

Extracts from the Tre Clan Addresses on Interplanetary Life

Between 2081730 and 2081768 Cooperative Standard Time, the experienced pilot Commander Irina of the Tre Clan returned to Lerequ to fulfil her Third Obligation by discussing the political, economic, social and military aspects of Cooperative space with several young members of the clan considering a career in space, illustrated with a number of stories taken from her fifteen kiloday career as an independent pilot. Transcripts and recordings were taken of these addresses and conversations, for the benefit of future clan members coming of age.

With the gracious permission of Commander Irina and the Elders of the Tre Clan, we are able for the first time to publish extracts from these addresses to a wider audience. Some names and other details have been changed for the safety of third parties.

Marin Stowalter, CEO, Texebi Interstellar Reference.

You don't want to be there.....	2
The Prime Objective.....	6
The Seven Light-year Itch.....	8
Friends and Enemies.....	10
The Elite.....	13

You don't want to be there

This was the opening address for the sessions, given to an audience of around three hundred. Approximately twenty of those returned for subsequent addresses.

You've got your own reasons for wanting to go in to space, and I want you to think about them carefully. Maybe you've heard there's good money in trading work, or you've always been fascinated by space, or you can't stand Lerequ and want to get away. More likely it's something far more complex than that. Maybe you couldn't even entirely put it into words if you tried, or maybe you've explained it to so many people you say it in your sleep. Either way, keep it in mind now.

You've all lived on Lerequ for your entire life, perhaps barring the occasional trip to one of the orbital stations, or an occasional visit to another system. Living in space is very different, and you need to be prepared for those differences. You need to be aware of them, and before you take your first flight, you need to have accepted them.

Space travel is fairly accessible, nowadays. Even a cheap ship is expensive, but not much more than other major purchases like a house. On a mid-wealth world like Lerequ, if you can get a decent job, and save up every last millicredit, you can be flying your own ship in five years. If that's not an option, or you want to get up there quicker, then if you're a promising enough pilot in simulation and on your licensing course, you can get a job flying someone else's ship, and probably save up enough to buy your own in a year or two.

You know that, of course. I expect most of you have it planned out how you're going to get up there. Take a moment now, though, to think about it. If it's in your reach, then it's within the reach of most of Lerequ's 3 billion inhabitants. How many of them do you think go into space as a career? Hardly any. The Tre Clan is one of the largest, with four hundred thousand members. Fewer than one in a thousand of us have space-based careers, and almost all of those work for companies local to Lerequ system. That's why this was considered important enough to be my Third. If all of you here go into a space career – and I think that's unlikely – you'll almost double the Tre Clan's presence in space.

So, why don't people take up careers in space more often? It's easy enough to start, and the stories are true: you can earn millions in not much time. There are three big reasons.

First one, morality. Spacer morality is different. There was a mass murder in the Southern Ocean Corporation a few years back. You probably remember the news. Ninety-five dead, over four hundred wounded. The most serious single incident for twenty years. My combat rating is less than a stone's throw from Deadly. I don't know exactly how many people I've killed, but it's probably about fifty times as many. There's only one person in Lerequan history to have personally killed more than that while remaining on the planet: Vren Apat. He was a war criminal, tried and executed in disgust by his own side after the nuking of the Commune's Habitat 31. I'm a free and indeed upstanding member of Cooperative society.

I can see some of you drawing back into your shells here. That's a normal reaction to a confession of mass killing, and shows that you have proper senses of morality as a well-raised Tre Clan member, and indeed as a compassionate sentient being. That sense of morality will get you killed in a couple of weeks at most if you take it into space with you. It nearly got me killed.

Let's be clear about this. Even if you do what I've done, and don't go into any morally dubious or outright abhorrent lines of work such as bounty hunting, piracy, or assassination, then unless you restrict your flights to the orbital space of safe systems, you will sooner or later be attacked by someone with no such qualms. All of my kills were either in self-defence or in coming to the aid of

another trader – but even so, it's natural to wonder if you're doing the right thing. You're taught to hold a very strong respect for people's lives, and to use violence as a last resort. Up in space, if you're spending time routinely considering the morals of killing in self-defence – and I don't want to tell you that you should accept that as moral – you're going to die.

So, if you don't feel that you can, over the course of your career, kill hundreds if not thousands of people, while at the very least coming up with a rationalisation for doing so which you can accept while you're actually flying, and not giving yourself permanent psychological damage thinking it through every time you dock ... well, go into space by all means, but stick to orbital space.

Even if you can cope with that, you might die anyway. Remember that. If all three hundred of you decide when you get out of here that your reasons for going into space are good enough to deal with all I'm telling you, and you leave immediately, then this time next year half of you will be dead. The next year will get eighty percent of the rest. The remaining thirty of you will probably live relatively long lives as experienced combateers, but the odds are not good. Are your reasons worth dying for? Only you know that.

That's the first one. The second one: loneliness and isolation.

This one also surprises people. Even with the small fraction of people going into space, it's still busy up there, because the Cooperative has over seven trillion people in it. Again, stick to Lerequ orbital space, or even Lerequ system, and you won't need to deal with this. Once you leave the system, though, you're making a witchspace transit, and that really breaks things up. Witchspace transits are faster than flying through realspace, yes, but they still take time. It's fifteen days from one side of the chart to the other, and that's taking the quickest route. Everything's limited to that: not just ships, but information too.

You're used to being able to pick up the comm and talk to anyone else on the planet instantly. Even other people in the same system ... well, there might be a few seconds lag to the high orbit stations, but even that's only mildly irritating. If you want to talk to someone in Ramaan's Keep, it's probably a fifteen or twenty day round trip on the messages. If you want to send a message to another pilot, and you don't know where they are, then there's a messaging system that works, but it could be thirty or forty days before you get a reply – longer if they're in a different chart and it has to do an Eight to get back to you. Or you might never get a reply at all.

As measured by Cooperative Standard Time, you will probably spend at least half your life in witchspace. If you work on one of the big freighters, with a shift system and deadlines to meet, you could be spending ninety percent of your time there. Any other spacer you want to meet will be much the same. You are extremely unlikely to casually meet someone you know by chance – you're hardly going to be in realspace at the same time, never mind the same system. So if you want to meet someone you're not travelling with, it can take years to arrange it – if you both survive that long.

I have a very good friend on Arries, who I am finally going to visit again after I'm finished here. She's on a planet, almost permanently in realspace, so most of the synchronisation issues aren't there, and I love her dearly. It's been twelve years since I last saw her in person: other than that, it's been rare messages. Imagine having that kind of relationship with everyone important to you: your family, your friends, each other. If you're not permanently travelling with someone, your relationships will be extremely stretched.

That's only half of the stretching. You spend all that time in witchspace, from the perspective of the outside world. From your point of view, though, it's a short flash of blue. If you only do the occasional witchspace trip, this isn't noticeable. It adds up. I'm back here for my Third, and true, I was born on Lerequ just over sixty years ago. I'm thirty-eight, in Lerequ years. If I don't get killed,

then I could quite easily be back here in another sixty years.

From your perspective, your friends and family who you leave behind will age and die rapidly, and the communications delay makes it more painful. I was in Chart 5 when I got a message that my father was seriously ill. By the time I'd received the message, he'd been dead for days. It took me another thirty days to get back to Lerequ. It's the only time I've seriously considered quitting; selling up for some land-based job. I might tell you the story of why I didn't end up doing so later.

So: there's you, there's your co-pilots, and there's a whole civilisation of people you'll never see again. It gets very lonely.

Right, the final one. Cultures. We've got a lot of different cultures on Lerequ, we like to think. Even in the Tre Clan we have variety. We're quite different to many of the other clans. We're even more different to the Commune, or the Southern Ocean Corporation, or to many of the Islanders, for that matter. All that difference? On a spacer scale, it's barely there. You can learn what you need to know to get along with an Islander or a Corpster – at least to the extent of not giving unwanted offence – in about five minutes. A proper appreciation of the fine details of their culture, sure, that can take years of study. Basic civilised conversation, though, that's easy. Our cultures may be different, but there are certain assumptions that underpin them all.

There are just over two thousand worlds in Cooperative space. With the communication delays, deliberate isolation, natural insularity, species differences (though they're less important than many people think), the variety in cultures goes beyond what almost any of you can comprehend. Maybe if you've visited another system and remember all the preparations and reading you had to do, you've got the start of an idea.

You need to be very flexible, and you need to start taking out all those assumptions about what a sentient culture acts like. Every single social convention you accept now without thinking about it, every single one you can't imagine doing differently, don't even realise is there because everyone on Lerequ follows it – there's someone else who does it differently.

Language is another big part of this. Pretty much everyone in space will speak Cooperative Standard, but that's a very compact language designed to be pronounceable by all species. You can get by with it, and you'll often have to, but invest in a decent translation computer for written texts. Spoken language is trickier – a lot of the air-breathing languages are basically unpronounceable for us – but if you can at least understand when listening to them it'll help. The big catch though is body language, and that's actually worst when talking to someone with the same basic anatomy. If I twist my claws like this, it probably means I'm amused, as you all instinctively know. On Anrain, it reflects a desire to be given additional time to think of a response; on Esrece, concern. You can imagine the mess you can get into from that.

There are conventions between spacers to help with this, and at least stop interplanetary incidents happening, which I'll tell you about later, but if you're not willing to be very open-minded and flexible about almost every social convention you'll find space travel very stressful. It's not *too* difficult when you're talking to other spacers, because everyone's in roughly the same situation, but you won't get very far without talking to people from the planets you visit, and they'll almost always expect you to conform to their social conventions. I know what I'm doing and I'm used to this, and I usually need to spend about an hour reading up on my next destination before I set off. If things go wrong and I need to break my journey unexpectedly, it can get very stressful trying to pick up the important nuances while also flying my ship and dealing with whatever went wrong.

My recommendation here for all of this – if I haven't scared you off already – is to look very closely when choosing your licensing course. All you technically need to get your pilot's license is some very basic understanding of how to fly a ship. If you intend to leave the system that is not enough.

Find a course that includes a tour through the safer local systems, so you can start getting used to time divergence and cultural issues, and thinking about the moral ones. If you haven't already decided it's not for you, that will tell you – and if it does, you'll still have a qualification good for in-system work and the occasional longer trip.

That's all for today. Think about what I've said, and why you want to be in space. If you come back tomorrow, I'll start on some of the details.

The Prime Objective

This extract is taken from a session on the politics and history of the Cooperative, shortly after a discussion of the major Cooperative treaties. Names, places and other identifying details have been changed.

Remember that of the Cooperative's objectives, “prevent intersystem war” is right at the top. In service of that greater good – and let's be clear, it's a very good thing that there hasn't been a major intersystem conflict in living memory – they'll do some things that will send you right back into your shell. Let me give you an example.

It was early in my first Eight, and I was dragging some cargo into Divees. About half way down the spacelane I pick up a faint distress call. I've got plenty of fuel left, and a well-armed ship, so I swing round and hit the injectors towards it, watching the flashes of light from dying ships as I get closer.

By the time I get there, the battle looks almost over, and it's not going well. There's a rock hermit under attack from seven ships, all fugitive. Three defenders left: two Sidewinders and an Asp, all taking heavy fire. The scanner is full of scrap metal and other wreckage. I'd been in space long enough by then to notice just how suspicious this all was.

No time to think on that now, though. I give the attackers the usual warning as I'm locking on, and as expected they laugh and tell me to stay out of this. Well, like I said, the *Carapace* was – by the standards of the time, anyway - an iron ass, and they'd all been fighting for at least fifteen minutes, so they didn't last long.

Everything looks fine – no sign of any other attackers, so I'm preparing to resume my interrupted journey – and then the Asp jumps out of the system.

Turns out that this “rock hermit” is a secret Cooperative prison, which explains a lot. One of the prisoners was a hotshot pilot, so when it started to look hopeless, they'd given him a ship that was down for repairs, and sent him out with some promises of a reduced sentence if they all lived. Anyway, he decided to start early, got just far enough from the asteroids to open a wormhole without them noticing, and was gone.

They offered three thousand up front as compensation for lost profit and risks, and another six thousand if I could bring him back, or three thousand dead. Exceedingly generous, but I was literally the only ship with a witchdrive for thousands of kilometres, and this was before wormhole scanners were widely available. The only hope to catch them was to go through that wormhole now, so they didn't have time to haggle.

I dive in to the flickering wormhole. Instant condition red, and we're in interstellar space half way to Cemaaran. I guess that ship was in for repairs for a reason. No Thargoids about, but there's no way he has fuel left to get anywhere, assuming he hasn't blown the drive entirely – unfortunately, neither do I, since I burnt most of it rushing to the fight.

I open the comms, and point out that if he wants out of here, he has to follow me. I have a Galactic Witchdrive to escape with, but the wormholes from those only last a fraction of a second – no way he could follow me through it in his ship. So, he's got two options: either he ejects, I scoop him up, and he gets out that way ... or I leave on my own and he dies slowly here. I don't want the fight – it'd have been a fair fight, and it's not worth that risk just for a few thousand credits.

So he ejects. A couple of minutes later, we're in Riare. Still not enough fuel to jump anywhere else, so it's a running battle right the way to orbit, and the *Carapace* is in bad shape by the end of it. I get

to the relative safety of orbital space, when my unwilling passenger calls from the hold. As expected, he's begging for mercy. Jettison them here, they'll make their way down to the planet, no-one needs to know.

I ask him why I should do that. He tells me – I verify some details to make sure he's telling the truth, of course – and I agree. So, why did I turn down six thousand credits I really could have done with for repairs, and drop a prisoner from a top-secret prison onto an Anarchy world?

Like I said, the Cooperative is about stopping intersystem wars. My captive had been a Cooperative police cadet on Rainle. Exemplary skills and service record, tipped for the fast track to squadron commander once they've finished their training year. One day, they've just got off a patrol, and they see this bunch of locals arguing loudly with a ship captain from Xeveon and their assistant. The argument turns into an actual brawl, and he steps in to break it up.

Well, with a cop right there, they stepped apart and went back to throwing insults at each other. He's sticking around to make sure, but this time he's close enough to hear, and it becomes obvious that the “assistant” is actually this captain's slave. So, he offers to break it up by escorting the captain away, giving the locals a warning, and in the process, leads them both past the boarding line for a shuttle down to the surface. Then he shoves them on board, just as its about to depart, flashing his ID at the shuttle crew to say it's all legit. Takes off with both of them aboard.

On Rainle, slavery is extremely illegal. So when the shuttle gets to the surface, the slave gets instant asylum, and the captain is smart enough not to object there and then – they get back up to the Coriolis and lodge an immediate complaint with the Cooperative authorities and with their own ambassador, that in effect a Cooperative cop has stolen their property.

You're probably thinking this captain got no less than they deserved here, and you know, I agree, but the Xeveon ambassador went straight to the top, accusing the Cooperative of running a plot to make slavery illegal by the back door. Rainle of course refused to even consider giving their newest citizen over to them. So it all started to get out of hand.

Under normal circumstances the cadet's actions would have warranted a reprimand, and probably a demotion, but he wasn't entirely surprised when he lost his commission over it. What did surprise him was when he ended up in secure detention on the station. The Xeveonians weren't budging and had the rules on their side, Rainle couldn't back down, and the Cooperative was trying to mediate some sort of compromise.

Then the Rainlese picked up a couple of spies trying to circumvent the diplomatic process by just kidnapping the ex-slave, and there was talk of war. The Cooperative regional commissioner had to get involved to settle things down, offering various concessions to both sides, and part of that was that this cadet's charges got increased from “assault” and “abuse of authority” to “high treason”, with the choices of “plead guilty” or “suffer a mysterious accident”.

The Xeveonians get reassured that its not a Cooperative plot – or if it was, that they won't try it again. The ex-slave gets to live in peace on Rainle. The ship captain got a few thousand credits of compensation from the Cooperative. Everyone except the cadet went away reasonably happy, and the Cooperative had prevented yet another interstellar war. But the cadet got packed off to this secret prison in a different chart, for a twenty kiloday sentence.

Do not mess with the Cooperative's peacekeeping duties, is what I'm saying. Every single other rule – officially or not – is subordinate to “no intersystem wars”. If that looks unethical, then they'll ask you how ethical having millions die in an avoidable war is. It's a tough decision, how far to go in harming a few individuals to prevent a war. Make sure it's not you they're deciding it about.

The Seven Light-year Itch

This extract is taken from a session on the eight charts and trading. Those interested in the progress of the mission described within can contact their headquarters at Zavezaon.

So far as anyone knows, that seven light years is an absolute limit. People have been trying to break it since before the Cooperative was founded, and in most of the current theories of witchspace physics, it's actually impossible.

If you know your history, you know that's why the Colonials and the Humanoids are stuck here. They came from somewhere out off the top of the chart, and entered this area of space at Tezaeded. All went well for a few hundred kilodays, and then the natural movements of stars through space meant that the star they were using to link back to their home systems dropped just outside witchspace range. There's a lot of very old worlds around that area, and Tezaeded itself is the closest thing those two species have to a homeworld now.

Well, this isn't the time to go into the details – there's some very good museums on Tezaeded itself if you're interested – but even now there's a lot of Colonials who want to get back to their ancestral homeworld. It's a big thing not to have it, even if it's not really the sort of thing they think about every day.

So they've a big interest in breaking or getting around the seven light-year limit. It's quite important to the rest of us, too – there are a lot of stars just out of reach round the edge of all the charts which could open up whole new avenues of exploration and settlement if we could reach them. Every so often one of them will come up with what they think is a bright idea and ... well, usually just get themselves killed in a witchspace accident. But just occasionally they hit on something more exciting.

Anyway, I'd just started my career, and was down in Fiddler's Green when I ran into a bunch of these enthusiasts. They needed a ridiculous amount of alloys and minerals for their project, and were willing to pay well for escort duty. So I spent a while babysitting Anacondas in and out of the region, and obviously got to chatting with them a bit in the off-time about what they were doing with all this metal.

So far as we know, you can't target a witchspace jump except to a star system – you need that gravity well as an anchoring point or you end up smeared into subatomic paste. Even with forced misjumps, the Zaedvera Pocket is unreachable except through Zaedvera. Sosole at the end of it just isn't quite close enough to get to Eszara with. Their idea, though, was that you could put together a ship at Eszara, fly it through real space for a while, and eventually you would be within seven of Sosole and you could make the jump – and if that worked, you could do the same thing to cross the Tezaeded Gap and find out what had happened to the rest of the Colonials.

The catch is, you need to fly a light year in normal space first, and any normal ship will need so much maintenance in that time you probably won't be alive at the end of it. So they'd built a ship big enough to carry its own maintenance supplies and crew. Then they ran into the problem that it was now so big and slow it would take more than a Colonial lifetime to cross that distance. Rather than giving up, though – and this is what the metal was for – they made it even bigger, so it could carry a few thousand people – which of course made it even slower. But that wasn't a problem: it could carry enough fuel and supplies for a couple of hundred kilodays.

So, at the end of all this, after spending billions of credits, they got a few thousand people dedicated or obsessed enough to go through with it, and launched this “generation ship” into deep space towards Sosole. The ship's now about ten kilodays into its voyage, and from what they say at the

HQ at Zavezaon, still doing okay. If all goes well, in several generations it'll be in range, and give Sosolian traffic control a real shock when it drops into the system. Then their real plan gets to begin – building an even bigger one to launch a full-scale colonisation effort across the Tezaeded Gap. Long term thinking, certainly.

Friends and Enemies

This extract is from a session on planetary politics and their effects on trade. Some names have been changed.

Now, that reminds me. It wasn't the point I was going to make, but it's important. You've got to be prepared for unexpected consequences. If you get involved in a rough situation, you'll make friends and enemies. Sometimes it'll just be for the duration, and your enemies will shrug it off – and importantly, stop shooting at you – once it's all over. Sometimes they'll take it personally and you'll be glad the things that make it hard to meet your friends also make it fairly tricky for your enemies to get to you. What you can't always tell is when you're going to get involved. My advice? Do what seems right, and deal with the results as you go along.

About a kiloday ago I was hanging around near the Arance cluster, and picked up some gossip about a shortage of hydroponics kit at Ininlequ. I thought it was worth the risk, so I load up the hold and set off. As luck would have it, I run straight into a nasty pirate ambush at Intiso and get some damage they aren't able to fix there, so I take a detour to Ususoner for repairs. While I'm hanging around the station there waiting for the mechanics to do their job, I find this advert posted from a Director Amirmoez of one of the agricultural co-ops on Ininlequ, offering 150 credits a barrel for hydroponics kit.

Well, since I bought them at about 60, that's a great stroke of luck, so I put together a quick reply and send it off with an estimated arrival time, and get some sleep. The journey in is quiet, and out of habit I check the market rate as I'm waiting to dock. There's a standing offer of 130 credits from someone called MetiGroup – oddly, with no limit on it. You could bring in an Anaconda-full and they'd have to honour it, so usually they're placed well below the market rate to Hoover up surplus goods. This one was a good ten credits higher than the next best public offer.

I'm starting to think that maybe someone's made a very expensive typo, when Amirmoez calls me. He's already at the station, and wants the cargo transferred immediately to his Transporter – it's needed urgently on the surface. Fine with me: I let traffic control know and they find me a spot on the same landing grid.

Still, twenty-five barrels takes a while to move across, so while that's going on I ask Amirmoez what's going on with all the weird pricing. Turns out that MetiGroup has been taking advantage of the shortage to deliberately corner the import market. It's costing millions of credits a day to keep that offer up, so someone must be bankrolling them. But it's made things a bit inconvenient for Amirmoez, and starting ten days ago most of his existing kit burnt out unexpectedly. He suspects sabotage, but can't prove anything.

I'd checked up on Ininlequ's culture on the way in, as usual, and apparently it's usually a fairly peaceful place – unusual taste in sculpture aside – with everyone just getting along with the farming as best they can. The surface is a dry sun-blasted wasteland, but get a few hundred metres down in some regions and there's a vast network of underground rivers and lakes, where the rodents have happily tunnelled out a civilisation producing some of the best meals in the chart. But with no natural light or soil, they need the hydroponics kit to grow the ingredients.

One other thing the guide was pretty clear they didn't have was cut-throat corporate politics of the kind I'm seeing now. I talk a bit more as the last of the barrels is being loaded on to his ship, and he tells me that MetiGroup has hired a bunch of consultants from Oresreat who are probably behind this new business strategy. I quickly pull up the cultural entry for Oresreat – noting as I do that that's a long way to go to hire consultants – and, yes, that makes a lot of sense. The whole planet is run by an extremely ruthless corporation.

Then a thought occurs to me. Amirmoez is about to take a supply of crucial machinery and himself in an unarmed transport ship down to the surface. If they're copying some of Oresreat's anti-competitive strategies, maybe they're copying all of them. I point this out, and ... well, he hadn't thought about that. I say that I'll throw in an escort as close to the surface as the *Carapace* will get, free with the delivery – and request launch clearance.

He gets the Transporter right behind me in the queue, and we start heading down towards the surface. His co-op's tunnels are inconveniently near one of the poles and Ininlequ is a big planet, so we've got a way to go out of geostationary orbit. Once we get past about 70 degrees latitude, we're out of scanner range of the Coriolis network. Normally that wouldn't be a big deal, because we're only a few hundred kilometres above the surface, but this time we get two Mambas heading up to meet us.

I position the *Carapace* between them and the Transporter, and lock missiles on to both of them. Both scan as Clean, not that I believe this means anything other than “hasn't been caught yet”, but it could still be coincidence. Then they split up – one breaks left, the other right – and I can't cover the Transporter from both at once. They're assassins, definitely, but I can't legally fire on them until they take a shot.

I get as close to the Transporter as I dare, making them swing out even wider if they want to fire, and tell Amirmoez that as soon as they start firing he needs to make a sharp dive. I wonder if they'll actually open fire at all, though, since the *Carapace* clearly outclasses them in combat, and I'm not flying like a pushover. Obviously better for them to have a failed assassination than to get their target but be dead themselves.

Then the sirens go off and Amirmoez is diving – and for a brief instant I'm looking around in confusion because neither Mamba has taken a shot. I was too busy keeping an eye on them that I didn't notice a Ferdy coming in behind us just out of scanner range, and lining up with its military laser.

Fortunately, Amirmoez followed my instructions, and dropped the Transporter out of the line of fire as soon as the first hit came in. That threw the Ferdy's aim off – and it gives me time to line up a burst of fire from my aft laser. It's a direct hit, and they pull up and out of the way ... just as both Mambas go in for the kill.

I hit the missile trigger twice, hoping it'll at least panic them, then wrench the control harness around to try to at least interpose the *Carapace* between one of the Mambas and Amirmoez. It's a sharp turn, and it sets up some pretty unpleasant currents on the bridge, but I'm used to those by now. Amirmoez, on the other hand, is pulling the same sorts of manoeuvres, but isn't used to it at all, so my comms are filled with screams and curses that I don't have time to mute.

I get a clear shot on one of the Mambas, and their ship turns into a debris field. The other one gets a few more hits in on the Transporter before my missile forces them to break it off and evade, which just leaves the Ferdy. With a military laser, it could blow the Transporter in a second if it got a good hit, but Amirmoez is dodging well – or at least with the unpredictability of a novice pilot – and so far the Ferdy's out of scanner range so they're having to line their shots up completely manually, while I'm making much easier shots at them.

Planetary traffic control acknowledges the distress message, and notifies me that a Viper team is on its way, ETA two minutes.

The assassins pick it up too, and switch tactics, the Ferdy coming in on injectors, glowing red hot as it knocks the upper atmosphere aside. The Mamba's now desperately corkscrewing away from my missile, so I launch a second to ensure it stays out of the fight, and try to line up a shot on the Ferdy.

No good, not at that speed, but their own evasive action meant they couldn't fire either. The assassin drops off injectors before their hull melts, then swings round and fires at me point blank.

Big target, not really dodging ... a much easier shot than Amirmoez would have been, plus no-one's covering me. The entire aft shield's down before I can swing out of the way, and there's a bunch of red lights on one of the instrument panels suggesting that they got a few more hits in too. Destroy me, and they can pick off the Transporter and still be gone before the cops show up.

We're in a close dogfight, and that's mainly about turning circles. The Ferdy and the Cobra III have the same angular turn rate, but I was guarding the Transporter, so I was going a lot slower and my circle is tighter. By the time they've braked down to my speed, I'm well out of their sights. They're pulling their ship around to try to find me, and I've got a couple of seconds of calm to get them into my sights first.

A blast of fire from the front laser smashes through their shields, and then I tap my own fuel injectors, just for an instant, to leap over their head. A slight attitude adjustment – harder than you might think when the acceleration is dragging you away from the controls, even with a full flight harness on – and they're in my aft sights. Same again, and both their shields are down, and they're leaking vapour through a hole in their hull.

I hold the injectors down and loop right around at high speed, trying to ignore the temperature warnings, and the sense that the water around me is getting uncomfortably warm – did I lose some heatsinks just then? - then head back in at them so I can face them with my intact fore shield. There's a flash of blue, and the familiar outlines of a witchspace wormhole. I don't see the Mamba on the scanner anywhere – either the missile got it, or it got well away – so I check how Amirmoez is doing.

He's stopped screaming, anyway, though whether he's stopped panicking or he's shouted himself hoarse I can't tell. There's a big scorch mark running from the exhaust housing down through to the underside of the Transporter where some of the incoming fire got through its shields, but it doesn't quite appear to have penetrated the hull, and he's flying level again. I take him in as close as I can get without burning up in the lower atmosphere, then the Vipers take over for the rest of his journey.

So, as I was saying, you never quite know what you're going to get into. I headed back to the station, picked up some cargo, and headed back to Ususoner for more repairs and sarcastic comments from the techs, not thinking much more of it all.

Couple of days ship time later, I dock at Ramaa for a good night's sleep. When I wake up, there's an urgent message in my inbox from Director Amirmoez. Turns out that the second Mamba did escape my missile, but then got pinned down and captured by a police patrol. That got the local cops investigating, and they managed to find enough evidence to link MetiGroup to the assassination attempt and sabotage. Their offices get raided, lots of arrests, including most of the Oresreatean consultants ... but one of the ones who escaped put a several thousand credit assassination contract out on me.

That sort of money is enough to attract seasoned killers, and a single ship won't stand up to them for very long. Fortunately the first few underestimated how tough a Cobra III can be, and after that I lost most of them by sunskimming all the way to Inzaan. Still, there were a few more close calls with the persistent ones as news of the contract spread, and I ended up having to jump to Chart 1 before I lost them. Not the sort of consequences you expect from a routine trading run, but the Cooperative's full of these plots and schemes and sooner or later you're going to get drawn into a few of them.

The Elite

This extract is taken from the end of a session on combat tactics and equipment. Our catalogue contains several wider accounts of the Battle of Isxees and the Cooperative war strategy as well as biographies of the Elite pilots mentioned here.

Have I ever met any Elite pilots myself? Just once. Two of them, though, that time – Ren Klaus, who'd gone back into bounty hunting after Klaus-Kline Labs folded, and Maricela Cedeño, who you'll recognise as the current president of the Elite Federation, though back then she was working as a contract mercenary. Now, you know my general opinion on the Elite Rankings. Too much reward for blowing up people on the say so of a Tiquat parking meter. It's taken me sixteen years in realspace to get most of the way to Deadly, and if you only count the kills I had a real choice in making, I'd barely rate Competent. So, don't put too much weight on the rankings in general.

But, to get to Elite is something else. Even for a cold killer, it requires more persistence, luck and skill than most people have. These two, their ships were technological miracles. I've been around a bit, and with a few favours here and there the *Carapace* has some kit you can't buy in the shops, but these two ... Klaus's looked like an Asp, just about, but I got a look at the specs while we were going through battle plans, and the inside made an Asp look like a Krait. The other ... I've never seen a ship like it before or since - must have been a complete custom build. Size of a Boa, and it could run circles around a Sidewinder. Must have cost her millions.

This was at the end of the last big Thargoid incursion, when systems were falling to them across the Eight. They'd taken Isxees early on in the conflict, and were laying siege to Ramaan's Keep – you ever wonder why it's called the Keep? That's why. There was a big joint fleet under Cooperative command massed at Titequ, and I'd ended up there after escorting one of their supply convoys, which is a whole other story.

Now, you've got to remember this was a while ago. A lot of the kit people take for granted nowadays either didn't exist or couldn't be bought. No shield boosters except some early prototypes, fuel injectors worked but would burn an entire tank in a minute, and no hardheads. Well, almost no hardheads. If you check the dates, they went on general sale not long after the Battle of Isxees. The supply convoys had been bringing the parts in, secretly, to Titequ.

So the plan was to go in to Isxees, and take back the witchpoint. They'd use these new missiles which should be able to resist the Thargoid's ECM, and hopefully they wouldn't know what hit them. And of course some military planner noted that a Cobra III can carry four of the things, which was a lot better than their Asps, so they offered me a full military refit for the *Carapace* if I volunteered.

Now normally war really isn't my sort of thing – the fewer fights I get into the better – but this was different. We'd lost actual systems to the Thargoids, and some of the projections had us losing entire charts if they got a decent foothold. So it was a case of die here or die later, really, unless we won. So I signed up. They put me with the other volunteers in a separate squadron, so we didn't mess up the discipline in the naval formations, and that's how I met those two Elites.

We jumped in wings of four – the first one opening the wormhole and the rest following – to give a good balance of spreading out our entry points into the system and keeping fuel for our injectors and if necessary a retreat. They'd coordinated the attack with the defenders at Anve, so they came out of witchspace at about the same time. Then we locked our missiles on, fired them off, and went into laser combat.

It worked, too. The Thargoids had the witchpoint well guarded, but by the time they figured out that

their ECM wasn't working and they might need to dodge or shoot the missiles down, it was too late. Won't work again, but it got us in, and we lasered the rest to death. Then we secured the witchpoint so the carriers and other capital ships could jump in an hour later. Now you'll notice they had to be in transit long before they had any possible way to know if we'd been successful – and if we hadn't been, they'd have jumped right into a heavily reinforced deathtrap – must have taken a lot of bravery to go through with that plan.

Then we could dock and reload our missiles (and let the survivors from Anve join in), and we rolled the Thargoids right back to the planet. Klaus and Cedeño must have got over a hundred kills each – and I mean warships, not drones – with the fancy ships and fancier flying they had. Saved everyone's life a few times on the way in, they did, but we got every last one of the warships, and started celebrating.

Of course, then we got to Isxees and found the Thargoids had been spending the last hundred days bombarding it from orbit until its defences were down, and then just kept going. Four billion dead, and pretty much all the infrastructure destroyed. It took us two hours of orbiting the planet and searching – with an entire fleet – before we managed to raise anyone at all on the comms. They'd been targeting power sources once the defence grid failed, so all the survivors had been running very dark. We literally didn't hear from them until we got a Sidewinder close enough for them to see it.

I'm not going to go into the way the Cooperative messed up the reconstruction work, but that system's now as much a memorial to that as it is to the Thargoid assault. The survivors hate the lot of us and I can't say I blame them. It's a place most people run through quickly, sunskimming if they can, not looking at the scarred planet – if they have to go that way at all.

I think this is a good time for a short break.