

Armistice Day

David Drazul

ARMISTICE DAY

Published by Lulu Press, Inc.

First Edition

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ISBN: 978-0-557-21238-5

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to Tammy, Alex and Rebecca for permitting me to steal away to write this story. I love you.

Many thanks go to Linda Chiara and all those who attended her writer's workshop and were subjected to raw chunks of this story. Without Linda's guidance, this book would still be a jumbled mess on my computer.

A hearty "whoa!" goes to Travis Leichssenring for the cover art.

Finally, a humble thank you to all those who believed in me even when I didn't believe in myself.

1

Rumowitz was only ten feet in front of Aaron when his head burst forth a fountain of pink and red. Thirty feet behind him, Johnson took one in the leg.

“Ambush!” Sergeant McConnell shouted, sending the remaining squad members scurrying for cover.

Aaron ducked into an alcove as a hail of bullets ripped through the street, launching clods of dirt into the air. He clutched his assault rifle to his chest. Adrenaline turned his heart into a hammer, yearning to smash through his armor.

From the relative safety of his position, he tried to find the rest of his squad. There was no sign of them on the other side of the street nor did they appear to be shielding themselves behind the ruined hulk of an abandoned car. Even Johnson wasn't visible.

He tried to raise the sergeant on his comm but the headset returned only static. “Must be jamming our network,” he thought. A glance down at his PDA confirmed it. No signal. “How the hell are they doing that?” Aaron scanned the buildings around him. “They couldn't possibly jam us without compromising their own communications.” His eyes fell on the dead car. “Crap! The jammer's gotta be in there along with a seismic proximity sensor. Damn, that's clever. Better take it out.”

But as he aimed his assault rifle, with the grenade launcher mounted underneath, the gunmen up the street caught sight of his gun barrel and sent

more bullets his way. There was no way Aaron could get a clear shot off without exposing himself to fire.

“Damn it!”

“Osborne,” Sergeant McConnell yelled from down the street, “can you see Rumowitz? What’s his status?”

Aaron stole a peek out at Rumowitz. His body was lying face down in a red ochre mud puddle that steadily grew in size. He drew back as a ricochet sent chips of stucco raining down on his helmet.

“He’s dead, Sarge!”

“What about you?”

“I’m ok!”

“Can you make it back to our position?”

Aaron saw that he had to cover twenty feet to re-join his squad at a side street. It may as well have been twenty *miles* with all the gunfire the local militia was throwing at them. But what was he afraid of? Dying? Would that be so bad? His wife, Angela, was dead. His parents were too. He could join them, wherever they were. It really didn’t matter if it was Heaven or Oblivion. Heaven, well, that was self-explanatory. Oblivion? It sure beat eating sand and breathing a hundred and five degree dust-laden air.

All he had to do was run out in the middle of the street. What was the problem? The pain? In a way, Rumowitz was lucky. He took the shot in his face. Judging by how he fell, the bullet must’ve killed him instantly. In Aaron’s case, his helmet and armor would absorb most of the blow. A lucky shot might clip him in his calf muscle or knee and send him down to the ground to writhe in agony while the militia riddled his body with bullets until he stopped moving. Maybe Sarge would send someone out to get him. After all, no one gets left behind. They’d probably get shot too and that wouldn’t be right. If Aaron was going to get himself killed, he had to make sure that no one else from the squad went too. Though they were just brothers in arms, out here that was enough.

But this was all irrelevant. Aaron *was* afraid of dying. Despite the fact that the people he loved the most were now dead, he still had a reason to live: revenge. If he died, who would make their murderers pay? Sure the coalition could win the war without him. He was just one man. But he couldn't die not knowing the outcome. The thought of Angela, Mom and Dad's killers not being punished ate him alive. There had to be a special place in Hell where the tormented souls of unrequited vengeance spent eternity.

He had to live, just to be sure.

"Osborne!" Sergeant McConnell interrupted Aaron's introspection. "Answer me! Can you make it back to our position?"

Aaron pounded his forehead and gritted his teeth. "Affirmative!" he shouted.

"OK! We'll lay down cover fire on three! Ready?"

A deep breath. "Go!"

"One... Two... Three!"

The three remaining uninjured soldiers in Aaron's squad burst from an alley. Thompson and Hernandez opened up with suppression fire from their assault rifles while the sergeant let loose a couple grenades. It was enough to give the militia pause and Aaron his opening.

He launched himself from the alcove. A couple of gunmen risked being hit to take a few shots at Aaron. However, he crossed the distance unscathed. Once he rejoined them, his squad mates retreated into the alley before the next full volley of enemy gunfire came at them.

"You ok, Osborne?" Sarge asked.

Aaron nodded affirmative as he caught his breath.

"You sure about Rumowitz?"

"Shot in the face. He stopped twitching a while ago." Aaron noticed that Johnson was there too, sitting against a wall with his leg bandaged. He decided to switch subjects. "Any chance we're gonna get air support?"

“Can’t get a signal out. Whatever’s jamming our network has got the radio too.”

“I think I know where the jammer is.”

“Spit it out, son. We ain’t got all day.”

“That car over there.” Aaron gestured around the corner. “It’s the only thing that makes sense. Unless these guys have directional jamming from their position, they’d only be hurting themselves with a wide area unit.”

“Can’t hurt. Hernandez, take out that piece of shit.”

“Gladly, sir!”

Miguel Hernandez loaded a grenade into the launcher on his assault rifle and fired from the safety of the alley. The grenade flew across the street, plowed through a door into the back seat and exploded.

“Hot damn!” Thompson exclaimed, “I’ve got a signal!”

“Hold off on the porn and notify DCOM of our situation,” Sarge ordered. Turning to Aaron, he added, “Good call on the jammer. But what took you so long out there?”

Aaron nodded. Before he could say anything in reply, Thompson updated the sergeant.

“DCOM says it’ll have a strike here in ninety ticks. We’re to hold our position until then.”

“Alright guys, let’s make it look good. We don’t want those clowns down the street to know the cavalry is coming. Give ‘em a few rounds. Make ‘em think we’re gonna make a move. Give me a countdown, Thompson, and we’ll roll up tight when it gets close.”

The roar of the jets was music to Aaron’s ears. Once Thompson gave the word, he hunkered down with the others behind a couple of short cinder block walls at the back of the alley. The concussion from the blasts, first east of their position then west, rattled his jaw. And just like that, the A-10’s were gone. Nothing stirred in the street save clouds of pulverized brick.

The squad cheered.

Besotted by morphine, Johnson added, “Man, there’s nothing finer than a couple of warthogs tearing things up. I’m so glad they kept them around.”

“Thank you, Johnson.” Sarge cut off the wounded soldier. “Alright, Osborne and Hernandez, you guys sweep east. Make sure those eagles took out the welcoming committee on our six. Thompson, has DCOM given you an ETA for Johnson’s MEDEVAC?”

“Five minutes after we ensure them that we’re no longer hot.”

“You heard ‘em, boys. Get to it. We’ll grab Rumowitz.”

Aaron and Miguel darted across the street, weaving around newly created piles of rubble that were, until a minute ago, an abandoned café and a former hideout for their ambushers. A bloody arm stuck out from the middle of one of these piles. With a curt nod to each other, the two soldiers moved on to the next pile and made a similar discovery.

“We’re clear here, Sarge,” Aaron radioed in. “We’ll go rooftop for a better look.”

“Roger that, Osborne.”

Hernandez kicked open the door to a still intact building and the pair ascended the stairs unopposed. Adrenaline got them on the roof in no time. To the west, they could see similar piles of ruin where the local militia had been holed up. Aaron looked through his binoculars just to be sure.

“Confirmed, Sarge. We’re looking clear here. Nothing moving.”

“Good. Keep a look out for the MEDEVAC chopper.”

“I see it,” Hernandez shouted, pointing to the southeast.

“Negative,” came Thompson’s reply over the comm line. “DCOM says the whirlybird is still on the ground.”

Aaron trained his binoculars on the patch of sky where Miguel was pointing. The black mass he spotted was too big to be a helicopter, or even a C-130 transport. It was more like a destroyer and closing in on them.

“What do you see, Osborne?” Sergeant McConnell asked.

“Something big, Sarge. Really big. Not like anything I’ve ever seen.”

“Some new top secret bomber?” Hernandez asked.

“Nah. The shape’s all wrong. No wings to speak of.”

“Give me something, Osborne,” the Sarge demanded. “I gotta know if I need to alert DCOM.”

“They already know, Sarge,” came Thompson’s reply. “There’s reports coming in from all over the Net. There’s at least a couple dozen different sightings all over the planet.”

“Aliens?” Hernandez asked.

“Bullshit!” Sergeant McConnell replied. “There’s no such thing. It’s a trick of some kind.”

“Sorry, Sarge,” Aaron said, “but this thing isn’t from around here. No one on Earth has anything like this. If they do, we’re screwed if it isn’t ours.”

“Hey! Watch your tongue, Osborne! Or I’ll...”

“See for yourself, Sarge. It’ll be overhead in just a few seconds.”

An awed silence fell over the men as the unidentified vessel forded the sky. Despite its size, the ship looked sleek, almost feral. A savage pattern of crimson, orange, and black played about its metallic surface, which bristled with small spiky protuberances that reminded Aaron of battleships from a century ago. It cruised above them, calmly defying gravity. Prowling for prey.

And just as quickly as it had come, it was gone.

“Where do you think it’s headed,” Hernandez asked slack jawed.

“Riyadh, maybe.” Aaron answered. “Sarge?”

“Yeah, I saw it. You boys better get down here.”

When Aaron and Miguel rejoined the others, Sarge motioned for them to be quiet. He was listening to something private over the comm. Thompson was busy assembling a makeshift stretcher.

“Change of plans,” Thompson said in hushed tones. “DCOM texted us to say that all flights were currently grounded. An e-jeep will rendezvous with us half a click down the road.”

“An e-jeep!” exclaimed Hernandez.

Sergeant McConnell shot him a reproachful glare.

“Sorry, Sarge,” Hernandez mouthed. He then whispered, “What happened to our chopper?”

“All flights grounded while the brass assesses the situation.”

“So that wasn’t ours.” Aaron interjected.

“No, it wasn’t,” the Sarge confirmed. He was done with the comm. “They don’t belong to anyone. Even Beijing was on the phone with the President demanding that he ‘stop this aggression.’” He waved an arm in the direction of the UFO. “Aaron’s right. We’re looking at a bona fide ET.”

Hernandez whistled a wow.

“And there’s something else. I don’t have all the particulars, but the aliens have been broadcasting that they’re part of some empire and they’re here to...”

“Invade?” Hernandez asked.

“Not exactly. They’re hear to ‘perform an intervention.’”

“What the hell does that mean?” Aaron asked.

“Damned if I know,” Sarge replied. “But one thing’s for sure, there’s a new sheriff in town and it ain’t us.”

2

Fifteen months later...

The rain beat against the glass, demanding Aaron's attention. He walked over to the window and stared at the ruins of New York, enshrouded in gray as clouds lumbered along on a cold and dreary November day.

Without turning around, Aaron asked his client, "Why New York, Jeekyri? Why here? There are plenty of other cities where the ceremony could take place." A distant rumble of thunder completed Aaron's illusion of a misty monstrous herd trampling its way across Manhattan Island.

Jeekyri's reply was neutral, "That is true." He sat in a leather cushioned chair across from Aaron's desk, his coat draped across his shoulders.

Aaron continued, "I know for a fact that you'd prefer a much warmer location. Why wasn't Guangzhou or Singapore chosen? At least they're intact."

"You know as well as I do that my people were not allowed to choose the location."

Aaron knew this to be true. Although Jeekyri's people enjoyed a loftier seat than humans did in the Empire, they were still subservient to the Overlords. "You were *told* why New York was chosen, right?"

"Yes." Jeekyri paused before continuing. His ears drooped as he mulled over which words to use. He realized that Aaron was dwelling upon the past again. Best to tread lightly around this human's old wound. Jeekyri's ears perked up again once the proper phrasing came to mind. "The ceremony is to be a bridge between the past and the future. The United States of America was the most powerful nation of your world before the Intervention."

Intervention: A nice way of saying invasion. Aaron supposed that's how their political consultants suggested spinning it.

"Washington would have been more appropriate, but radiation levels are still too high and all the historically familiar landmarks have been obliterated. An alternate site was needed. New York City was your nation's preeminent city..."

Without turning around, Aaron cut him off, "And now it's in ruins." Anger was rising inside of him and threatening to undermine his professionalism. He took a deep breath and resumed his vigil by the window. Fortunately, Jeekyri knew him well enough to understand his feelings.

Jeekyri continued, "I disagree. With sufficient investment, New York can easily be restored," he could see Aaron growing tense, "but now is not the time to debate reconstruction strategies. I understand your point. The fact that it is now in ruins, as you say, only strengthens our Overlords' metaphor. Here we have the most prominent city of the strongest nation of Earth's past reduced to a flooded collection of shattered spires. What better place to reinforce the fact that the Empire is here to stay. When images of the ceremony are transmitted all over your world, the new leading nations will be reminded to know their place in the Empire."

Aaron knew Jeekyri wasn't trying to goad him. He was merely stating the party line. "Are they so sure it won't have the opposite effect?"

"That is why they want to hire you."

"So they expect the Resistance to mount some sort of attack."

"Yes."

"Why not bring down your own security?"

"There will be plenty of security vehicles and personnel in the area. However, there are too many places to hide. We need small, maneuverable reconnaissance teams on the ground to keep watch. You are much more

familiar with the city and its hidden inhabitants than any offworld security detachment.”

Aaron finally turned around to face his client.

“So my team would be allowed to carry weapons?” He watched for a reaction on Jeekyri’s face. Although Jeekyri was the closest thing to a friend Aaron had among the Queezal, he still didn’t trust him.

“Yes,” Jeekyri said, although it sounded a bit more like a yip.

“And use them if necessary?”

“Yes.” Jeekyri’s eyes darted around the room. He was startled by Aaron’s sudden turnabout and hunkered down inside his tan coat, the orange blotches in his fur fading to match it. The Queezal were a jumpy race. “But...”

“There’s a condition.”

“Yes. Your team will be required to have transponder implants. If a problem does arise, we would not want to mistake your team for hostiles.”

“Fine,” Aaron said, feigning indifference. It wasn’t fine but he didn’t want to let on. Aaron didn’t care for transponder implants or any other subdermal technology. Although he was no technophobe, he wasn’t comfortable with biotech that he couldn’t control, especially when it gave away his position.

“They’ll be removed upon completion of the ceremony, right?”

“If that is what you wish.”

“It is and we’ll want it in writing. It’s the sort of thing that can jeopardize our ability to do our job.” *And be able to sleep at night.*

“It will be done.” Jeekyri cautiously emerged from his coat.

As Aaron walked across his office to the door, he asked Jeekyri, “Coffee?”

Jeekyri perked up. His tail wagged beneath his coat. “Oh yes!”

Aaron called out from the kitchenette next to his office, “You take it with five teaspoons of sugar and coconut milk, right?”

“Yes. I am impressed that you remembered.”

“I make it a point to know my clients.”

Aaron returned to his office with two cups of coffee. He handed Jeekyri’s mug to him before sitting down behind his desk in his antique Herman Miller chair. The mesh membrane molded itself to Aaron’s frame.

Jeekyri took a sip and trilled his delight. “Thank you, Aaron.” He took another sip and then asked, “I have to ask you though, where did you get this coffee? This is a different flavor than what you normally have. The aldehydes and ketones are not so strong. They are more subdued.”

Aaron smiled. “A gift from a client. The South American Coffee Consortium renewed trade relations with us a couple weeks ago. My client acquired a case before the first shipments hit the market next month.”

“I see. I saw on the American newsfeed that some people were upset over the treaty.”

Aaron’s eyebrows signaled mild surprise. “That was pretty far down on the list of headlines.”

“I make it a point to know the people that I have been assigned to.”

Aaron acknowledged Jeekyri’s retort with a nod. “Well, the one thing those people don’t want to admit is that American grown coffee sucks.” He chuckled. “I give the scientists in the lab a lot of credit for figuring out how to geneer coffee so that it can grow this far north, but let’s face facts: it doesn’t taste nearly as good as the original. Probably something in the soil.”

Jeekyri looked as though he was going to hide inside his coat again. “I never wanted to insult your hospitality.”

“No that’s ok Jeekyri. We make do with what we have. I’m sure plenty of people will still drink American coffee because it’s the patriotic thing to do. But if we’re going to rejoin the free market, those agricorps will adapt. There’s plenty of other food we still don’t import.”

Aaron set his mug down on a coaster. His mahogany desk was a rare find, rarer still since it was an antique, almost a century older than his chair, salvaged from a bank across the river. It had survived depression and prosperity, mergers and acquisitions, chaos and exodus. After all that, he wasn't about to let a cup of coffee mar its finish.

He folded his arms across his chest and resumed the discussion about the job, "But enough about coffee. What sort of security are the delegates bringing?"

"Each delegate is permitted an escort of three to five members. They may or may not be security guards. Even so, they will be permitted nothing more than a pistol or stunner and all will have transponder implants."

"How did that go over?"

"I was not at the United Nations when the protocols of the ceremony were dictated to the assembly, but a colleague of mine informed me that there was no dissension. Several ambassadors did object to the ceremony being held in New York City rather than Geneva."

"I'm not surprised. The burned out hulk of the old U.N. building is sure to be a grim reminder of our old rogue nation days."

Jeekyri's brow furrowed and he leaned closer to Aaron. Looking as though he feared being overheard, Jeekyri said, "I have heard that there are several nations who still consider you to be a rogue nation."

Because we wouldn't roll over and play dead when you showed up. Aaron bit his tongue and changed the subject. "So did you get any other local security forces involved or are we it?"

Jeekyri sat back in his chair and consulted his datapad. "As you know, the ceremony is to be held in the stadium on 34th street. There are three local security detachments on the ground covering the city from the river to Broadway. We have Saltobellini and Sons covering 42nd street to 57th street."

Aaron interrupted him, “Sal’s working this job? That’s good. Sal’s a good guy.”

Jeekyri looked up at him. When it appeared that Aaron was finished talking he referred back to his datapad and continued, “Bergen Security will be covering 23rd street to 42nd street and we intend for you to handle from 23rd street down to 14th street.”

“Haven’t worked with Bergen. Got any intel on them?”

“I was not involved with their recruitment. I will check.” Jeekyri’s long thin fingers scurried over his datapad.

Aaron finished off his coffee while he waited for Jeekyri to access the information on the Bergen Security recruitment. He mulled over the idea of doing another job for Jeekyri. The last one hurt, literally. He was laid up for a month. Still, it paid better than any government contracts they usually got. It more than made up for any lost revenue the firm suffered on account of his absence.

But not the loss of Bill.

“Here it is.” Jeekyri’s ears fell. “This is strange. There is almost no information here. A local address plus coordinates. I guess that my associate has not finished filling out his report. No matter. I will check back later and send you the information on them.”

“That’s fine, Jeekyri. Ok you’ve piqued my interest. How much does the job pay?”

“Which currency would you like to be paid in?”

Aaron smiled and leaned back in his chair. “The coin of the realm of course.”

“300,000 Imperial drekna.”

“No chance. 500,000. I’ve got a team to consider.”

Jeekyri’s ears flopped. “Are we haggling again?”

Aaron laughed a bit cynically, “Yes. After what happened last time, I have to raise my fee. Hazard pay you know.”

“I see. Would 400,000 suffice?”

“Yes, but you’ve missed all the fun of haggling. You’re only supposed to go up a little. Then I come down a little. Then you go up a little more and so on.”

Jeekyri’s ears resumed their erect posture, “Inefficient if you ask me. Why is it not better to just say how much money you want for the job?”

Aaron sighed. “Never mind. 400,000 it is. And I’ll need 25% up front.”

“That is fine. I will have the money by Friday.”

“Deal.” Aaron leaned across his desk to shake Jeekyri’s small hand, which was all but swallowed up by Aaron’s.

“Deal.” Jeekyri smiled to hide his anxiety. He exhaled his relief when Aaron let go of his hand.

“One other thing Jeekyri.”

“Yes Aaron?”

“No surprises.”

“Excuse me?”

“No surprises. Like last time.”

Jeekyri swallowed hard. “Yes. But that was not my fault. You do know that Aaron, right?” Jeekyri shrunk inside his coat again.

“I know it wasn’t. Just make sure your people are level with you this time. If there are any surprises... *any*... it will be the last time we do business together. Understood?”

“Yes, Aaron. No surprises.”

“Ok then. I’ll walk you out.”

Jeekyri gathered his coat around him and hopped down from his chair. He walked in front of Aaron out of the office and toward the front door. As they walked down the hall, they passed the offices of Aaron’s business partners.

Out of the corner of his eye, Aaron saw Marcus staring at him from his desk. Marcus didn't look pleased. Jeekyri, who was only waist high to Aaron, didn't appear to notice or couldn't see Marcus. *I'm gonna hear about it when Jeekyri leaves.*

Aaron opened the front door for Jeekyri as he finished closing his coat and pulled up his hood.

“Thank you, Aaron. See you Friday.”

“Friday it is. Good day, Jeekyri.”

Aaron watched Jeekyri bounce over a hopscotch array of puddles on his way to his grav car. Jeekyri's driver, who had been waiting in the vehicle the entire time, already had the door open for him. In just a few strides, Jeekyri was in the car with the hatch closed. He faced forward as it lifted from the ground. The rain all but drowned out the hum of the grav car's lifters. Once the vehicle was clear of the parking lot, and a safe distance from the office buildings, the thrusters kicked in and it disappeared behind the clouds.

3

The grav car broke through the storm clouds and ascended into the vast blue sky. The sun briefly blinded Jeekyri before the windshield tinted out the glare.

Jeekyri asked the driver in his native tongue, “Kreelee, would it be possible to turn off the tint on my side of the car? After spending the day down there in that dreariness, the sun feels good.”

“Yes, sir.” Kreelee pressed a button on the dashboard. The sun returned to its full intensity on Jeekyri’s side of the car.

“Ahhhh, that is much better.” Jeekyri sank back into his seat and closed his eyes.

A few minutes later Kreelee asked, “How did your meeting go?”

“As well as could be hoped, Kreelee,” Jeekyri replied without opening his eyes. “Humans can be such a tiresome lot. Just *talking* to them in their language is a linguistic workout. I am glad to have a rest from,” Jeekyri fought with his tongue to pronounce, “English.”

Kreelee shook his head. “Why is it that we can not use the translator algorithms built into our datapads?”

Jeekyri smiled. “You are new to the Imperial Exploratory Service are you not?”

As if ashamed of this fact, Kreelee bowed his head. “Yes, sir. I am. I was chosen shortly before departure to replace a comrade who resigned. I spent the journey in cryostasis as my piloting skills were not needed until our arrival here.”

Jeekyri opened his eyes and assuaged his companion's embarrassment. "Then your question has merit. You see, Kreelee, most aliens are uncomfortable with mechanical voices emanating from little white boxes. Primitive cultures are fearful of the *magic box* while more sophisticated ones view them with suspicion, as if they were programmed to lie." Jeekyri chuckled at the thought of his datapad lying on his behalf. "By speaking their language back to them, we put the aliens at ease. Surely, we can not be deceptive if the words we use are the same as theirs. Furthermore, it is also essential to not speak our language in front of the aliens as they may infer that we are talking negatively about them."

"But is that not paranoia?"

"Perhaps, but it is often based on fact. We Queezal are something of an anomaly in that we never warred upon ourselves. Our ancestors were forced to cooperate with one another against the many predators of our world. They could not afford to let suspicion cloud their minds for the consequences would be fatal. Most aliens, including the humans, became the dominant species of their worlds without having to resort to global cooperation. Small groups were sufficiently efficient at dominating the beasts of their worlds. As the eons wore on, there was nothing left for them to dominate except each other."

"And language kept them apart," Kreelee chimed in.

"Yes! Very good, Kreelee."

The grav car climbed through the upper reaches of the atmosphere. The sun grew ever brighter as the last traces of protective diffraction were whisked away.

"Thank you, Kreelee. You may turn the light filtering back on. I now feel rejuvenated."

Kreelee complied with Jeekyri's request. "I will be changing course soon, so the glare of the sun will no longer be a problem."

With the near vacuum of space at hand, Jeekyri could make out the ships of the Imperial Exploration Fleet in orbit over Earth. They came in many

shapes and sizes. Most of the science vessels were simple spheres. Supply ships, which made up the bulk of the fleet, were long rows of boxes attached to a central spine. Ambassadorial yachts were customized affairs, built to the whims of the Overlord who commissioned their construction. Except for the science vessels, none of these civilian ships were designed to enter an atmosphere. This task was left to smaller, streamlined vessels and small craft like the grav car Jeekyri now rode in.

And then there were the military escort ships. In his youth, Jeekyri had wondered why the Exploratory Service would require a military escort. He had naively believed that all worlds would openly welcome the arrival of the Overlords as his people had done. He had been shocked to learn that some aliens had fiercely rejected the presence of the Overlords on their worlds. An unarmed exploratory mission could easily be overpowered. Its personnel taken hostage or even killed. After the hostilities the fleet encountered here at Earth, it was reassuring for Jeekyri to know the military was there to protect them all.

The Great Protector in the flesh.

Except for the enormous Krendorian flagship, the *Klalventoria*, all of the warships in the fleet were of Mazzulian design. While Krendorian ships were large, ponderous vessels, like their designers, the Mazzulian ships were always designed to appear sleek, even when they were on a scale to match the ships of the Overlords. And the colors! While Overlord ships were typically a metallic gray, Mazzulian ships were savage stripes of red, orange, and black. But these colors could be changed at the whim of the captain for the “paint” was programmable. Mazzulian ships could be all black with points of white to blend in with the stars or a host of yellows, pinks, and browns to mimic the clouds of a gas giant.

The three classes of warships present were the nimble *Bak'-To*, the steadfast *Bak'-Fray*, and the fearsome *Bak'-Rrrova*. The primary weapon of the latter was a particle accelerator; a terrible weapon which harvested the massive

energies contained within the fusion power plant to accelerate subatomic particles down the length of the ship to relativistic speeds. It was capable of inflicting catastrophic damage with just a single shot.

Jeekyri shuddered as he recalled when the order had been given for the *Bak'-Rrovos* to bombard the cities which harbored the Resistance. The American military, which had already surrendered by this point, had dubbed the attack *Operation: Sea of Glass*. As callous as it sounded, it was terribly accurate. Except for weeding out pockets of Resistance forces, it put an end to the Intervention War. *But the cost was too high.*

Jeekyri noticed that they were not headed directly back to their home away from home, the *Queleeree*. “Kreelee, where are we going?”

“My apologies, sir. I thought you knew. Grothlar has summoned you before him.”

Jeekyri’s ears popped up. “He wants to see me in person?”

“Yes sir.”

Jeekyri’s nose twitched. Grothlar was the Krendorian Overlord in charge of Terrestrial Security. It was rare for him to require face-to-face meetings. Communications were typically handled via datapad.

“No, I was not informed. Most unusual. Were you told what this was in reference to?”

“No, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Kreelee hailed the *Halvento*, Grothlar’s ship, and was granted clearance to proceed inside its modest hangar bay. The *Halvento* was a surveillance ship. Although streamlined, it nonetheless had the peculiar, angular features common to stealth designed ships. Like the Mazzulian warships, it also utilized an active camouflage system.

The hangar bay doors parted and Kreelee nimbly slipped the grav car inside. Jeekyri preened himself while Kreelee parked the grav car and the cargo bay pressurized.

Jeekyri sighed.

“Is there something wrong, sir?” Kreelee asked.

“I detest surprises. I have had no chance to prepare for this meeting and I have no idea what I am to be reporting on.”

“I am sure that you will be fine, sir.”

“Thank you, Kreelee.” Jeekyri took a deep breath to calm himself, then opened the passenger door and hopped out.

Jeekyri walked across the bay to the access door. It promptly slid open as he approached.

Waiting on the other side of the door to greet Jeekyri was a Mazzulian, a large bipedal creature that resembled Terran tigers. The humans were fortunate that the predators on their world weren't as cunning as the soldiers of the Empire. They'd likely be extinct.

“My people too,” Jeekyri thought.

The Mazzulian was dressed in a dark blue formal uniform, sleeveless and legless to allow unencumbered mobility. He had over a dozen ceremonial pendants pinned to his chest. The pendants were in the shape of distinct predatory animals from several Imperial worlds, each denoting deeds of valor and prowess in combat. It was Sosiphur, Grothlar's top officer, *First Claw*. Jeekyri's ears drooped and his tail went limp.

Sosiphur and Jeekyri had competed for the very job that Sosiphur now possessed. Grothlar had insisted that both candidates were superb and that his choice had been a difficult one, but the Mazzulian won. *They always do.*

Sosiphur regarded him with amber eyes laced with red flecks. He sneered in the formal language of Old Krendith, “Greetings, Information Specialist, Jeekyri.”

“Greetings, First Claw, Sosiphur,” Jeekyri returned. A sneer from a Mazzulian was to be interpreted as a sign of begrudging respect for a rival. It was when they growled, hissed, or salivated that one had reason to fear them.

“Lord Grothlar will see you now. Please accompany me to his quarters.”

“Thank you, noble sir.”

The odd pair walked down clean, spacious corridors. Although the lighting was dim, Jeekyri had no problem noticing the occasional maintenance bot tidying up the place. He also couldn't help but notice the stares and glances he received from the other Mazzulians. There was a musky, almost predatory scent in the air. Queezal were not stationed on board Mazzulian ships. There was general concern within the Imperial Navy and Exploratory Service that a Mazzulian might mistake a Queezal for a prey animal. There was no need for Jeekyri to worry though. His escort had a fierce reputation for swift punishment. If any Mazzulian made even the slightest effort to harm Jeekyri, Sosiphur would cut the beast down in an instant.

They arrived at Grothlar's quarters. The door slid open automatically. Sosiphur never broke stride.

“Definitely expecting us if Grothlar cued the door to open upon Sosiphur's transponder,” Jeekyri thought.

A single Krendorian, dressed in the emerald green robes of a lord, stood in front of a view screen which displayed an image of the world below. Wide goldenrod colored bands accented the edges of sleeves and the bottom of his robe. Family names, written in Old Krendith, were tastefully stitched in black within their borders. Krendorians were large rotund beings, typically massing around five hundred pounds. Their legs resembled tree trunks, thick and round to support their weight. Three horns emanated from the skull: a long one over each eye and a short one at the end of the snout. A great crest of bone fanned out from the back of the head. When down on all fours, it protected the back of the neck, shoulders and upper back from attack.

Jeekyri and Sosiphur bowed before their Overlord.

Grothlar turned around, his massive arms crossed. “Greetings, Jeekyri.” His baritone voice filled the room though he was clearly not shouting.

“Greetings, Lord Grothlar,” Jeekyri bowed again. “I apologize if my arrival was tardy. I was unaware that you requested my presence until my driver informed me en route to your vessel.”

Grothlar dismissed Jeekyri’s apology with the more relaxed tongue of Common Imperial, “No need, little one. I didn’t want to interrupt your meeting with the human. I trust it went well.”

“Yes, sir. It did.”

Grothlar gestured to heavily cushioned Krendorian chairs. “Please have a seat, both of you.” The chairs were low to the ground and very broad. Each leg was of the same girth as the legs of the being for which they were designed. For a Queezal, they could have doubled as king-sized beds.

“So this Jersey City Security you spoke so highly of in your report has agreed to join the other two security firms in ground surveillance for the Armistice Day ceremony?”

“Yes, my lord, they have.”

“Good,” Grothlar tilted his head and scratched the callused skin over his left eye where the horn emanated.

Jeekyri briefly wondered if Krendorian horns ever got in the way. He’d never seen a clumsy Overlord. Perhaps they’d been culled from the herd over the millennia.

“How much did they ask for in payment?” Grothlar asked.

“Four hundred thousand drekna.”

Grothlar stopped scratching and fixed his large brown eyes on Jeekyri. He frowned. “I thought that the price was to be three hundred thousand.”

Jeekyri swallowed hard as his ears drooped. Grothlar’s two eye horns were pointed right at him. While Jeekyri was quite the nimble fellow and would most certainly get out of the way of a charging Krendorian, Grothlar’s

countenance still scared him. *Only a Mazzulian would have the courage to stand up to that.* “Yes, my lord, but Aaron insisted on more money. We haggled...”

“Haggled?”

“Sorry, my lord. It is a human form of financial negotiations. We settled on four hundred thousand.”

Grothlar laughed. “Some day I will have to meet this Aaron. He is bold, even for a human. Is he related to the other one, Saltobellini?”

“No, my lord, but they do know of one another. Each spoke very highly of the other.”

Grothlar shot a glance over at Sosiphur. The Mazzulian let the slightest nod escape his rigid posture.

“And did Aaron agree to the transponder implants?”

Jeekyri’s ears drooped. “Reluctantly, my lord.”

“Oh? How so?”

“He stipulated that the contract must specify that the transponders will be removed upon completion of the ceremony.”

Grothlar frowned. “Did he explain himself?”

Jeekyri scrunched down in his chair, “Aaron stated that they interfered with his ability to do his job.”

“The human has a point,” Sosiphur added. “The transponders would reveal his location to his enemies should they gain access to our monitoring systems.”

“This intertribal warfare must cease!” Grothlar bellowed. “The Empire will not tolerate its citizens warring upon one another. I thought that we made that perfectly clear when we crushed the insurgent factions.”

Jeekyri gripped the cushions of his chair. If his claws had been as sharp as Sosiphur’s, he would’ve ripped them. His muscles tightened, poised to spring across the room and away from the Krendorian. But he couldn’t. The Overlords wanted respect, not fear. Jumping away in terror would disgust

Grothlar. Jeekyri would lose his job and likely spend the rest of the mission confined to his ship. He swallowed hard, desperately holding onto his composure.

Unfazed by Grothlar's outburst, Sosiphur countered, "My lord, did we Mazzulian not take several years of our own to comprehend the wisdom of unification?"

Grothlar sighed. He didn't have to answer. He asked, "Is this Aaron Osborne worth the trouble Jeekyri?"

Once he saw Grothlar calm down, the tension in Jeekyri's muscles subsided. He relaxed his grip on the chair. His ears perked up at the chance to defend Aaron. "Why yes, my lord. His reputation is unblemished. He has never taken part in any anti-Imperial activity, unless you consider his membership in the American military during the Intervention war to be a problem."

"I do not."

"His firm has a triple A bond rating with the Paramilitary Underwriter's Association. Their clients, both corporate and government, speak highly of them. They also possess a thorough knowledge of Manhattan. Aaron used to live there before the debris from the comet, and subsequent terrorist attack, made it uninhabitable."

"I see. How did he survive? I was under the impression that few humans survived both the impacts *and* the contagion."

"Aaron was a soldier in the American military at that point and was involved in the Arabian peninsula conflict."

"Ahhh yes, that was the conflict we witnessed upon our arrival."

"Yes, my lord."

Sitting in silence, Grothlar stroked the black whiskers on his chin with the four stubby fingers of his right hand.

"Was there something else, my lord?"

Grothlar stopped stroking his chin, "Why do you ask, Jeekyri?"

“No disrespect my lord, but this information could have been read in my report, which I was planning to write upon returning to my ship.”

Grothlar smiled. “You always were an astute Queezal, Jeekyri.”

A smile played out on Jeekyri’s face. “Thank you, my lord.”

Sosiphur’s whiskers twitched.

“Jeekyri, I would like you to oversee the collation of surveillance data for the Armistice Day Ceremony.”

Jeekyri’s ears flew up. “Me?”

“Yes, Jeekyri.”

“But why? No disrespect intended my lord, but...”

“But why not Sosiphur?”

“Yes, my lord,” Jeekyri was thankful Grothlar anticipated his question.

“Sosiphur will be acting as intelligence liaison with military security. He will be reporting directly to the head of military operations. It will be your job to analyze the surveillance data and funnel what is pertinent to him.”

Jeekyri’s tail began to wag. “Thank you, my lord.”

Sosiphur wrinkled his nose in disgust at the Queezal’s excitement.

“Assemble your team and make the necessary equipment requisitions.”

Grothlar looked over at his second in command. “Sosiphur will see to it that your requests are expedited and will grant you the necessary access privileges in the security network.”

Grothlar returned his gaze to Jeekyri and stood, signaling that the meeting was over. What passed for a smile among Krendorians appeared on his face. “Impress us young Queezal.”

“Yes, my lord. I shall, my lord.” Jeekyri’s tail began to wag as he bowed once more before leaving Grothlar’s quarters.

Grothlar returned to the formal Old Krendith, “Elder noble warrior, please escort master Jeekyri to his vessel.”

Sosiphur bowed, “Yes, my lord,” and exited Grothlar’s quarters.

Walking back to the hangar deck, Jeekyri couldn't help but occasionally bounce down the corridor. His tail wagged the whole time.

"Show some dignity for someone of your position," Sosiphur growled.

Jeekyri settled himself but a grin remained. "I am sorry, Sosiphur. I can not contain my happiness for Lord Grothlar's faith in my abilities."

"So it would seem," Sosiphur muttered.

They finally reached the hangar bay airlock. Jeekyri couldn't wait to tell Kreelee the good news. He approached the doors but they wouldn't open. A quick glance at the hangar bay air sensor light indicated that it was safe to enter. Jeekyri whirled around to face Sosiphur. The Mazzulian had manually overridden the door sensors.

"What is the meaning of this?" Jeekyri demanded.

Unfazed by the little Queezal's Overlord inspired courage, Sosiphur replied, "I have not given you permission to depart this vessel."

Jeekyri was perturbed. Lord Grothlar had expressed confidence in his abilities and he wasn't about to let the dour Mazzulian ruin his day with protocols. "Very well. My lord, I request permission to disembark from your vessel."

"No."

"No? Why not?"

"While our Overlord may have finished his inquiry into your meeting with Aaron Osborne, I have not."

Jeekyri scowled, "If it was good enough for him..."

"I still outrank you little one," a leer full of teeth appeared on Sosiphur's face, "and I can inquire into your affairs as much as I want until I am satisfied."

"What is it you want to know?"

"You left out a very important detail from your report."

"I did not!"

“Yes, you did.”

Jeekyri crossed his arms. “Tell me, all knowing Sosiphur, what did I omit from my report?”

Sosiphur moved closer to Jeekyri, baring his teeth, “Mind your tongue, little one. It would make a wonderful bracelet for my mate.”

Jeekyri backed up into the door. The airlock suddenly seemed much smaller. He swallowed, trying hard not to show his fear.

Sosiphur continued, “This Aaron Osborne of yours has had past dealings with us.”

Oh Great Protector! He found out!

“Half a Terran year ago, there was an incident at the Newark spaceport. Aaron and his comrade, William Stenloski, arrived unexpectedly at the cargo bay door of the supply ship, *Frentosa*. Two Mazzulian guards intercepted them. William was killed and Aaron was wounded. Aaron would have been killed as well had a certain little Queezal not intervened in time. Who was that Queezal, Jeekyri?”

“Me.”

“Yes, it was. According to your report, the Mazzulian commander was not informed of their arrival time. When you realized your associate’s oversight, you immediately contacted the Mazzulian commander, who, in turn, alerted his guards. Although too late to save William, Aaron’s life was spared.”

“I do not see how the omission of this fact is a problem. Aaron took no hostile action against the Mazzulian that night. If your species was not so quick to violence, no harm would have come to either human.”

Sosiphur moved in closer to Jeekyri. His face was now half a Queezal’s arm length away from Jeekyri’s face. “The reason why your omission is a problem, is because your Aaron is a risk.”

“A risk? How?”

“These humans share a dangerous trait with us Mazzulian: the desire for revenge.”

Jeekyri’s fear was replaced with surprise. “You think that Aaron would use his presence at the Armistice Day Ceremony to exact revenge upon the Empire for the death of his friend?”

“Yes I do. All the more so now that you tell me that William was his *friend* instead of merely a business associate.”

Jeekyri, you idiot! “I assure you Sosiphur that Aaron is above this behavior. He is too much of a professional to let personal feelings interfere with his work. Besides, he realizes that the whole incident was a regrettable misunderstanding.” *At least I hope he does.*

Sosiphur placed one long finger in front of Jeekyri’s chest. A claw slid out of its socket and made contact. Jeekyri could feel the tip cutting into his skin. If Sosiphur so much as twitched, blood would be drawn.

“For your sake Jeekyri, he’d better.”

The Mazzulian backed off. He returned control of the door to the airlock sensors. Detecting Jeekyri’s presence at the door, the sensors immediately instructed it to open. Jeekyri, who was still leaning on the door, fell to the floor of the hangar deck.

Sosiphur’s posture returned to a formal stance. “Master Jeekyri, you are granted permission to disembark from this vessel.” He then turned around and left the airlock.

Jeekyri sat on the floor of the hangar bay and watched the airlock doors close. *Oh Great Protector, what have I done now?*