

Tough crowd

It's no joke.

Marko Jankovic

Mike in hand, Brian McKay was sweating profusely. His bow tie was unusually tight, his mouth dry and vision blurry. He blinked a couple of times, licked his lips and pulled an ace out of his sleeve:

"So ... Why did the Zeltarian Groon-beast cross the street?"

The bar was silent. Someone at the back coughed. *This has got to work*, Brian thought to himself.

"To get to the other side!"

The brief second of silence seemed like eternity. He was ready to faint, when, all of a sudden, the bar filled with approving laughter! Well ... the ones who had mouths laughed. The bizarre concerto of sounds, ranging from growling, purring and screeching to rather unsettling gargling baritones, echoed through the room. The aliens were actually enjoying his comedy! Brian wiped the sweat off his face and stared into the crowd — he finally had 'em right where he wanted 'em! They liked his jokes — they really liked them! Encouraged, he shrugged off his insecurity and counter-attacked.

"Thanks, folks, you're too kind. Are there any Banjurans here tonight?"

A slimy pinkish-green tentacle rose from a bile-hued glob of indeterminate sex seated in front.

"Great! I'll have to talk ... *slower*."

Once more, the bar filled with the chaotic crescendo of what could be, with more or less certainty, interpreted as laughter, and a counterpoint or two of satisfied grunts. *It's in the bag — I'm the king!* Brian McKay, an ex-undercover operative of the Endless Terran Empire, conveniently crowned himself sovereign of interplanetary stand-up comedy. Of course, there weren't many things a human could do these days.

Several decades ago, an aggressive alien race calling themselves The Sons of Januur made contact with the Terran Empire. The Sons' ambassador announced that only they held claim over the Galaxy and that the destructive existence of the Terran insects had to be terminated once and for all — Brian could clearly remember the broadcast. The proud and overconfident Emperor and his parliament were

swift in answering the ambassador — they dispatched a fleet of starships to deal with the meddlesome aliens. Humans mercilessly bombarded the Januurian homeworld into submission. For a couple of years, it seemed as though the Sons had disappeared off the face of the Universe. This lulled the Emperor into a false sense of security — a mistake he wouldn't live to correct.

Brian's short stroll down memory lane was interrupted by another salvo of dissonant laughter. The smoking ruins of the Januurian planet forgotten, he was thrown back on the stage, where the now growing multitude of aliens was waiting for another

Brian reminisced during the brief pause in the show. Over the decades, The Sons of Januur systematically hunted down and killed any remaining Terrans in the Galaxy, forcing once-proud humankind to cower, flee and hide. Other aliens, former slaves to the Terran Empire, threw their shackles away and took revenge on their former masters. Years passed, the hunt ended — and humans were all but destroyed. Several thousands, however, still remained, scattered across the star-sprinkled Milky Way, doing chores and menial tasks for their various alien masters. Brian McKay had it *real good* compared with some of his kin — he heard terrible stories about the uranium mines up on Farzook Prime.

But there were some who resisted.

As he walked back to the stage, his mike and the stereotypical red brick wall behind them (remains of human architecture were still present on many planets), Brian's former euphoria subsided. He remembered Sam Dublin, his colleague from his covert-ops days. During the first years after the devastation of Earth, the two of them had performed dozens and dozens of successful clandestine operations, such as blowing up Januurian supply lines, assassinating their

top generals and politicians, recovering valuable data ... After a while, Brian got fed up — they were winning small battles but losing the war. The accomplishments they'd made were, ultimately, all to naught. He left Sam and the covert-ops for good, choosing a more secure life.

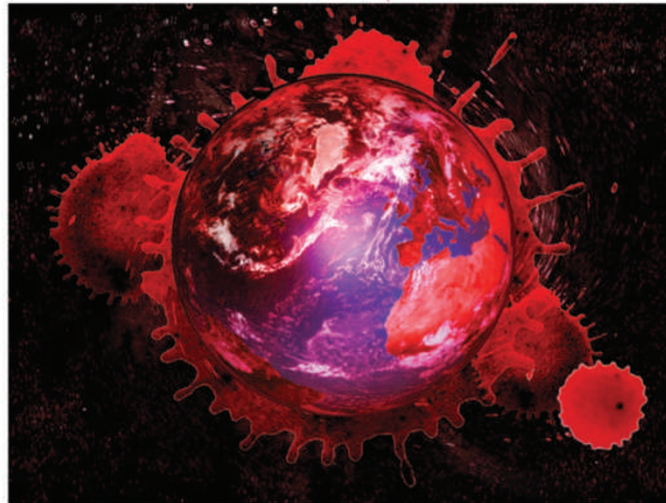
A more demeaning life.

The crowd cheered him as he walked towards the centre of the stage. He slowly moved his head from left to right, and his sight was filled with myriad weird-shaped figures — none of them human. He took the microphone, wanting to shout: *Terra Firma ad Aeternitatem!*, the old Empire battle cry, but all he said was:

"A Jarbroof, a Lampadi warhorse and a human walked into a bar ..."

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dose of wit. Imbued with confidence he started strolling among the tables, searching for a victim — time to take out the big guns.

"I don't think you see the point of the joke, sir," Brian was tongue in cheek with the blind bat-like creature from Wortanos. The customer blushed as the crowd accepted the tease with a cheer.

"And what's the deal with those Myrrian waspoids? Their hive queen is so fat, you have to take a starship just to get on her good side!"

Half an hour, ten hilarious jokes and one humiliated bar customer later, it was time for a break — Brian went back to his private quarters followed by thunderous applause. A quick drink and the soft chair had him thinking again.

Seven years after the destruction of the alien homeworld, a vast Januurian armada appeared out of hyperspace and wiped all life from Earth. Their technology was unsurpassed and starships innumerable,