

A Galaxii Series Preview

OVERKILL



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Overkill by Christina Engela

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First Edition

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Foreword

“Overkill” provides a glimpse into the life and background of one of the main characters of the Galaxii Series – Mykl d’Angelo. Galaxii is set in the not too distant future – at a time when an Earth shattered by a 21st century global nuclear war has, more than a century later, risen from the ashes to become the seat of a largely peaceful and prosperous stellar Terran Empire.

The series tells of the struggles and adventures of realistic characters, each with their own unique interests and obstacles to overcome: career-minded Space Fleet officers, solo adventurers and rogues, Corsairs – space pirates who in their pursuit of wealth and fame, turned the less-travelled space lanes into perilous journeys – and aliens of all persuasions.

“Overkill” is about the early life of Mykl (a futuristic alternative spelling for Michael) d’Angelo, the main character of “Blachart”, the first book in the Galaxii Series. It’s a prequel that fills in a few of the blanks – since in “Blachart”, the reader learns that Mr. d’Angelo had been a highly decorated Edonian war hero before joining the Terran’s Space Fleet Academy and embarking on a short first attempt at a career in the ‘Fleet. “Overkill” recounts the story of Mykl d’Angelo’s early life as a teenager.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading them as much as I did writing them!

Best regards,

Christina Engela

Setting the Scene

“Okay, back to business.” Captain Falcone muttered, bringing the meeting being held in the Antares’ conference room back to order. “By a strange coincidence, we’re also en route to help a freighter that put out a distress call. Now, I believe their engines are beyond repair, not that we

have the time to spare to help them with repairs anyway. Besides, considering the state our Chief Entech is in, he might do more damage than good. Due to the urgent nature of our mission, we will simply have to take the crew aboard – they'll have to go along for the ride. How many are there, Ripley?"

"One, sir." His Exo, Commander Ripley Jones replied.

"One?"

"Yes, sir."

"Excuse me?"

"Just the one, Captain." Ripley repeated. "It seems some unfortunate incident onboard disabled the engines of the Pegasus and killed some of its crew."

"I can't decide if this lone survivor is very lucky – or *very unlucky!*" Falcone smiled wryly. "Do we know anything at all about him?"

"Just the basics, sir." Ripley continued. "His name is Mykl d'Angelo, 33 years old, born on the planet Eden, and grew up during their civil war." She shifted some notes in front of her. "He fought on the side of the Edonian Democratic Alliance as a child soldier – starting at the age of 17, before becoming a fighter pilot in their air force."

"*They had an air force?*" Lt. Hanson asked, surprised.

"Mostly primitive first world war type fighters." Ripley remarked. "Anyway, he became something of an 'ace', scoring twenty-five kills in aerial combat. When the Empire finally entered the war a few years later to support the Dems, Mr. d'Angelo enlisted as a local volunteer pilot in a special squadron equipped and run by the Space Fleet's Fighter Wing – they were trained on and flew the Skorpiad aerospace fighters."

"That was quite a leap from strings and struts." Falcone commented. "How did he do?"

"By the age of nineteen, he was doing just as well as before, it seems. By the end of the war, he was a Pilot-Captain and an 'ace' with fifty-seven confirmed kills to his credit. He received five awards from the EDA, including three special citations of valor and two medals – the Blue Star for gallantry and the A.M. Fields Medal for bravery. He also received a citation 'for outstanding leadership skills in combat' from the CO of the Terran Fighter Wing based on Eden. When Eden rejoined the Commonwealth, he had no life to go back to on Eden, I suppose, and decided to join the Space Fleet – that's where I met him, sir – at the Academy. He was in the same class as me."

"Did he do well there?" Falcone asked, not at all unimpressed.

"Yes, sir. He did. *Very* well – graduated near the top of the class – '*Grad Lux*'. That's not bad considering he had no recognized formal Terran education, and he was a little older than most of us – he started there later than we did. I joined the Academy straight out of high school – almost 18."

"So he has to be a fast learner." Falcone smiled. "Or his record and citations must have helped his application to the Academy."

"Yes sir, he caught up fast. I seem to recall he mentioned the CO of the Fighter Wing put in a good word on his behalf – but you'd have to ask him about that, sir."

"Hmm."

"Anyway, after the Academy, his first commission was as a Lieutenant aboard the *Valdek*."

“With Captain Andersen,” Falcone mused. “Yes, I knew Andersen. The Valdek too, she’s a good ship.”

“He was there two years, then he was promoted to Lt. Commander aboard the *Santorini*. Then, as a Commander, he served as Exec for Captain Akida of the *Liberty*. He’s received three Space Fleet awards for valor, and several notations for dedication to duty – in addition to his already impressive decorations from his service on Eden.”

“Why did he quit the service?” Falcone asked.

“He resigned two years ago, citing personal reasons, but ...”

“Yes, Commander?” Falcone asked, seeing the look of puzzlement on her face.

“Sir, when I accessed his file, some of it was classified above my level, and inaccessible.”

“Any idea why?”

“No, sir.”

“You seem to have known this man reasonably well?” The Captain noted questioningly. “At the Academy, I mean?”

“That’s why it’s so puzzling, sir. If I had any idea why, I would tell you.”

Falcone gave a deep sigh.

“Never mind,” He smiled at her, and winked. “This sort of thing happens in our line of work.”

“Right,” Falcone said, turning back to the meeting. “I see this d’Angelo is quite a colorful character. We must be cautious. We’re investigating Starbase 91’s mysterious silence – and the silence of the Holbrook. If Corsairs were involved, then Mr. d’Angelo, his ship and his S.O.S. might be little less than a diversion or an ambush. On the other hand,” He said noting the shock on her face, “He might not. His life is at risk, so we have to give him the benefit of the doubt.” He gave each of them, especially Ripley, a penetrating stare. “If all goes well, once he is aboard, I want him confined to guest quarters, his every move watched – Lt. Hanson?”

“I’ll be on him so tight you’ll think he’s me, sir.”

“Please, Hanson – too much information.” Falcone quipped drily. Hanson blushed, and grinned at the unintended innuendo. Falcone continued. “He can have one of the V.I.P suites. I don’t want him mixing freely with the crew. If he isn’t who he claims to be – or if he is, and he’s a Corsair agent, the less he sees and learns the better. If he’s not, we can apologize later – if not, no harm done.”

“Understood, Captain.”

Distracted, Ripley allowed the remainder of the meeting to flow around her like a river. Among the notes she’d brought along was a picture. In it were two people, both in lieutenant’s uniforms. Happier times, perhaps. The world seemed to fade away around her a little as she stared into it. His handsome features were crisp and clean. The smile on his face was warm and genuine. She and Mykl had been in a relationship once, back in their Academy days – though however briefly. In spite of that, Ripley didn’t know very much about him – he was a rather private individual, reluctant to talk about his history, and especially about what happened to him before... on Eden.

Overkill

Imagine, if you will:

Eden: a planet so unlike the imagery evoked by its name as to be the embodiment of sarcasm itself.

Torn apart by a violent, bloody civil war that had already lasted decades, the people who lived, fought and died there were – almost to a man – jaded, cynical and bitter, and if nothing else, survivors. Eden was a lost colony once founded on a habitable planet many light years away from Earth. It was green and lush and full of promise – which is why it attracted so many people keen to make a fresh start. Unfortunately, that dream had struck rock bottom early on.

Within five years, without adequate social management, petty differences between diverse groups of colonists led to civil and social disputes that quickly spiraled out of control and escalated to violence. That violence quickly led to the young colony splitting into two distinct armed camps, and losing contact with the Terran Empire – which is what led to them becoming a lost colony in the first place. These armed camps quickly solidified into actual states – the Democratic Edonian Republic, and the Edonian Marxist People's Republic. These had been at each other's throats for nigh on twenty-five years – and as many years had passed since the last communications had been received from Earth. Meanwhile, the soldiers of the Edonian Civil War fought and killed each other with whatever they could muster under the circumstances.

At the onset of the war, the colony's only space ship – the one that had been responsible for delivering the colonists and the necessary materials and equipment to establish a colony on Eden – held orbit around the planet, kept out of the reach of both sides – or so the captain thought.

Both sides coveted the *Exeter* – and not just for the weapons and shuttles and machinery she carried, but for the technical knowledge stored in her computers required to manufacture *more* – and that's exactly why Captain Sanders decided to keep the ship neutral. Later, historians would record that she hoped the war would be brought to an end quickly without the *Exeter's* involvement on either side. Receiving requests – and *demands* – from both sides to deliver the ship and its treasures to the surface, Captain Sanders held firm and insisted that hostilities cease immediately and representatives be sent to the *Exeter* to negotiate a peace. At first, both sides scoffed at Sanders' demand, but eventually the allure of the *Exeter's* treasures became too great to resist.

Exeter's last two shuttles – one from each side – returned and landed on the ship under the pretext of diplomatic negotiations which were to be held onboard the *Exeter*, with Captain Sanders and her senior officers acting as mediator. Unfortunately for the *Exeter*, it was all a ruse. Both sides used the talks as a cover to mount attacks on the ship, using commando tactics once aboard.

What really happened next remains a mystery, but what became known later is that in the fighting, the *Exeter* was badly damaged, leading to its destruction in orbit, along with both shuttles and all on board. In the end, neither side gained the secrets to make advanced weaponry to feed the war-machine, while everyone lost the ability to leave Eden or to communicate with Earth. Unfortunately, this blow didn't dampen the desire of either side to destroy the other. Instead, both sides blamed the other, swore a bloody vengeance, knuckled down and made do with what they had available. A local weapons industry sprang up almost overnight,

manufacturing the sort of weapons used by their remote ancestors, so that from memory and by trial and error, Humans in deep space began to pound each other into the mud over petty ideological differences or for that most sincere of all Human motives – hatred and its cousin, vengeance.

At first, improvised tanks mass-produced from converted agricultural tractor designs rolled towards each other across open fields and farmlands, with the first soldiers of the Democratic Edonian Militia and the Edonian People's Army shooting at each other from trenches with single-shot hunting rifles and shot-guns. In the cities, archaic factories mass-produced what technologies were most needed and what was possible without support from Earth – but within a really impressive six months, the two armies were already shooting lead bullets at each other from guns manufactured in Edonian factories. Within two years, machine guns rattled overhead the trenches. By year four, all-terrain transport vehicles made the military much more mobile, causing the front to expand dramatically at both ends as each tried to out-flank the other. By year eight, the first fighter aircraft appeared – within months of the first string-and-strut spotter planes taking to the air to spy on the enemy.

Fifteen years after the initial landing, when what was supposed to have been a thriving Terran colony on the planet Eden, life had become instead centered around a perpetual stalemate – a line of opposing trenches dug into the damp earth nearly two hundred kilometers long!

The sky was a pall of grey from horizon to horizon and there was the sound of distant thunder. This wasn't a fireworks display, and it wasn't a storm... well, any *natural* storm. It was a storm of steel and fire, and flesh and blood.

The guns had been firing all night again – big ones, little ones, sometimes with pauses between them, sometimes a deafening chaotic crescendo, replete with distant flashes of destruction and faint crackles of death on the horizon. Everywhere smoke rose into the sky, obscuring what might have been an otherwise clear sunny day, and the thunder that shook the ground came from the big guns on both sides, righteous giants that pounded the deserving enemy and all their monstrous children into the mud!

Adamsville – former capital city of this lost Terran colony, *Eden*, was a city on the edge of oblivion – a pock-marked, shell-cratered shambles that had been steadily obliterated by months of high explosive shelling. In the right kind of light, say just before dawn or just after sunset – or under these storm clouds for instance – it had begun to look like something between a lunar landscape, or Berlin in April 1945. For many people, forgetting that Adamsville had been there since before the war, it had seemed to be a stupid place to put a city. Many people were still going to die. A great many – and a lot of *them* would've argued that it was a stupid place to put a *front*.

Mykl d'Angelo, a stout young lad of sixteen years stood behind the cover of the ruined bullet and shrapnel-shredded garden wall that surrounded what remained of his parent's luxury home. If four complete walls and a roof that didn't leak could be called a *luxury*, then it had been luxurious... until fairly recently. The *other* luxury which many children took for granted was also noteworthy by its absence – parents. Both Mum and Dad were dead now, killed in the

incessant violence of the past few years as it rolled over their city, their neighborhood, and their home like giant waves of terror, sorrow and despair.

An aunt who'd moved in to live with them to care for Mykl and his twin sister Maxine had only recently died as well, and now it was just the two of them – living in the roofless, half burned-out ruin that had been their home.

All of their young lives, Mykl and Maxine d'Angelo had known the shrieking of shells, the flashing on the horizon that adults had originally told them was the gods arguing in the distance, and later on, that it was bad men being stopped by good men... and the harsh note of gunfire. All of their youthful innocence had been lived in fear of the rumble of the distant thunder as it grew steadily closer. The sight of convoys of military vehicles, trucks, troops and armor passing their home on the way to the front had become ...ordinary. In the springtime, civilians often handed flowers plucked from their gardens to the passing soldiers, offering them prayers for victory, safety and deliverance from the horrors the specter of defeat presented.

But that was not happening today. No – there were no flowers anymore. It was autumn, and the gray clouds shrouding the morning sky heralded the fast-approaching Edonian winter. The hundreds of figures streaming past their home now weren't soldiers, nor were they even moving in the same direction. He watched the lines of stragglers, men and women, young and old, as they slowly moved past in a steady stream – wordlessly, grimly looking ahead or at the ground. Some carried their meager possessions with them, looking every bit as interesting as the black-and-white newsreel images from all the documentaries on the interesting wars in Earth history he remembered seeing while at school as a much younger, more innocent boy. Their faces all looked like those same people, the hollow, tragic looks of hopelessness and despair in their eyes was the same. He averted his young eyes from them, saddened by the tragedy of it all, angered by the powerlessness of his life and circumstances – a burden and a tragedy that should have been beyond his ken.

The stream of wounded being carried from the front on battered vehicles – a recent feature which had intensified right up to this point – indicated that things were not going too well. The Reds were making gains – getting closer. An occasional com-jeep would race past, loaded with injured soldiers, some of whom lay stacked atop each other and whose only movements seemed to be caused by unevenness in the road surface. The drivers would callously honk their horns at the refugees, and shout at them to get out of the way – there were plenty more where those came from, apparently, waiting for the vehicle's return!

Panic had suddenly replaced the seemingly endless numb inaction and drudgery that had occupied the daily life of the people for what seemed so long. The bitter six months siege of Adamsville was nearly at an end – but not the end they had hoped for, nor the one promised in the many fiery speeches made by their leaders... The defenders were reeling, the defenses faltering. A lot of refugees were trying to flee the besieged rubble that used to be Adamsville, before it became their last resting place. The former capital city of the planet had been surrounded by the Red forces just the day before. The Reds had finally succeeded in outmaneuvering the failing Demo army at Adamsville, and cut it off from its support and supply lines! The refugees would probably reach the Western outskirts of the city by nightfall, only to

be slaughtered *en masse* by the advancing Reds – who didn't care a damn about human rights or compassion or lofty ideals embodied by conventions of war. If they won, by whatever means, they were the ruling power on Eden – and who would judge them for atrocities?

Mykl looked through the cracked lenses of his father's old field glasses, and with one arm held the auto-rifle slung around his neck and shoulder. He wasn't a soldier, he was just a kid surviving a nightmare, looking out for himself and his sister. He'd never wanted to be involved in the war, but like others – like the people walking past him in small clusters and long, endless lines, he had little choice in the matter! The boy felt the familiar pang of hunger gnawing at him. They'd last eaten anything remotely resembling a meal the day before. Food was becoming scarcer than usual, and expensive too! They had very little left in the ruin to barter with.

Suddenly, through the glasses, Mykl recognized the sinister striped camouflage of Red tanks advancing up the hill in his direction! The Reds were there already! Mounds of rubble and blackened walls marked the locations of other former homes along the route. The lead tanks began firing their guns, probably to maximize panic in the fleeing populace. Shells began screeching close by – closer than before! An ear-splitting roar signaled the demolition of another house further down the road! The ground trembled beneath him, and instinctively he ducked as shrapnel smacked the outside of the low wall and decimated the unkempt shrubbery behind him! He dared to look over the wall again. The tanks were moving closer all the time, at not much faster than a walking pace – and the sudden distant screams and the staccato clatter of machine guns told him they were firing at the fleeing civilians!

Mykl turned and ran for the house – the Reds wouldn't pass up the chance to flatten whatever structures they could see still standing! Maxine was his sister – his twin. She was his whole family at that point, the only person in the whole world that mattered to him – and she was inside the ruin, most likely inside the crude shelter they'd built in what had been the living room.

“*Max!*” He called urgently, racing inside, turning corners and skidding to a stop in the living room doorway.

The scene was surreal. She was folding washing on the ruined kitchen counter under a roofless sky of gray clouds! The pretty young brunette, her hair tied up in a pony with a pretty pink ribbon, looked up at him, wide-eyed – recognizing the fear in his voice! They were always afraid now – if it wasn't bombs or bullets, it was the scavengers stealing whatever they could to sell on the black-market, or the various outbreaks of disease and plague that had decimated the population in recent months.

“*They're here!*” He panted, wide-eyed. “*The Reds! They're here!*”

“What?” She began – but they couldn't wait any more – he grabbed her by the wrist, and dragged her with him, protesting all the way, to the back entrance. They exited through the old kitchen door, just as a loud explosion flattened the front of the ruined house. The roar of the detonation rang in their ears as they ran for cover into the overgrown garden. Falling bits of masonry rained down and thudded into the tall wild grass around them. Mykl and Maxine

d'Angelo ran with nightmarish rhythmical slowness towards a shallow ditch in the shrubbery, just as bullets suddenly zipped a dust spray behind them!

Mykl's shoulder took a hammer-blow – he felt Max's body jerk and pull him off-balance, hard to one side, and they tumbled headlong into the long grass in a tangle of limbs. The auto-rifle and field glasses went flying. In the adrenaline-fuelled moments that followed, all he could hear was his own breathing. His head ringing, ignoring the sharp, burning pain in his right shoulder – his arm feeling mostly numb and useless – he crawled back to his sister, calling her name frantically as she lay motionless, face-down in the grass. Small flying insects came swarming up to his face in the humidity of the long grass. Patches of red had oozed and spread quickly around the large rips and craters in the back of her shredded t-shirt as he watched. Then he realized with horror that the rips were not just in her shirt! Moaning in a combination of anger and abject horror, Mykl gently turned her over, cringing as he saw the same bloody mess reflected on her front!

“No, no, no...no...” He whimpered. Mykl didn't even try to stop the tears as they began to flow freely down his cheeks as his face distorted with a murderous cocktail of fear, horror, anger and grief. Suddenly, her body convulsed. She was still alive!

Maxine's eyes flickered open and found his. He held her, clinging to her, ignoring the hellfire and pandemonium erupting around them, explosions, gunfire, the roar of engines, throbbing loudly nearby – all of that existed outside the little bubble of reality they were in. He gently brushed errant strands of her soft long hair away from her ashen face, as she gasped and panted, making a bubbling sound as blood entered her lungs. Her shaking fingers of her left hand, dripping with her blood found his right hand, and held on tight. Blood bubbled from one nostril, and she coughed and swallowed.

“Hold on!” Mykl sobbed frantically. His mind seemed to be numb and at the same time racing at hyper-speed to find a solution for the insoluble. *“I'll get you out of here!”*

Mykl was becoming hysterical – there was no other word for it. *Where could he take her to? Where could he find help?* The world was falling apart around them – and Mykl knew there were no hospitals, no clinics for miles around – no help at all! He also knew, with surprising maturity and yet in his own still child-like way, that even if he could reach such a place, it would already be too late for her! There was nothing that could be done – nothing at all! It had been done – and it could not be undone!

Suddenly Maxine stopped panting, and rested back in his arms. She became strangely calm, as if nothing had happened. Her eyes found his and locked on. They were together, brother and sister, locked in that moment in their private universe. Her free hand found the wet, slick patch on his upper arm – near his shoulder. He'd been lucky – the bullet had more-or-less grazed him. But even so, it was by no means 'just a scratch' – damage had been done. The bullet had cut a trench along the back of his shoulder blade and across his upper right arm at the shoulder. Her brother was so numb with shock and grief that he almost forgot to wince at the pain, as she withdrew her hand, wet with his blood.

“You're hurt!” Maxine rasped, her teeth and lips red with her own blood. *“I'm so sorry, Myki!”*

“It’s nothing, Max!” He whimpered, dismissing her concern with false bravado, and pulled her body closer to him with his left arm, and clung on tightly. She coughed again, blood streaming from her mouth and nose this time.

“You’re not alone!” He cried, his voice distorted by torment, tears obscuring his vision of her.

“*N...neither are... you!*” Were her last words, almost whispered. He watched the light of life leave his sister’s beautiful eyes, and she was gone.

“Max?” He called her name, shaking her body. “*Max?*”

Young Mykl collapsed over her body in grief, crying, screaming, sobbing. Around him, the explosions were becoming more distant, the rattle of machine-gun fire fading, the roar of engines becoming more regular. Utterly grief-stricken, tears streaming from his eyes and even from his nose, young Mykl d’Angelo gave himself over to the hopelessness and anger that was already boiling over within him. It smothered all doubts, all fear, any thought for consequences. He heard his own heart pounding in his head, the rhythmic pulsing aching burning sensation in his shoulder subsided somewhat, and he felt like his body contained a wound-up spring that could power the universe! His body twanged like high tensile steel – and the pain in his shoulder? That searing pain now seemed like an infusion of electricity – of *power!* Still hunched there with his sister’s body, young Mykl let out a scream of pure anguish. And then another of pure rage, eyeing the broken body of his twin, a warning for all the world to hear! He reached out, recovered his father’s old auto-rifle, and dragged it closer to him by the sling.

He had nothing left to lose now! No-one to save, no-one to protect anymore! Nothing at all to live for now but – what? Justice? Vengeance! If he died now, what would it truly matter? He accepted that he had perhaps minutes left to live, maybe even hours – but he was going to use what time he had left to make them *pay!* The boy scrambled to his adrenaline-numbed feet, knees trembling slightly with shock, nearly fell over with the effort. He half-fumbled the weapon with his injured arm as he plucked it from the bed in the long grass, almost dropping it. He recovered it, and held it firm. Grimacing with pain as he slid the bolt back to cock it, he allowed the torture inside him to manifest in the demented expression in his eyes. Setting his smooth jaw, Mykl d’Angelo started to run toward the street.

The last tanks of the Red armor group were just passing by the blazing rubble that had been home. These were large truck-sized machines that could transport 20 soldiers inside their armored bellies. The barrel of an artillery piece jutted out of the turret near the front end, the heated barrel still smoking faintly but perceptibly. Machine-gunners jeered at him from their open hatches atop the sleek bodies of the long tanks, mockingly showing him raised middle fingers! With a sudden roar, the gun fired a shell into a still-standing structure across the block, levelling it with the resulting explosion. A moment later, the canon mechanism ejected the shell-casing from the side of the turret – it sailed through the air a short distance, landed on the gravelly earth, and rolled and clanged away, stopping in the gutter.

The rear gunner on the back of the nearest tank spotted him, and traversed his machinegun to open fire – but young Mykl ducked below the body-line of the same tank’s hull and from that short distance, the gunner’s short burst of fire overshot. Mykl made use of the opportunity and instinctively mounted the rear of the tank at the side by climbing a recessed ladder, grabbing onto some extra equipment strapped onto the outside of the hull to stabilize himself!

“Where’d he go?” He heard a gruff voice of one of the gunners grunt at another.
“Dunno!”

Mykl suddenly popped up from the center of the rear of the tank, holding his father’s old auto-rifle in his right hand.

“There he is!” A gunner cried out. “Scrape ‘im off!”

Mykl squeezed the trigger. A hail of bullets from the blazing recoilless auto-rifle perforated the heads and chests of both gunners, suddenly and rhythmically decorating the painted camouflage armor plate with their contents. Screaming, the temporarily insane young man charged forward and scrambled over the smashed bodies as they slumped over their weapons, and made directly for the turret! He saw the backs of two figures jutting out of the top hatch – the commander began frantically shouting orders at the gunner, who was now also frantically trying to turn his machine gun round far enough to shoot at Mykl – but it wouldn’t turn that far! Barely aiming, and in mid-stride, Mykl squeezed the trigger and inexpertly reduced the gunner’s head to a messy red pulp inside his helmet in a split second!

The soft *ding* of the bullet-strike inside the dead man’s helmet still uppermost in his thoughts, Mykl d’Angelo clambered across the machine’s lurching superstructure, and up the shallow rungs of a short ladder up the sloping turret side, while the tank commander – who was swearing in a panic – fumbled to free his holstered side-arm! Mykl closed in, zeroing in on him like the Angel of Death, and put two into his chest. Panting, trembling and exhausted, Mykl leaned forward, pinned the body against the side of the turret with his boot, and then snarling, put another shot into its chest. A grunt escaped the dead man’s lips, along with a final breath.

Still trembling with shock and exhaustion, Mykl leaned on the side of the turret and turned his attention to the gunner’s corpse. It was wearing a flak-jacket laden with objects dangling from straps on it that Mykl recognized. Resting in the stage where the nerves are frayed and the limbs like jelly, he sat on the top ledge of the turret as the tank jostled along the messed up road, passing blazing houses and burning trees. He wondered what to do next. He felt no sense of victory or triumph – just disgust, and a taste of satisfaction in what he’d done. In just a few moments he’d unleashed a lifetime of misery and suffering that had been bottled up inside him. Clearing his head, he reached over to the dead man’s flak jacket and pulled two of the objects free, popped their tops and pulled the pins. Then he dropped them down the center hatch of the turret and waited as they clanked and bounced around inside. Moments later, as the tank evaporated under him, his last memory was of bright light, a great heat and a faint faraway sensation of weightlessness.

It was a fearful day in Adamsville. Under a dirty gray sky smudged with the screams of the dying and of those who wished they were already dead, the corpse of the city burned a hole through a page of history. A long line of refugees that had managed to evade the marauding Red tanks and their murdering, sadistic machine-gunners wound along a muddy, corpse-littered stretch of road at a slow, tired pace. Most carried only what they wore, endeavoring to reach a safe haven somewhere at the unseen end of the road. The more astute – and those fit enough to do so – stayed as far away as they could from the roads, and worked their way out of the city cross-country.

An old, ragged-looking man trudged tiredly on, dragging an old wheelbarrow behind him. Raindrops in the intermittent drizzle splashed on his wrinkled old face. His eyes – gray, educated, piercing eyes that had seen a lifetime of many interesting things – still reflected a look of numbed disbelief that could not be elucidated by mere words alone. In the wheelbarrow behind him lay a limp, reddened and blistered figure that aside from the occasional soft unconscious whimpering sounds it made, could otherwise easily have passed for dead.

Barracuda!

It was a fine morning on Eden, a lost Colony of the Terran Empire – but the planet wasn't itself 'lost' in the sense of it having gone missing as one misplaces a set of keys or a mobile phone, but 'lost' in the sense that for nearly two decades, the planet had been isolated from the rest of humanity by the civil war now raging across its surface, on the land, on its oceans – and in its skies.

It had been just over two years since Mykl d'Angelo had woken up in a tent at a DEM triage center. At first, he'd been really surprised to still be alive at all – and then, while pondering his losses, his grief and the pain of his injuries, he wallowed in regret. He'd hoped to join his loved ones on the other side, but fate seemed to have had other plans for him! Once he'd recovered sufficiently to not occupy a cot, he was booted out of the military field hospital – and found himself at a loss for what to do next. So he joined the DEM army and went off to fight.

The Democratic Edonian Militia was on its back foot at the time, struggling to contain the surging Reds, and before very long, the young soldier found himself right in the thick of it. The loss-rate at the front was extremely high, but young Mykl was lucky – and within a couple of months, he found himself field-promoted to Corporal. Not long after that, a recruiter swung by his trench to draft volunteers for the Flyers Brigade. To the astute young fighter – who was still keen and hungry for revenge, it looked like a better, more effective way to kill the enemy than picking away at them one by one as a lowly foot-slogger! He signed up, without a second thought, right away.

Several cloudbanks lay over to the east on the horizon – heralding bad weather on its way. They would likely pass over to the south, eighteen year old pilot-officer Mykl d'Angelo decided. Even though it was slightly chilly, it was still a good day to be alive! It was near the end of his second year as a fighter pilot – and despite the odds that promised him dead by Saturnalia two years previously, he'd managed to stick around long enough to know that good weather meant flying, and *lots* of it! And oh, how he loved to fly. This driven young man hadn't always been the cold, efficient killer he was now – who he was then, was the product of his life and experiences, and so far, being good at it suited him. Fighting was okay – he got plenty of it – but the flying was a salve to his sanity! Bad weather, on the other hand, meant hours of doing nothing – awaiting orders, resting, and waiting around with too much time to think.

It was *thinking* that got people into trouble, Mykl often told his friends in the squadron. It was *thinking* that made people afraid – and it was *fear* that got them killed. Young Mykl d'Angelo

tried very hard not to think too much about anything when it came to doing his job – which was also his *passion* – killing Reds, and not letting them kill him back... for as long as he could!

The fighter plane ahead of him lanced forward and began its take-off run down the strip, just as a sharp breeze from its prop-wash tugged at his face. Mykl was next in the queue for take-off, and grimaced behind the little windshield of his open cockpit. Once his predecessor had lifted off, he eased the throttle wide open, and his Tabor Barracuda surged forward – and the powerful twin wing-mounted inline turbofans behind him, gave a healthy roar! The little aircraft – not much more than a collection of strings and struts like the dogfighters of World War 1, although a tiny bit more high-tech – shot smoothly down the runway! He pulled the control stick back gently and the little aircraft quickly and willingly surged away from the ground!

The wind of the slipstream was icy, and the cockpit was open. Even though he was protected from the weather by his tiny windshield and a fleecy flying jacket, his face was exposed under the very traditional flying helmet and goggles. Leveling out, he spotted the rest of his squadron. Then he settled lower into the open cockpit, thankful for the seat harness that kept him in it, and joined the squadron in orbiting the airbase and climbing to 10,000 while they waited for the last fighters still on the ground to join them. He looked down over the side – the last few Barracudas were climbing to join them now, leaving behind the heavily camouflaged airstrip below.

It had been two years since the siege of Adamsville – but the scars of that messy period, which he felt had ruined his life forever – were still visible on the landscape vista spread out below. That was not the only place there were scars. It had been two years since he'd lost his sister to a horde of marauding Reds – two years since he'd lost home... Mykl d'Angelo tried not to dwell on it, and even though he mostly succeeded – as defiant as he was – he was still grieving and mourning the loss! He never wanted to go back there again! *Ever!*

He was 18 now, nearly 19, and – like the brave young men who had left school and leapt directly into an aircraft cockpit centuries before on Earth – he was rapidly growing into an air-combat veteran of the Edonian Civil War. That might seem a bit young to be in combat – let alone to be *good* at it – but like many other youths of his time on Eden, Mykl had been fighting for his survival most of his life – and to be lucky enough to live through it, one had to be good at something.

The last fragile-looking high-winged little monoplanes joined the formation, and Squadron 061 headed Westward, toward the lines. Mykl maneuvered until he was at the port wing-tip of his wing leader, Lieutenant Li Sherman. The Barracudas weren't equipped with any communications equipment, mainly because of the weight factor, but also because in an open cockpit, this would have been pretty much pointless anyway. Besides, radio wasn't necessary to convey what Li felt when she smiled a good-luck farewell with a thumbs-up sign across the gap between the two fighters. She had the loyalty of the wing, the sort of loyalty bought with camaraderie and blood.

Once the fighters had taken off, being incommunicado, they were committed to whatever mission they were on and couldn't be recalled. On this day, the entire squadron was on a mission to bomb a series of heavy artillery batteries located just across the lines. Mykl knew it was going

to be another rather futile exercise as the bombs the Barracuda could carry were too small to penetrate the armor plate protecting the enormous guns – but it would serve as a deterrent to the gun crews who would get peppered with shrapnel, and it would give their soldiers in the trenches some badly needed respite from the shelling. Besides, there was always the chance that a lucky bomb would actually cause some damage!

The DEM's also had bombers, such as the Conqueror Sprite... a fragile-looking mosquito of a thing only a bit larger than his Barracuda, which was laughingly called a 'heavy bomber'. Despite all the technological catching up the Edonians had done since losing the Exeter, they still hadn't managed to build all-metal aircraft that could handle heavy loads or stresses, or the metallurgical expertise required to make jet engines! Sprites were the best they had at the time, and they could carry about only three times the weight of a fighter like the Barracuda – but on the down side, they couldn't dive or maneuver like the fighters could – their wings would come right off! They were also too slow to escape the harassing enemy fighters, so despite having fighter escorts, the bomber squadrons were still suffering unacceptably heavy losses.

To make matters worse, bombers like the Sprite stood little chance against the new, faster enemy fighters that had just appeared at the line a few weeks earlier. This is precisely why Mykl cursed the futility of the mission through clenched teeth – he wanted the Reds dead! He wanted to do his job – which was to realize the maxim popular with the troops: *"The only good Red is a dead Red!"* His quest for vengeance demanded victory over the Reds – both militarily and politically – and personally! Bombers were too ponderous and vulnerable to do the job, and fighters too small and lightly armed to satisfy that demand!

The ruined city below had passed behind them, giving way to trenches of chaos, death and disorder that spread out below them like an obscene map on a god's table 15,000 feet below, partly obscured by lower cloud formations and smoke rising from the battlefield. Presently, the sprawling green shell-crater pocked remains of a forest that had been whittled down by repeated artillery barrages stretched ahead of them. Then he heard the first gunfire for the day, coming from far below as 061 Squadron crossed over the lines above the reach of the Red anti-aircraft fire at high altitude. The big guns they were heading for were somewhere just behind the fringe of shell-splintered greenery.

The attack began as Captain Max Bredell, the pilot of the leading aircraft, gave the sign by wagging his wingtips with a quick left-right-left sideways motion of his control stick, before rolling the plane over into a steep inverted dive towards the target. He was followed by his wingmen, and then the rest of them. The steep dive was intended to provide extra momentum to assist them with building up speed in avoiding the ack-ack that would trail them part of the way down – and then carry them back across their lines, if they made it that far! That was the really dangerous part – where they would be flying back home across the lines at lower altitude!

Flak exploded harmlessly behind Mykl's Barracuda as the enemy gunners under-compensated their aim. The Barracudas had spread out and chosen their individual targets. At 3000 feet and losing altitude rapidly, Mykl saw the guns – big long-range canon fixed onto thick concrete slabs, and pointed in the direction of the lines. Some were in the process of firing, big plumes of smoke and fire springing from the mouths of their barrels! His engines screaming deafeningly

behind him, Mykl primed his bomb load and resisted the impulse to squeeze off a short burst from the guns at the little brown-clad figures rushing crazily between them, looking for cover! He wisely decided to conserve his ammo for the return journey.

The element of surprise had already been lost – huge multi-layered steel blast-shields had already been raised by their massive steam-powered rams to protect the critical big guns from the falling bombs. This wasn't the first time they'd been sent to carry out this sort of attack, after all. It had virtually become a routine in the last few weeks. At the first sight of their squadron passing overhead at high altitude, the shields would already begin to go up! Angrily, Mykl d'Angelo decided it was time to try something different! He was going to improvise! He noticed something in mid-dive, and decided to pursue it!

At 300 feet he should've dropped his bombs – as he had done so many times before, but this time he didn't! Instead, he pulled the stick back slightly, then at 200 feet all the way back – one hand hovering over the bomb release toggle, and he leveled out in time to trim the tree tops! Mykl was sick and tired of risking his life to waste bombs – and to waste time, risking his life for nothing! He was here to kill Reds, and to make a difference for the war effort!

His jaw set determinedly, Mykl worked the rudder paddles with his feet, circling back towards the same gun emplacement. At this low altitude, he could see he had a clear shot at getting a bomb or two under the raised shield! Bombs were striking it from above, detonating loudly into big balls of flame as his mates made their bombing runs! He broke into a huge grin before jamming the engine throttle wide open! Like any good plan, this one was probably going to be suicidal!

The ground crew seemed to have taken cover in sandbag shelters below the shields. Surrounding anti-aircraft batteries seemed to be either distracted with shooting at the rest of the squadron higher up, or taken completely by surprise – so that not a shot seemed to be fired at him as his Barracuda roared low over their heads straight at the nearest gun! He reached it in a matter of seconds, jerked the bomb-release and rolled away to port, climbing back in the direction of the lines!

Mykl heard shattering explosions sound from close behind, above the whistle of the wind in the wire struts in the wings, and the howl of his engines! Small-arms fire tore at his tail-plane and wings as he strove to climb higher! It was a close call, and no mistake! The squadron's attack-wave was already spent, and as the last of the squadron dropped their bombs and leveled out, the rest of the squadron began to regroup as they headed back toward the lines, climbing and zig-zagging slowly. Mykl fell in behind, looking for the rest of his wing.

They had to get back over the lines as soon as possible, Mykl knew, to avoid getting intercepted by the murderous 213 'Flying Artillery' squadron stationed nearby. It was for this very reason he'd saved his ammunition. He hadn't seen any of the squadron going down during the attack, so thus far it had been a good day – despite the wasteful exercise of dropping good bombs harmlessly on hardened targets. He scanned the horizon – there seemed to be nothing in sight but clouds. They had to run into some Reds on the way back, surely? The law of averages was bound to come back to bite them somewhere!

Covering his eyes with his gloved left hand, and peeping through a gap between his fingers, he scanned the bright disc of the sun. Sure enough, there they were – a whole squadron of enemy fighters standing on their noses in a steep dive that would take them in the rear! Mykl rocked the Barracuda's wings – a sign of warning, then pointed at the sun. Seeing the nearest Barracuda rocking its wings, he knew the pilot had seen his warning and repeated it. The squadron began to turn to meet the attack head-on!

The dogfight began quickly, with the roar of racing engines, and the staccato chatter of machine guns. Drab brown enemy fighters whirled all around him, like angry bees, with their triangular markings of blue, white and green, as they engaged with camouflage-painted Barracudas. The machines spat fire and lead at each other, whirling round in a maelstrom of deadly combat! Mykl fired at a brown shape as it flashed past his guns on its way down. It wasn't many seconds into the fight when he spotted a Barracuda falling in flames. Best to not think about it, he knew, as he turned to fire a burst at a passing Red.

Moments later, he spotted another Barracuda spinning downward without any rear fuselage at all – shot away by the enemy's new flying artillery. He cursed. The 'Carrion' as the new enemy fighters were called, came with a single, fuselage-mounted 20mm anti-aircraft canon that could decimate any aircraft. He latched onto the tail of a passing Carrion, maneuvering into the 'sweet spot' with ease, and fired a burst of machinegun fire into the aircraft's tail plane. Pieces flew off the machine, telling Mykl that his aim was true, and the enemy machine twisted into an evasive spin.

"Oh no, you don't!" Mykl said icily, following his opponent. "Not so easily!"

The next burst he fired peppered the port wings, smashing struts and supports. The enemy pilot tried to turn to avoid Mykl's withering fire, straying unwittingly into the path of another Carrion – who at the same time was aiming for Mykl! Mykl swerved *just* in time and the canon shell slammed into the center of Mykl's prey, into the fuselage right behind the cockpit and went off with an unsettling bang right in front of him! The enemy craft vanished in a ball of flame and shattered struts and plastic sheeting, with falling debris leaving trails of black oily smoke beneath!

The other pilot, cursing his unfortunate aim, tried hard to turn his plane round to get another shot at Mykle, but as the muzzle-flash from the front of the Carrion faded, it seemed to Mykl that the man had missed a second time. As his enemy roared past, Mykl had already latched onto his tail, appreciating all the possible meanings of the phrase '*friendly fire*'. As much as he already knew from experience that dogfighting was generally unpredictable, it was a game of life and death. A gamble. It wasn't just as easy as getting on someone's tail and shooting them – it was a matter of taking whatever chances fate gave you, *and* avoiding collisions and getting shot by your own side as well as by your foe!

Unfortunately for the enemy pilot, he didn't notice the other Carrion that was trying to evade another Barracuda below. A wild maneuver on the part of the other resulted in a pretty spectacular mid-air collision! A loud splintering crash was followed by an explosion, and both

pursuing Barracudas had to turn sharply to avoid following into it! Bits and pieces of burning debris fluttered past Mykl's plane as he fishtailed his rudder to shed speed in order to avoid flying into it as well! Looking round, he noticed that the fight seemed to be over, with the squadron of Reds turning back for the lines and his own squadron separating and turning towards home.

A short while later, as Mykl taxied up to the hangars of 061 Squadron, his wing-leader came walking up to his Barracuda, flying helmet off, jacket open, and shaking her head slowly. He noticed the look on her face – she seemed, frankly, shocked. He cut the motors, and silence descended gently. It was a relief to be back again, and in one piece!

“What's up Li?” he asked cheerfully, and grinned at her as he climbed out of the cockpit. “*You!*” She said.

“Me?” He asked. “What did I do now?”

“Just... just get down here and have a look, would you! Just get down!”

“Okay, okay!” He shrugged, getting down from the fuselage and onto the turf as quickly as he could without falling on legs that were still a little shaky. “What's all the fuss?”

Mykl turned to look at where Li was pointing. A look of disbelief crossed his face.

“*Well, screw me sideways!*” He breathed. Under the cambered wing of his Barracuda there was a large jagged splintered hole in the fuselage, and the steel wing struts that braced the wing to the lower fuselage were missing. There was a hole of equal size on the upper portion of the opposite side of the fuselage as well! Mykl felt the exposed wooden ribs of his plane – tenderly, as though he were exploring an exposed wound on a large animal. A shell fired by the Carrion appeared to have passed right through the Barracuda without exploding – or apparently without destroying anything vital.

“The struts were sheared clean off!” He observed, mesmerized. “It must've been that Carrion that took a shot at me and missed!”

“*Missed?*” Li grinned, patting him on the shoulder. “You best rethink that statement, young ace!”

“I'm surprised the wing didn't come off!” He murmured, shocked.

“Talk about *lucky!* C'mon.” Li said, pointing at the barracks. “Debriefing time! I'll buy you a drink after!”

By the time they arrived, Captain Bredell and the rest of the squadron were already seated at little tables and with their backs to the bar in the little hall of the prefab building being used as a barracks. Bredell stood in the center, holding a glass of wine, as were the rest of the assembled aircrew. Mykl and Li picked up filled glasses at the door as they entered, carefully and respectfully tended by the squadron's ground staff.

“To the glorious dead!” Bredell toasted solemnly. “Pilot-Lieutenant Amhard and Pilot-Lieutenant Haskel – seen falling to their deaths in flames over the field of battle! May their glorious names live forever!”

“To the glorious dead!” Mykl repeated, joining the chorus. “May their names live forever!”

Mykl followed that solemn toast with a deep sip from his glass, very much aware that it could easily have been *him* they were toasting. But oh well, he'd lived to fight another day, again. The usual formality seemingly over with, Captain Bredell waved to retain everyone's attention, before claiming an opened bottle from a small table close by.

"Hang on, folks – it's not over yet!" He said, approaching Mykl.

"Sir?"

"Come on, old son." Bredell nodded at Mykl, coercing him to the center of the circle. "Time to take the lime-light! That's right – I saw what you did!"

A little taken aback, Mykl followed as his commanding officer guided him to the center of the gathering.

"Let me fill your glass, *sir!*" Bredell said in a fatherly sort of way, and put down his glass before filling Mykl's almost to the brim.

"*Six weeks!*" The Captain said to the assembly dramatically. "I say again – *six weeks!* We've been bombing those damned guns for six weeks now, and every time we've come back and counted our losses with zero gains! Today is different, my friends! For the first time, we went over there and one of us – *one...of...us* – this young man here in fact – did something different! For the first time since we were given the task of wiping those big guns off the map, there is one less great big bloody gun on the line!"

"You mean it worked?" Mykl asked, taken aback. "I got it?"

"You sure did! The call came in from Ops twenty minutes ago!" Bredell beamed, quoting. "*A Barracuda from 061 Squadron leveled gun number 34 at the Northford E.M.R. gun battery, sector 17 at 07h48!*"

"The *best* part is," Max Bredell continued, giving him a sly wink, "You'll be giving us a detailed explanation of what you did today, old son! ...Because tomorrow morning we're going back to finish the job – your way!"

As the pilots swarmed round and swamped Mykl, cheering and patting him on the back and congratulating him, Mykl's mind boggled. Using his tactic, 061 Squadron was going to cost the Reds dearly in terms of artillery assets and the accompanying strategic advantage they offered along that part of the Line. All in all, it wasn't a bad day to be young pilot-officer d'Angelo! Mykl hoped to one day be able to look back to this time, and to be able to appreciate it all – every saving grace, every narrow escape, every kindness – and every friendship, and good memory.

The Ace

High above the war-torn landscape, serenely detached among the clouds and seemingly in a world of their own, a pair of Tabor Barracuda's flew a lonely dawn patrol. The light of the false dawn had given way to dawn itself, and the light of Eden's star began to rise over the edge of the horizon, slowly revealing the shell-pocked landscape far below. Cold, brisk air whipping against Mykl d'Angelo's exposed face as he looked down helped to keep him awake.

After fighting the Edonian air war for three years, Pilot-lieutenant Mykl d'Angelo – who still looked young for his already sage 20 years, was already an accomplished air ace with 84

confirmed kills to his name. In fact, he was the second highest scoring ace – and the highest still living, on either side in the history of the Edonian civil war. Taking into consideration the inherent risks of aerial combat – with a predicted lifespan of new pilots just eight weeks after arriving at the front – lasting three years was considered a rarity! The record – which still stood, was five years – and the holder of that record was already long dead. At 20, Mykl d’Angelo was considered ‘an old man’ by the rest of his squadron – whose pilots were almost without exception on the order of between 17 and 19 years of age, and there were only two who had more than a year’s experience.

His friend and former wing leader, Pilot-Lieutenant Li Sherman, had reached the three year milestone before him – and less than a week later, died in mid-air collision with one of their own pilots in the thick of a dogfight. 061 Squadron’s CO, Captain Bredell got promoted and transferred out to be a major in some higher HQ that had less to do with flying or fighting, and more to do with strategy and administration, a.k.a. paperwork. The rest – including the last of his friends, had taken their place on the Squadron Memorial – a line-up of small photographs on the Mess wall beside the bar. Mykl tired of making acquaintances into friends, and watching them die and turn into photos at the bar. He took to keeping to himself and making the most of what life on Eden had to offer *today* – because there might not be a *tomorrow*.

Mykl yawned and stretched inside his open cockpit, clearing his mind of morbid thoughts. He looked up and over to his left – on his port wing tip, another Barracuda kept pace with him. The pilot, a young rookie pilot officer by the name of Jenny Haskel, nodded and smiled at him and gave him a bright, cheery, gloved thumbs-up. Apparently, everything was still alright.

“Oh, *brother*.” He muttered.

Mykl had mixed feelings about rookies – on the one hand, they reminded him of himself not too long ago, when he reported for flight training. Being full of hatred for the Reds and eager to prove himself wasn’t always enough. On the other hand, being green and raw created a risk for other pilots around them – and could get them killed. Like Li Sherman, who died the previous year. “*Friendly fire*” was the term. Oh, Jenny Haskel seemed nice enough, Mykl thought, but she was a rookie. She was here to fight the Reds right enough – and to avenge the death of her older brother, who’d been one of 061’s brightest stars – she was *motivated*... but she *was* a rookie with just two months flight training, ten solo training flights – and two uneventful patrols under her belt. She had yet to taste combat – and *if* she survived her first engagement, she might have a chance of making it through her first month... but Mykl wasn’t optimistic about things like that anymore.

There she was – at his wingtip, eager to prove herself – and green as grass! Mykl grunted a protest that was drowned out by the sound of the engines as he continued to mull over his new wingman – he had no plans to die just yet, least of all at the hands of his own green wingman!

Mykl D’Angelo covered his eyes with his gloved left hand and peeped through a crack between the fingers to scan the bright disc of the sun where it lay ahead of them, close to the northern horizon. A few small dark specks shadowed against the bright glare of the sun told him what he needed to know – enemy fighters had spotted them and were diving out of the sun to pounce on

their unsuspecting prey! Without hesitation, Mykl smoothly rocked the Barracuda's wings from side to side – a sign of warning, then pointed at the sun, looking back at his wingman. Haskel nodded vigorously and showed him another gloved thumbs up.

Without hesitation, Mykl pulled the stick back gently to climb to meet the enemy. He raised his hand to his eyes again to get another look. There were four enemy fighters coming right at them – which weren't good odds. He felt confident enough to take them all on by himself – but he had a noob with him who probably wouldn't last two minutes against an experienced pilot! Turning tail and diving for the safety of the lines was an option, but that wouldn't dissuade the enemy fighters from their attack – and would just present the Reds with a couple of easy targets!

Under the circumstances, Mykl felt that meeting the enemy head-on was probably the best thing to do! The gap between the two forces closed quickly, and as soon as they were within striking distance, the staccato chatter of machine guns and racing engines filled the air around them. Four drab, brown enemy fighters marked with blue, white and green triangular markings on their wing surfaces and fuselages whirled around the two outnumbered Barracudas – each jockeying for an advantage or to evade fire.

Unsurprisingly, it didn't take long for Haskel to pick up a tail – one of the drab biplanes seemed intent on emptying his magazine into her tail-plane! Haskel was zig-zagging madly, with her nose pointed down. In mid-maneuver, Mykl held the barracuda steady for just a moment and took advantage of his window of opportunity – firing expertly at the brown shape as it flashed past his guns. The Carrion fighter smoothly rolled over onto its back and went into a steep spiral dive, trailing a plume of dense black oil smoke on its way down to the patchwork scenery far below.

“85!” Mykl said aloud to himself proudly, banking away instantly to avoid getting greased by another Red who just fired and overshot. He tried to keep an eye on Haskel. She was green, but she was brave – and she had some raw skill! He saw her take a shot at one of the three remaining Reds, as though trying to remember everything she'd been taught at once! The training wheels were off! *Good show*, he smiled – she had to learn to do this for herself! He closed on a Carrion's tail and awaited the right moment – a seemingly slow painstaking process in the heat of combat – before squeezing the trigger on his control stick. The Carrion jerked upwards, a sure sign the pilot had been hit, and then the enemy fighter's nose dropped and it went straight down, vanishing into a cloud bank.

“86!” Mykl congratulated himself. “Two down, two to go!”

Haskel was a quick study, it seemed – she latched onto the tail of one of the two remaining enemy fighters, and began firing short bursts from her guns at it.

“*Good girl!*” Mykl grinned appreciatively, looking round to spot the fourth fighter. It was approaching her from behind and below, taking advantage of her fixation on her target. In a matter of seconds, it would be all over for his wing-man. “One for each of us!”

Mykl rolled his plane over and quickly brought it round to engage the plane that was trying to blind-side Haskel. A short burst of fire from his guns closely missed their mark, doing no more harm than knocking a few pieces off it – but discouraged the enemy pilot enough to make him turn away. Rather than take his chance to latch onto its tail and boost his score, Mykl kicked the rudder over hard and turned back to follow his noob wingman – just in time to see her aircraft falling in flames! Mykl’s disappointment was palpable.

The Carrion she’d been pursuing rounded a cloud formation and joined the other some distance away. The grisly sight of the burning aircraft as it plummeted, shedding bits of debris as it spun, held his gaze for a long moment. He saw no sign of movement in the cockpit, other than the fluttering of her white scarf! Haskel was gone!

Mykl caught himself squeezing the life out of the hand that held the control stick, and managed to hold himself back from tearing right after them and going completely crazy! A red rage surged inside him, but he maintained control! Thinking more clearly now, he steeled his jaw and sent his Barracuda into the pursuit of the two remaining Red fighters, who seemed to be disappearing into the clouds as they headed back to their lines.

He throttled back slightly. The two Carrion were flying abreast of each other, wingtip to wingtip, slipping in and out of the clouds. The pilots seemed to be celebrating, waving and gesticulating to each other across the gap between them. They didn’t seem to be aware of him at all. Mykl settled back and held his position, following them at a short distance directly on their six-o’clock, until they were well over the Red lines. Still, they hadn’t noticed him. Unlike his prey, Mykl kept a watchful eye on his sky to make sure no other Reds were around, waiting to pounce on him.

He opened the throttle slightly and edged closer, and closer still. Setting his jaw again, indulging his anger, and he prepared to strike. He set his sights on the Carrion to the right, and worked the rudder pedals to turn the plane and the fixed guns quickly to their mark – and fired a sustained burst. The cockpit area of the first target was peppered with bullets, the pilot jerked and slumped – and within the same flowing motion, he deftly used the rudder pedals to swing the plane’s nose back over, and delivered the same shattering blow to the enemy plane to his right before the second pilot could react. Both aircraft rolled over and began steep dives that led them to the bottom of small craters on the ground below. Satisfied, Mykl turned the Barracuda around and headed for home.

About an hour later, Mykl d’Angelo landed at 061 Squadron’s airfield. Still feeling the effects of adrenaline, he climbed unsteadily out of his cockpit, over the side and onto the grass runway just as a fine mist-like rain saturated the air. He undid his gloves and slipped them off, dropping each of them into the cockpit as he did so, and then his flying helmet. Mykl held onto the side of his plane for a long moment, patting it soothingly with one hand before letting it go. Then he took a few steps away, and stood in the fine soaking rain with his head back and eyes closed, taking in the faint sound of falling raindrops in the refreshing silence.

“Sir?” A female voice called respectfully from behind, and after a short pause again, “Lieutenant?”

“Yes, Cogsgill?” the ace pilot replied finally, his eyes still closed as streams of water began to run lightly over the skin of his face. The water formed large droplets on the fleecy collar of his flying jacket and soothed the warm skin of his neck.

“Captain Latham would like to see you in the Mess right away, sir.” The mechanic said softly.

“Thank you, Cogsgill.”

A few minutes later, Pilot-Lieutenant Mykl d’Angelo walked into the Squadron mess hall by the open door at the main entrance. It was deserted and quiet save for the squadron CO, Captain Latham, who was standing at the memorial wall beside the bar counter and pointing at portrait photos of the dead. They were quite small and there were rather a lot of them, Mykl knew. Another person was with Latham, a gray-haired man dressed in a uniform he didn’t recognize. Mykl paused to drop his flying jacket on a nearby wooden chair before coming to a semblance of standing to attention and saluting without a head dress.

“Captain.” He greeted.

“At ease.” Latham replied, returning a brisk salute. “Come over here, Mykl. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Mykl walked over to the pair of officers, not feeling entirely as interested as he wanted to be. The gray-haired officer in the strange uniform was standing beside Latham, smiling at him. Mykl looked him up and down. His uniform was made from a material he didn’t recognize, finely woven but smooth, unlike the slightly fluffy natural fiber cloth the Edonian uniforms were made from. The cut was different, and if anything, more practical – but the color was the most striking difference he noticed. Unlike the standard air force dress uniform which was dark blue – or even the army’s dress uniform which was dark green, the elder man’s uniform was a warm shade of red. He realized he was staring.

“Mykl,” Latham said, introducing him to the stranger. “This is Commander Hagar... a visitor from *Earth*.”

“Lieutenant.” Hagar greeted, shaking Mykl’s outstretched hand warmly. “Commander Jeffrey Hagar, Terran Space Fleet, Fighter Training Wing! I’m *very* pleased to meet you!”

“Er – *what*?” Mykl stammered. “Earth? What d’you mean?”

“The Terrans have decided to join the fight!” Captain Latham beamed. “To put an end to this war at last!”

“Well,” Hagar interjected, “Not to *join* it exactly, but we’re here to supply the D.E.M. with the means to win the war. Weapons ...and training... which is why I’m here to see *you*, young man!”

“Sir?” Mykl asked his CO uncertainly. He didn’t like the sound of that.

“It’s alright. It’s all legit.” Latham nodded. “Give him a listen. Help yourselves to a drink at the bar. I’ll leave you two alone for a bit.”

Latham withdrew, leaving just Mykl and Commander Hagar alone in the mess. Mykl didn’t like awkward silences, so he went over to the bar, slipped in behind it, and reached under the counter. He came back out with a bottle of the local brandy and a pair of short glasses. He selected the nearest table, pulled out a chair and indicated the other chair to the alien commander. Seated at the table, they began to share out the brandy.

“Hmm.” Hagar said after sampling his. “Very good.”

Mykl had no idea what the Terran was used to where he came from, but right now he decided he didn't really care.

“Okay Commander, what's this all about?” Mykl asked the man. “What do you want from me?”

“I'm here to meet the Edonian air force's hottest living air ace.” Hagar smiled.

“That's Flyers Brigade, actually.” Mykl corrected the visitor. “And thank you very much, but I've already been interviewed by a bunch of newsreels last month! What do you want?”

“Okay.” Hagar smiled pacifyingly. “In fact, I'm hoping to recruit you for a special training program I'm running.”

“Special training program? For what?”

“To put you and as many experienced D.E.M. pilots as possible in the cockpit of a Skorpiad fighter.” Hagar explained.

“That sounds... crowded.” Mykl quipped sarcastically. “Why? Doesn't the Terran Empire have enough pilots of their own?”

Hagar sighed. As he expected, Mykl d'Angelo was proving difficult to convince.

“Lieutenant,” He explained, “this war of yours has been dragging on for two decades because both sides are too evenly matched. The Empire's decided to bring Eden back into the fold – and to do that, the war has to end... And to end the war, we can't just *march* in here, guns blazing, Terran flag waving – say, into the middle of no-man's land – and shout at everyone to put down their weapons... and expect both sides to love us. We have to pick a side and help *them* to win the war. This is *your* war – and one side has to win. We picked yours.”

“Lucky us.” Mykl snapped again, sarcastically. “Why not the Reds?”

“Because the Reds aren't...” Hagar hesitated, “...nice people. They represent everything the Terran Empire was founded to stand against. Your Democratic Republic on the other hand, well, we can relate to you.”

“So why me? What do you want me to do?”

“You're a local air ace with 84 kills...”

“88 as of this morning.” Mykl interjected.

“...88!” Hagar said, sounding impressed. Mykl instantly regretted saying that – it made it sound cheap in Mykl's view – and Haskel had died in the process, making her death seem nothing more than another footnote on his list of personal achievements.

“You're a hero.” Hagar continued. “People round here know your name, they have your picture on milk cartons and calendars...”

“Newsreels.”

“Newsreels... right.”

“So it's my name you want.” He summarized. “For your little PR gig.”

Hagar sighed and took another hit from his glass. “Let me to be frank with you, Lieutenant.” he continued. “You're young, you've had a basic education, you can read, you can write, you can fly, and you can fight. That means you can think too – anticipate, evaluate and strategize. What's the life expectancy of one of your pilots right now? Three weeks?”

“Eight.”

“Okay, a whole eight weeks.” Hagar said, giving him a thin smile over a thoughtful pause.

“There're 52 weeks in a year – even here on Eden, cut off from Earth for twenty years, you still use the same calendar. You've been at this gig for *three years* now – you're an inspiration to

your squadron – hell, to your side of the war even. You’re a bona fide hero – troops on the Line admire and cheer for you – they fight better because of you. Now, there are a lot of pilots in the Flyers Brigade, and like you, none of them likes or trusts Terrans – and, well, since I have 300 Skorpiad aerospace fighters to fill, that’s going to create something of a recruiting problem!” Hagar paused in his lengthy soliloquy to sip from his glass again, before finishing. “I want you to be the first!”

“So the rest will happily follow?” Mykl replied almost snidely. “That it? They’ll hear my name, see a bottle of milk with my picture on it, and flock to join your outfit, put on your... very pretty red uniforms, that sort of thing?”

“Something like that.” Hagar admitted, sitting back casually. “Hopefully they’d like a chance to get their hands on better weapons... do some real damage against the enemy, win this terrible war. Do you even *know* what a Skorpiad is?”

“No.” Mykl admitted candidly.

“It’s the front-line fighter-interceptor of the Terran Space Fleet.” Hagar explained, making his passion evident to the younger officer. “It’s pretty damned fast – it can run rings around that box-kite you call a fighter! It’ll out-climb it, out-fly it, and out-gun it! Plus it can hover in place, and take off and land just about anywhere!”

Mykl thought this was all very impressive, though he really didn’t want to seem impressed.

“Okay. So?” He said.

“Go on, ask me what the Skorpiad’s ceiling is.” Hagar said, daring him. “Bet it’s more than your Barracuda’s!”

“Okay.” Mykl said, draining his glass. “I’ll bite. What’s its ceiling?”

“You ever seen this planet from orbit before?” Hagar grinned. “Or *any* planet? A Skorpiad has no ceiling – surface to orbit time on an average gravity world is less than five minutes!”

Mykl looked down at the table they were sitting at, then at the droplets of rich yellow liquid at the bottom of his glass, rolling around as he turned it in his hands. He tried hard to not look impressed. He *was*. But he was reluctant to show any enthusiasm. He didn’t know how much speed or power were needed to break orbit from any kind of planet, but he was sure it was a lot more than what the Barracuda – a light, nimble twin-engine piston-driven fighter plane barely capable of lifting more than its own weight, had! He reached for the bottle and refilled both their glasses.

“Okay, you know what Lieutenant?” Commander Hagar sighed. “I can tell you’re not really keen on this – perhaps I can appeal to your baser instincts – but let me ask you something: Why are you here?”

“*Why am I here?* You mean why am I on this shitty planet on the arse-end of space? Or do you mean why am I here fighting this war?”

“The latter.”

Why *was* he here? Was the man *serious*? The loss of his noob wingman was still fresh and uppermost in his mind – and behind the curtains somewhere, lurked the death of Li Sherman, and even further back, his sister Max, and their parents! The years of starvation and struggle, privation and misery!

“*To kill Reds!*” Mykl said angrily, gritting his reply through set teeth. “To kill every one of the fuckers I can before the war ends! Hopefully it won’t before they’re all dead!”

Hagar looked at him in silence. Mykl didn’t often get an opportunity to vent his anger verbally at anyone, so he was making the most of it. Truth be told, for an instant, Hagar seemed just a tiny bit shocked.

“You want to help us end the war? Why not just drop a nuclear bomb on them? The only good Red is a dead Red!” Mykl said flatly, sipping from his glass before sending him a look laden with resentment and sarcasm. “Does that shock you, Commander? Did I offend your refined Terran sense of morality?”

“Not at all. I understand.” Hagar shrugged impassively. “You’re a soldier fighting an endless war. But we’re not here to fight your war for you – and that would be too easy, wouldn’t it? Besides, you wouldn’t feel like you had won it yourself.”

“You’re right!” Mykl nodded, before admitting again, reluctantly. “You’re right.”

“You Edonians seem to have the will to fight – but do you have the tools to do it properly? What does that Barracuda of yours fire at the enemy? Musket balls? Or do you drop bricks on the men in the trenches like they did on Earth back at the start of World War One?”

“The Barracuda carries two fixed forward-firing machineguns.” Mykl said coldly. “She can carry four 20 pound bombs too. Six in a pinch.”

“Anything to protect the pilot?” Hagar smiled. “Armor plating perhaps?”

“None.” Mykl snapped back, resentment evident in his voice. “It would be too heavy – you should know that!”

“You seem to have me all wrong, son.” Hagar said, smiling at the brooding Edonian pilot. “All I want to do is give you a better ship with better weapons and training, and send you back into the fray!”

“Tell me more.” Mykl asked. “What’s it got?”

“The Skorpiad? Well, it comes with a set of ion laser canon *and* a set of sonic pulse blasters – cross-linked, so they can be fired simultaneously or separately – your choice!” Hagar rattled off, sounding like a car salesman. “Additionally, both these weapons are linked to the pilot’s helmet aiming device so they increase accuracy by 87% and unit response time by an astonishing 156%!”

“Ion lasers...sonic pulse...” Mykl repeated, looking a little bemused. “That doesn’t mean much to me – what exactly are they? What would they do against a fighter? A tank? A concrete fortress?”

“They’re energy weapons. Ion lasers are photo-kinetic – a strike against a target, like say one of your fighter planes – would basically burn through it and cause it to burst into flames at the same time...which would make a very pretty ball of flame! An ion bolt burns hot enough to melt steel on contact. The resulting kinetic energy generated by the reaction would also affect the structure of the target, breaking it apart, causing something similar to an explosion. Sonic pulse weapons use high velocity, focused sound bursts – with pretty much the same results.”

“Sounds pretty good, whatever that means.” Mykl said, nodding and sounding impressed at the same time. Then he leaned forward, and looked Hagar in the eyes. “But I think I’d like to test it for myself first, if you don’t mind... Sir.”

“Okay then!” Commander Hagar grinned, satisfied. “Get your gear, say your goodbyes, and meet me at your CO’s office in half an hour!”

“Yes, sir.” Mykl d’Angelo said, rising.

Strangely, as he walked to his room, along the narrow corridor in the prefabricated wooden building, passing the doors of the other pilots rooms – he felt lonelier than ever. Because Pilot-Lieutenant d’Angelo was the top-scoring ace in the squadron, he’d been given a room to himself in the barracks block. The rest of the pilots had to share, two to a room. Mykl had preferred it that way, since he didn’t like getting close to the rest of the squadron’s pilots – they tended to die just when they started to get interesting. It was a lonely way to live, being surrounded by people and not letting himself get close to any of them. But it was ...*safer*.

Mykl reached the door to his room, opened it and went inside. It wasn’t a big room, and even though it was the same size as the others and even though he was the sole occupant, it still felt a little claustrophobic. Mykl sat down on his rudimentary military bed, sighed deeply and put his head in his hands. What was he getting himself into? He sighed again heavily.

Jenny Haskel was just eighteen. She’d joined the air force because of her older brother. She adored him – he was her hero, and when he was shot down, she made up her mind to follow in his footsteps, and to avenge him. Mykl’s memory jogged back a couple of years – he remembered Pilot-Lieutenant Jarrod Haskel. He was a good pilot who had a good run of it, but the reaper caught up with him over Northford a couple of years previously, just more or less after Mykl himself had stopped being a greenhorn. Captain Bredell, the previous CO, had told him that Jarrod Haskel had joined up to avenge the death of his father – who’d been a fighter pilot too, one Bredell had known fairly well. The whole family had got caught up in fighting this war, and to Mykl’s knowledge, they were all dead now. And for what? Revenge?

The war had become more than a dispute over territory or ideologies or even about who started it – it had become a generational family feud without end! It had become a gang war – you hit us, we hit you, etcetera. Eden had been locked in this blood-feud for two decades, and it had become a way of life. Edonians on either side didn’t seem to *want* it to end, at least not without victory – they just wanted to get at the enemy, perpetuating the same sick, vicious circle of violence and cruelty and death – creating more need for more people to seek revenge! To contemplate an end to the war – this terrible, costly, bloodied war, without any definite victory, was just... *inconceivable!* Victory was the only thing that seemed to justify all of this... horror.

Mykl realized with a sudden shock that the same applied to him in principle! Oh yes, it did! For the last four years of his life, he’d been driven by his anger and his pain at the suffering and loss of his own family – and then losses of his comrades in arms – all of which had translated into hatred to passionately kill as many Reds as possible! Hagar – that self-assured Terran son of a bitch – was right! It had to end sometime, even if he didn’t completely want it to – but the way things were going, that wasn’t going to happen! Not without outside intervention!

Pilot-Lieutenant d’Angelo packed his meager belongings into his kit bag and shoulder bag, and walked out of his room laden like a mule, leaving the door open behind him. On the way to the CO’s office at the end of the block, he made a detour back to his plane. Ground crew dressed in cover-alls were already giving it a once-over, and a small tanker was parked close by, refueling it.

A woman around thirty-something, dressed in a greasy cover-all was lying on her back on the grass, loading fresh drums of ammo into the ammunition ports in the underside of the fuselage.

“Going out again? We’ll have her ready for you in half an hour, sir!” Sergeant Cogsgill said dutifully, looking up at him from under the plane. She seemed to notice the baggage Mykl had with him.

“Thanks, Cogsgill.” Mykl smiled. “For everything.”

“Sir?” Cogsgill asked, pausing. “Are you on your way somewhere?”

“I’m afraid so. I’m being transferred – some kind of special op.” he said, placing a hand on the port wing and patting it gently. “I just came to say goodbye.” Mykl sighed. “Take care of her for me, will you Cogsgill?”

“Yes sir.” Said Cogsgill, noting that d’Angelo had just turned on his heel and started walking away, in the direction of the admin block across the runway.

As promised, Mykl found Hagar in Latham’s office. The two officers were chatting about sundries, and stopped when he arrived. Latham rose and offered his hand in greeting.

“We’ll really miss you, Mykl.” He smiled as he and Mykl shook hands. “But I’m sure the rest will understand. I know I do.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“We’ll drink a toast to you at dinner this evening!”

“As long as you don’t hang a picture of me beside the glorious dead of 061 Squadron, sir!” He quipped.

Latham laughed. Commander Hagar stood up, placed his red officer’s peak cap on his head, and took a compact high tech device out of his red jacket pocket.

“Are you ready, son?” He asked. “Said all your goodbyes?”

“Yes, sir.” Mykl replied, adjusting the weight of his pack.

“Got all your gear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Okay then.” The Terran Commander said, and then spoke into his comlink. “*Carter* this is Commander Hagar – ready when you are.”

“Acknowledged sir,” Came a clear, tinny reply – which Mykl presumed came from the device. “Standby.”

“The I.S.S. *Carter*,” Hagar explained. “The ship I’m from – it’s in orbit.”

“Great.” Mykl nodded. “You mean like up there, in space?”

“No – it’s a Zeppelin.” Hagar replied jokingly. “Yes, like up there, in space.”

“Are they sending down a shuttle?” Mykl asked, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb in the direction of the runway outside the office.

“No.” Hagar smiled, as though aware of a secret Mykl wasn’t in on. Before Mykl could even ask another question, the world – or rather, the office started to sparkle and fade out around him, until it was gradually replaced with dull gray walls in the transmatter chamber aboard a Terran warship in orbit around Eden. With a curious sensation that was a mixture of thrill, fear and elation, Mykl d’Angelo straightened up and followed Hagar off the platform, down a gray corridor, and into the start of a brighter future...

Commander Ripley Jones awoke from her ruminations. She chided herself, amused at her own weakness at being distracted so easily! Then she wondered again about her... *what should she call him?* Her *ex?* That sounded so... *common?* A former lover? "*Lover*" made it sound so...*cheap* – didn't it? Friend? Well, to be honest, after their break-up all those years ago, remaining friends had been the very last thing on her mind – and doubtless, judging by the cold static between them whenever they were in the same room, he'd felt the same way!

...and yet she still remembered him, and kindly – fondly even. She found that she didn't like the explanation... the *obvious* explanation for that. Regardless, there was no doubt in her mind that there was unfinished business between them! Of all the youthful post-high school romances she'd had, Mykl been one of the nicer, better ones – and one that she still harbored some guilt and regret over. Was he still single? If not, had his partner been with him on that ship – and if so, had she been killed in the accident?

Ripley Jones found herself suppressing a curious urge to wish so... dismissed it, and instead hoped that he was single regardless. There would be no way of telling how long he would be with them aboard the Antares after all, and how much time they might have together... if he would even speak to her. They were, after all, heading into a situation that could prove hostile – one that seemed to have "Corsair" written all over it!

Whatever secrets Mykl d'Angelo had, she hoped they didn't include being a Corsair!

To find out what happens next, you need to read "Blachart", book 1 in the "Galaxii series!"

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About the Author



Christina Engela is one of South Africa's most unique and skilled storytellers, having written 13 novellas in three science fiction series, and also several non-fiction titles. Best known for her realistic characterization and for casting fully-fleshed-out LGBT characters in leading roles, Christina brings her wealth of personal experience to each of her stories. With several new offerings already in the pipeline, including several standalone titles, 2020 is bound to be a busy year for her fans!

You can find out more on ChristinaEngela.net.

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