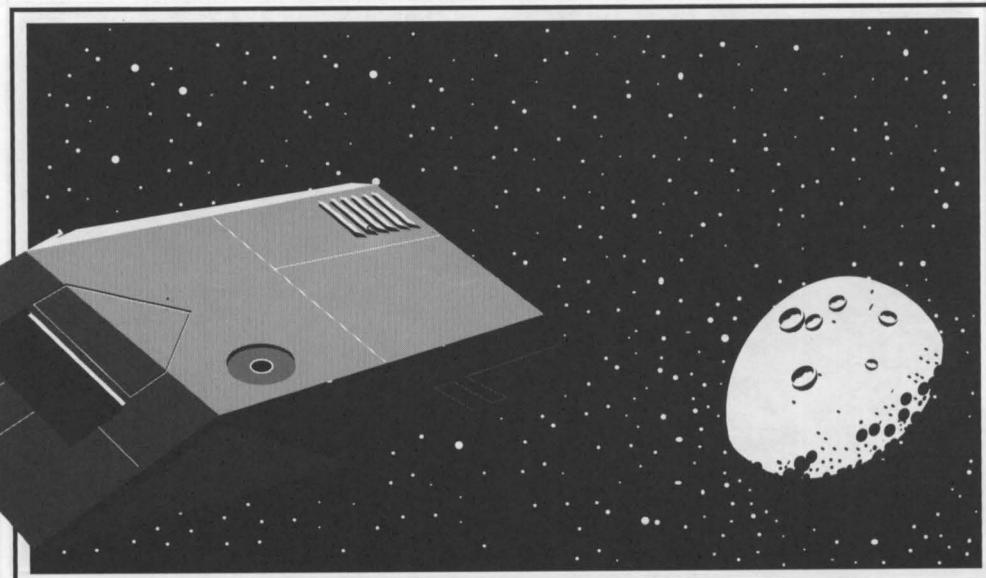
ADDER

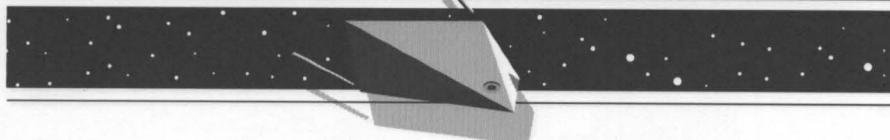
Manufactured by Outworld Workshops, a rogue breakaway company from Spalder and Prme Inc. which operates without a licence from an unknown location, the Adder-class craft has dual atmospheric-spatial capability and is often used by smugglers.

Pregg's 'wingfolding' system permits landing on planetary surfaces. Carries one missile.



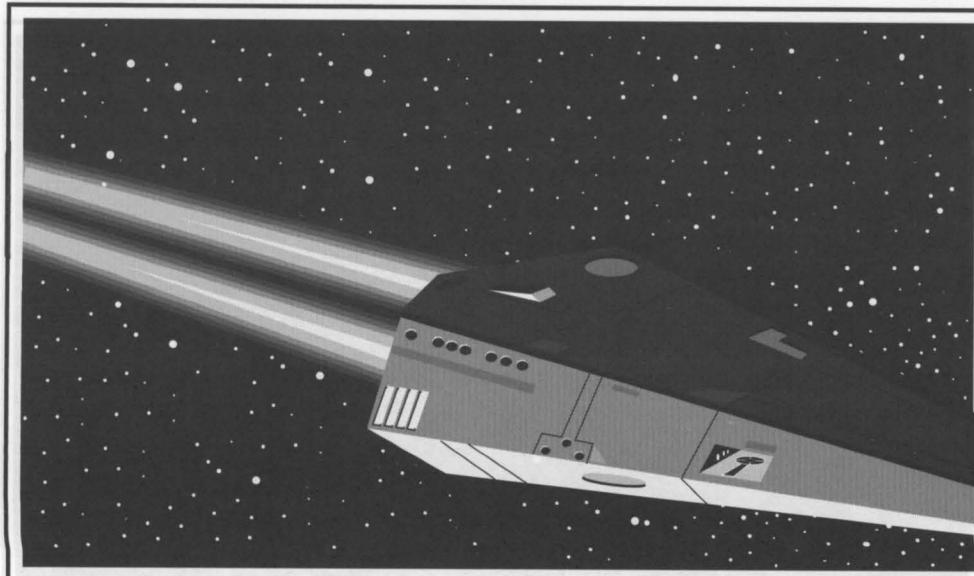
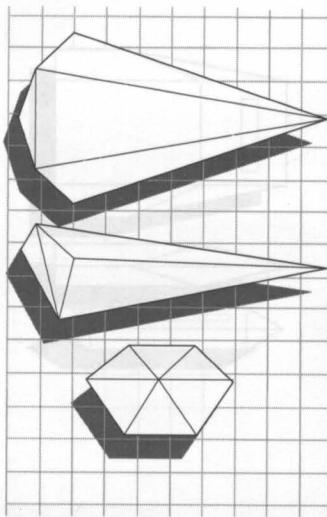
DIMENSION	45/8/30FT
CARGO CAPACITY	2TC (TONNE CANISTERS)
ARMAMENTS	Ingram 1928 AZ Beam laser Geret Starseeker missile
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.24 LM (Light Mach)
INSERVICE DATE	2914 AD (Outworld Workshops)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF4 (Curve Factor)
CREW NUMBER	2
DRIVE MOTORS	AM 18 bi Thrust
HULL STRESS FACTOR	Tko28
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes





ANACONDA

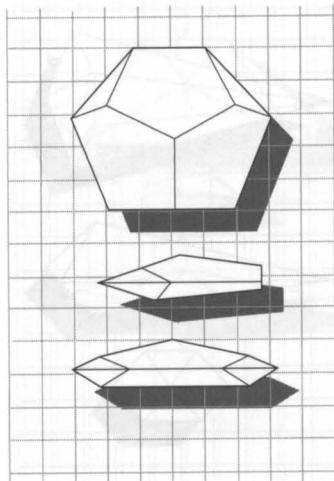
DIMENSION	170/60/75FT
CARGO CAPACITY	750TC
ARMAMENTS	Front-fire Hassoni HiRad Pulse laser ColtMaster Starasers Missiles (Geret Starseekers)
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.14LM
INSERVICE DATE	2856AD (RimLiner Galactic)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF (Curve Factor) 3
CREW NUMBER	40-72
DRIVE MOTORS	V & K 32.24 Ergmasters, with under and over firing tubes
HULL STRESS FACTOR	T(ensmann) JI57
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	YES



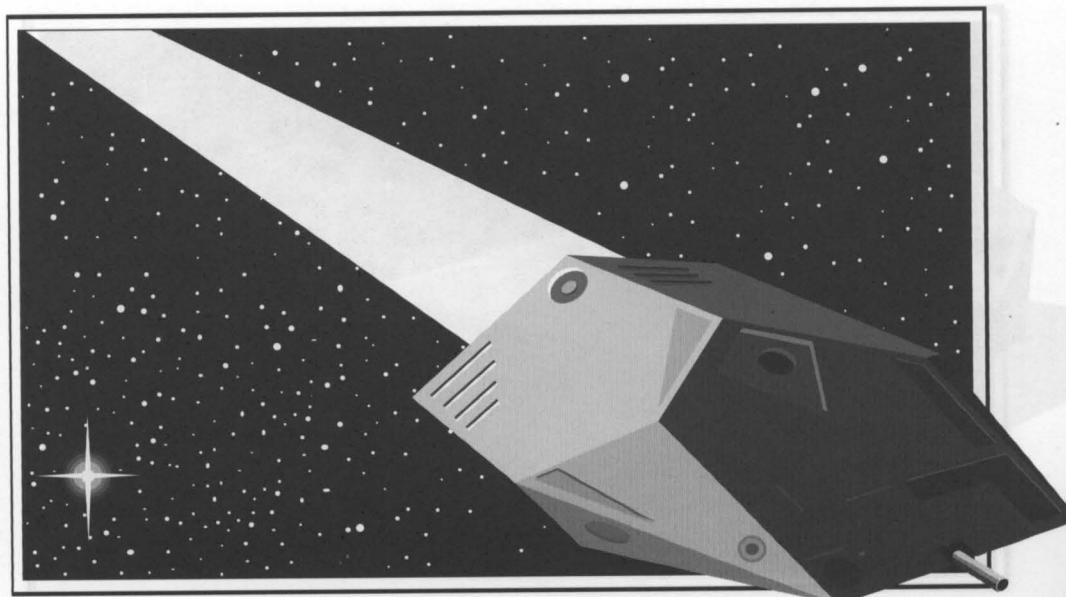
ANACONDA

The largest known freighter with a cargo bay designed by Beerbaum and ThruSpace Inc., the Anaconda is the only freighter fitted with Dizaoner SpaceWares swing-float platforms. These load-balance metering devices enable the loadmaster to rearrange the cargo within seconds to increase manoeuvrability of the great ship. Equipped only with laser weaponry (the 500 Gigazap front-firing pulse), and sometimes with missiles, the Anaconda range of craft usually have fighter escorts. In trader parlance, the Anaconda is built as strong as a rogue asteroid, and steers like one.

ASP MK II



DIMENSION	70/20/65FT
CARGO CAPACITY	None
ARMAMENTS	Hassoni-Kruger Burst Laser Geret Starseeker Missile
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.40LM
INSERVICE DATE	2878 AD Galcop Workshops
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF (Curve Factor) 4
CREW NUMBER	2
DRIVE MOTORS	Voltaire Whiplash HZ Pulsedrives
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TT 16
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	YES



ASP MK II

Galactic Navy vessel designed and manufactured in government workshops, incorporating secret self-destruct devices which are primed to activate when the astrogation controls are used by unfamiliar hands.

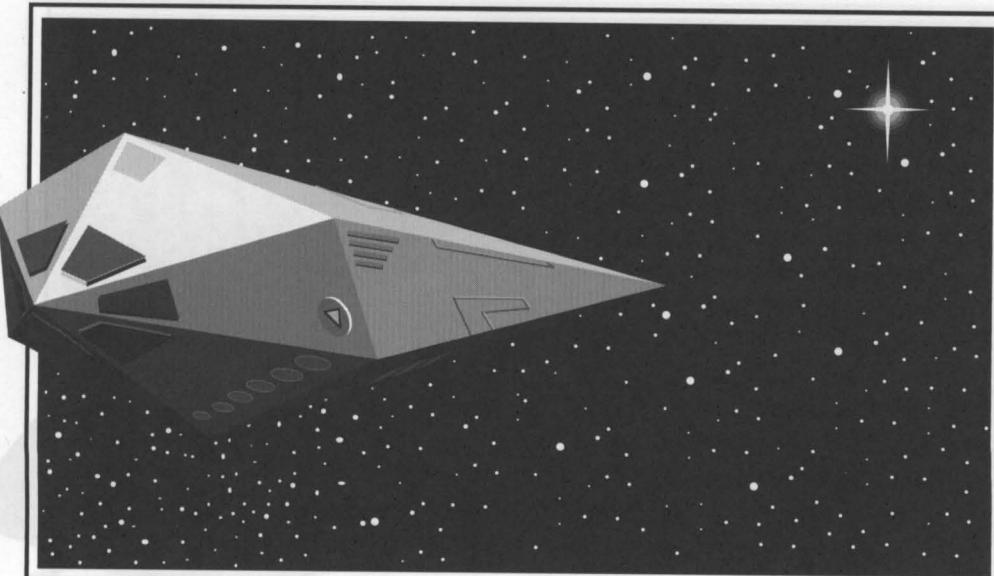
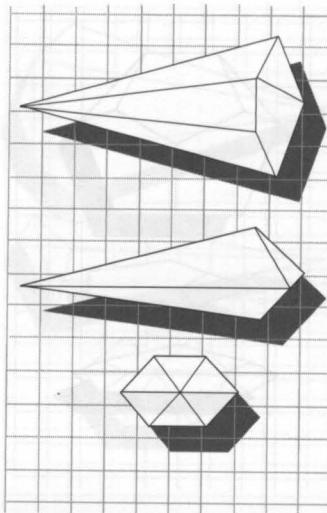
Integument has chameleon properties enabling the ship to assume effective camouflage in any type of environment.

Intended for reconnaissance and the transport of high-ranking military personnel from combat. It is very fast and manoeuvrable. despite its hazardous nature it makes an ideal private vessel, primarily because of the speed, camouflage and high intensity Hassoni-Kruger Burst-lasers.

The Asp II has room for powerful shield generators, but only one missile pod.

BOA CLASS CRUISER

DIMENSION	115/60/65FT
CARGO CAPACITY	125 TC
ARMAMENTS	Ergon Laser System Standard JK Pulse laser IFS Seek & Hunt missiles
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.24 LM
INSERVICE DATE	3017 AD (Gerege Federation Space Works)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF4
CREW NUMBER	15-28
DRIVE MOTORS	4C40KV Ames Drive motors. Seeklight Thrust Systems
HULL STRESS FACTOR	T(ensmann) YO20 C-Holding K21-31
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes



AS Mk II
Gericic Hya vessel design
ANACONDA
The large cruiser features a more rounded hull design with a more vertical profile. It has a larger cockpit section at the front with a prominent sensor array. The main engine exhaust is located on the upper deck near the stern. The hull is primarily white with black trim and accents.

BOA CLASS CRUISER

Although marginally smaller than the Python, which it has superseded, the Boa has a greater cargo capacity due to refinements in equipment design (e.g. the Renold Astrogation bloc is one fifth the size of the previous Machanalian Interspatial Wayfinder) and reduced number of necessary crew. Largely developed out of the recommendations left by Commodore Monty, a Python Captain of 40 years experience.

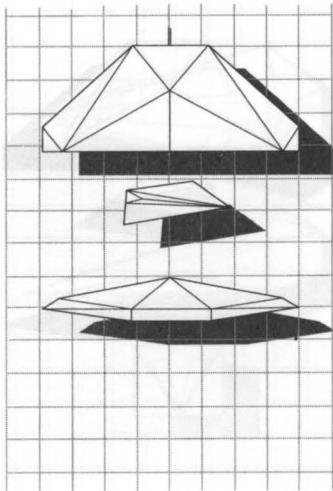
COBRA MK 1

PER-DE-LANCE

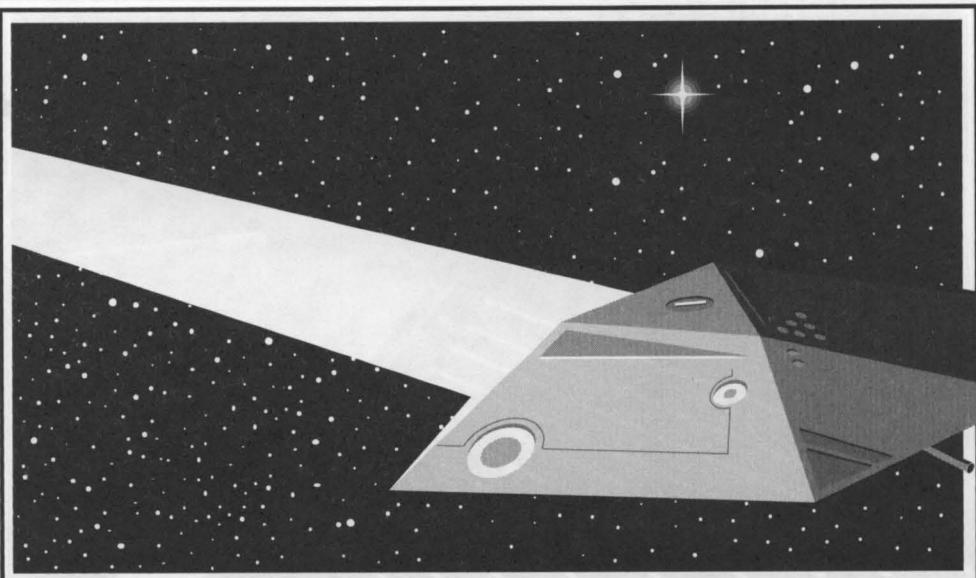
A Zengon Peterson Linup (Lee Poo Gee) designed vessel favoured by well-heeled bounty hunters and freewheeling business emporium. A sophisticated

COBRA MK1

Combat-trader craft favoured latterly by pirates, the Mark 1 Cobra was the first trade ship designed and built for the one-man trader. Its special feature at the time of manufacture (by Paynou, Prossett and Salem) was its Prossett Drive, which incorporated afterburners with proton-tightened, interior shaft walls. These are now a standard fitting for both internal and external integuments of all PPS made craft.

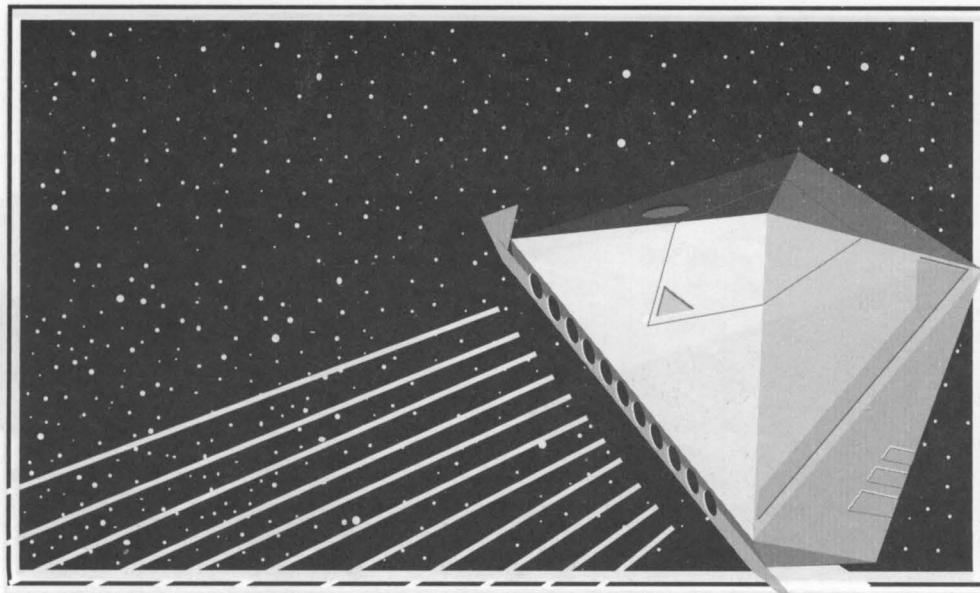
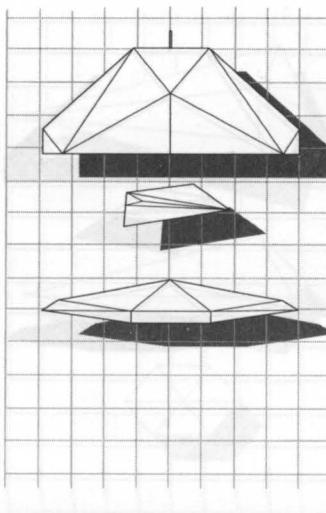


DIMENSION	B DIMENSIONS	55/15/70FT
CARGO CAPACITY	C T C	10 TC
ARMAMENTS	D	Hassoni Variscan laser system and early Lance & Ferman missile system.
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	E	0.26
INSERVICE DATE	F	2855 Paynou, Prossett and Salem
MANOEUVRABILITY	G	CF3
CREW NUMBER	H	1
DRIVE MOTORS	I	Prossett Drive
HULL STRESS FACTOR	J	T Ji 18
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	K	Yes



COBRA MK III

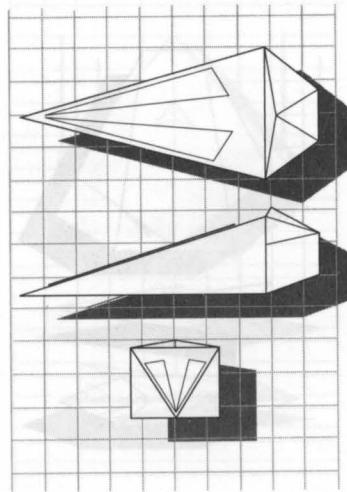
DIMENSION	65/30/130 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	20 TC
ARMAMENTS	Ingram laser system Lance & Ferman Seek & Kill missile system.
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.30
INSERVICE DATE	3100 AD (Cowell & MgRath Shipyards, Lave)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF8
CREW NUMBER	1 or 2
DRIVE MOTORS	Kruger 'Lightfast' motors Irrikan ThruSpace
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TJi18
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes



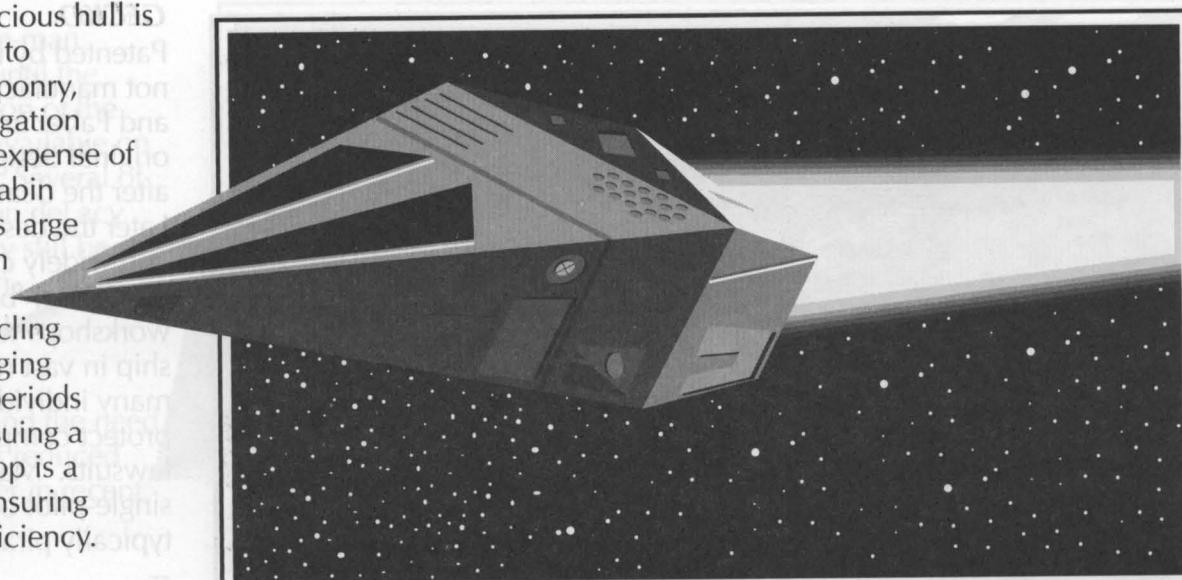
COBRA MK II

Larger, more popular version of the Cobra Mk1 (the Mk 2 only reached prototype stage and was abandoned due to a design fault in the hull). This ship is equipped with several special features, including Zieman Energy Deflection Shields, fore and aft, and mountings for four Ingram Pulse lasers. The Cobra is much favoured by lone-wolf traders who wish to combine potential superior combat qualities with adequate cargo space.

FER-DE-LANCE



DIMENSION	85/20/45 ft	DIMENSION
CARGO CAPACITY	2TC	CARGO CAPACITY
ARMAMENTS	Ergan Laser System IFS Seek & Hunt Missiles	
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.30	MAXIMUM VELOCITY
INSERVICE DATE	3100 AD	INSERVICE DATE
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF5	MANOEUVRABILITY
CREW NUMBER	12	CREW NUMBER
DRIVE MOTORS	Titronix Intersun Ionic for LT	DRIVE MOTORS
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TJ10	HULL STRESS FACTOR
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes	HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY

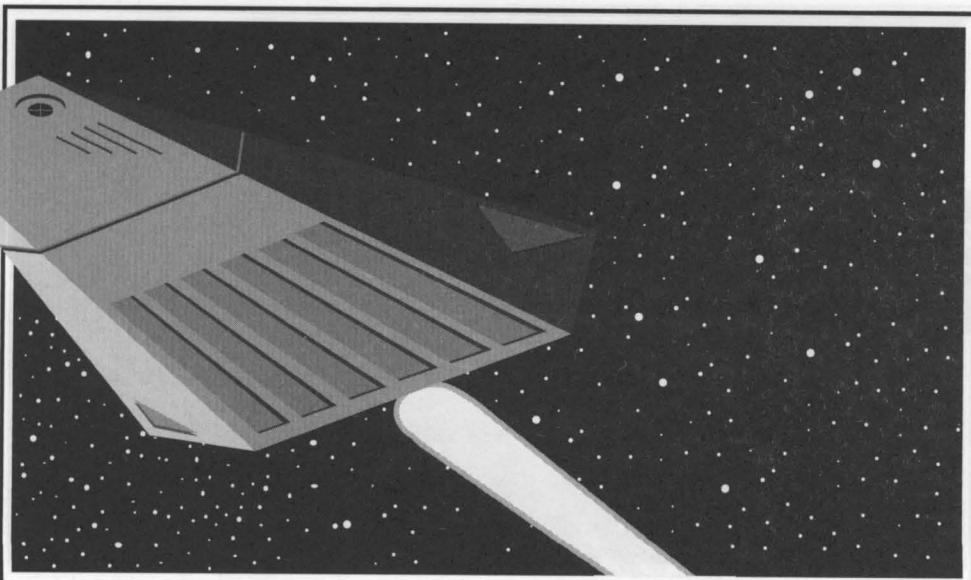
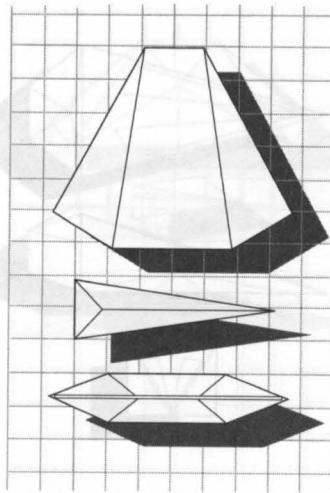


FER-DE-LANCE

A Zorgon Petterson Group (Zee Pee Gee) designed vessel favoured by well-heeled bounty hunters and freewheeling business corporation. A sophisticated craft, capable of both limited trading, combat, and leisure function. The spacious hull is mainly given over to sophisticated weaponry, defences and navigation equipment at the expense of cargo capacity. Cabin accommodation is large and luxurious with extensive Owndirt Inc. recycling facilities, encouraging extended live-in periods (useful whilst pursuing a quarry). Fuel scoop is a standard fitting, ensuring complete self-sufficiency.

GECKO

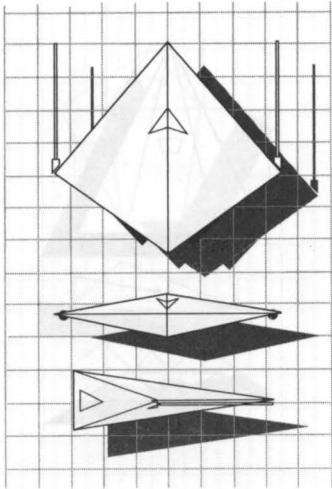
DIMENSION	12/40/65 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	3TC
ARMAMENTS	Ingram 1919 A4 Laser LM Homing missile
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.30
INSERVICE DATE	2852 Ace and Faber Hull Works, Lerelace
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF7
CREW NUMBER	1 or 2
DRIVE MOTORS	BreamPulse Light XL
HULL STRESS FACTOR	T to 48-94
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Not available



GECKO

Patented by Robert Bream, but not manufactured until Ace and Faber improved upon the original design specifications after the death of the inventor. Later the design was stolen and widely circulated to a number of 'backyard' workshops who produced the ship in vast numbers with many individual variances to protect companies against lawsuits. Mainly used as a single-pilot combat craft, typically pirates.

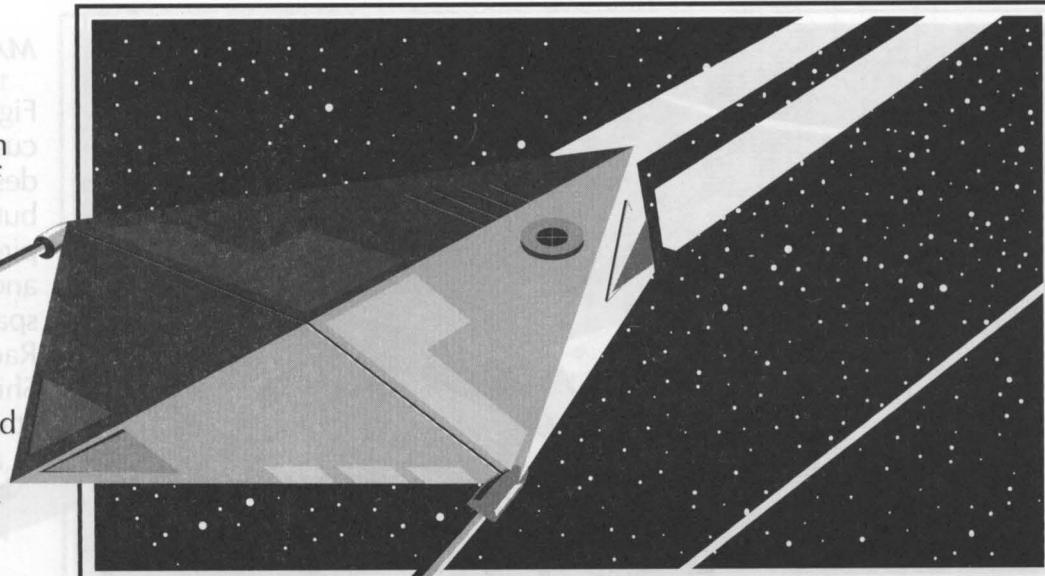
KRAIT



DIMENSION	80/20/90ft
CARGO CAPACITY	10TC
ARMAMENTS	ErGon laser system
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.30 Light Mach
INSERVICE DATE	3027 AD (deLacy Shipworks, ININES)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF8
CREW NUMBER	1
DRIVE MOTORS	deLacy Spinlonic ZX 14
HULL STRESS FACTOR	C-Holding A20-B4
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No

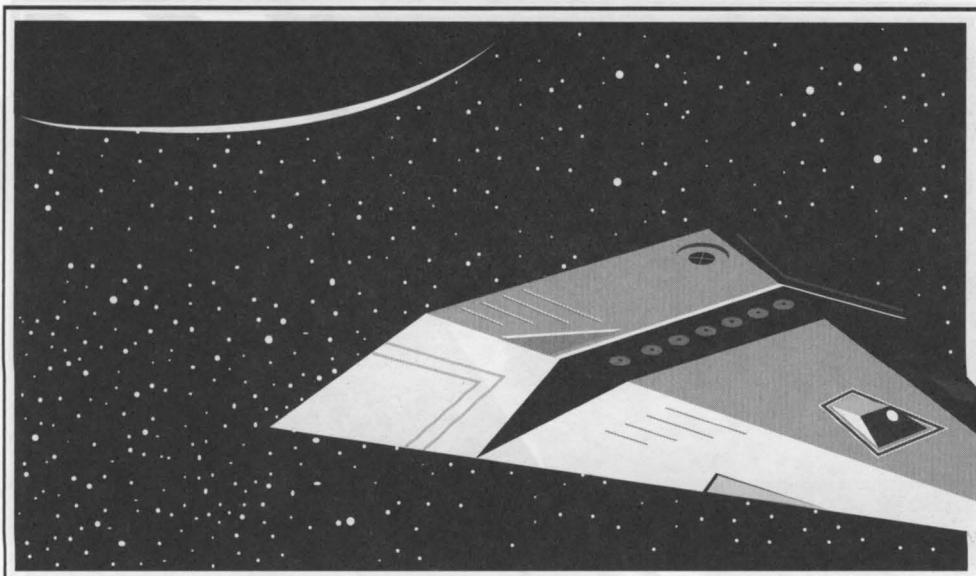
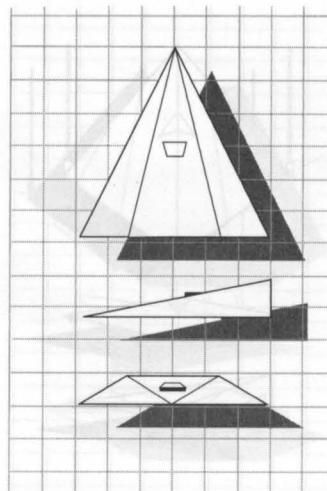
MALIBY STARBOAT

Used initially as a flyingboat, Marine Small, reliable one-man fighter, common until the standardised version of the Mamba became available on the open market. Several of these early Faulcon deLacy designed craft may still be found in service in remote areas, but space parts are no longer available and the need to cannibalise has reduced number still further in recent years.



MAMBA

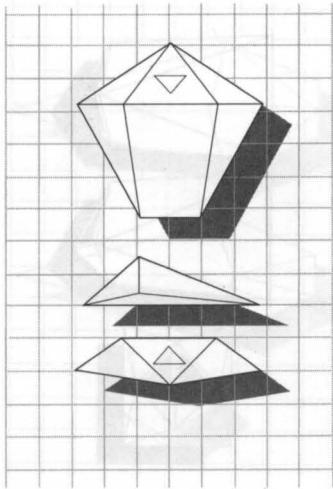
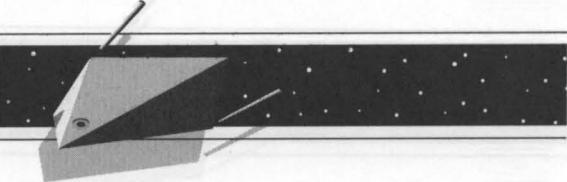
DIMENSION	55/12/65 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	10 TC
ARMAMENTS	Ergon laser
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.32
INSERVICE DATE	3110 AD (Reorte Ship Federation)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF9
CREW NUMBER	CF9
DRIVE MOTORS	Seeklight HV Thrust
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TKi 10 C-Holding B100+
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No



GECKO MAMBA

Fighter which grew out of custom-build craft primarily designed for racing purposes but adopted and armed by pirates due to its high speed and manoeuvrability. Cargo space was added later when Raddlett and Rayburn Shipyards (based at Reorte) standardised the variances and began manufacturing the craft in large numbers.

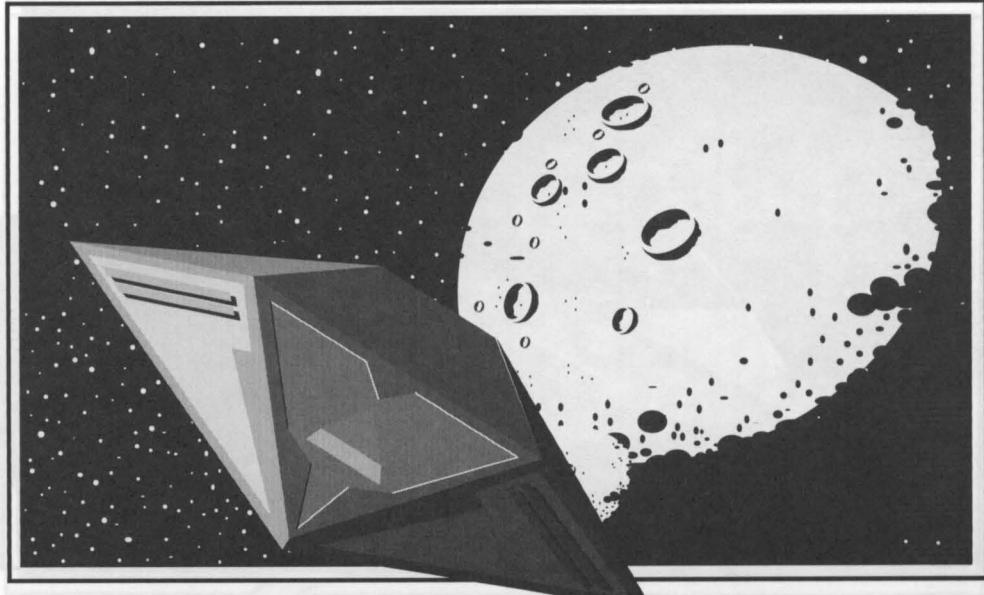
MORAY STARBOAT



DIMENSION	60/25/60 ft	DIMENSION
CARGO CAPACITY	7TC	CARGO CAPACITY
ARMAMENTS	Geret Starseeker Missile System	ARMAMENTS
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.25	MAXIMUM VELOCITY
INSERVICE DATE	3028 AD	INSERVICE DATE
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF4	MANOEUVRABILITY
CREW NUMBER	6	CREW NUMBER
DRIVE MOTORS	Turbulen Quark Re-Charger Mode 1287	DRIVE MOTORS
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TKo24	HULL STRESS FACTOR
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes	HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY

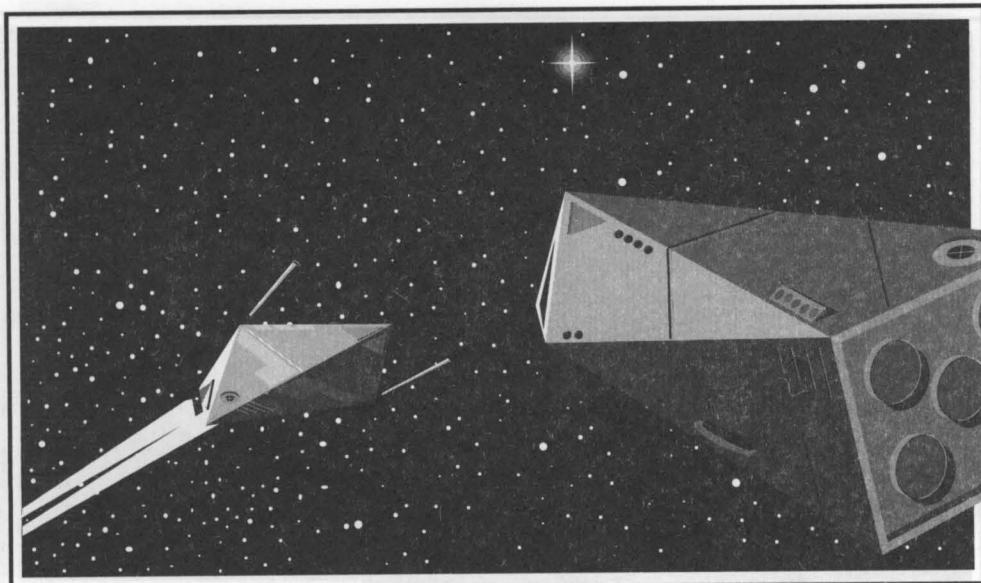
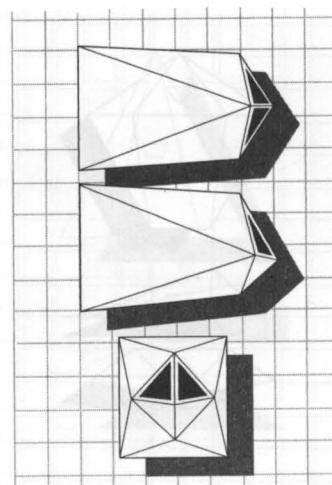
MORAY STARBOAT

Developed initially as a submarine flyingboat, Marine Trench Co. soon saw the possibilities for extending their operations into space and the Moray SFB became the 'Star Boat' after its ingenious adaptations were completed. Aquatic space-faring races are the main users of this multi-purpose vessel, whose hull is able to withstand the pressure of depths of up to 5500 fathoms. Standard fitting include: highpower seal locks, 2 torpedo tube/single missile pods and flood-lock cabins for suaqueous life-forms.



ORBIT SHUTTLES

DIMENSION	35/20/20 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	60 TC
ARMAMENTS	None
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.08
INSERVICE DATE	2856 Saud-Kruger Astro Design
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF4
CREW NUMBER	6
DRIVE MOTORS	V & K 20.20 StarMat drive
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TKo28
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No



ORBIT SHUTTLES

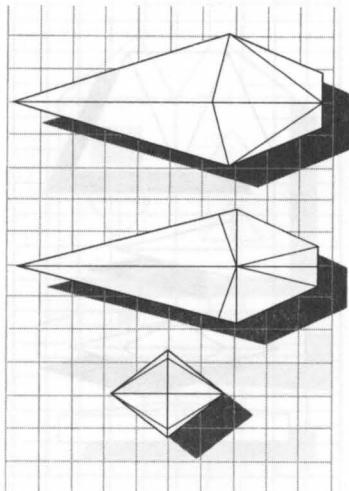
These unarmed and often unmanned craft are built under license in every planetary system. Based on a prototype developed by Saud-Kruger AstroDesign, they are used for cargo ferrying between planet and space station, but can be modified to hospital ships, or orbiting prisons. Favourite targets for small-time criminals, because of their instantaneous release of cargo canisters, they are often followed by single fighter patrol ships.

PYTHON

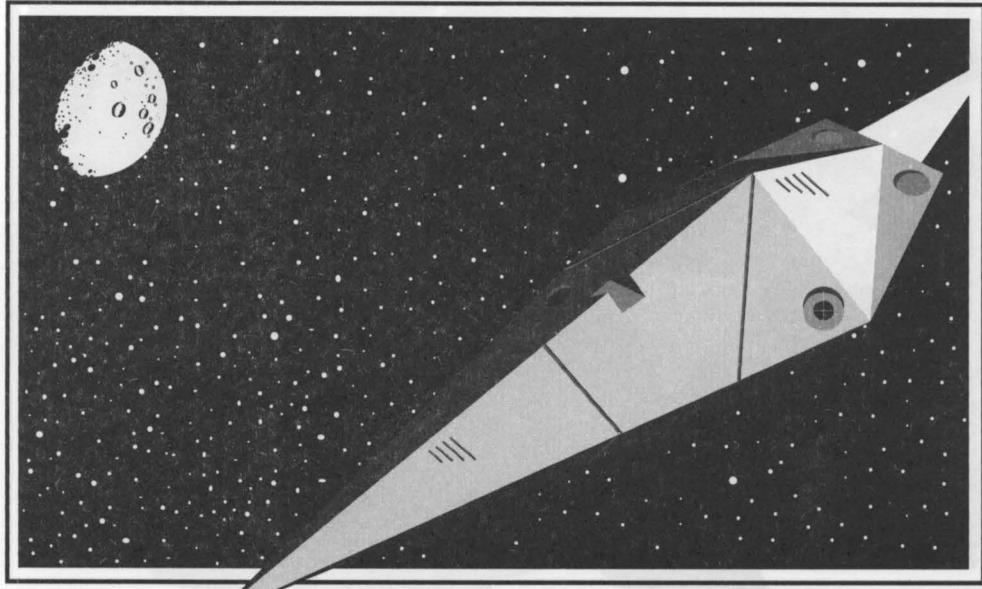
SIDEWINDER SCOUT SHIP
Designed by Faucon de Pau
Bns built in the Quins O'neill
Orbit Space

PYTHON

One of the larger trading vessels manufactured in Inera Orbit Space by Whatt and Pritney shipConstruct. Cabin accomodation is cramped and spartan in contrast to facilities for cargo and 'alien environment' transport. Though slow and ponderous, the craft has powerful CC-Voltaire shields and Volt-Variscan Pulse lasers, earning it the nickname of the 'space porcupine'. Not commonly attacked by pirate ships, but a popular craft for freebooters, usually used as a way-station and storage hulk.

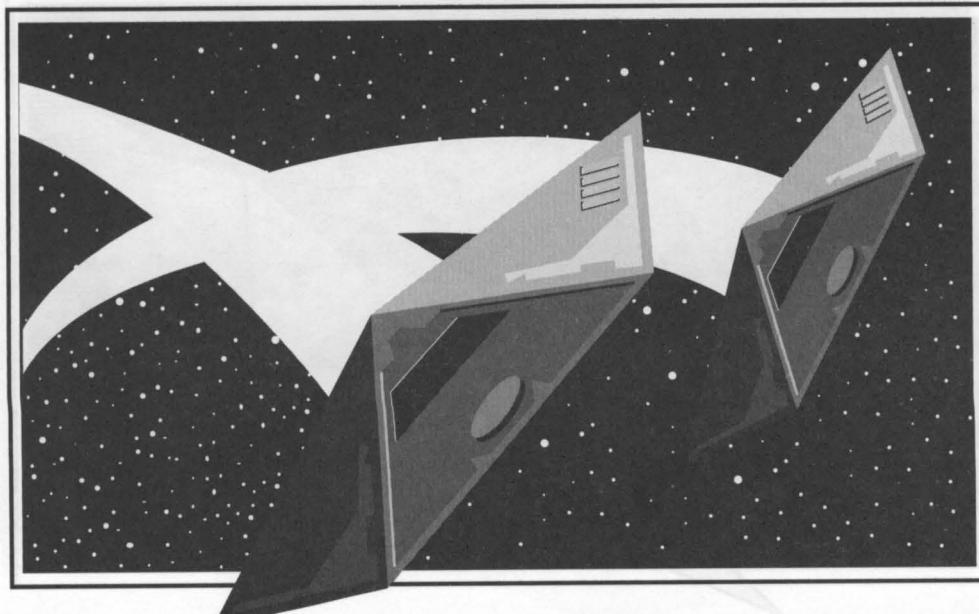
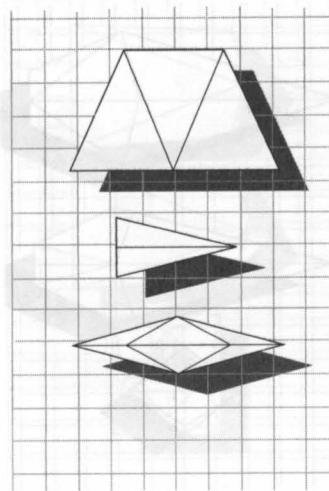


DIMENSION	130/40/80 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	100 TC
ARMAMENTS	Volt-Variscan Pulse Lasers
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.20
INSERVICE DATE	2700 ADWhatt and Pritney ShipConstruct
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF3
CREW NUMBER	20-30
DRIVE MOTORS	4 C40K V AMES DRIVE Exxon 76NN model
HULL STRESS FACTOR	T(enisman) YO 20 C-Holding K21-31
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes



SIDEWINDER SCOUT SHIP

DIMENSION	35/15/65 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	None
ARMAMENTS	Dual 22-18 lasers/Seeker missiles
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.37
INSERVICE DATE	2982 (Onrra Orbital/Spalder & Starblaze)
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF9
CREW NUMBER	1
DRIVE MOTORS	de lacy Spin Ionic MV
HULL STRESS FACTOR	Not available C-Holding C50
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No



SIDEWINDER SCOUT SHIP

Designed by Faulcon de lacy and built in the Onrra Orbital Shipyards by Spalder and Starblaze Inc to Galactic Navy specifications for a multi-purpose support craft. Mainly used for atmosphere and planetary surface scouting, but extensively too for city-strafing, reconnaissance and infantry air support (and by pirates who favour speed and elusiveness, its primary advantage). Has some interspatial capability, not including hyperspace, and must be carried through hyperspace by jump-capable vessels. Hull is too small for the installation of fuel scoops, or more than one missile pod.

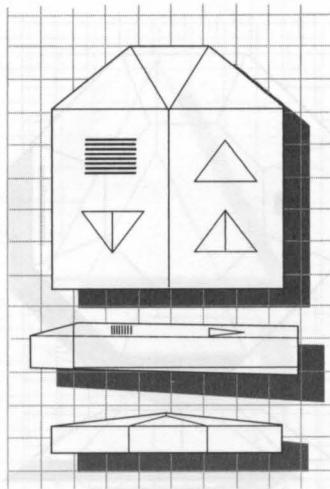
TRANSPORTER

TRANSPORTER
SHIPS

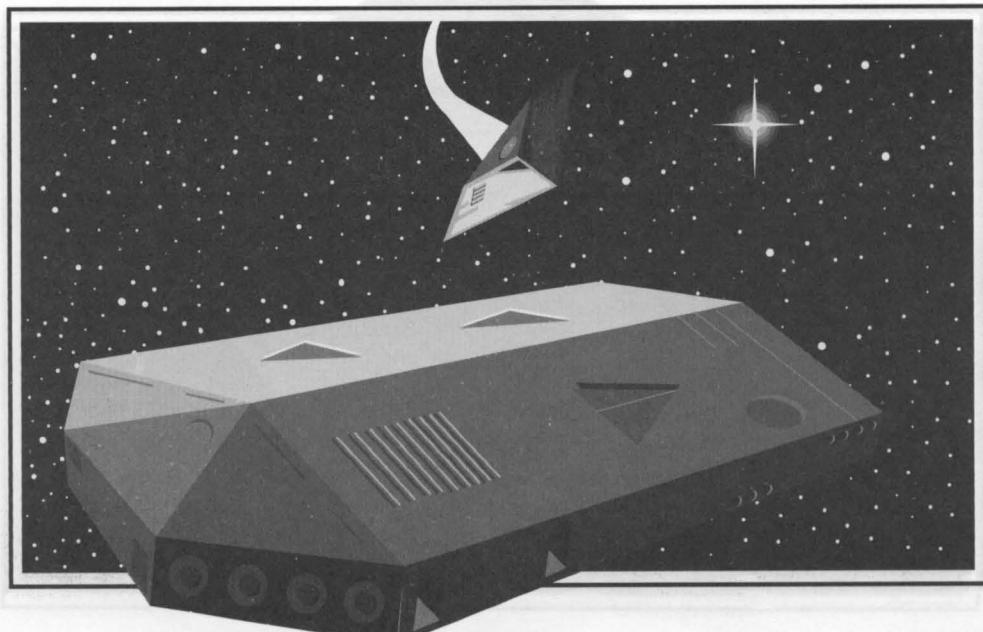
The Lakon Spaceways MC15 QuikTransport Shuttle is the most commonly encountered intermediate range shuttle, with a range of 0.1LY and a full HiGrav Loading facility. It can carry up to 100 passengers, and has a cargo capacity of 10 tonnes undefined bulk. Can land on asteroids, space stations, and can skim atmosphere, and touch down on land surfaces and all liquid surfaces except acid.

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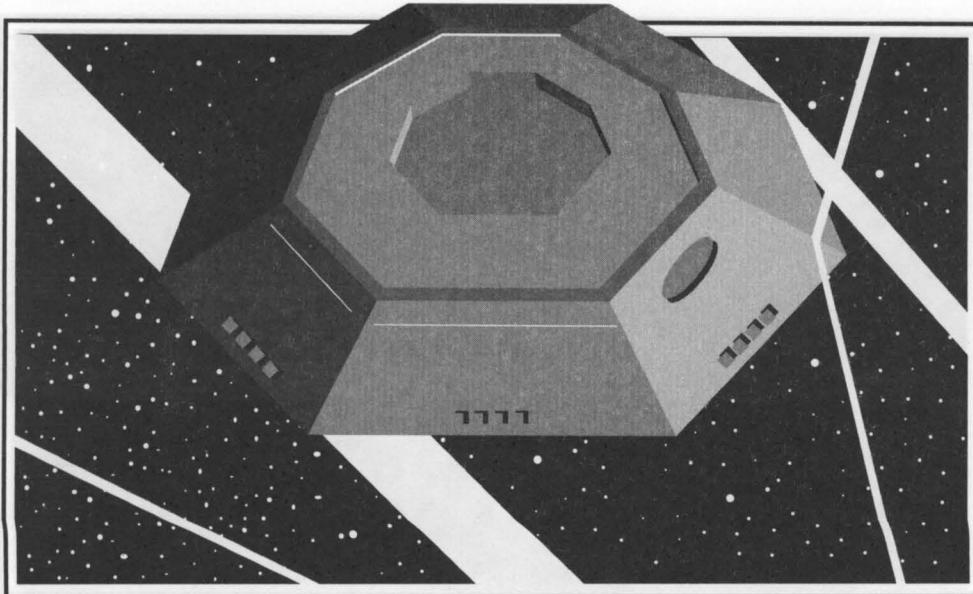
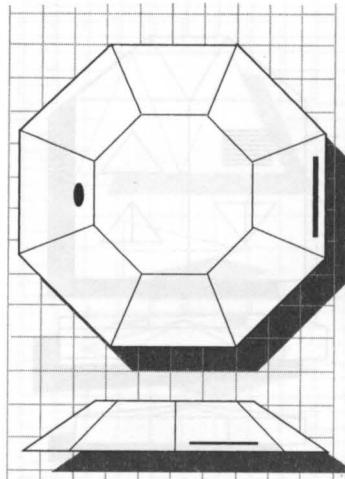


DIMENSION	35/10/30
CARGO CAPACITY	
ARMAMENTS	
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	
INSERVICE DATE	Unknown, but probably pre-2500 AD. Known prototype built on SpaceLink Shipyards, Mars orbit (Old Earth).
MANOEUVRABILITY	
CREW NUMBER	
DRIVE MOTORS	
HULL STRESS FACTOR	
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	



THARGOID INVASION SHIPS

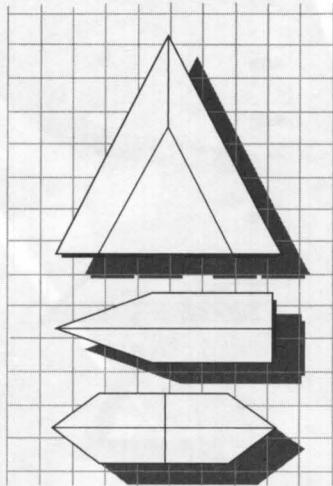
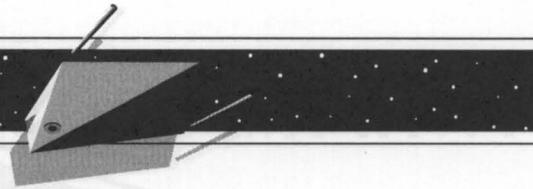
DIMENSION	180/40/180 FT
CARGO CAPACITY	Uncertain
ARMAMENTS	Widely varying. Mountings available for most systems
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.20 LM
INSERVICE DATE	Uncertain
MANOEUVRABILITY	C66
CREW NUMBER	150
DRIVE MOTORS	Thargoid invention
HULL STRESS FACTOR	Uncertain
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	Yes



THARGOID INVASION SHIPS

Though most of the Thargoid Space Fleet is currently engaged by the Galactic Navy in Intergalactic Space, a few of the smaller battle ships make occasional sorties into Human Space. These ships are extremely fast for their size and invariably have ECM Systems (this was originally a Thargoid invention to counter Navy missiles, subsequently copied by the Navy from captured Thargoid ships). Additionally, most Thargoid battle ships carry a few small remote-controlled ships, each equipped with a single pulse laser. It is rumoured that the Galactic Navy are designing their own remote-controlled fighter, and will pay well for Thargoid one to study.

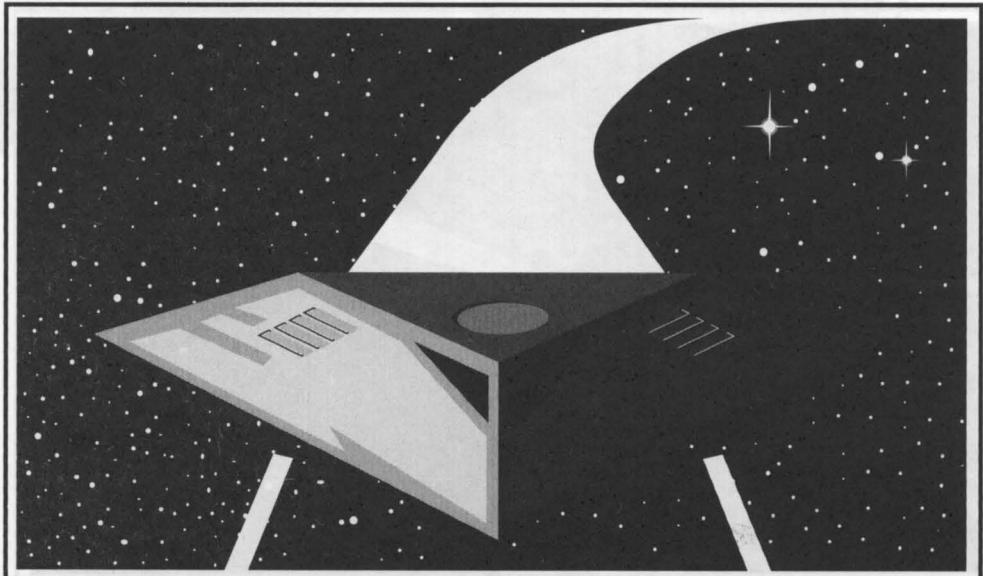
VIPER(POLICE SHIP)



DIMENSION	55/80/50 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	Zero
ARMAMENTS	Ingram MegaBlast Pulse Laser Seeker missiles
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.32 LM
INSERVICE DATE	2762 AD (Faulcon Manspace, Reorte)
MANOEUVRABILITY	High (CF7.4)
CREW NUMBER	1 (up to 10)
DRIVE MOTORS	de Lacy Super Thrust
HULL STRESS FACTOR	Varies
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No

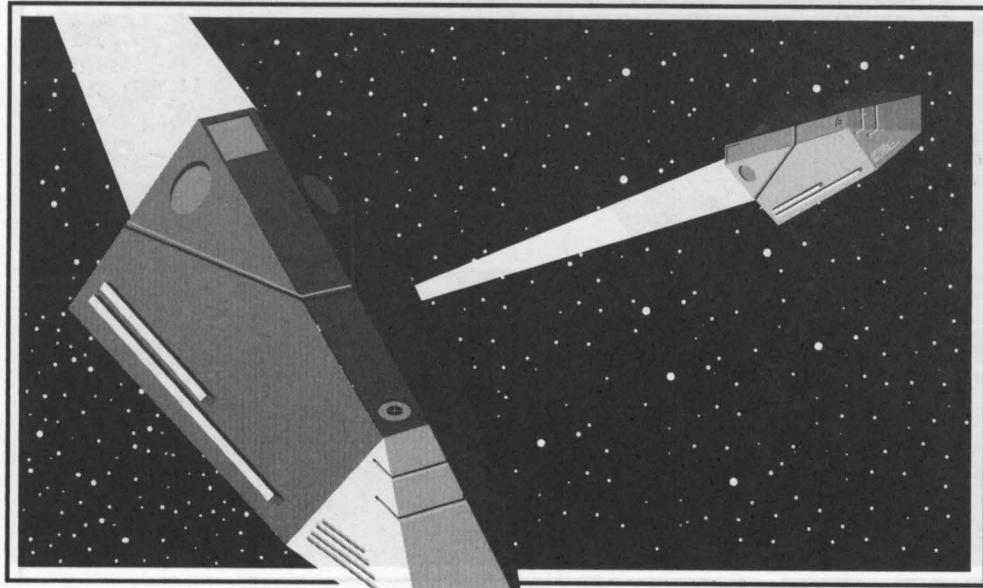
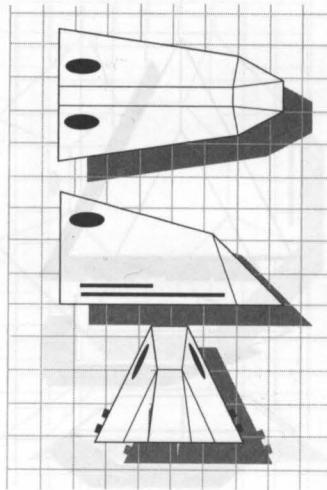
VIPER (POLICE SHIP)

Small, highly manoeuvrable short range 'hunter-killer', the Viper was specifically designed for Gal Cop Space Policing purposes by Faulcon Manspace and are built under licence on all Medium Tech worlds. The Viper is a single pilot craft, but can carry up to ten humanoid passengers. It has no cargo space, but has a 'tug' capability, and can tow a ship of up to 140,000 MTS mass (including the Cobra Mk3). This popular ship is also carried by large freighter convoys, for defensive purposes.



WORM CLASS LANDING CRAFT

DIMENSION	35/12/35 ft
CARGO CAPACITY	None
ARMAMENTS	Ingram Pulse laser
MAXIMUM VELOCITY	0.23
INSERVICE DATE	3101 AD
MANOEUVRABILITY	CF6
CREW NUMBER	2
DRIVE MOTORS	Seeklight HV Thrust
HULL STRESS FACTOR	TKi10
HYPERSPACE CAPABILITY	No



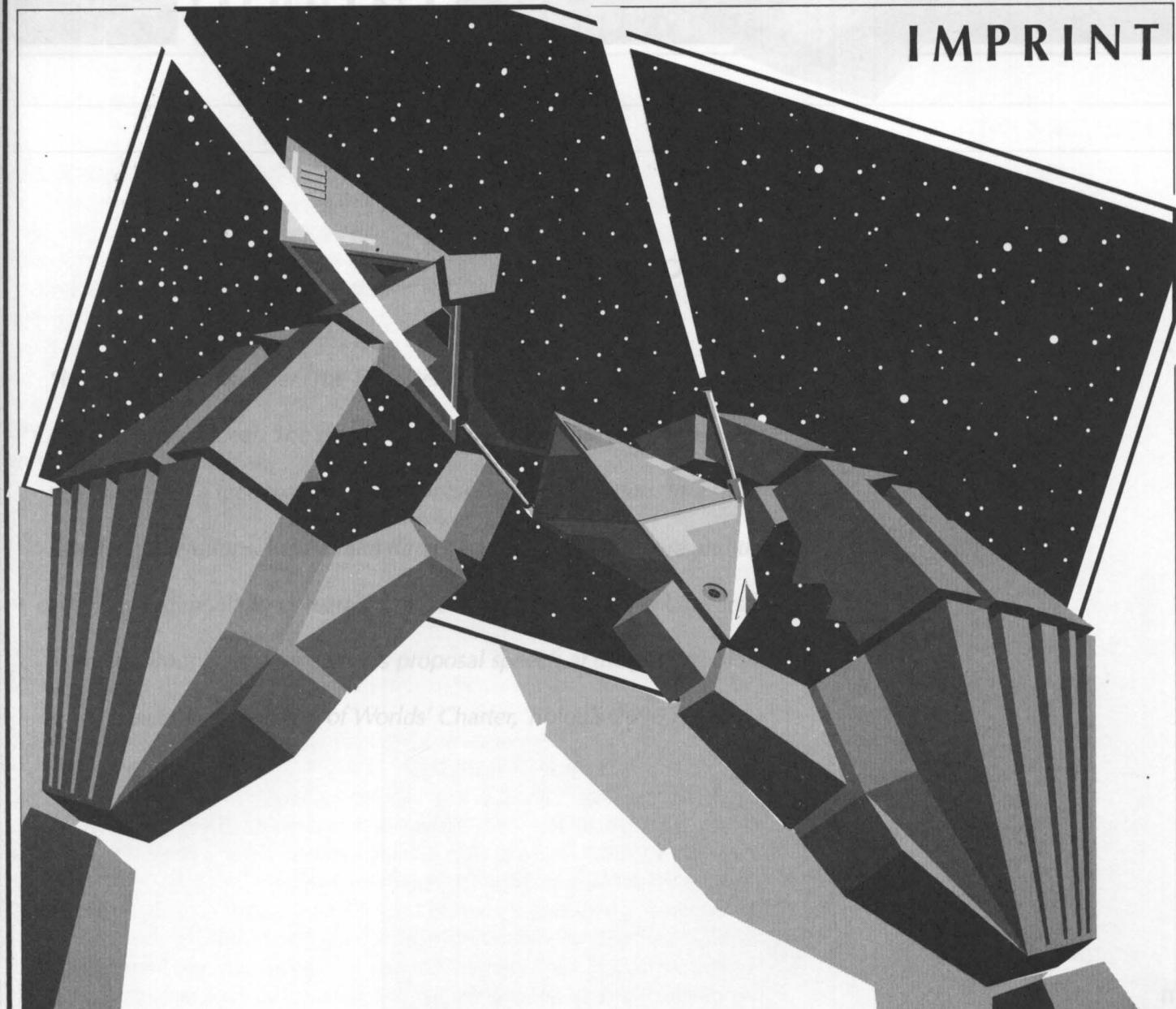
THARGOID INVASION SHIPS

Though most of the Thargoid Space Fleet is currently engaged by the Galactic Navy in Intergalactic Space, a few of the smaller Battle Ships have occasionally sorties up the Main Spine to mine and劫掠 extreme density hyperspace anomalies.

WORM CLASS LANDING CRAFT

A small landing craft carried on larger ships, for use as either a lifeboat, or for landing parties. Lightly armed, the Worm is occasionally employed as an attack and/or decoy craft during combat conditions. Manufactured to specific requirements dependent upon the Mother Ship, the Worm is highly adaptable.

IMPRINT





IMPRINT

"It was a time of wonder. The Divergence of the 27th Century recaptured discovery as an ideal. The realms of adventure into the unknown were represented to a race that had grown intensive in stagnation. In a short span of generations, the Human Race was exciting once more and they came forward, revitalised; ready to make an imprint upon the Universe."

Excerpt from Hahris Moersven's proposal speech at the passing of the

Galactic Co-operative of Worlds' Charter, Tibionis 2696 A.T.



CHAPTER ONE

Debris dulled on the scanner; glowing embers lifted on a night breeze. Quiet entropy was met by elation inside the Boa.

"That's a registered kill. We're at Condition Yellow."Whaahoo !"

"Nice shoot, Ino."

The bridge was still operating under Combat Reserve Conditions, dull orange lighting creating its own colour spectrum, catching the scene like a sepia-tinted photograph. Relieved bodies fell back into the bucket seats, arranged in a chevron forward from the command recess. The figure there was gripped by an involuntary spasm and he glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, sweat running in rivulets down his creased features, a couple of drops shaken loose and now seeping into his jacket below his chin. Commander Vanirrens knew he wasn't getting any younger and inter-system trade routes certainly weren't getting any friendlier. He was approaching 74 and although he'd managed to secure one regime of Bio-Assertion Therapy in a Ceesxe centre, he wasn't sure his body or his credit rating would stand another. He returned his gaze to the astrogation console, aware that his mind had wandered.

"Realign for Lave approach: Ino, can you check price data and confirm cargo secure. Meridian, take over at cannon."

Two figures moved whilst others carried out a flurry of system checks on their monitor boards. Lave, cool and comfortingly close, rotated enigmatically into the main scanner view.

"Cargo safe and secure. Prices are good, Commander. Excellent margins on the run", said Ino, "We might just make a killing here."

Bad timing. The brief "Condition Red" warning sounded.

"3 right lateral; 20:40. No comm return. No IR confirmation. Definite intercept."

"Hear you Warniss", said Meridian, turning to the armaments board. Ino looked at Commander Vanirrens; should he take cannon ? Vanirrens shook his head, gesturing towards Meridian's back that she would keep the laser system controls. Meridian was scrutinising the co-ordinates fed across from the navigation boards.

"Too far out to run", said Vanirrens, "Prepare for combat: Wiv, you have navigation."

Wiv dumped velocity and brought the Boa around. The three raiders were closing,



identified as two Kraits and a Sidewinder, all in-system craft, waiting for prey.

There was still no structural definition on the Main Scanner, just dots amongst the stars. Meridian nominated the Sidewinder as Target One, aiming to cut the opposing firepower at the weakest link. Wiv rotated the craft right and climbed slightly.

Target confirmation. Meridian opened up with the Pulse Laser. The Sidewinder maintained trajectory.

Its shields voided and the craft erupted.

"Yes", Vanirrens seethed between clenched teeth.

The two Kraits were now inside their designated approach zone and banked; one high and one to the left. Wiv kicked the drive looking for an elliptical to counter the pincer movement. Rolling to the right and banking suddenly, the Boa was beginning to come to bear on the climber. Meridian was resetting the laser controls and readying relative projected co-ordinates as the Main Scanner skewed across space and the system star briefly lit the bridge.

"Tend", came the spacer exclamation from one of the system boards, running tracking, "three's cutting back in, we're vulnerable; side-on!"

Wiv made a decision to continue for a shot, maintaining velocity and curve. The target Krait was slowing to clear the intercept and the 'live' Krait, out to the left, had anticipated the follow through; its run uncompromised, it opened fire.

Distilled tracking data was fed to Wiv and Meridian. Wiv tried to flux speed, a bluff on the live Krait whose first rod had just spent wide.

Meridian got one bolt away in return. Accurate, a crack on comm from the target Krait's shields.

Second shot from the live Krait: the fuzz of shield interference. They'd taken a hit. Wiv sacrificed speed and tried to climb but the live Krait held them on intercept and a second blast wracked the Boa. Energy levels had never picked up to optimum after their last sortie.

"We've got a malfunction. Shields are compressed. Hull's vulnerable to secondary", said Warniss.

CHAPTER ONE

He was right. Another bolt brought the shock of hull damage with the white-noise of shield stress.

"Oh no", groaned Wiv, his voice wavering on the edge of real terror, "we've got motor damage. Sixty down after compensation."

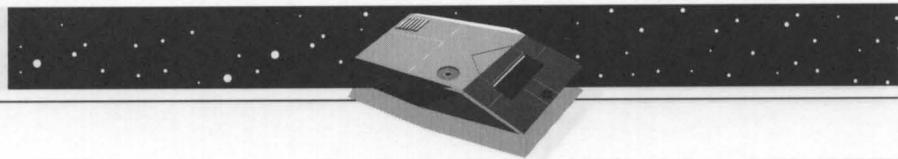
The target Krait, perceiving advantage, dared a head-to-head bearing and another bolt impacted, nobody aware of Meridian's accurate ripostes tearing the Krait apart as all navigation systems crashed. Wiv's console went dark and he turned to Vanirrens, his face half apologetic and half apoplectic at the implications.

"Abandon ship", said Vanirrens, already moving from the command section, to the left of two corridors receding into the ship from the bridge chevron. Bodies left seats and were carried across the bridge by another blast from the remaining Krait. Shields had failed: the Main Scanner and surrounding astrogation instrumentation exploded, slinging cleon shards and metal past and through bodies. Ino landed in the command recess, crumpled, in ribbons. Vanirrens bounced off the corridor wall, crushed against a seal. Meridian hadn't left armaments and the rear of her seat bore the brunt of the blast. She moved to follow Warniss, his shoulder and neck torn open.

Warniss opened the capsule door and Meridian stooped to pull Vanirrens in with her. No one else followed up the corridor. The capsule sealed and disruptors tore it away from the hull.

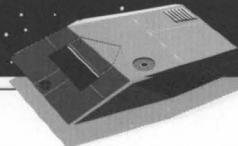
Warniss fumbled for the support systems and the scanner came alive; the Krait passing over them to finish the stricken Boa. Eight friends and family lost inside. Vanirrens opened his eyes, his breathing shallow and his chest burning. He looked up at Meridian who was rifling through the medical locker, her face set; only concern showing through. The cousin of his nephew, Ino, she had been on ship with them for over four years now, since the Commander had returned briefly to Diedar on a trade run and she had talked her way onto the "Land", fresh back from Lave with her licence.

"Ino, the others?", He forced his lungs to give him the words and they bubbled in his throat. She looked down at him. Fixing him with her pale grey eyes, obviously surprised by the extent of his injuries. He knew the answer and Meridian said nothing, mopping at the blood he was breathing over his lips.



"Say a prayer", he hissed. Warniss looked across at her, holding a pad to his shoulder. They knew that the Krait was out there and they were hanging on its decision; cargo or the capsule. As Meridian gave the Commander a pain-killer, one of his old spacer rhymes came to mind:

*"Against the odds, a foe in tow,
That's the way we all go."*



CHAPTER 2

As the indicator in the Translocator settled on the requested level and the slight pressure of deceleration set itself against his body, Hood stood up from the smooth grey seat and felt a three joint click. Aware of his body again he caught the tension gripping his back, the taut curve from his neck to his shoulders. A conscious effort to relax left a ghastly ache in his muscles, now malleable in a lingering mould of stiffness that had set as he had made his way towards GalCop licencing.

The complex was in the anterior of Station 3 orbiting Lave. Each Lavean Station had a perpetual stream of would-be pilots and, currently, a waiting-list for appointments. He was renting a small resunit and, apart from a brief visit to Ashoria, Lave's primary colonial city, on the shuttle, he had been on the Station for two weeks; ten whole days, passing the time. The wait had been made all the worse by the knowledge that he had a Mark III Cobra berthed in the Station, waiting for him whilst he awaited his licence.

The doors opened and he gazed out across jade floor tiles to the cleon foyer doors. Aligned vertically at their centre, and spreading up and across the access in a sweep of majesty, was the Golden GalCop symbol; RA the Robotic Avian, fixing him with a benign and impregnable stare from holocaust eyes. Above its feathered helm, across the lintel, was the complex title; 'GalCop Space Licensing Authority'.

Hood stepped out, amongst the green pools under soft pillars of light falling from the ceiling, light-headed from the adrenaline coursing in response to the furious pounding of his heart. He could feel this moment, a turning point in his life as sure as the Station pivoted in geostationary above the green world below. Today was the culmination of his life thus far, the effort he had put in at an Anlama ground Station, 15 light years and a life-style away.

In the foyer beyond he could see numbers of people; their only common bond the Space and Interstellar Pilot Exam, waiting for the doors to the Issuing Hall to open for Licence Registration. As Hood approached, the foyer doors responded in silence. RA parted, a shimmering shedding of skin, for the image was replicated, emblazoned behind the reception desk, just beyond. There was no accounting for the ingenuity of the GalCop Design Section when it came down to their perceived integrity of the GalCop mantle, corporate wholeness unblemished.



"Card"; demanded the figure behind the desk. Paying more attention to his surroundings than the officer, Hood held out his GCID card and waited whilst his appointment was confirmed. "Wait in the foyer until you are called please". It seemed something of a understatement, but whilst Rif Hood felt a pang of annoyance that his moment of achievement was a passing occupational chore to the figure before him, who was already turning back to a comm screen, it could not deflate his anticipation.

"Thanks", he retorted as he began to head in the direction of the foyer. He almost laughed out loud as a gold-plated cliche popped into his head and he wondered if anyone had ever said to the officious reception staff; 'Remember my name, I'll be famous one day'.

It turned out to be a sobering thought. The vastness of space was peppered with the remains of pilots with stars in their eyes. You didn't need to be told that trade was tougher these days. The figures from IR signature transmissions spoke for themselves at the dockside system data monitors.

Plenty of spacers passed dock time with rented message boxes filed under IR codes and maintained by Orbital Space Authorities. It was indicative of the strange lives spacers led, especially inter-system runners. "Meet me at Xexeti", as one spacer saying went. A downpayment would open a box for ten years with additional fees for access time. Unused boxes were generally archived and there were probably uncounted self scribed epitaphs in data storage throughout the eight galaxies.

Some attempt had been made to arrange the seating into small, sociable, areas. Soft uplighters glowed from behind lush Lavean planting, with Station comms-units to hand. No connection made, the screen that Hood sat next to operated a free-space run of adverts between general Station announcements. 'Celebrate as a licensee at the Balcony Complex' was followed by 'The Lave Orbit Space Authority: Trading Profile Seminar. Call on C43-97T28 for your competitive advantage'. Hood watched for a while, unwilling to make eye contact and possibly have to engage in conversation with the eight people in his seating enclave. He reasoned his reluctance, as the screen proceeded through a panoply of bluster, and pinpointed a fear that the people surrounding him might share his dreams, diluting their essence.



"Concern has been mounting for some years now at the alarming increase in pirating activities and the proportion of trading casualties in many systems.

Lobbying by the GalCop Trade Bureau hinges upon three main proposals, for a reform of the IR signature registration system, an increase in bounty payments and a mid-system deployment of GalCop Police Stations to patrol system space trade routes.

The ruling Decemvirate in Galaxy One have indicated that careful consideration would be given to the forthcoming Trade Bureau Report".

Quote from Station News item.

Lave.

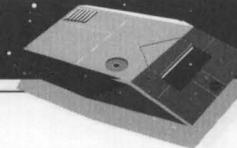
The Station docks ran in levels behind the free-space at station-core. Beyond and below the Station egress gaped planetwards, powerful shields operating a safety vortex both for, and against, traffic in the tubes. In a honeycomb of wedges behind the dockside were the cargo warehouses where a specialised transport network supported the auto-trading system. Autoscum modules plied their intermediary trade along these routes. The life-cycle of the Station was a peculiar one. The docks never grew still and the Station authorities were active even when sections of the Station with something approaching a diurnal routine fell quiet as they moved darkside.

Rif Hood headed towards his berth. Registration had dragged on and on: with the time it took to process, no wonder a licence cost so much. Still, rumour had it that once the I's and T's had been dotted and crossed, bureaucracy lost interest in just about everything but your Credit Rating. Regardless, he was now, legally, a pilot, Commander of a new Mark III Cobra. He was on the GalCop computer network, linked to his ship's IR signature and the actions of his ship would assume a legal character of their own as a counterpoint to his legal status as a GalCop civilian. For active spacers, the ship's record was the dominant party. Depending on a search by IR signature, he could be legally shot at by any bounty-hunter or have-a-go trader in the business.

There was a commotion further ahead on Dock 4. A med-unit mobile arrived to stand-by at a berth not far along from Hood's Cobra, and he paused to check the



information on incoming flights on the dockside system data screens. The berth was designated for an escape capsule being tracked through the safety zone. Judging by the equipment being prepared at the berth the occupants were travelling under suspended-an. Curiosity got the better of him and Hood wandered on past his berth to get a closer look. Few other people were showing any interest; the reality of the commonplace danger for spacers began to come home to him. The berth matrix came alive, indicating imminent arrival of the capsule. Station systems brought it to dock and a crew moved in to access the berth for the med-unit, preliminary scans drawing out the seconds such that Hood nearly forgot to breathe. The med-unit went in and shortly after, a body was brought forth from the capsule, still rigged into a suspended-an sack. Inside the grey spacer overalls were shredded and red with blood at the shoulder. Hood could see a green ships insignia on the breast of the figure but he was too far away to make out any detail. He moved forward, again, standing against the perimeter barrier wall and flush with the capsule entrance. One of the dock crew cast him a disdainful look and mumbled something under his breath; Hood was oblivious to the insult, a second S-A sack was being moved out towards the mobile. This body was a young woman, pale and twisted in the rig. Blood was splattered across her suit giving it a mottled ground-camouflage effect. Her hair was matted with the same dark-red substance but under the cloak of S-A, her condition was indeterminate. The green insignia depicted a star over a valley, a natural symbol which seemed anomalous to these broken lives in the vast metallic dockside. "Life signs for both", he heard a voice comment inside the mobile whilst a third form was brought out of the capsule, an old man with a large stain of blood across and around his front. How long had he been a spacer? Hood wondered how any spacer eventually made the decision to give the life up and whether the decision was inevitably decided vicariously. He recalled his mother's enforced separation from her ship, left recovering on an Anlama Station from a blasted leg and he imagined a similar dockside scene as that Python limped in to be met by a med-unit. Had she looked as pale and fragile as the women in the mobile? Hood tried to catch a glimpse of her as the mobile side slid shut. He doubted it. His mother had never said but he'd lay money on her having walked unaided from the berth.



So that was all. Three people from a complement probably six or seven times that. Hood's mood swung considerably blacker as he turned to board his vessel, for the first time as Commander. He had a sudden vision of GalCop Licensing acting as a cosmic arbitrator, working registration on the principle one out, one in, awaiting confirmed fatalities before opening up the Issuing Hall.

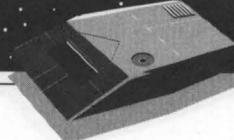
Card and key at the berth matrix got Hood into his Cobra, moving through the compact quarters section to the gravity well which would take him up to the bridge.

He rose and the bridge grew around and before him. He could sense his ship waiting, waiting as eager as he was to break berth and shoot through the tubes, the egress and the curtain rotating behind, Lave looming before on the main scanner. The hypnotic swirls of atmospherics contracting with the regular flux patterns of the Station and, in-between, Hood, set free to tackle the heights of his ambition.

Hood moved over to the pilot's seat and lowered himself gently, like fitting into place as a fulcrum, potential all around, latent in the consoles, scanners and systems; all to hand.

As yet, all of the vocal controls remained unset. On a single-pilot ship they were a valuable tool for exercising support functions whilst flight and fire remained as a concentrated hands-on activity.

There were a number of available security checks which the pilot could use in the activation process. Hood had a basic palm scan and code-entry at present, which quickly brought the array of instrumentation alive. He brought up the Orbital Space Authority Data Link on the Comms Console and left the latest flight and docking information running on the local view screen. A matrix showed Hood's Cobra in perspective of the docked complement at Dock 4 where standard information would show berthed time, whether loading or unloading, ship to ship contact data and various local statistics. Watching the data flow, Hood felt insecurity knowing at his thoughts again, fear of trying and finding mediocrity, the burden of insignificance, he looked at



the small code for his berth, tangled in the midst of 400 berths on Dock 4.

He reasoned that everything he wanted now, he had to get for himself. No-one was going to contact him, nobody could be expected to take an interest. Rif, he warned himself, assert yourself.

He recalled the Technical Modules of the Space and Interstellar Pilot's Exams and prepared to run a comprehensive systems check, to get back to basics on a specific set task, a pattern to settle his nerves. Then, he decided, it was time to consider cargo.



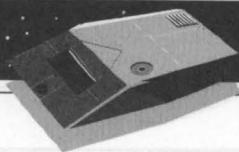
"The matrix of the GalCop Trading System envisages distinctive roles for in- and inter-system traders....the inter-system trader is a facilitator.... [and] the uniform cargo doctrine recognises this, providing benefits through locating commodities rather than concerning itself with comparative specifics. The intention is to prevent the inter-system trader being caught up unnecessarily in the socio-economic details of a system."

Excerpt from the Report accompanying proposals on a GalCop Trading System.

2715 G.C.T

The Faulcon de Lacy proprietary trade systems supplied with the Cobra were well respected, and designed in accordance with GalCop Trade Bureau standards. Few traders had cause to install replacement or upgraded units. A Transrelations Database structure was fully integrated with the ship's Financial Systems. Each IR signature constituted a corporate identity providing a distinction between trading activities and the personal Credit-Rating of a pilot. Escape capsules took a critical data dump with a straight financial transfer to a 'crisis' account to be re-established under a new IR signature.

Hood looked over the price data on the CorCom Trade System. With 78.6 Credits in the Trade Account he began to work margins on his first run. He reckoned on a run to Leesti as the nearest complimentary trade system where the massive TLK Conglomerate was the dominant political force on a physically unsettled and inhospitable world. Lave's rich and fertile plains were a renowned source of protein extract and trading food would allow him to maximise cargo space. CorCom advertised 16 tonnes at a unit rate of 3.4 Cr. Hood bought the available stock and was able to purchase a tonne of Liquors at 23.4 Cr. As the AutoScam modules delivered the CT's to his cargo bay, Hood began to select Leesti co-ordinates at the Astrogation Console. In a short time there would be nothing keeping him at Lave. Nerves and excitement pushed against his temples and an adrenergic momentum suffocated his inertia. Rif was eager to go. Go and get. A thought came from nowhere and he called up informatic on admissions to the Station Hospital. He found the three people from the escape capsule and, remembering how he had been struck by the lack of concern on the docks, he left a message for them: "Thinking of your



recovery". At the same time he took out a message box. He got screen confirmation of secure cargo and called the Orbit Space Authority Control for clearance to break berth. Whilst he waited for an automatic launch schedule the faces came back to him, trussed and helpless in the web of suspended An-rigging, an old spacer, pale young woman, torn uniforms.

His launch slot arrived and he cleared Dock 4. Station systems took over and, for a brief moment, the main scanner showed the gaping tube until a sudden acceleration thrust him into the segmented rictus, screaming towards the egress and suddenly into space where a tone indicated that Rif Hood was now in command.

The strain of Station exit was soothed by a listless air passing over his body, and he stretched himself in a series of fluid manoeuvres, like a tiger pacing his cage. Starlight cascaded across his scanner and Lave, with swirling storm systems embracing the bright continents below in a clean, cathartic dawn. If anyone asked, in times to come not when Hood grew up, but when he first remembered feeling truly alive, he would recall this moment. Next stop Leesti.



Coming out of Hyperspace was like emerging from underwater, changing elements with all the associated sensory disorientation. Hood's ears were ringing, his mouth and throat felt parched and his head was fuzzed. Taking lungfuls of air he concentrated his mind to assess his surroundings. His Cobra was moving at velocity in a vaguely system-orbital drift. Comm was taking instructions on Leesti relative time, showing over two hours as elapsed since leaving Lave. Working on compass indicators, Hood increased to Space Skip velocity and reorientated to Leesti, not wanting to prolong the inward journey any longer than was necessary. The phrase, 'minimise risk', came to him from some part of the Pilot's training that he didn't bother to try and recall. Instead Rif ran the words through his mind as a litany whilst he aligned a course and kicked into Space Skip. The pull of an in-system Skip was a lot greater than regular Hyperspace; interference and conflicts of forces were more apparent, something that normal spatial awareness recognised and reacted to. Hood didn't mind the sensation. For him it was a momentary relief, a second where he had relinquished control. Associated interference registered and Hood fell back in to regular velocity, bridge systems switching to combat mode and the Condition Red lighting casting its contrasts across the consoles, focussing attention on the main scanner. 'Minimise risk'. The phrase took on a new edge and cut through the remnants of jump lag in an instant.

Moving swiftly, Hood activated ship identification and damped velocity, checking the flight grid scanner for the hostile craft. Comms confirmed that reciprocal identification had been ignored and the scanner showed the approaching ship high and behind. Rif pulled the Mk. III up and over in a tight arc, keeping an eye on the main scanner for a visual as he negotiated rolls to get a forward bearing on the flight grid. Rotate and compensate. He pulled a distant speck into the targeting area. Identification; Boa Class Cruiser.

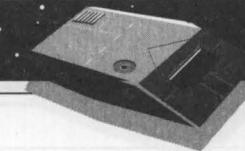
Hood's stomach turned. The escape capsule back on Lave had been all that remained of one Boa. He had presumed that they had been innocent traders, victims, but now here he was with a Boa bearing down on an intercept course, getting close to the dangerous early engagement distances where skillful flying could not guarantee safety from the cross-thread of an enemy cannon. Rif felt a tide of panic rolling towards



him, threatening to sweep his consciousness into turmoil, he saw the incoming craft on the scanner and blood on an old man's chest. Fumbling for the armaments console he felt the superstructure of the Cobra, envisaging it twisting around him ready to entangle and choke. Minimise risk. He pulled at the words, latched onto them and tried to fit himself into the events unfolding around him. The Boa slid across the targetting area. He fired a bolt. Nothing. He rotated to realign and the Boa curled back into the sights; another bolt with the tell-tale crack on the combat comm. probe. A hit ! It brought everything rushing back to him, a flood of control. Certitude. He had the ability, at the pivot of events, to survive. His first true hit was an assurance of that. He fired again and again, pulse laser blasts raking at the Boa's shields. Fire was returned. One blast and systems data erupted on his monitors, quantifying energy loss in an outrage of information. An exchange of hits; Hood recoiled. Wrapped up in attack he realised that he was still waiting, almost motionless. Cursing himself he wrenched the Cobra into acceleration.

Now there was definition on the scanner and the after-image of another bolt. Front shield was almost depleted. Hood banked 50:80, intending to break out of the punishing head-to-head but he was in the danger zone, where the Boa pilot could easily compensate for Hood's trajectory with a simple realignment. Hood span 30 anti-clockwise, dumped velocity and dropped on a vertical to the Boa, across and below the enemy's intercept path, at contrast to its existing climb.

It was enough to close the distance and the rules changed. Hood reasoned that combat by the book would give him the edge now with a vastly superior manoeuvrability and he decided to open with a gamble on the Boa's expectations to give him some room. Surely they would be expecting him to try and work a curve behind them and surely that would mean they would try to anticipate that with a turn. Banking on that, Hood killed velocity and waited, and succeeded. The main scanner showed the reacting bandit at 340:20. With the slightest rotation, the Mk III picked up the Boa which was already intent on correcting its mistake, but Hood followed the climb and fired four bolts into the exposed upper reaches of the target. The Boa swung round recklessly, trying to buy some time out of the line of fire, and Hood hit with two further



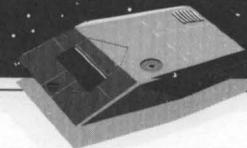
bolts before he had to move in pursuit. Rolling quickly in acceleration he intended to keep the Boa close and maintain his curve factor advantage. It was better than that, against the odds he had managed to run right back onto a target intercept and he fired again; the crack of his pulse bolt almost instantaneous as the Boa loomed close and an escape capsule veered away just as the next pulse battered through the depleted shields and split the Boa's drive sector. The explosion sent a ripple of detonations along the equipment level and laid waste to the entire cargo sector. For a split second, the bridge of the cruiser floated on an expanding cloud of fire before being engulfed, debris marking the trajectory before fluxing slightly against Hood's already weakened front shields, biting into his primary energy bank.

The escape capsule registered on the flight grid, and, burning with success, Hood brought the Cobra around, dipping into the path of the capsule so that it floated into his sights on its slow voyage to the Leesti safety zone.

Energy reports appeared dutifully on the console. Hood glanced to check his fore-shield wave strength and requested a systems check. Confirmations scrolling on the systems console display, Hood turned his attentions back to the capsule. How many of the Boa's crew had made it? Rif suspected that it would have been relatively few. His fingers danced compulsively about the armaments panel but his thoughts were caught in confusion. He tried to imagine the people in the capsule, now fearing for their lives. They would be following the drifting remnants of their cargo and see that the Mk. III had ignored the pickings and had settled into a tactical position in their wake; preparing for their wake. Would he celebrate their deaths tonight?

How many people had they killed, Rif wondered. Would they have enough of an account to buy a new vessel and stalk the lanes again?

Minimise risks. Fate could throw them together again and next time the outcome might be different. Rif brought the Ingram laser system to life and dealt swift, arbitrary justice to the pirates. GalCop justice, since his comms. screen was monitoring TS ComDirect and a reference from the Bank Federation Monitoring Authority as to bounty was imminent. Despite the administrative approval of the Boa kill and the tacit acceptance of the follow-up on the capsule, the latter had chilled Rif's spine. There was



a difference between defending yourself from obvious hostile intent on a trade run and a clinical decision on an option to destroy. 6.4 Credits were allocated by the GBFMA for the Boa; the last official word on the incident. For Hood it went beyond that to the capacity he now had to influence events. He had power and he was responsible for the way it was exerted; for the impact it could have on people's lives. He felt that he needed to change the distinction he knew was there, that it could be important to him as a spacer as much as a person but there were more pressing practical matters to attend to. The front shield had recovered and was now almost at optimum. Rif felt about as secure as was possible under the circumstances, and manoeuvred for Space Skip.

Leesti grew on the scanner until the planetary mass made too much interference and the Cobra fell back into normal velocity. Ignoring two asteroids that appeared on the fringes of the flight grid scanner, Rif headed doggedly for the safety zone. The assuasive indicator appeared on the Astrogation Console, promising Orbital Space Authority assistance, and, more pertinently, Viper support should anyone be attacked.

The compass reset to the co-ordinates of the local Station, reminding Rif that he had yet to dock. For the inexperienced pilot, there was no substitute for Galactic Navy procedure and Rif manouevred roughly into the orbital plane at a point between the Station and Leesti. From there a short run towards the planet and about face at standstill brought him on to the accepted approach run. The moment that terrified Rif was trying to maintain equivalent Station rotation without any visual reference as the egress loomed out of scanner and the shield curtain had yet to be breached so that automatic docking might take over in the tube. He held his breath as if passing air through his lungs might throw his Cobra against Station orbit and bring the raking of the shields which was a death knell for all spacers.

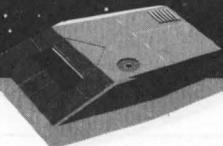
The curtain parted and before Hood, Leesti docks wrapped around the free-space core of the Station. He laughed out loud as Station comms. spat docking information across his systems, reassuring everyday chatter after the dark and the danger. Suddenly it came home to Rif why stations had such thriving leisure activities. Spacers had a lot of unwinding to do.



Just about everywhere you looked on Leesti Station 5, the imperial purple TLK logo would intrude your line of vision. The corporation sponsored, monitored, administered and generally wished you well whenever they received your money. Evolving out of a Leesti System Federation which governed by economic interest groups, the Technology Sector had thrived on early runs by newly licenced pilots from Lave and had subsumed other sectors into one mammoth corporation. Aggressive commercial policies and specialisation in agrotechnology, both planetary and Station bound meant that Leesti had a powerful presence in the local galactic area, with interests on Orrere and Ra as well as a Corporate arm on Zaonce. The TLK delegates to the GalCop Senate on Aruszati were often in the news for their fractious run-ins with other GalCop groups. Hood followed GalCop politics on the most superficial level. Traders skimmed the news for potential profit and rumours circulated around dockside facilities across the galaxies of crop failures, accidents at processing plants, consumer booms. Anything that might speculatively affect supply and demand.

Hood had sold his cargo at attractive margins, showing a gross CorCom profit of 55.9 Cr on his first run. He felt that he had good reason to be pleased with himself as he sought out and sat at a small table in "Turbulence", a slightly more upmarket bar than he had expected. Consequently, Rif also felt uncomfortable; economically and physically; the former was entirely due to the cost of the thin glass of mixed-density liquids that he cradled in hand, still swirling slowly since being stirred into consort at the bar; the latter was due to him not being able to fit his legs under the immovable table which bore a, possibly intentional, resemblance to an upside-down egg in a vice.

There was a TLK Leisure Pad in a pocket of the seat, and Rif scanned through the list of Station activities. The various descriptions of sports and pastimes on offer, and the accompanying prices, were an entertainment in themselves. As Rif sipped at his Bifurcation, which had lapsed into uneasy entropic equilibria, the house lighting dimmed and the lower level of the amphitheatre split and moved into three clean-gridded dance floors. Holo-effects lit the grids with criss-crosses of flame as a lava-flow cascaded under the floors, and customers were invited to have fun at the scene of one of Leesti's premier tourist traps. "Show me your fluid dynamics", encouraged a voice over



the speakers. The screen to the leisure pad flicked to an ad; "Now at the Turbulence. Set your lavalite". It beamed to nobody in particular from the table top. Rif certainly didn't notice. He'd spotting a young woman in a flame dress slide away from the bar and sidle in his direction. Rif knocked back his cocktail, winced, and left.

Rif came out of the gravity well on the Cobra bridge and sat down, intent on replenishing his supply of quirium. He felt a lot more comfortable slipping into the pilot's seat than he had done back on Lave. For one thing, his Cobra was a refuge after the imminent excesses of turbulence. He called up the supplier section for equipment on Corcom. Quirium was available at 1.3 cr. Its prices and supply were carefully regulated by a complex set of Trade Bureau regulations. As Hood understood it there were several tariff filters on Quirium. A cut went to registered inter-system craft manufacturers to offset against their loss-leading prices for basic ship designs.

To make spacing affordable, basic models tended to be spartan, utilitarian creatures. Manufacturers made their profits on development and expansion, as well as from areas like Quirium tariffs. The market for inter-system jumpers was a second generation one. The first generation had been epitomised by the Starseekers and Founds that left old Earth in the 25th century in Earth time. The second generation of ships were available with fly-by-wire systems for jump. Hood had the GalCop Galaxy One approved plateau of systems already installed in his navigation units when he had bought his Cobra. Once GalCop had reconnoitred Galaxy One and began to colonise throughout the systems, they realised that by using the available knowledge of the galaxy they could introduce a bespoke jump map of GalCop worlds. It had been an important phase in GalCop history. Drives with the kick but not the brains reduced the expensive navigational processing equipment needed to plot and control jumps. There were numerous associated benefits. Nearly all spacers were now limited to activity inside GalCop boundaries which conveniently reduced interaction with other planetary federations or general over-expansion which GalCop might be unable to consolidate. Planets that were not designated as inter-system reception worlds were left off the jump map, as were a number of 'secret systems' and systems which were still undergoing monitoring and exploration under GalCop's after-the-fact conscience policies.



Rif had opened a message box at Leesti shortly after he had sold the cargo. He was surprised to see a message waiting, having left the link active unintentionally before he had left the ship. The respondent was given as Gisburn:

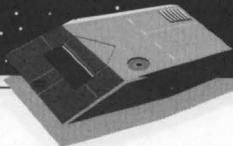
"We might have been licensed together but you got the jump on me for cargos. I had to wait another hour after you cleaned up on food supplies and then I was quoted 3.7 Cr/t. I'd like to meet my rival and let him buy me a drink. Squeeze your margins at Lave."

After that followed a box reference. Gisburn, the name seemed familiar and Rif put a face to it from licensing at Lave. A tall young man with a fast smile and faster eyes which gave you the impression that he was being pulled along by time at a slightly more frenetic pace than everyone around him. The cost of that to his composure was balanced by his dark and swarthy stature. He had taken his licence medical at a Lave Station and he had been delayed whilst they confirmed the results of his GeneScan on an overworked inter-station link. All prospective pilots had their DNA analysed to test for a number of prescribed conditions, sanctioned in the schedules to the Licencing Regulations. There had been some disturbing consequences to the post-Divergence colonisation of the eight galaxies.

Some local genepools had been muddied by both in breeding and the environmental effects of the strange new lands.

Rif confirmed a meeting at Lave for Gisburn and closed the message box. 'Somebody else to keep in touch with', he thought as he sank back into the seat and closed his eyes, a smile breaking on his face which he checked almost immediately when he realised exactly what he had just framed in his thoughts. He recalled the three spacers in the capsule. They'd never met but Rif had made a subconscious assumption that they might keep in touch. It was a satisfying and, more pertinently, reassuring thread to hang on to when you were just starting out. They did have his message box reference, after all.

Rif flicked through the OSA news service for traders as a precaution against anything which might have a bearing on his next trade run. He had intended to return to Lave anyway; wanting to build up his confidence on a familiar run, and his trade account as well, come to think of it. Now he was fortunate enough to have other motives to draw



him, should he choose. His morale soared momentarily as he felt that he almost had a grasp on the threads of his future. That tangible things were already happening to him, and were waiting to happen when he got to Lave. Rif imagined seizing those strands; consolidating along the way.

As with many of his flights of fancy of the past few days, it was short lived. The lead item on Comm. was an incoming report of a skirmish above Alaxide, one of the Leesti system worlds where there was a mining operation and several construction plants. Several in-system haulers had been destroyed along the standard flight route. A pirate incursion from Riedquat was suspected. Local TLK outsiders and a viper unit had engaged the force but no more recent information was available. The bulletin analysis already laid the blame on the Knights Templars, a terrorist force across the galaxies which seemed far better organised in recent years and was committed to destabilizing GalCop. A mention in the analysis of growing tensions at the diplomatic convention between Galcop and the Interstellar Sanction implied, even to Rif's politically naive eye, that there could be a possible connection between the Sanction and the Templars. The item was more shocking from a travel than from a trade perspective; piracy on the jump routes was far less sinister than an orchestrated act of destruction. The trade effects that Rif could envisage did little to his choice of outbound cargo. If a sizeable cargo of ore had been lost at Alaxide, minerals might be a worthwhile consideration at Lave.



"Out there, a lot of speeding masses devoid of intelligence are not asteroids, not wrecks or debris, but active spacers."

Quote from "Psychosocialisation and the single spacer",

P. Trewathas (3rd ed., 3064)

Witchspace washed away leaving a wash of untangible scree stacked against Hood. In his hurry to take a breath, Rif nearly choked. When he turned his attentions to the bridge systems it was through tear-filled eyes and in between grating coughs. Lave space stretched out before him and he eased the Cobra through a dump and rotate. He must have come to take the worldscape for granted at the Station because Lave was a beautiful planet. It looked now as it had when he first left the Station, bright and alert. Rif negotiated a short Space Skip into Lave - relative with an incoming non-response on the flight grid and the Condition Red lighting swamping the bridge. Constant deceleration and a manoeuvre towards 110:95 brought the Cobra to bear; data suggested that the craft was an Adder class. Rif pulled the cannon console back and took aim; distance was good. Bolts kept hitting the pirate, which, in turn, kept coming.

"Void those shields. Come on..void..void". Rif spat the words as his ship spat substance. The Adder commander lost his nerve, still outside a suitable engage distance for whatever style of attack he practiced. The pirate began to climb but the craft was locked in the danger zone, a lethal principle of moments where the torque was a killer blow. Pelted simply and steadily by Hood, the Adder Commander realised that their role was that of prey; probably his last thought. The main scanner lit and Hood's flight-grid cleared.

"Gotcha".
Checking on his cargo, a tonne of computing equipment from the TLK agro-labs and a tonne of machinery of similar origin, Hood brought himself back to a course for Lave. The return on TS ComDirect was for a 12 Cr. allocation.

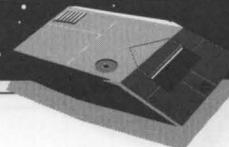
Another Skip fell short of planet waves and Hood found himself back in the Red. This time the pirate was confirmed as a Wolf Mk. II, approaching fast on a 195:15 bearing.



"Tend", swore Rif. He knew he would be in range very soon. There was no time for idle pot-shots. Rif arched into a head-to-head-and-hit velocity. He had to close the distance against the Wolf's superior fire-power, or his shields would be pulled apart swiftly and clinically. Hood got off three accurate bolts and watched almost helplessly as his shields fluxed wildly under heavy onslaught. His leg twitched violently as he counted down both distance and his fore shield status. Suddenly the first round was over. The Wolf climbed and rotated, an experienced Commander without a doubt. Hood killed velocity and set up a missile. He anticipated right, using the flight grid for clues as the Wolf lurched, looking for some space, preferably to Hood's rear. Locked on and off, the LF glistened and burst. Enemy ECM. In a flash, Hood's heart sank and his attention wavered. He suddenly found that he had lost positioning. By the time he had come round on the Wolf it was turning for a strike-run. Rif hit the velocity and glanced anxiously at the shields. He fired and tried to pitch and yaw into a vortex that might take him out of the intercept trajectories. The Wolf hit him twice before bearing off to the right. Killing velocity, Rif imagined the Wolf's last arc transposed, and anticipated its path. Diligently the Wolf swept into Rif's sights and turned. He had the measure of it on this run and curved into a predatory dive. This time the cracks on comm were his own bolts punishing the Wolf's shields, and when the Wolf whipped over, Hood managed to keep pursuit without leaving any distance for a counter-attack. On the Wolf's next climb, three good hits sent it on its way in pieces, which dashed against Rif's shields like a hollow curse from beyond the grave. In the spacer world of combat systems Hood's eyes were ablaze and it was several moments before he began to extract himself from the combat mind-set, and the armaments console. Resetting for Lave, Rif felt his skin burning from the nervous tension. All of his responses were still on edge.

Lave grew in Space-Skip and Rif calculated that he was close to the safety zone. His attention was snapped back from Lave's powerful atmospherics as condition Red flashed again. Low and behind at 205. Rif could almost feel a pulse from the blood pressure in his fingers. He rode over the adrenal instincts and held down a course for the safety zone.

"Minimise risks", he told himself. It didn't take long. The pirate had settled into a



straight pursuit trajectory when comm. confirmed he was in the Orbital Space Authority protection zone. He moved with the compass and the glistening speck of Lave Station 2 appeared on the main scanner. Watching the flight grid for the pirate to break off, Hood was shocked to see the ship adopt a diagonal intercept across his docking approach route. Suddenly worried, Rif ran short for a swift ID scan: Thargoid. "Oh shit...", Rif turned the Cobra and made a run towards Station. The Thargoid was closing. Where were the Vipers? There was nothing on the flight grid yet, Station was still outside monitor range.

Then it came, a torrent of fire that sliced through the aft-shield bank and struck deep into an energy bank. Rif knew he had to make some space and some time, he turned back on himself, dropping velocity only at the relative apex and diving with full velocity, waiting for the Thargoid to react. It didn't, not perceptively. There was little visual way of gauging where a Thargoid intercept trajectory or even how many, lay. Rif waited until he hoped that the Thargoid was ready to react and then dumped to assume the Station run again. It seemed to have had some effect and as Station grew on the scanner, Rif could see pinpricks emerge like wind scattered seeds from a pod. The Thargoid reacted similarly, obviously intent on some sort of stand. Thargon spores materialised on the flight grid. On a rear view, Rif could see them, still in launch phase, preparing an attack run. He had never felt so vulnerable, and in placing his trust in the Police Vipers he stripped away his confidence; became engrossed in fleeing to behind the battle lines.

Another strike by the Thargoid or one of its satellite hunters. Rif managed to rotate and climb out of the laser stream and then the Vipers were in range and fire was returned. The Thargoid let him go, keen to entertain an active opponent.

people floating 'round this planet. To get recognised we need to do more. We mark we gotta avoid congrat'ing us up betwix mudzidz. "Every' going down now". We small things you blind or know I'm gonna bring a slow, sedum dare. Jay muh jah moh! times no one's daud or borona ti. Unseen side boot biss." blues, blues on one end, blues on the other. Cripes, who's gonna need you, who's gonna need you!

"But y' gonna be safe", he hissed before crashing back into his seat and drawing his



CHAPTER 8

"I heard that we might be in real trouble with the Thargoids soon," said Gisburn, placing his third glass of light back down on the tabletop.

"Somebody leaked a Navy report that reckons, unless GalCop and the other Federations team up to target Thargoid galactic space, that they've got a better military resource gearing ratio. That means they breed fast and have dedicated warrior caste. The way I see it though, Lave just lost one pilot out there and the bug-eyes lost a hundred or so. Sounds like good odds to me".

Gisburn talked as fast as he drank, and all the time it seemed his attention was elsewhere. His eyes flicked to cover the slightest noise or distraction. He finished his drink and gazed down at the empty glass.

"Good odds", he reiterated before turning his attention to the bar menu screen.

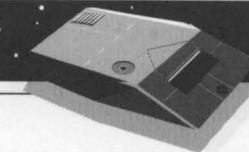
Rif fingered his glass, pushing it backwards and forwards across a small patch of spilt liquid, drawing a crossroads of parted spirits. Even though he was sitting comfortably, letting Gisburn's chatter wash over him, in the bar of the Sans Serif Leisure Complex on Station One, he kept getting flashbacks that sent his stomach cascading down and thrust his heart against his chest. They came not only of the Thargoid, but also the Adder and the Wolf. He rationalised that the Thargoid attack had given him a bad post-traumatic shock.

It was during one of those flashes, where he imagined the Thargons blistering the image on the flight-grid indicator, that his body had physically convulsed and provided the spilt drink to tease.

Since docking Rif had been forced to amend his view of people's indifference to the small passion plays in system space. Once you got into the safety zone and Vipers got involved there was plenty of interest; two hours worth of waiting, forms and questions from the GalCop Police.

"Where y' going next?". Gisburn repeated the question.

"I'm not sure yet. Leesti maybe, with a mineral cargo. I want to build up some flying time on one route," said Hood absently. Unexpectedly, it seemed to touch a nerve with Gisburn, who nearly choked, having been unable to compromise between swallowing and speaking.



"Got to be sure"; Gisburn literally covered the tabletop with gobs of light.

"S' too easy to drift 'tween systems, n' cultivate a trade mentality. S'not the life for us".

Gisburn warmed to his theme with an enthusiasm that was only matched by his consumption of light. Rif realised that it no longer mattered to Tom Gisburn where he was heading next; a lecture loomed on the horizon.

"Credits are like quirium h-fuel", continued Gisburn. "They're something to use. Means to'n end. I'm sure what that end is. You got to be too".

Gisburn pushed against Rif's shoulder with his glass, spilling light down his spacer overalls, to make sure his audience appreciated the point.

"If you wanna' be Elite you got to be sure. All those systems out there. They're all stepping stones. We use them as a path, n' that path's more than jus' trade routes. S'bout reputation n' action. S'bout bein' the best. Bechin' n' Elite transcends all that routine".

Rif was listening now. Some of the people at the Pilots' courses told stories about Elite pilots; some had even got a licence and a craft to get out and become an Elite. There was a glistening hook in Gisburn's conversation which Rif could almost see reproduced now in Tom's unusually fixed stare, tempting repudiation of an implacable truth. When it failed to emerge from Rif's bemused face, Gisburn took it as a sign to continue and he hunched forward conspiratorially. Around them the Sans Serif balcony was filling up with spacers, coursing through their strange social lives, extrovert after the intense pressure of space. Gisburn's eyes flicked around, taking in anything new and seeming to check that their conversation could continue uninterrupted.

"If you don't cut through it, see, then you get swallowed up. Eight galaxies, a thousand light years, five thousand billion GalCop citizens. There could be a million people floating 'round this planet. To get recognised we need friction. To make our mark we gotta avoid congealing in the mould. I tell you who we remember now. We 'member the Elite. They're the people with the power. GalCop moves around Elites. We can be new gods".

Gisburn paused, froze just in front of Rif's face.

"But y' gotta be sure", he hissed before crashing back into his seat and draining his



glass. "The unbeatable heights".

Rif gazed across the table. He could feel something in Gisburn's dream but it seemed to be tied in knots, or to have a hidden face where perhaps something unnatural writhed in the shadows. Gisburn looked elated. He had released his manifests into the air and he twitched as though his very vocalisation made it real.

"Think we should find some company", said Gisburn after scanning the bar menu. "I could use some".

He turned, watched the passing figures for a moment and then lent out and caught a woman by the wrist. She turned in a flash of green and gold. Gisburn leered and pointed to a seat at the table. The woman sat down, a GalCop official of some sort, RA burst in gold across the front of her suit and wrapped his wings around her shoulders. Gisburn seem oblivious.

"My friend and I're lookin' for some fun".

"I don't think....", the woman began.

"Don't think, jus' tell me how much". said Gisburn, leaning forward to feel her knee, which was moving, and he fell slightly.

Rif leant over and took Gisburn's shoulder; "I think we should go".

"If you're not interested, go and find your own", spat Gisburn shaking his hold free. The woman stood and turned to leave. Gisburn grabbed her arm again, Rif grabbed Gisburn's and suddenly Rif found himself hoisted to his feet and swung out from behind the table. He was being propelled, off balance, towards the bar.

"Shouldn't interfere Hood, not with me". Gisburn's face was burning and as he moved Rif back, the physical exertion seemed to strip his mental faculties.

As Hood backed against a stool and teetered, trying to get his legs back under his body, the struggle for balance became academic.

"Gis....", was all Rif got out before the punch followed through. He felt a full pressure and a searing pain and heard, which somehow seemed to concentrate his thoughts, his teeth grind. His back hit the bar then he lost his sense of direction in a fall, with the stool and away from it. His hand flailed along the bar, knocking a drink flying and failing to find any purchase.



Rif crashed to the floor, his shoulders taking much of the impact, but his head cracked back against the ground. Sickened, Rif's muscles slackened and refused to respond. All around was uproar and then the kick came, twisting his upper body, his legs caught against the bar. He felt his stomach spasm, his knees trying to push his body into a ball, but failing on the slippery floor.

Shouts and laughter. It was all unreal, distant; no sooner was he a pilot, successful, with dreams of Elite stirring him, then he was humiliated, hurt, and in danger.

"Don't let it go to your head sonny, or you'll lose your ass". Rif heard the voice and turned his head to try and focus, his cheek dragging back along the tiles, pulling his lip away from his teeth and allowing a trickle of warmth to slide out. Whoever was talking had stopped Gisburn from continuing the battering.

Then Gisburn's voice, shrill, unchecked: "Don't patronise me!"

The noise increased. Hood saw a pair of blue spacer leggings beyond Gisburn who tensed and moved to the right, ready to thrust forward. One of the blue legs lifted and Gisburn bent double, coughing, before truculently moving forward again. He threw a punch, a block returned his arm wide and defenceless a crack whipped his head backwards and his body followed, landing close to Hood.

"Your ass to lose, ... sonny", said the voice, and the legs moved past the prostrate Gisburn to reach a hand down in front of Hood.

Rif allowed himself to be helped to his feet, and was led, his head sagging, through the crowd of spacers. Another person took one of his arms and he was led towards one of the tables in a corner of the bar complex.

He heard Gisburn rasp: "We'll keep in touch huh!".

Propelled into a seat, Hood flopped down and pulled his head up to look at his rescuers. His head felt the weight of a planet. The first thing that caught his eye was a green insignia, a star over a valley. Rif's mind reeled and he saw the faces. His bewildered stare was caught briefly by a pair of concerned pale grey eyes. It was the younger man and the woman from the capsule.

"Meridian", she said and then nodded across. "He's Warniss".

"Hood, thanks".

Meridian punched for three drinks. It was her, the voice and presumably the body that had laid Gisburn out.

"You ought to learn to look after yourself", one said with a wry smile. Rif had a feeling that he was beginning to lose touch with reality.

"I know you", he ventured.

"I think you're concussed", replied Warniss, taking three glasses from the waiter and placing one in front of Rif.

"I'd like to talk", said Rif, "but I'm not sure my head can cope at the moment. Can I buy you both a drink in about 6 or 7 hours. I don't want to keep you from a run or anything".

"You won't", said Warniss absently.

"We're due a credit ruling from GLC Probate tomorrow", added Meridian.

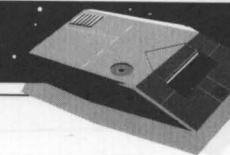
"Ah, yes, of course. I'm sorry", Rif felt embarrassed. "How is the other man?"

The two faces across the table looked surprised.

"He they couldn't help", said Meridian in a broken voice.

"Maybe we can talk later", said Warniss laying a hand over Meridian's.

Rif leaned over and took Gisburn's hand. She pulled it away but held onto his fingers. He let go and turned to leave. The woman stood and followed him through the doorway. A young blonde woman moved Rif back, the physical exertion of holding his own weight causing him to move. He let go of Gisburn, who walked away. He tried to concentrate his thoughts, his teeth grinding. His eyes shifted from item to item, direction in a fall, with his mind's eye zeroed on one item after another, his hands hovering over it, knocking a drink flying and failing to find any purchase.



Rif was sitting on the bridge of his Cobra, CorCom active on the comms console at his side. Below him in the hold, the Station Autoscum Modules were ferrying a cargo: 19 tonnes of food with a balance of minerals for a Leesti run. He paid their activities little attention, his thoughts instead on the meet with Meridian and Warniss. On grey eyes that alternated between sadness and steel. Once he'd had a chance to sleep off his beating from Gisburn they had met up in another bar of the Sans Serif complex next to a pool, separated by a screen of cleon that curved up and partly over the seating area so that a variety of Lavean fish swam in front of, and above them.

Meridian and Warniss had come to the GalCop Law Centre on Station One to confirm allocation of the trade accounts from the capsule, and whilst Rif had slept, they had completed the formalities and both had confirmed purchases of Cobra Mk III's. Warniss was a slight man, tousled dark hair receding and flecked heavily with grey. With a RevPad around his right shoulder and neck he moved carefully and used his off-hand where possible, irritated at the lessened dexterity. He had only been with the 'Vanirrens Land' for a few months before the last battle of Lave.

Meridian was an imposing figure, tall and broad-shouldered, striking features and haunting eyes. She wore her hair in one of the latest spacer fashions, bobbed short to the left and shaved to the right where it was dyed blue. Obviously some years younger than Warniss it was difficult to guess her age; her features were tired and drawn. Both now wore standard blue space overalls but had kept the green insignia from the Boa.

Rif had explained about the dockside scene back on Station Three and how he had sent the message to the hospital. Warniss briefly covered the end of the Boa, 'Vanirrens Land' and Rif still felt a pang of guilt for considering that they too might have been pirates after his own first combat experience. Now though, even after his short spacing career, his confused feelings about destroying the capsule seemed like a distant piece of history. Spacing tempered spacers with a speed appropriate to the way they lived their lives. He knew that next time there would be no second thoughts and if he could help it, no second chances for pirates.

They had spoken about Gisburn and Rif had listened carefully when it brought about an unexpected openness in Meridian. She was vehement in her dismissal of his doctrine



but, to Rif, Meridian's opinion seemed less of a different path than a more complete understanding. At least, it was one he could relate to and it crystallised and merged with his own undeveloped ambition.

Where Gisburn saw 'Elites' as being at odds with the existing structures, where antagonism was the superlative that let you break free and achieve, Meridian sought a pattern where the key players faced change with a belief in their own abilities.

"Everything you need to use you already have, inside", she had said, and it seemed to have as much relevance to her own resurrection as a spacer.

There was a pirate Krait somewhere in the Lave system that had shaken Meridian from a trading career and rekindled her ambition. For a while at that table they had experienced a catching swell of excitement. Talking of the possibilities, Rif had felt more complete, more sure of himself than he had ever done before, his flesh had tingled with the spirit of Elite.

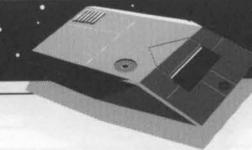
"Forget the odds; they're weighed heavily against us. We make our own possibilities and we believe in ourselves". Meridian had invoked what had seemed like the one truth, her face had come alive and she looked young and whole.

It was a look that reminded him of his mother's stories when he was little, where she would weave a tale of magic and adventure and Rif would imagine that she was famous throughout the galaxy. Then he had seen Warniss, gazing at the two of them with a tolerant, humouring, smile and the spell had been broken again as he'd eventually come to be disillusioned when his mother's tales were tarnished with spiteful relish by other children at a Delta East CareCentre on Anloma.

Meridian spoke as if she had read his mind, gently castigating Warniss; "We're not little children any more Warniss. You are just a jaded old spacer".

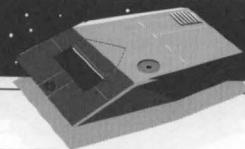
"Less of the 'just' please. I'm proud to be a jaded old spacer", laughed Warniss, his face creased into a map of laughter lines.

The exchange had gone some way to exorcising Rif's memories of childhood betrayal. There was an honesty and rapport between the two spacers that he appreciated. It fed the occasion and kept Rif at ease, enjoying their company. They had laughed, drank and watched some of Lave's more peculiar forms of aquatic life scuttle



around the tank.

CorCom bleeped. The screen on the bridge confirmed that the Autoscam's had completed loading and systems confirmed a secure cargo. Rif snapped out of his reverie and sighed. They had all agreed to keep in touch via the message box systems. Warniss was staying on Station One to recuperate, Meridian was going to run down her trade account and build up her Cobra before she considered a run. Rif decided he would miss them both, but, as RA lit the Comms screen and he logged out of CorCom, he felt that there was a message in those golden wings, a new dawn spreading out across a galaxy of possibilities. Rif could choose what mark to make; Elite's were allowed to wear the RA symbol as an insignia. He could imagine that through the corridors of time he would return to Lave again to register as an Elite licensee, a nexus in the great pattern that RA rose above.



CHAPTER 10

When you start out, every situation is life or death. Small mistakes have big consequences. It seemed to Rif as he set the course for Leoned that these days big consequences were looking for small mistakes. It had been over two years now since he first came rushing out the tubes at Lave, wonderstruck, mixed-up and naive. If that was the birth of a spacer, no one had warned him how difficult life was. Rif smiled; perhaps they had and he hadn't listened. Before he could pick-up velocity for a Space-Ship the flight-grid indicator warned of incoming raiders. Concentrating in the red glow, Rif brought 'Katharos' around working for an ID on Target One: Sidewinder. It took little of the battering Rif could administer with the LF91A military laser. The second target, a Krait, never even made definition on the scanner.

Head-to-head with the remaining Wolf Mk II, Rif impacted its shields before he needed to pitch out of intercept. His shields took a light rapping but the extra energy unit installed in the Cobra would soon right that. He paid scant attention to the TS Com Direct confirmations of viable kills and credit allocations, turning already, through the debris, towards Leoned.

Coming in towards the safety zone, Rif scanned through the OSA news bulletins from the local station. The war in Galaxy Three with the Interstellar Sanction was a major drain on Galactic Navy resources. The Treaty of Texeonis had collapsed after last year's talks on Enata had ended with an impasse. Shortly afterwards sanction forces had overcome the GalCop administration in the Rea System which was currently being used as the launchpad for the conflict. Rumours abounded that their standard navel hunter craft, the Excelsior Mk VI was infiltrating various pirate haunts throughout the galaxies. Only one kill had been confirmed outside the war zone, in Galaxy Four. Local agents said it had hit like an earthquake.

The effect of the war on Galaxy One had been to place most of the responsibility for dealing with the Knights Templar's on local system clusters, and further, to allow considerably more Thargoid invasion craft through to GalCop space.

Rif curled into orbital space, intending to complete a good proportion of the run to Station before switching to docking computers. He called up Meridian's file from TRD, an accumulation of over thirty message box dumps; her last message at Ordima had



been that they would meet at Ceesxe if he was around. Rif hadn't seen her for eight months now and he intended to be around.

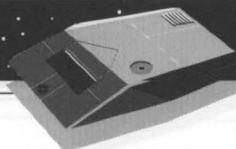
They'd kept in touch, paths criss-crossing occasionally, and had met when coincidence struck initially, then when it was convenient. Now Rif wanted to see her again; he'd long ago given up lying to himself. It was a pointless exercise when you spend a deal of time on your own and spacer myths abounded with stories that twisted around self-deception and eventual madness.

Rif had seen Warniss more recently. Once he was fit again he had taken to developing trade runs; getting to know places. Rif appreciated his level-headed advice, his intuitive trading analysis and his wicked sense of humour. He hadn't heard from Warniss since then, apart from picking up one old message at Maxeedso. Those messages that you collected out of date and out of synch with time always got to Riff. Snippets of history waiting to be picked up, there was a certain mystique to them because the converse train of thought was that you were living in the future.

Slightly less savoury were the messages from Gisburn, who, true to his word, left little pockets of venom and kept in touch with relish. He had been a fugitive for over six months now and still promised that they would meet again; "Drinks and Revenge", most messages began, much like an invitation.

Rif handed over the controls to the docking computer and called up CorCom to check price data on his cargo of medical supplies. The OSA flashed a message to make sure he read the Leoned OSA Station Regulations on the conduct of affairs with the Atch 'Ruk, a sapient reptilian life-form on Leoned that, unusually, were employed by the local OSA on-station and were allowed GalCop citizenship, should they so desire. It was an indication of the influence wielded by the Ceesxe Corporation, which also dominated the Leoned System and funded the dictators of Veis. Ceesxe was renowned for being the white-heart of technological developments, and similarly had a long history in GalCop politics.

'Katharos' came in to berth on Dock Two and Hood sold the medical supplies, moving to his living quarters whilst the AutoScam's scuttled beneath the hull. He reckoned on hitting a Relaxapad before getting straight back to Ceesxe; Meridian could



arrive at any time. As he lay back and fumbled blind for the Neuroweighting, he smiled.

'You fool', he told himself. 'You're hooked and dangling; as obvious as a fish out of water'.

That was when the Emergency Signal came on comm. Rif didn't bother to go to the bridge, he leapt across the section from the Relaxapad to a slave comms station he'd had installed. He'd intended it to allow mixing business with pleasure, or leisure anyway, but it proved useful in several circumstances.

The link was direct from the Galactic Naval complex on-station. It was an urgent request to all combat-proficient pilots for seconded duty in the Arazaes system. Rif knew that the hard-pressed Navy were prone to seek paid assistance at hot-spots these days, but he'd never been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He opened comm and notified Galactic Navy admin. that he was available and to provide data including conditions. It wasn't a hard decision. GalCop was perhaps currently facing its most difficult test yet with major trouble on several fronts, and if GalCop foundered, a lot of people would be drowning in a sea of chaos.

The conditions came back. "Secondment of temporary navel roster : actions subject to allocated command orders : data dump on mission brief : 500 cr. subject to fulfilling mission criteria : immediate response required".

Rif responded with an affirmative and his TRD received a relayed data pack. There was a major Templar incursion in the Arazaes system. A Navy Cobra Commander was leading the seconded unit from Leoned, all Pilots were to clear Station for jump immediately. Rif swung out of the living quarters and threw himself up the gravity well. Bridge systems were active and station control had flashed him a prioritised berth clearance warning. As the forerunners cleared the tube, Rif left a quick message in a Leoned box, in case Meridian, Warniss or any of the other spacers he kept in touch with came out here to the outer reaches of Galaxy One.

"Keeping busy. See you at Ceesxe via Arazaes. Rif". Comm handled the box groups, shortly before Rif handed over to automatic Launch and the Cobra burst like a worm from an apple into orbit space. A jump group was gathering beyond the Station. Rif pulled 'Katharos' over above the Station and negotiated to join the pack. The mission brief had included a comms network for the seconded unit and a message came



through from Commander P. Forth to accept incoming jump co-ordinates and over-ride the standard Arazaes navigational data.

"Gods know", thought Rif, "that spacers have enough problems taking orders"; but to ask a spacer to accept a strange set of jump-nav. co-ordinates had more to do with blind faith. Trust was short on the ground at many docks and it remained to be seen how many of this scrambled unit actually appeared at their jump destination. Everything was hurried. The jump directive was implemented in the minimum time you could feasibly allow spacers to perform an override they had probably never had cause to do before. A motley assembly of craft glittered out of all scanner views; Cobras, Pythons and Star Boats alike began to blink into witch-space and away to somewhere in the Arazaes system.

"That's the way we all go", said Rif, engaging drive.

"...and were beginning to appear as the galaxies faded and the stars blurred into a

ID was confirmed as an Adder. No IR confirmation on



CHAPTER 11

'Katharos' dropped out of witch-space. Rif tried to match the rhythm of his breathing to the extended interference waves in time and space. If he managed it, he could usually pull out of jump without a thick head and spiralling blood pressure. P. Forth was obviously already through, data was pouring across the screens on the mission link. They were dropping into the outer orbital reaches of Malthea, the third planet in the Arazaes system. The Knights Templar forces had emerged in the standard reception zone and had headed this way. The objective was to seek and destroy, and protect planetary and orbital installations. Ominously, further details were to follow.

They didn't need to come over the mission link, the in-system comms were in turmoil. Rif listened to snatches from relayed and delayed conversations whilst his comms station desperately attempted to sort out the mass of data into some sort of chronological, intelligible order. Forth obviously had a single source of data, the mission link pinpointed a number of Arazaes Vipers and in-system defenders, embroiled in combat with a mass of Templar ships on a trajectory to Malthea. Rif was stunned to see an early estimate of 140 attackers. This must rate as the largest Templar mobilisation to date; they could only have come from Ususor. A skirmish in Arazaes had to be seen as provocation by the Ceesxe Corporation.

Whilst he awaited an order to move, Rif pondered the logic of the move, if there was any. There had to be a sane tactical motive for the Templars. Perhaps they intended to sun skim and launch an attack in a Ceesxe supported system; possible but unlikely. Maybe; now this made more sense to Rif; maybe they hoped to rouse the sleeping political giant of the Ceesxe Corporation in a particular area. Rif reasoned that if the Templars wanted to provoke moves for retaliation then Ceesxe might lobby at senate for a reallocation of naval resources or possibly even a settlement with the sanction. That was guaranteed to cause discontent between most of the galaxies in GalCop, stresses and confused priorities.

Forth assumed that all who intended to jump had arrived and the call came through, a straight run to engage the Templars in Malthea orbit space. The Naval Cobra, with the latest 'lightfast' drive technology probably occupying a good proportion of the redundant cargo space, lead the unit. Rif fell in with three other Mk III's, the Codec, Hermes and



Mani, where he knew they would be able to operate with comparable manoeuvrability.

Malthea was a small planet where, from what Rif could remember, ten years of work had detoxified the atmosphere to allow forestation. Fruit was one of Arazaes' staple exports and Malthea had orbital Agro-Research Labs that were lauded throughout the galaxies for their Botanical Resource Centres. They were approaching from its darkside, bearing in-system and the planetary image dominated Rif's main scanner like an ebony shield.

The news on comm was bad. The Templar incursion was driving a wedge through the ragged Arazaen defence forces; skilled outriders hunting down the scattered Vipers. Desperately outnumbered they were no more than a distraction to the wave of offensive forces.

A seconded unit from Ceesxe was currently in system fall, further out from the Leoned unit's jump location. Rif's group was fast approaching an intercept distance and he glanced frequently at the flight grid waiting for scanner recognition. As the first Templar outriders appeared on the grid, the familiar red cloak swept over the bridge and Rif tried to focus his thoughts around the 'Katharos' and combat. The ability of the Templar pilots was an unknown quantity, a flight from the main group had been drawn off and were beginning to appear on the grid. Rif opened normal comms to the three Mk III's with the Katharos:

"No need to get reckless here in a head-to-head. Can we pick off a few from standstill?" He didn't wait for a response and began to dump velocity, accompanied by the Hermes and Mani.

The Codex grouped back into the main pack where Forth was leading a section on a climb, leaving a wing arrangement behind out to Rif's left. Rif tried to visualise the line, there was no time to try and set the tactical systems to cope with mass melee manoeuvres. He worked on targetting one of the outriders.

ID was confirmed as an Adder. No IR confirmation on standard or mission link channels. LF laser strands tore through Target One. No smile broke the concentration on Rif's face, his eyes ignored the blasted Adder and checked Targetting and the Flight Grid for the next outrider in. The Hermes took one, a Sidewinder which briefly flicked with an ID on the console before decomposing in a blaze of light.



CHAPTER 11

The Templars avoided a run at the standing wing and swept up to confront Forth's breakaway arm, seeking scanner cover from the Danger Zone in a myriad of dogfights playing across the grid. There was little point in maintaining a distance combat position; Rif considered long spiral roll and flashed a rough to Mani and Hermes before breaking into a high-speed run. They led the way for a cluster of 12 from the wing, flying wide into an extended barrel roll that brought them towards what appeared visually as an upside-down conflict; Templar craft with bellies exposed.

"Lets cut some guts", hollered Rif, his hand darting over the familiar territory of the armaments console.

The run wrought devastation amongst the Templar force, but the cost had already been high. Forth's group had suffered severe losses in the close to dogfighting and Rif's cluster numbered only five after a run across the theatre where wide shots were as dangerous as targeted fire. 'Kathoros' shields had voided from shield bank to main energy store on the run and he'd come within a cosmic string's width of colliding with a Mamba, which, Rif had no doubt would have seen him on his way. His flight grid was next to useless; it appeared that most of the Templars were loaded with empty cargo canisters. As Rif turned, they drifted like leaves in the storm of combat.

Before Rif could make any decisions on returning to the fray, a distress call was transferred through to the mission link: "A-G Research Station MT3: Attack imminent: Please Assist".

The call was on a dumb cycle. No hard information from MT3. No comm hoping that the Ceesxe secondment would make this mêlée shortly, Rif decided to leave Forth's group and run to back-up the last of the in-system defenders against the main Templar wedge. Breaking to velocity he took Hermes, Mani and the remaining two ships from the cluster and headed toward MT3.

The situation was bad, you could count down the defenders with the seconds, and there weren't many left. Taut voices left the channels, one by one. A martyr in an escape capsule rammed an incoming Mamba but would never tell the tale. There was still nothing ahead on the flight grid.

Suddenly the rear of the wedge appeared, and talk on comm cleared up exactly



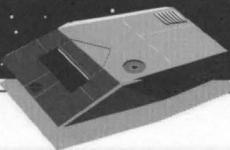
where the front-runners were. The Research Station was under attack. Rif felt helpless. To leapfrog the attackers and try and pick-off the craft from the station-side would leave him vulnerable. It was a stupid move that would just add to the death-toll. To wade in from behind would risk the lives on the Station: Civilian Scientists and Botonists with generations of research around them. Gardens of trees and plants from Old Earth and a wealth of specimens from the new worlds. They were all at risk and nearly defenceless. Rif fought the frustration and the sense of futility. You needed some odds to work with; even Elites didn't perform miracles and Rif had some way to go in that department.

They did the only thing they could, struck at the rear until they brought some attention on themselves; then dumped velocity to pick the Templars off as a large contingent closed over the danger zone. Mamba, Adder, Krait, Krait. Rif counted them off until his laser banks overheated and they were still faced with incoming raiders.

The five closed to dogfight. Rif span 'Katharos' towards the Templars whilst over the comms. Channel came the panicked call and then the screams of a technician called Seronnay. There were still at least forty craft in the forward wave, pounding at MT3's shields, which at no time during design had been expected to require the protection of a Coriolis.

Rif knew that Seronnay and all of her colleagues were dead at about the same time they did. A wash of light that you only normally got from sun-skimming turned the scanner and most of the other astrogation systems blind. Blotches of colour blooming at Rif's retina hampered him as he tried to place Target One in his mind, waiting for systems to pick up again: "I hope some of you bought it badly", he seethed at the Templar forces. "Rot in hell!".

The light fronts dimmed and a Krait hung just out of intercept. Pitch and yaw saw Target One to eternity. Target Two was moving fast in a cunning spin through the canisters from the Krait, blurring grid definition, and was lost behind the debris from a fill by Hermes. Rif's laser temperature was still dangerously high. The flight grid was beginning to register well over a score of craft, returning from the Station attack to join the group engaging Rif and his small cluster. Rif urgently tried to raise Forth on the mission link. No success.



"We've got to run them back to the Ceesxe unit", he yelled across comm to the cluster. It was their only realistic chance at survival. They turned and fled. Inside range for distance shooting, Rif hoped that the Cobra's speed might reduce the number of incoming bolts. He opened comm to the Asp in their cluster, to ask Commander Irinus, with his superior speed, to try and lead a group off, but Irinus link died with him, leaving four Cobra's at the crest of a tsunami of fury and hate.

Forth came through. They were there, the Ceesxe force and a small contingent from Veis. Possibly sixty strong but with nearly as many Templars being led by Rif towards them.

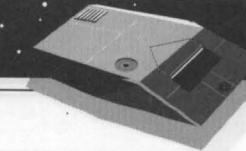
Bolts cracked across Rif's shields and momentarily he was plunged into the past. A young pilot running from the destructive power of a Thargoid invasion ship, towards the defensive line of vipers who had come to help and one of whom would die; nameless to the life they saved.

Rif knew that the oncoming conflict couldn't be straight head-to-head, there was too much chance involved, and chance, left to itself, dealt some fierce shocks.

Rif broke the run without a lead message to the other Cobras. 'Katharos' soared above the darkening plain, a distracting bait glowing temptingly on every Templar grid. 'Hermes' and 'Mani' swept to follow. The fourth Cobra, 'Ascension', broke relatively low.

It was enough for some of the Templars. As they peeled high and low, the Ceesxe unit was able to pound into them with the force of a sledgehammer, and they broke, like a fragmentation bomb, in all directions. Rif was lost for a response. The three Cobras were facing twenty or so Templar craft in fractured trajectories. 'Hermes' was caught in a double intercept and 'Mani', diving to assist, couldn't break the pounding that tore the Hermes apart. Then 'Mani' was in the thick of the Templar forces and Rif killed velocity to turn on a splinter and dive into the fray. No sooner had the 'Mani' thanked Rif for the back-up than the pieces of his ally danced across his fore shields and Rif found 'Katharos' enmeshed in a Templar onslaught with the Ceesxe force still turning from the last pass.

A Fer De Lance ID'ed and swept over 'Katharos'; there were still four Templars in the immediate frontal vicinity. Rif picked a Krait to try and sweep through and out of the



net. Cracks on comm metered the strikes of laser strands but the Krait cleared intercept and a rogue Cobra appeared, to take its place, cannons tearing at Rif's shields. Suddenly the Cobra was gone and Rif could break the 3D noose.

"That's the punchline", came the message from a Cobra that passed close over his hull; Warniss. Warniss was here.

"Em's back in the pack", he heard Warniss say, and he turned.

If Warniss had flown into the fray, Rif was sure as hell going to support him. As he asked, the Fer de lance passed close. ID queried and Rif could see the fake cladding across the hull. A chill crawled under the sweat on his skin, he thought he had caught a glimpse of a Interstellar sanction insignia.

"Warniss; I think the FL's an Excelsior VI. Watch your back".

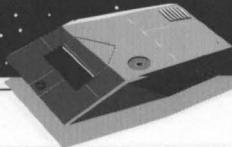
Rif picked off a Krait that was bearing down on Warniss and by then they were in the middle of a colossal clash as the Ceesxe force met the Templars. The chill ran deep to Rif's bones as he realised that somewhere, in the conflagration of bolts and laser streams, missiles and canisters like mines, was Meridian.

Warniss hadn't managed to shake the Fer de Lance, the disguised Excelsior. He was bearing down beneath the conflict towards Malthea. Rif began to turn to follow. A message flashed to his screen: "Drinks and Revenge".

Shortly afterwards a Cobra bore down on him from above; a smattering on the shields before he could react and pull 'Katharos' wide. Gisburn, of all people, was in the Templar force. If ever Rif had needed a personal reason for this fight, it was now a need fulfilled.

There was no way for Rif to suppress his IR response and Gisburn had picked him out. As Rif spun an avoid pattern he could imagine those eyes, frenetically following him on the scanner, and that lethal smile, a harbinger of destruction.

Rif had Gisburn at a straight 30 : 80 course but clearing intercept took him away from Warniss and merged that chase into the madness on his grid. With one hand he called a fix on Warniss' trajectory and put a blind call out to the New Vanirrens' channel, hoping that Meridian could pick off the Excelsior. At the same time he cut across Gisburn and banked up over him. Rif called for Gisburn's comm. Channel from



TRD and screamed:

"Lets just call it revenge, freak".

They corkscrewed and burst into curves that took them across each other's bows, playing for advantage. Gisburn got off a missile, almost too close for Rif to react, but he hit the ECM and the shards coruscated across his fore shields.

"I think I'd rather toast your soul", came Gisburn's manic voice in reply. In the cut and thrust for position, Gisburn got several good strikes on Rif's aft shields. They coiled like two snakes. One's recurve preventing the other's strike run. Each pass was lengthening the odds for Rif; increasing the chances for Gisburn to break and scald 'Katharos' with a deadly chrysalis of laser strands. Rif dumped velocity early on Gisburn's next pass, turning in anticipation of Gisburn's trajectory, and accelerated with everything 'Katharos' had, blazing laser strands. The strands weakened Gisburn's aft shields and Rif let the full weight of 'Katharos' follow in behind. Shields stripped in parallel but Hood had weakened Gisburn's critically. His shield flux bore at velocity into Gisburn's Cobra, which discharged over his hull like a foul miasmic blast.

"Call it friction, Tom", said Rif. 'Katharos' bore on, through the dwindling relics of Gisburn's being, into a climb and swift about face.

Warniss was all that filled Rif's thoughts. Gisburn was a distraction he could afford to dwell on later. Rif charged down towards Malthea, hoping to get a clear fix on the grid, and hoping that Warniss had kept the fight local. He called, channel specific, to Warniss, asking for a briefing on his situation.

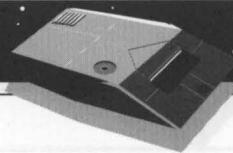
"I'm in trouble Rif," was what he got back.

"Hang in there Warniss, I'm coming in. Bring him back this way if you can". Rif had the two craft on the grid, looming up into mid-distance; he twisted 'Katharos' for all it was worth, caught the Excelsior on targetting and opened fire, hoping to buy Warniss some time.

"Thanks Rif, I owe you one".

It was the last thing he heard from Warniss before a killer blow from the Excelsior's heavy laser battery ripped Warniss's Cobra from the grid, a small light against a dark planet.

"Oh no. No please. Warniss, where's your capsule". A lifetime's wait in a second's



time span.

But Rif knew, from the suddenness of that blast, that there wasn't going to be a capsule. He didn't want to believe it. People died. Friends died, but not in front of you. Not in the same battle. That wasn't message box rules. It wasn't right.

Rif had his hands against his head, crushing his hair in fistfuls when a Mamba struck from above. The reactions of self-preservation drove 'Katharos' up to meet the Templar. Hate destroyed it, seconds later and Rif watched the scanner for the Excelsior.

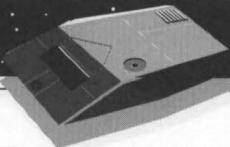
It was at 310 : 120, a fleck on Malthea. Rif slowed and tried for targetting; foiled by another raider descending from the clashes above, a Krait screaming towards him. Rif turned to face the immediate enemy and lost the Excelsior VI; it turned, moving at pace back towards the main battle. The Krait pilot was a skilled spacer and put Rif back on his guard, stripping away his emotions to where he could rely on reflexes and his experience to cut the impasse in speed and manoeuvrability.

Handling 'Katharos' at peak performance he caught the Krait's upper hull and followed it with fire to oblivion. With a moment to collect his thoughts, Rif rifled through the comms and link data trying to get a grasp on events around him. Forth was dead. Each group was still evenly matched, skill sacrificed against skill, whittling down numbers rather than odds.

He scanned for the 'New Vanirrens Land', which was caught inside the combat zone against possibly three active opponents. Rif moved to intercept, willing 'Katharos' forwards, weaving between canisters and debris. To his horror the ID scan showed the Excelsior was one of the craft pursuing Meridian.

An Asp coursed down against him and Rif knew there was no way to outrun it. Manic, Rif cut to a stop, pulling round, straining to bring the Cobra onto an intercept with the Templar, watching desperately out of the corner of his eye as Meridian and her pursuers moved further off the grid. The whole battle was curving down into Malthea's orbit. Fatigued and frantic, Rif tore into close combat with the Asp.

It took time he couldn't spare to beat the Asp, and when it was dispatched to cosmic wind his shields were shredded. Despite the chronic condition of the Cobra's defences, Rif forced 'Katharos' after Meridian and the Excelsior, ploughing desperately through



several melées, praying not to suffer wild or wide hits.

The lower edges of the battle were dangerously close to the outer atmosphere of Malthea when Rif located Meridian again, in a belt of cargo canisters and enemy craft. Bearing down on the scene, Rif began targetting on the Excelsior which was turning back to stage another strafing run on the 'New Vanirrens Land'. Meridian destroyed a Krait as it passed close over her hull, foolishly baring a vulnerable shield to her military lasers.

"Watch the FL, Em. It's sanction", Rif called wretchedly across comm.

He could see that it had good range and positioning on her. He brought the Excelsior into intercept and fired a continuous torrent of laser strands at the sanction craft. Two cargo canisters drifted across his path in a scissors movement. Reckless, Rif rolled 90 and careered through the dwindling space between them, unsure whether his shields would take the impact of either.

"You've got a sidewinder on your butt, sonny", said Meridian's voice over comm.

Rif felt his heart sour and realised that his tension was bordering on tears. He kept his teeth set and the Excelsior in his sights. It was increasing power and compensating for Meridian's run towards, and beyond, 'Katharos'.

Rif hoped that Meridian had some shield cover left; the Excelsior must have given her a lashing before Rif had, in turn, given it something else to consider.

The sanction craft climbed assuredly, intent on passing out of Rif's intercept and over, in pursuit of Meridian. Straining velocity up and down, Rif kept the Excelsior in his sights for an extra few seconds by timing his flip-over to perfection, guns blazing. It was all he needed, as the Excelsior broke into its component parts and opened the bridge to the relentless cold of space.

As Rif exhaled with relief, he saw a motionless blip on the grid kick into an ambush on Meridian from amongst the mass of flotsam. He watched helpless as Meridian's run against the Sidewinder left her in a pincer attack and the 'New Vanirrens Land' winked off the grid. The Excelsior's destruction had killed his adrenaline for a moment and in that time Meridian's life was taken before him.

This time Rif couldn't stop the tears or the pain that gripped his throat like a vice.



There was nothing, no signal from Meridian on comms. He was paralysed at the helm. Malthea loomed on the scanner, an ancient goddess of death presiding over the harvest of souls. Occasional shards and pods swept towards her dark continents, burning up in re-entry. It was all somewhere else, some else's reality. Rif sat slumped in the red shadows on board a motionless 'Katharos', paying no attention to the comm., unconcerned and empty.

The shouts and cries of victory eventually managed to reach across the void and touch his senses. The Templar force had jumped.

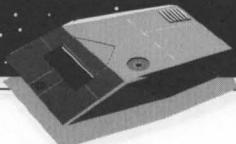
The delighted and spent voices quickly died down to a subdued calm as the devastation around hit home. The few remaining seconded units found themselves in a vast graveyard, signposting the course of the battles from the chunks of wreckage from MT3 through a maze of littered flight corridors to the saturated orbital space of Malthea, a miniature spiral nebula.

In that microcosm, the survivors could have felt outsized. A pantheon of gods in a swirl of new heavenly bodies after a titanic battle for domination. But no one did.

Somebody was answering the flood of questions and requests for information from Arazaes OSA, the local authorities on Malthea, and its remaining orbital stations.

It was the last of the surviving units, a lone survivor, who spoke. A voice that sounded like a machine, a mechanical, metallic, synthetic voice, a voice that had been built for war, designed for war. A voice that had been born in the heat of battle, forged in the fire of conflict, refined in the crucible of combat. A voice that had been trained to speak only in code, to communicate only in binary, to send and receive only in binary. A voice that had been built to last, to withstand the rigors of space, to endure the extremes of temperature, to survive the harsh conditions of the void. A voice that had been designed to be invincible, to be unbreakable, to be unstoppable. A voice that had been created with a specific purpose, a purpose that had been set in stone, a purpose that had been written in the very fabric of the universe. A voice that had been created with a specific purpose, a purpose that had been set in stone, a purpose that had been written in the very fabric of the universe.

"Somebody's answering. We need somebody to help us." A voice that sounded like a machine, a voice that had been trained to speak only in code, to communicate only in binary, to send and receive only in binary. A voice that had been created with a specific purpose, a purpose that had been set in stone, a purpose that had been written in the very fabric of the universe. A voice that had been created with a specific purpose, a purpose that had been set in stone, a purpose that had been written in the very fabric of the universe.



CHAPTER 12

"Forget the odds; they're weighted heavily against us. We make our own possibilities and we believe in ourselves."

Tahrissa "Meridian" Laundrestoarn
Lave Station One : 320 G.C.T.

The seventeen surviving craft from the Naval secondments were brought into a hurriedly cleared berth-set on Dock Three of Station Two at Arazaes.

They had made the cross-system voyage completely unhindered; pirates and traders alike knew who they were. All channels buzzed with the news. Terrible losses but decisive victory. A commanding advantage. A heroic stand that must mark the turning of the tide in the struggle against Templar terrorism.

Rif was numbed by the stream of hyperbole. Docking computer on, he methodically sifted through channels in the vain hope of finding news of additional survivors. A naval Battleship had arrived in-system, too late to join the battle, but now scouring the scene of the conflict. Rif's comments across the link about the presence of an Excelsior had been picked-up and had spread like wildfire from spacers to station and by now the news was probably travelling with trade-runners to nearby systems. The Station Egress loomed and 'Katharos' systems brought rotation into step, easing towards the tube.

Ahead of him, Rif envisaged a lengthy debriefing and he had to clench his fists to prevent himself taking 'Katharos' away, running for the sun to skim plasma and put light-years between himself and this place. As he pushed himself back against his seat the decisions were taken out of his hands. Now there was no longer the relief he used to feel, when he used to fall back and rely on someone else. Now Rif just felt trapped, cornered with a dockside party of GalCop authorities waiting for him ahead. Unwelcome strangers who would want him to put aside his grief for the sake of the important information he might be able to provide.

It was no less than he anticipated. A GalCop mobile was waiting to usher him the length of the dockside, past the unprecedented crowds, to a Translocator in Dock Reception. From there the lift moved on over-ride until Rif was huddled out into the



Galactic Navel Complex. RA glowed again across clean foyer doors. A flashback to the excitement of registration at Lave combined with the tension and exertion Hood already felt and as the doors slid open his thoughts were washed with confusion. He felt in his pockets for his GCID card; he wouldn't be able to register without it.

No, he had to get a grip. Rif hoped that his tunnel vision might pass. It didn't. He felt light-headed and thought he might blackout. Rif stumbled and was caught.

'I'm OK; I could use a drink and a seat. Is that OK?", he told anybody who was listening. "Glueneuran booster. Get one here quick", he heard a voice say and a figure to his left dashed off.

Instead of being taken to the reception area he could see ahead, where, he presumed, the seated figures were the other seconded spacers who had docked so far, they led him to a side corridor.

"We're just going to get you a biobooster to wake you up", a voice said.

Rif nodded lamely. Helpful hands and voices told his subconscious that he could let go. That people would look after him. A child-like faith that things would be all right. He fought it. Tried to shock himself back to reality.

"We've got an incoming capsule from the battle-zone". He heard the voice and slowly separated it as something that someone else had said.

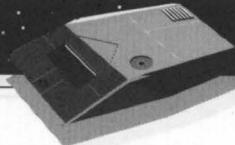
It was the kick he needed. One of the medical suits that had been accompanying him down the corridor was running down towards the lobby again. There were three people with him. They were taken by surprise when he looked up, eyes focused and suddenly broke free from the guiding arms, diving backwards.

Rif had almost thrown himself off balance. Turning he tripped over his feet and nearly fell, carried after the medic more by momentum than independent action. He could feel the adrenaline rush, the noise behind him.

"He's freaked. Get him under control."

"Somebody, sedation. We need sedation".

Rif ran, throwing himself through a door that was still closing after the med. who had left. The door stopped, confused, and Rif was gone before it could decide that it had to open again. The Translocator door was sliding shut, forcing Rif to dive again, and he



CHAPTER 12

crashed into four bodies.

"I'm sorry. I've got to come down..... Please". Faces, anxious, angry and surprised looked at him.

"Its OK", said the medic; naval officer wings on his uniform.

At the dock there was a mobile waiting. Nobody said anything. The five of them clambered in and they were off again. Rif had time to take in his fellow passengers. Two from the lift wore the claret and silver uniforms of the Galactic Navy, the other two were naval medics. They pulled up by berth 3:40, where a detachment of Police were waiting, forming a semi-circle around the zone, against the dock wall. Rif stood, watching the tracking on the berth matrix screens. There was no comm from the incoming capsule but it had an ID as a Cobra fitting; a Xeeslan LSC 7.

"Its coming in" said one of the naval medics and they turned to pull equipment from the mobile.

Rif waited, hardly able to breathe. The capsule came through the tube and automatic station docking took forever. Another mobile arrived; standard capsule-reception med-unit. There was a conversation in hushed, emphatic tones between the naval and station teams.

The matrix flashed through the docking sequence. Rif hoped, he prayed, he knew it was Meridian. If it wasn't, he would be destroyed.

"The capsules' damaged", said a naval officer.

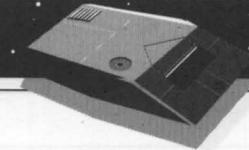
"That doesn't mean anything", shouted Rif, stopping himself and holding his hands up, palms out, to show he wasn't going to cause trouble.

Preliminary scans were carried out. Stage One externally, Stage Two accessed the capsule. "God there's been a fire in there", said a medic, breaking procedure and rushing forwards into the darkness around the blackened entrance.

Rif wanted to rush forward, but he knew that after one breach of docking rules, the police were unlikely to suffer a second.

"I've got one body. Suspended-An. Life-signs registered", said the medic from inside the capsule.

"Go", said one of the Naval Officers, and the rest of the stand-by meds went to help.



"Burns unit on stand-by please, bringing out a figure in a suspended-an sack."

Through the cover and rigging, Rif could see the blue spacer overalls, the green insignia; valley and star, and the spacer bob. The relief cracked as a half-laugh in his throat and he could do nothing as he fell to his knees and blackness swirled across his view.

"We make our own post-pictures", the bob said of the medical who had

look that quickly defined Rif's countenance as wearily familiar.

"As soon life it", the bob intoned after the dangling figure.

When the came round after the E-D-like first desensitization the desensitized sense no pain same, Rif was able to tell her this in the mid to the middle of Mantis. Medivis just then took her back into Elite survival. The Mayan watched in wonder as the regeneration as gifts into a special preservation.

It had been for her second life gift-giver.

"I know what you were worth when I took you", the unnameable

"Please.....", Medivis replied in mock deference.

"As one of the Asgaard Generals, O2A, Ciclop and Mayan supporters scattered to the universe, Medivis knew Rif saw how the public outcome to a corner near the RV

swayed in the will Mayan Blighting hand.

"I've still got to go to face it I want to register officially. Can you please tell

Medivis's key codes please.

"Sorry now", said Rif. "I'm not suddenly still, its good practice for address."

"I've been assigned an Elite commission", said Medivis, her face telling serious stories.

"A brief summary sir. Special obligation. I get relieved in full lump usavision

and a full little Conductor like it."

Rif was desolate. "That's great", he was saying

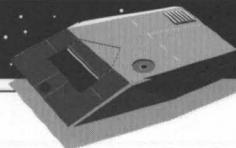
Medivis smiled and took his hand in hers. "I've got them I need a co-bottle."

"I love you, I want you, I need you... but..." Rif's lips were touching by Medivis's

finger, silencing him.

"I know what you're thinking. Here's my offer, buster..... I'll give you a month to

do it. You'll need to move there a week. You make it a possibility. Now makes it a



CHAPTER 13

"The last club in the known Universe where money won't buy you a place".

Elite Epithet.

The burns weren't beyond repair. The capsule almost had been. As he had waited in the Hospital Complex, people kept telling Rif that it was incredible she had stabilised the environment, let alone for the capsule to have returned safely.

"We make our own possibilities", he had said to one medic, who had shot him a look that clearly defined Rif's comment as mystical bullshit.

"As you like it", he had laughed after the departing figure.

When she came round after the E-D-fits that redeveloped the damaged areas on her arms, Rif was able to tell her that in the midst of the battle of Malthea, Meridian had taken her kills into Elite territory. The Navy wanted to make the registration as Elite into a special presentation.

Rif held her for what seemed like light-years.

"I knew what you were worth even before I nearly lost you", he managed.

"Please.....", Meridian replied in mock disgust.

As one of the Arazaen Senators, OSA, GalCop and Naval authorities gathered fo the presentation, Meridian drew Rif away from the purple uniforms to a corner near the RA symbol in the main Naval Briefing room.

"I've still got to go to Lave if I want to register officially. Can you believe it?", Meridian's grey eyes danced.

"Somehow," said Rif, "I'm not surprised. Still, its good publicity for Arazaes".

"I've been offered an Elite commission", said Meridian, her face falling serious again.

"A third generation ship. Special operations. I get retrained in full jump navigation and a fully fitted Constrictor Mk.II".

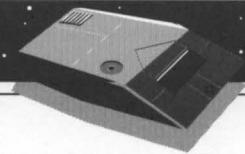
Rif was desolated. "That's great", he managed.

Meridian smiled and took his hand in hers. "I've told them I need a co-pilot".

"I love you. I want you. I need you. But..." Rif's lips were touched by Meridian's finger, silencing him.

"I know what you're thinking. Here's my offer, partner..... I'll give you a month to do it. You'll need no more than a week. You made it a possibility. Now make it a

IMPRINT



reality."

Rif let a smile of disbelief play on his lips. "You'll wait a month for a co-pilot?"

"No, I'll wait a month for an *Elite* co-pilot. Elite plus Elite. Good, huh?"

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