

Kings

by Travis S. Taylor, 1968–

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“All hail to Abhir!” the Corps of Seven sounded.

Michael saluted smartly and then raised his staff, caught up in the excitement and cheers of the crowd. The Corps of Seven was a conglomeration of the most amazing military minds in recorded history—in *forever*. The Seven stood before the crowd and before Him.

“Grace to you,” Abhir said calmly in His booming voice as He filtered by the Corps. Michael could feel Him smile upon his presence. The mere thought of that filled him with pride. But it was more than just pride. His presence and acknowledgement of Michael somehow had an overwhelming physical effect upon him. There was the increasing and near unstoppable urge to adore and honor Him. Michael couldn’t explain it.

“To the General, to Abhir,” the crowd continued.

“All hail, Abhir!”

One uniformed man standing beside the Corps stepped forward and spoke through the sound projector at the five million subjects below that surrounded the palace as far as the eye could see—praising Abhir.

“Impressive soldiers, each and every one,” Abhir said to himself.

“To General Abhir, to Him who loved us and with His own blood made us kings, emperors of worlds, and generals of armies, in the name of His Father. Glory be to Him and His dominion forever and ever! Hail Abhir, General Abhir, Emperor Abhir!”

Abhir approached the edge of the palace overlook and peered down at the sea of elite soldiers below. They stood below him, ready and willing—in fact anxious—to give their lives for the Emperor. Abhir felt calm and confident as always and definitely looked the part of the Emperor of the Universe. The Corps of Seven stood firmly behind him in their smart golden uniforms. Abhir stood straight, ran his fingers over his long white hair and then straightened his golden Corps insignia band. The insignia bore a man holding seven suns in his right hand and wielding a brilliant shining sword before his face as if he were poised to kiss it.

“Bring the creature in,” Abhir said in his booming voice. The crowd below had no problem hearing Him.

Michael and two of the other members of the Corps moved to a doorway off the balcony and opened it and stood post on either side. Four men in Army of the Seven Stars uniforms led the creature forward.

“Its name is Jacob, sir,” Michael whispered and then backed away toward his post position. Abhir nodded in acknowledgement.

Jacob fell before Abhir, trembling, panicking, his eyes wide with fear. Then he grasped his left side in agony and collapsed completely. Michael held his staff over Jacob and then looked at his Emperor announcing the creature’s death. “The shock must’ve killed it, sir.” Michael grinned at the primitive. He understood that the strain of meeting one’s maker must be too overwhelming for such simple creatures.

Abhir knelt to the frail creature and touched him, thinking *how much alike us they look; the geneticist did well*. “Do not be afraid of me,” Abhir said as Jacob jumped to life, coughing and eyes wide again.

“Who are you?” Jacob asked.

“I am not for you to fear but instead to love. I am your beginning and your end, or rather what you will become in the end. But you and your peoples will never reach that end if you do not circumvent the path you are presently on. My generals tell me that your people are on a downward spiral into despair and might not survive. But if you and your people will join us willingly and give yourselves to me I will show you the path to overcome your obstacles, to eat from the fruits of life, and to join us in the everlasting paradise that is My domain.”

The crowd cheered, “Hail, Abhir!”

“And what if I decline?” Jacob asked, still trembling.

Michael stepped forward as though he would rap Jacob with his staff, but Abhir warned him off with a sideways glance.

“These things you can say to your people.” Abhir began. “These things you *should* say to your people. These things you *will* say to your people. Any peoples who bear the mark of the Seven Stars shall be fearless of the evils of this universe

and will live forever in paradise and never want. Those who do not I fear will soon find themselves at the mercy of my evil adversaries and will know no such days of paradise of which I speak.”

“What price would such enduring paradise require?” Jacob asked.

“Only love and gratitude and the desire to do your part in perpetuating the Great Kingdom of the Seven Stars would be required of you and your people.”

“And what part is that, Great One?” Jacob sneered as his hatred for required servitude overshadowed his fear of the overwhelming sights before him.

“Your people will give to me those that are willing to serve in harm’s way in order to ensure their families will live in freedom from evil forever.” *The impudence of this one; I really like him*, Abhir thought.

“Then this is an offer we cannot refuse?” Jacob said more than asked.

Abhir smiled. *The strength in this one and the defiance should make the Genetics Corps proud. So many others in his position merely fell to their knees in worship of me with no defiance.* “Correct, you cannot refuse.”

“Sounds evil to me, and I will not bargain my people's future on such an *offer*, never!” Jacob spat.

“Do not be so hasty in your decision. I shall give you ten days to think it over. You will be shown the evils of the heavens and why the only safe and true path is with Me. And believe me, Jacob, that after your ten days of tribulation are over you will beg to join us!” Abhir boomed with confidence.

“Hail Abhir, Supreme Emperor!”

“Enjoy your stay in Hell, Jacob.” Abhir waved his hand and Jacob disintegrated.

“Hail Abhir!”

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Jacob reintegrated in a dark room filled with screams and disgusting smells. He could feel the presence of others nearby but couldn’t see them. The area was dark—dark enough so that he could only imagine that he was seeing edges, walls, and details. He was certain that he felt the moisture of breath around him, but it was foul and strange. The stench was too alien to be of creatures that Jacob was familiar with. Jacob tried to calm himself as his eyes adjusted to the extreme darkness. Then an eerie red glow appeared before him.

“Follow me,” the red entity said in Jacob’s tongue. “Careful, the path is narrow ahead.”

“Where am I?” Jacob asked. “And, and, what are you?”

“You are here,” the red glow said. “I am Lucy.” Jacob heard female overtones in the glowing thing's voice. “Step into me now. You will not be able to complete the rest of the journey on your own.”

“What? I’m not going anywhere until I get some answers. Where am I and what is going on?” Jacob stepped slightly backward, away from the red glow.

“You are here and if you will follow my instructions I am taking you to someone who will explain it all.” Lucy’s glow surrounded Jacob, “I won’t hurt you.”

Then Jacob was inside of Lucy and appeared to be traveling or flying. To where and how fast was difficult to tell since there were no visible landmarks or stars or any light at all except for the faint red glow in the direction they were traveling. And then they were there on what appeared to be solid ground surrounded by the

red glow and Lucy warned Jacob that he should not try to leave the safety of her because it would destroy him instantly.

Then a man stepped forward through the infinite half hemisphere of red. He appeared to be a typical man. He stood six feet tall with short closely cropped black hair and goatee. His facial features were handsome, yet haggard, and his clothing seemed military, but old and worn.

“You can call me Belial,” the man said. “Or if you prefer, Anson.”

“Why two names?”

“Belial is what many peoples from many stars hereabouts know me as,” the man replied. “Anson is the name I was given at birth and one I haven’t used for several thousand years.”

“Okay, Belial then. What the hell is going on?”

“If you are here to talk to me, then I fear that your planet is unfortunately being overrun by the expansion wave of a species in this galaxy known as the Kingdom of the Seven Stars—or, more precisely, reclaimed by its original designers and builders. Your people were developed years ago by the Army of the Seven Stars Corps of Genetic Design. The purpose was as it always is, as my planet was millennia ago, to evolve soldiers for the Emperor’s Armies of Conquest. Emperor indeed—bleck!” Belial spat and shook his head.

“If he rules the heavens who would he need to fight?”

“He merely controls a fifth of this galaxy—about a hundred billion worlds—and He *claims* to be the Emperor of the Universe. There are trillions of trillions of worlds out there. One of these days the bastard will get his. His geneticists travel the galaxy and seed every world within reach with various genetic codes that are designed to evolve into his future fighting forces. Emperor Abhir has expanded his kingdom this way for the past billion years or more. It is hard to know exactly how long.”

“A billion years—then he is a *god*?” Jacob was amazed by His longevity.

“No more than I am! And no more than you are. His technology is just better and far more advanced. His people typically gain the benefit of longevity. It makes for better soldiers.” Belial looked displeased and added, “It allows him to torture his prisoners longer as well. He takes pleasure in that.”

“I’m confused. How is it that I was whisked away to here? And why?” Jacob was frightened as well as confused. “Only a god would have such powers.”

“It is merely your time and misfortune, I guess. The Emperor’s expansion in the galaxy has simply caught up with your people’s development.” Belial walked around Jacob sizing him up. “As to how you were whisked away, well, it would take you years of graduate school in quantum physics to get that. The key is... well, the things I am about to tell you might prove difficult for you to understand at first, but for your sake, for your people’s, you must try hard to grasp it.”

“Okay, but this is so very strange to me. What’s kwantun fisksks?”

“Quantum physics,” Belial replied. “Tell me, what is the most complex tool or machine or device you have on your homeworld?” Belial stroked his goatee.

“We have great machines designed to lift large stones the size of a dwelling. Our architects have used them to design vast monuments to our gods,” Jacob replied proudly.

“Typical. The coward is afraid to reclaim a planet with any real technology. Hmm, that’s why I’m here, don’t you know. We almost ran him off, the son-of-a-bitch.”

“But where is here and why am I here?” Jacob gritted his teeth.

“The Emperor has lost touch with reality, I think. He believes that he has sent you to Hell—a pit of despair and torture that you will beg to be free from. And no doubt, Lucy here will take you to all of the levels herein and you will see some of that. She is an automaton that functions only to serve Him. The only way in or out of the event horizon is through the connected transport tunnel that you came in on. And as far as I can tell He alone controls that. But Hell? No, I would dare to say that Hell is out *there* under His tyrannical rule.”

“I came through no tunnel, Belial. I was there at His palace in the Heavens and then I was here.” It was more than Jacob could grasp at the moment. *connected transport tunnel, event horizon*. He understood the individual words, but used together as this Belial just had, made little sense to him.

Belial laughed. “Yes, it’s not easy to grasp and should not be an easy concept to understand for your people for thousands of years. But you must begin to grasp this information now, if you wish to survive this *invasion*.”

“Very well, explain it to me.”

Again Belial laughed, “That’s the spirit, Jacob.”

Belial spent the next day telling Jacob the story of his people and how they were spawn of Abhir. How his people had achieved over several hundred thousand years of development the means of longevity, of superior strength and intelligence. How his people had mastered all of their homeworld and then reached out into the heavens. They had colonized several of the moons and planets in their own solar system and had begun to expand outward to the nearest stellar neighbors. They had even defeated two separate alien invasions. But then came the Army of the Seven Stars.

Jacob found this all amazingly difficult to believe. Yesterday, it would have been fantasy, but today he had met a “god” and had seen his planet from the heavens. He had seen this all-powerful creature named Abhir and his army’s top ranked individuals. The Army of the Seven Stars officers that he had already seen with his own eyes alone was nearly a full percent the size of the entire population of Jacob’s homeworld. There was no knowing the full magnitude of His armies. And His Kingdom spanned over a hundred billion homeworlds!

Belial described the armies as massive and requiring vast armadas of vessels that could traverse the heavens just to move them about. The magnitude of those armadas was lost on Jacob as he could not really grasp the vastness of the galaxy and what a hundred billion worlds truly meant. Jacob did understand that Abhir’s domain was huge; it was just the scale that was lost on him. And he finally realized the dire situation of his people as Belial described the fateful day when *his* people crossed the boundaries of the Kingdom of the Seven Stars’ developed worlds. Then Abhir was more arrogant and less cautious. He attempted to force Belial’s people into worshiping submission with the same offer that had been made to Jacob. War is what occurred.

Belial’s people saw Abhir for what it was and stood their ground in a war that waged for more than a century. Finally, when his people were defeated, most of

them were assimilated into the Seven Stars Army. Those who remained dissident were imprisoned or simply disposed of. Belial had been their leader and Abhir had taken pleasure in seeing him tortured in prison for eternity.

“That brings me back to my question as to what and where *here* is?” Jacob responded.

“Well, Jacob, you see when some stars reach a certain maturity in their life cycles, they collapse on themselves into a single minute point, but they still maintain their mass. These stars become bottomless pits from which nothing can escape once they begin falling inward past a certain distance. Anything too close to this star—inside its event horizon—will never be able to escape.”

“How could we survive being inside such a place?” Jacob challenged.

“Somehow, the Emperor has seen fit to place several oases with varying forms of atmospheres and levels of gravity. He is smart and powerful, I’ll grant you that. You’re at one of the lower levels now, where the remainder of my people are held. We have learned over the years to tolerate the harsh conditions here. The red cloud was placed here to make the very act of breathing difficult as punishment and reminder of our defiance to Him.”

“Why would He do that?”

“We used this gas cloud against His armies during the final battles. It killed hundreds of thousands of his soldiers, but they kept coming until they eventually overran us. It was that bastard Michael who finally defeated us in the end—too bad the gas didn’t get him. Forcing us to breathe the gas is His idea of poetic justice. His scientists altered the gas just enough that it wouldn’t kill us, but would make us suffer, forever.” Belial lowered his head and began to cry. He whispered something under his breath and Jacob could tell he was praying. Jacob bowed his head and offered a prayer to his God in pity for Belial and in fear for his people.

“It is time to move onward,” Lucy’s voice interrupted the silent moment.

“Jacob, do as he says and your people will not suffer as mine have. Enthusiastically and thus peacefully allow yourselves to be assimilated into the Kingdom. You cannot defy him... now.” Belial bowed slightly to him as Lucy swept Jacob upward and then away from the oasis in the bottomless pit of despair.

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Lucy showed Jacob similar cases to Belial for the first four days and then she took him to a part of the pit that housed what Lucy described as the Emperor’s most feared and evil enemies. Indeed, Jacob agreed with that assessment. There were creatures that seemed mindless and murderous that had no will other than to inflict harm. There were beasts and creatures that were so far from anything resembling Jacob that he felt fear and revulsion from the mere sight of them. There were animals with intellects far superior to what Jacob possessed, but their motivations were *alien*.

One small gathering of creatures that appeared to be large men with lion fur and manes and claws and fangs showed interest in their presence—an intelligent curiosity. One of the largest of the lions with a white stripe on his forehead approached the red boundary of Lucy and peered in at Jacob.

“Creature, you misunderstand us,” it said.

“What?” Jacob was startled.

“There will be a day that we are needed, as we are not mindless animals. In fact, there are those who believe us to be gods. Indeed, we will be needed.”

“Needed for what?” Jacob asked.

“One day, one great day, the key to His defeat will fall to my species. For that day, I pray that at least one of us still survives.” The lion roared in heart-wrenching agony and turned away.

“What did he mean by that?” Jacob asked Lucy, but Lucy had proven to be nearly useless when it came to information.

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The boundary war with a new evil had been waged for more than two centuries. If there ever was a *true* evil in the galaxy it had to be these creatures. Standing more than nine feet tall and appearing like giant black and red locust, the creatures proved to be horrid adversaries. They seemed to have come from nowhere and procreated at an amazingly nonlinear rate. No one in the Kingdom knew who they were or where they came from, but their purpose seemed clear: spread and devour anything in their path—anything. A fleet of the giant beasts could completely ravage an entire star system in a matter of years. Their standard procedure being to start in an outer cloud of comets, building up their forces and devouring all the raw materials in the cometary cloud. Then they would move inward to the belt of larger bodies. When the belt of outer planetoids was devoured the bugs would move inward and swallow up any civilizations that might exist in the planetary system.

All attempts at negotiations with the creatures only seemed to fuel their desire to destroy and spread destruction. No living being within the Kingdom, not even the all-powerful Emperor, knew what fueled their rage. They simply advanced and continued to advance. The Army of the Seven Stars slaughtered them by the hundreds of millions over the past two centuries, yet they still advanced.

Jacob grew tired of fighting the bugs on the fringes of the Great Kingdom, but he knew that *this* was a true evil that must be halted. He had faced countless other species and none of them were as frightening as the bugs—and none of them deserved to be slaughtered by the millions as He had ordered done. But not long after Jacob’s people were assimilated into the Kingdom, and not long after Jacob had begun fighting to protect his people’s well being, the bugs appeared on the fringes of the Kingdom. Soon Jacob, as a competent soldier, was moved to where the need was greatest. The General Michael noted Jacob’s abilities early on and personally promoted him to the Fleet in the Fringe to battle with the new foe. But that had been two hundred years past and the evil creatures advanced, and the Army of the Seven Stars fell back. On all other fronts the Kingdom grew, but here, against this adversary—this evil—the Kingdom retreated.

Four of the Great Seven Generals were now stationed on the fringe. Occasionally He would visit the “front lines” to rally the soldiers of His Army, but He never seemed concerned with the advancing expansion wave of alien insects. The bugs had forced the Kingdom lines of expansion to a complete halt since Jacob had been on the front lines and he was beginning to wonder if there was a Great plan

that would lead them to victory over the bugs. *Did He have a plan?* Jacob would only wonder.

The expansion wave was beginning to encroach on the comet cloud of a small yellow star system that contained an implanted civilization. Michael had explained to the front contingents that this planet's development showed great promise and the inhabitants must be protected and allowed to continue developing. The species had begun building large monuments to their gods and showed a great propensity for combat and strategy. It was decided by Him to let them evolve another few thousand years before assimilating them into the Kingdom. However, the horrid alien insects were changing His plans—THAT COULD NOT BE ALLOWED!

An all out offensive was ordered against the bugs in that region of space—planet designation 17,777,111,342. There were several surrounding star systems in similar situations and several behind the lines that would make for good muster points and tactical operations centers. Michael had personally asked Lieutenant Colonel Jacob to handle initial contact on one of the primitive worlds.

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“Lieutenant Colonel, we are falling out of pseudo-jaunt space and are now subluminal!” Lieutenant Spixcer informed the bridge captain.

“Thanks, Spix. Standard parking orbit. You and Captain Freeney meet me in the launch bay in ten minutes, suited up and ready to go.”

“Yes sir!”

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Jacob walked beside his Starfire FB111, doing his preflight and pondering his present mission. *How far I've changed from the leader of a primitive world those centuries ago*, he thought, as he always thought.

“Sir? We are preflighted and ready when you are,” Spixcer thought over the net as he waved to him from across the launcher.

“Right. Let's move out.” Jacob thought to the control device in his frontal lobe and the repulsor field appeared tightly around him making a shimmer of light surround him for a split second. Jacob calmly levitated himself into the pilot's seat and then lowered the canopy of the Starfire. Wireless connections to the control systems began handshaking with his implanted control device and Jacob could *feel* the starfighter/bomber come to life. A few milliseconds of handshaking with the fleet launch tower and Jacob was thrown out of the larger craft into space at more than five percent of light speed. The repulsor field damped the acceleration and Jacob barely felt more than four gravities. Lieutenant Spixcer and Captain Freeney were right behind him. They had done this tens of thousands of times over the last century or two.

“All right, boys, standard ops. We land in the desolated area here.” Jacob highlighted part of the map in their heads. “Then when we are certain the perimeter is secure, we have the convoy descend and set up base camp and operations.”

The three starfighters dropped in formation and landed quietly in the designated area. Freeney flew from his ship and began a security sweep. Spix followed suit.

“Boring, sir. Nothing unusual,” Freeney thought over the net.

“Great. You two continue setting up and get the convoy started. I’m going to reconnoiter,” Jacob commanded back through the net. He watched the two men at work—a bright golden glow surrounding them from their repulsor fields interacting with the atmosphere making them look extremely *regal* even to his sophisticated eyes.

The little planet was not that unlike the one he had grown up on centuries before. There were loamy rolling hills and occasional tropical vegetation and trees. The indigenous creatures were not overly harsh or meek—it was a typical planet. Jacob flew at a moderate pace of a few hundred miles per hour until he reached the first sight of dwellings and intelligent lifeforms. They were humanoids, as most all of the implanted species were. *He* didn’t really like nonhumanoids. Jacob had never understood that, but his was not to question the Emperor.

Jacob set down on the loamy soil between an outcropping of tropical fruit trees. On his way down he picked one of the fruits. His implants told him that the fruit was not only safe, but also enjoyable, so he held it to his mouth and the field made an opening for the fruit to pass through. Jacob took a bite of the fruit and felt the juice dribble down the corner of his mouth. The field quickly cleaned it—the reflex to wipe his face had been conditioned away a century ago.

Two of the indigenous humanoids were startled by his presence and ran away. The two seemed to be a male and female and were young, perhaps adolescents. Jacob followed them on foot toward a small village. Sometimes it felt good just to walk like a man. By the time he reached the center of the village a crowd had gathered, led by an elderly female in a brown cloth sarong and wielding a large bent staff. Jacob decided she must be the mayor, high priestess, or whatever they called the leader of this tribe.

The woman jabbered at Jacob for a few seconds and he stood patiently listening. Then finally the interpreter program correlated to the language and Jacob understood them.

“Hello, I am Jacob. I have traveled a long way to meet you and I come in peace.”

“These two say you fell from the sky,” the old woman said, pointing to the teenagers that Jacob had startled in the orchard.

“That is true. I come from far far away. The bright spots in the sky you see at night is where I am from.” At that several of the primitives fell to their knees and bowed. *Get up you fools*, Jacob thought.

“Why are you here, Great One?” one of the younger tribesmen asked.

Jacob hated playing to the primitive beliefs of any species, but it was the standard protocol for first contacts—any contacts. It was His protocol. “I come to help you and to bring paradise to your people. I am here to help and spread the Greatness of my Kingdom to yours. I am but the adjunct and emissary of my Leader. The One who rules the heavens. I am here to spread His word and bring you into His fold.” Jacob bit back his distaste for this approach.

“Will we meet this Great One, emissary?” the old woman said skeptically.

“Likely, in due time, as he is everywhere.” *He always shows up sooner or later.*

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It took a mere few weeks to have the tactical operations center and rear post camp set up. The locals built a village around the camp and were used as labor

forces when possible. Jacob coopted as many of the smarter locals as possible to “spread His word” and bring more of the locals “into His fold.” Occasionally Jacob would have to levitate a house, cure an illness, or rescue a missing child in order to prove His might. Once, Jacob even appeared in front of a local architect and implanted him with all of the languages of his planet. Jacob told him to go spread His word and bring more workers. Jacob also had his most trusted officers spread out and set up multiple stations across the planet using the same tactics.

A month later the planet had fleets of starfighters, hovertanks, and heavy armored walkers at each of the muster points. Word through the net was that the other rearward planet muster points had been established as well. Hospitals, training centers, and manufacturing facilities were set up and the locals were used in menial labor tasks everywhere possible. Battleships, spacecarriers, and attack class frigates filled the void between the worlds behind the lines. Hundreds of millions of soldiers from the Army of the Seven Stars rallied and prepared. Convoys from the center of the Kingdom were moving more and more of the war machine closer to the front lines. Very soon it would be brought to bear on the evil beasts.

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The world had changed overnight for Elijah when *they* showed up. In a matter of weeks his entire village and all of the villages within weeks journey were now laboring day and night for *them*. Elijah had no particular love for the newcomers but he also understood when to fight and when to join, so he learned and absorbed as much information from the aliens as he possibly could. Aliens, not gods, is how Elijah understood them. Sure, they possessed powers that were so amazing that they in all intents and purposes to him were gods, but they were not gods. Elijah understood this.

Elijah also understood that these aliens had not come to his homeworld for the benefit of his people. They seemed preoccupied with something—something else, something that scared them. So, Elijah decided that if it scared these powerful beings, then their only hope would be to join *them*—as distasteful as that might be.

Elijah had studied his people’s history and was probably one of the most learned students of his people’s past. Much of that history seemed too much like religion and mythology to him but now, now he was unsure of everything. Every chance he got he would question the aliens about why they were there and what was their purpose. What he typically got was that “His will would be done. ”

“These aliens are here,” Elijah would tell his family, “because they are preparing for something. We should all endeavor to discover what this is. To them we are but primitives. In science and technology yes we are, but we have minds and we can think and we know our planet, our home. We are the only ones who care what happen to us. We must keep our eyes and ears open and look out for ourselves.”

Elijah’s family quickly built a network of closely trusted friends. In a matter of weeks Elijah was getting steady reports from many villages of the aliens’ movements and planning. He had to bide his time and learn.

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Michael stood stiff in the war room of the huge wheel-shaped spacecraft that he had designated as the forward operations command post. From the tactical information and the real-time multidimensional battlescape emulator, he knew that the war raged fiercely in the planetoid belt just past the outer gas giant planets of this system. The Plan had already been disrupted when the Army failed to stop the insects at planet 17,777,111,342. The bugs continued to advance and were only a decade or less from the rearward muster points that had been set up a decade earlier. They had to be stopped, but Michael had used every tactic and strategy that had worked for him previously—for more than ninety million years. But the Bugs advanced forward.

“General,” Jacob thought over the net.

“Yes, Colonel, report.” Michael barked into Jacob’s mind.

“We have lost more than seventy percent of the Starfires, and the fleet frigates have all but been destroyed. We need reinforcements or I fear this campaign will be lost,” Jacob thought as he dodged incoming repulsor blasts from several different bug pods. He pulled the starfighter into a full acceleration dive through a small planetoid, shattering it into thousands of deadly fragments. The planetoid fragments caught several of the bug pods unaware, smashing them into oblivion.

Freeney swept in behind Jacob to mop up the bugs that had taken a six o’clock vantage point and was himself blind-sided by heavy fire from bug plasma artillery on the planetoid below. Spixcer dropped a cache of antimatter bombs on the planetoid, but it was seconds too late. Freeney’s shields were gone and his personal field was nowhere near strong enough to repel such a hit. He had been vaporized by the plasma bursts.

“Colonel, this is madness! We are outnumbered and outpowered. We must retreat!” Spixcer thought on the person-to-person code to Jacob.

Jacob had exhausted his antimatter bombs, his plasma disruptors were offline, and his repulsor cannons were at thirty percent. The starfighters in his command had been dwindled to less than a third the number of the bug pods and there was no support from the fleet that would be available for precious minutes.

“General Michael, it is my professional opinion that we are nothing but meat for the grinder at this point. We are having little to no effect against their superior numbers.” Jacob was slammed by a repulsor blast that completely depleted his shields and sent him spinning wildly at near relativistic velocity out of the planetoid engagement zone.

“Very well, Colonel. We shall try a new tactic.” Michael switched from the command channel to the wide area net. “All soldiers retreat at maximum pseudo-jaunt capabilities. Rescue frigates will be back to save you as soon as possible. You have all fought in a manner that would please our Great Emperor. Glory to Abhir!”

Michael watched the tactical displays and the multidimensional emulated battlefield in his mind as the Army of the Seven Stars retreated once again. But this time he would do something different. All of his great ships would be lost, but that would be a small price to pay to stop these insidious vermin. When the emulator showed that only acceptable losses would be taken, he gave a command to the giant space wheel’s navigation system and at full pseudo-jaunt it lurched

into the local star and the giant spaceship—and its crew of seventy thousand—imploded at the star’s central core.

Michael reintegrated on the connection pad of a battle cruiser waiting at the maximum range of the teleporter system—nearly half the distance light travels in a year. Michael regained his composure and walked immediately to the tactical systems displays and completed the coded wireless handshaking to his frontal lobe implants. The battlescape emulation reappeared in his mind. Michael could see the star had collapsed on itself and been induced to go supernova. Of course the bugs could escape the blast wave, as they were a few light hours out, but they *would* have to retreat. The system was lost completely, but at least the insects did not take it. Michael continued to read the tactical displays and watch the data from the battle and now the rescue operations filter through his mind. More than eight hundred million inhabitants of the little green world of that system were lost and over seven million soldiers of His army were lost. Abhir would not be pleased. A bittersweet victory to say the least.

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The rescue went well and most all of those who made it free of the engagement zone were saved. The survivors were rushed back to the muster points for medical attention, resupply, and new orders. Jacob survived the ordeal physically unharmed, but the sacrifice of millions of lives again and again was more than he could accept. *Was His plan simply to sacrifice everybody in the Kingdom? Would that be any worse than being overtaken by the Bugs—after all, isn't death death?*

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Over two decades had passed since the aliens landed on Elisha’s homeworld. When they arrived he was but seven years of age. His father had warned them then that they should keep an eye on the invaders as closely as possible. For twenty years the house of his father had slaved and labored for the aliens. The entire cell network that Elijah had created had yet to deliver anything useful that would aid them in ridding themselves of the false gods—that was about to change.

Elisha was spreading His word to villages in the mountains when a fleet of battered vehicles landed at the nearby basecamp. Laborers rushed to help the soldiers from the Army of the Seven Stars unload wounded and equipment from the vessels. There were tens of thousands of wounded, there were thousands of damaged weapons and ground assault systems—it took all day for the villagers and the healthy soldiers to unload the ships. Elisha did his part to help, whether he believed in these aliens or not, he was still a good man and these were living beings that should not be forced to suffer so for their Leader. Elisha did the right thing and helped where he could.

For two decades the members of the cell network had been trying to discern more about what battle was taking place in the heavens, but the aliens were tight-lipped about it. It was none of the business of the primitives—they should be more concerned with pleasing Him and carrying out His will. But today—

A small battered frigate dropped to the south side of the village nearest the alien hospital. Thirty-six armed guards flowed from the hatch levitating via their magic glowing presence and between them they carried a different creature. It had the likeness of an insect and must have been taller than two men. Its shell was black

and red and when it turned its head its face had the likeness of a man but with large mandibles. The creature wore some sort of body armor on top of its exoskeleton and when it moved it moved with great strength, for it bounced the soldiers levitating in their magic glow around like toy balls.

Nukpana! I must tell my father, Elisha knew.

Several days later word finally got to Elijah through the cell network—Nukpana! Elijah knew that he must do something, but what he was unsure of. If the ancient warnings were true, nothing would stop the creatures, nothing could stop the creatures—except their masters. If the Nukpana have been unleashed, then Elijah feared it was only a matter of time before they destroyed his world—his family. *I must act,* he thought.

* * * * *

“What do you mean he claims to know about the bugs?” Major Spixcer questioned the sergeant via a person-to-person.

“Well, sir, he came up to my men and started babbling about knowing the evil we face and how to stop them!” The sergeant shrugged his shoulders and placed an image of the primitive laborer in Spixcer’s mind.

Spixcer contemplated the man for a moment as he thought over his image. “Okay, get him here now, and keep it quiet. We don’t want to raise false hope.”

“Right, sir. I can have him there in half an hour by Starfire. If you want him earlier I suggest the pads.”

“No, spacecraft is fine. Spix out.”

* * * * *

Elijah had traveled in his life, as far as a hundred villages away, but this was incredible. The soldier had led him to one of their small metal beasts and levitated him up and into a seat that was directly behind where the soldier would sit. The man placed binders all around Elijah’s shoulders and waist and told him not to move around too much and not to touch anything. Then the man floated into the front seat and a large clear crystal formed above them. A few seconds later Elijah heard the rushing noise of a thousand rivers and was thrust into his seat and felt as though he weighed many times his normal weight.

“Have a look out the cockpit, uh, what did you say your name was again?”

“Elijah. And you aaarr—” Elijah looked out at that moment and realized he was so far above his world that even the largest buildings could barely be seen.

“I’m Sergeant C’leat. Never flown before I gather.” The sergeant laughed.

“No. My Gods, we can see the world from here. It is round!” Elijah said.

“They all are.” C’leat laughed again. “Just relax and enjoy the view. I’ll have you back on the ground in about fifteen minutes or so.”

* * * * *

“Do you have a map of my world? I will show you,” Elijah told Colonel Jacob and Major Spixcer.

“Spix, accommodate him,” Jacob replied.

Spixcer thought a few commands to the rooms systems and then a three dimensional image of the planet appeared before them. “There you go.”

Elijah looked at the planet, his world—it was round, the stargazers were right! *And my Gods look at the great seas upon it.* But he had no idea where to start. He had never seen his planet from that view before.

“What’s wrong, Elijah? Here is your map. Just touch it to zoom in.” Spixcer said.

“Spix, I forget that you were born into the Kingdom and not assimilated.” Jacob shook his head side to side. “Elijah, this is how your world looks from a great distance away, just as your moon does. Understand?” The colonel waited to see if Elijah did understand and could tell that Elijah was a quick study. “Now, you’ve never seen your planet from this view right?” Elijah shook his head. “What is the name of your village?”

“I am from G’l’d,” he said.

“Really? My first contact with you people was not far from there in a little place called Z’ra’p’th. There was a little old woman there running things.” Jacob laughed.

“Yes,” Elijah remarked. “I know it well. I had an, uh, acquaintance there at one time. Can you show me this place on your map?”

Jacob reached out to the world floating before them as if he would pick it up, but rather he spun it slightly to the opposite side from what they had been viewing. “We’re on the wrong side of the planet. You have traveled today, Elijah.” Jacob could see Elijah’s eyes widen.

Jacob zoomed into the village that he knew from decades before—he stopped at house level resolution. Elijah gasped.

“Praise be to Him!” Elijah said. “This is wondrous.”

“Colonel,” Spixcer said impatiently.

“Right, Spix. So, Elijah, show me what you wish to show me. Just drag your finger along the surface in the direction you wish to go. If you need to zoom out we just say *zoom out.*”

Elijah nodded as he studied the map. He touched the surface, expecting to feel something—he did not. He traced the path through the streets and from village to village, across the mountain pass and the Mountain Temple, to the ancient temples near the Great River. “Here. It is here that I need to take you.”

“Spix?”

“About thirty minutes, sir.”

“Get us there.”

* * * * *

The temples were mammoth architectural feats for such a primitive culture. It must have taken them a century to build. Why they had built them was a mystery to most. But Elijah—the premier historian of his people—knew their ancient purpose.

“It’s through this passage and then down another thousand feet or so. Follow me.” Elijah led them through the passages of the ancient temple to a great chamber filled with writings from thousands of years before. “Here, here! See!” Elijah pointed to a hieroglyph of a large insect creature carved into the chamber wall. The creature stood towering over many dismembered men. Spixcer and Jacob traded glances. “They are called Nukpana—true evil they are. And here, see

this.” He pointed to a wall covered with the bugs marching over army after army of men and all manner of beasts.

“What does this mean, Elijah? Have these Nukpana been here before?” Jacob asked.

“No, no. This is a warning from our ancient Gods. Long before you arrived. These are our Gods’ protectors and are only unleashed if our Gods are overcome by evil. It is then that the Gods believe the universe will be unfit and their Nukpana will spread and devour the heavens. Making way for a rebirth. Once the galaxy is devoured, the evil creatures will die and the cycle of life can begin again. This is not a prophecy but a warning not to threaten the Gods.” Elijah explained.

“A thrice-be-damned doomsday device!” Spixcer exclaimed.

“Sounds like it,” Jacob agreed. “But who are their gods?” Jacob placed a finger on one of the Nukpana and asked Elijah.

“Ah, yes. Here.” Elijah pressed into a golden symbol on the wall with all his might. “Uh, it is stuck. Can you help me depress this lever here?” He pointed at the large symbol. The three men put their shoulders against the large symbol on the wall and pushed. A door-sized panel gave way and swung open. Before them was a thirty-foot tall gold and ivory statue of a giant half man half lion beast with gold mane and a white stripe on his forehead.

* * * * *

Elisha passed from village to village as swiftly as he could with hopes to reach his father before he left. At each alien encampment he would stop and speak with the alien liaison officer. At each encampment the alien liaison officer expressed to him that his father had been called to Serve Him in the heavens and he might not see him again for a while—or maybe ever.

“Be proud that your father is the first of your race that has been blessed enough to be called to Serve Him,” the aliens would tell Elisha. “But you must hurry for they leave soon.”

Elisha wished to see his father before he left their world to Serve—Elisha had to know why he would do such a thing. Finally, several villages downstream on the Great River, Elisha managed to find an officer of the Army that had met Elijah before and thought well of him. The officer took Elisha’s hand and levitated him at speeds faster than any of the flying creatures of his world to the camp near the Great Temples. He managed to find Elijah with only minutes to spare. There, in the shadows of the Great Temples, he saw his father for what might be the last time.

“Father, oh father!” Elisha wept. “How can you leave us, your beloved family to leave with *them*?”

“Elisha, my boy, I love you and your brothers and sisters and your mother more than life itself. And it is because of this love that I must go in order to save you and our world from the evil swarm of the Nukpana that will soon light upon our world and devour us, as the ancient warnings tell.”

“But they can take care of this, father.” Tears streamed Elisha’s face.

“My son, you must promise me to carry on as we have and that you will be the man of the family. You must take care of our world, son.” Elijah held his son’s head in his hands and kissed his son goodbye.

“Elijah, it's time to go,” Spixcer said as he and Jacob came to him. The two aliens lead Elijah into a ship and it left for the heavens. Elisha fell to his knees and wept.

* * * * *

“Don't try to step out of the red glow, Elijah. It is there for your protection.” Spixcer told him.

“Thank you, Major Spixcer. Where are we? Where did He send us?” Elijah had been greatly intimidated by Him before being transported magically to where they were now. One minute he had been bowing in front of the Almighty and the next he was in this dark place being greeted by this talking red cloud.

“We are in Hell,” Spixcer said, frightening Elijah.

“Enough of that, Spix!” Jacob ordered. “This is a maximum security prison, Elijah. We believe that the Kingdom conquered your gods about two and a half centuries ago. There are a few of them left here, we believe. That is why we brought you to them. If they understand who you are, perhaps you can convince them to help you.”

The three of them set down in the region where the lions were held. A few moments later several of the lions approached them.

“By the look of your robes, creature, I would guess you are from G'l'd?” The tallest and oldest of the lions—the one Jacob had met so many years ago—stood before them, sizing them up.

“Yes, Great Nalsa!” Elijah said and bowed his head.

“If they have brought you here, I can only surmise that the Nukpana have been released?” The lion looked at the two soldiers from the cursed Abhir's Kingdom.

Elijah nodded.

“And you cannot stop them, can you?” He looked at Jacob.

“We cannot thus far,” Jacob replied. “A doomsday tactic?”

“Doomsday, indeed!” Nalsa growled.

“Tell us how to stop it, Great One. My world is on the verge of being devoured.” Elijah fell to his knees.

“I am sorry, primitive one, but I will not deal with the Kingdom's evil Leader. His expansion has been completely in disregard for any of the indigenous species throughout his domain. He has conquered and imprisoned or committed genocide on countless millions of species. Besides, I can do nothing from—here.” Nalsa waved his hands regarding his imprisonment.

“Could you do something from outside the event horizon? That is, if I can arrange it?” Jacob asked.

“I could do much.” *I could do very much*, he thought to Jacob. Jacob was surprised that the prisoners were on the net, but he shrugged it off as the Emperor's arrogance.

As well could I, another voice whispered in his mind—a voice Jacob hadn't heard in centuries but he recalled it. Jacob stood thoughtful for a moment.

“I'll return soon. Elijah, you can stay and speak further with your god if you wish,” Jacob said as he turned and prepared to leave for the pad.

“I would like that. Yes, I want to stay and speak with him for a while.”

“I’ll return for you soon.” Jacob and Spixcer left Lucy behind to protect Elijah and the two used their personal fields to return to the connection pad. At the pad, Jacob thought on a person-to-person, *Almighty, two to return.*

* * * * *

Emperor Abhir listened calmly to Jacob's explanation and solution to the Nukpana threat and was pleased with him. *I knew centuries ago that you would be a great one, creature,* He thought. Abhir smiled upon Jacob and boomed, “Excellent work my son. Leave your subordinate here to prepare for moving the beast and return yourself to retrieve him and your primitive.”

“Thank you, Almighty Abhir. Your will be done.” Jacob bowed and backed away. When clear of the throne he rose and thought to Spixcer, “I want a frigate ready for flight, and make sure it is loaded with Starfires—a contingent of armed soldiers around the pad, and a prisoner transport field bubble. And bring me a belt of plasma grenades, several handhelds, and a repulsor rifle. If we’re going to transport this beast to the Fringe I’m going to be loaded to the teeth.”

“Roger that, sir.”

* * * * *

Almighty, three to return. Jacob thought as he primed the repulsor rifle and then disintegrated.

The three of them reintegrated on the pad outside the Throne Room—Jacob, Nalsa, and Belial. All of them were wielding weapons and they quickly overcame the unaware guard contingent. Poor Spix never knew what hit him. Nalsa and Belial both began to shimmer and repulsor fields formed around them.

“Ah, that feels good,” Nalsa growled.

“Yes, it has been so long I forgot what it felt like to be out of that damned dampening field of His.” Belial stretched and gathered several of the weapons from the dead troops around them.

Jacob surveyed the connection pad near the throne room—the only pad to the Pit of Despair. He drove his right arm deep into the control panel for the pad and ripped through the power circuits one after the other until he was certain the pad was inoperative. Abhir could not send them back to the prison pit—anytime soon. And sooner or later they could fix it and free the prisoners.

“Shall we?” Jacob asked.

Faster than the eye could track, the three of them created as much destruction as they could manage. Belial dropped plasma charges and fired repulsor blasts and did just as much damage slamming through things with his personal repulsor field. Nalsa and Belial crushed through the thirty-foot thick granite walls of the Throne Room and did not bother to kneel before Abhir. The two of them were on top of Him pounding away, with each blow making a thunderous boom. The palace shook violently from the impacts.

Abhir rose, straining against Nalsa and Belial, “What treachery is this!”

“The treachery is your own, you mad man,” Jacob announced as he flew headlong into Abhir’s midsection. The four of them crashed through walls and buildings and continued their groundshaking combat throughout the Imperial starship.

Abhir fought back wildly, he was greatly powerful, and Jacob was beginning to understand why he had been called “Almighty.” But Nalsa and Belial were similar creatures, and Jacob had learned and gained much power over the last two centuries.

“Keep him busy!” Jacob thought to Belial and Nalsa as Abhir fought back. A blow sent Jacob back through the palace roof below and through several hundred floors. A few seconds passed before Jacob regained his senses. “Whew, that hurt,” he said to himself.

Jacob could hear the loud booms throughout the giant starship and could feel massive vibrations from the battle of gods above. “How are you doing?” he thought to Nalsa.

“Alas, it is my fear that we are stalemated and will destroy this ship in time.”

“Great! Keep Him busy,” Jacob thought.

* * * * *

At maximum field speed Jacob boarded the awaiting frigate—Spixcer had always followed orders. The frigate crew was not yet aware of what was actually happening, so Jacob knew he had a few moments when the crew would still follow his commands.

“Abandon ship immediately. This is Colonel Jacob, all hands abandon ship,” he ordered over the net. The crew of thirty on the small frigate followed his orders and were off the ship in a minute. The Army of the Seven Stars was strong on discipline and it would have been odd had any of the crew stop to question their superior. About the same time, Abhir thought to the global net that Jacob was a traitor—*nick of time*, Jacob thought. But Abhir was too late. The frigate was closed up tight and Jacob had raised its fields.

Jacob steered the frigate in line with the general combat zone and then thought to Nalsa and Belial, “Okay, steer him to me!”

Nalsa and Belial, working together, steered the fight back toward the Palace area at the same time Jacob powered the frigate’s pseudo-jaunt drives online and plugged himself into the ship so he could *feel* it.

“Jacob, we are coming now!” Belial thought to him.

As soon as Jacob felt the first pain from the hull rupturing he hit the pseudo-jaunt engage controls. The hyperfield bubble formed around them instantly and they were jaunted into superluminal space. Jacob could feel the interior of the ship being torn apart by the Olympian struggle within and he feared that the ship could not manage the strain. It didn’t have to hold together forever. Just long enough to get them into the Fringe. Fortunately, that trip was not as far as it could have been. With Abhir paying more attention to the Fringe efforts after Michael’s failures, the Imperial starship had been moved closer to the rearward muster points. They only needed to travel a hundred light years or so.

“Keep him away from the engine room as long as possible,” Jacob thought.

“We are trying, Jacob,” Belial replied.

Jacob brought the internal weapons and life support systems online and attempted to aid in the battle where he could. But for the most part he spent his efforts putting out fires, setting up emergency structural integrity fields, closing and opening hatches when needed, and rerouting power circuitry. He did all he

could to keep the vessel going. He knew that none of them would try to pierce through the ship at superluminal – powerful or not that would be certain death.

The battle inside the ship waged for nearly thirty minutes before the vessel was destroyed beyond engine function. The frigate came out of superluminal more than five light years from the Nukpana lines. Jacob disconnected himself from the ship and slammed into the fray. He forced all of them through the hull of the ship and out into open space. Nalsa tagged out with Jacob and made a run for the remains of the frigate.

“Coward!” Abhir boomed in their heads. “I will destroy you all!”

A Starfire burst from the remains of the ship and blasted Abhir with a repulsor blast just before the little fighter disappeared into pseudo-jaunt.

Belial and Jacob continued trading blows with Abhir, but each of them realized that their internal systems would run out of power long before Abhir’s would. Jacob remembered Belial telling him two centuries earlier that Abhir’s technology was better. Obviously, and most certainly purposefully, Abhir had the most advanced and superior systems allowed in the Kingdom. That, of course, was how he had remained Emperor and Almighty for eons.

Abhir began to boom laughter into Jacob and Belial’s heads. “Ha, ha, ha. You have failed, primitives! I am Emperor Abhir, General of the Army of the Seven Stars, Ruler of the Kingdom, ALMIGHTY!” He continued to laugh as a fleet of thirty mixed Army of the Seven Stars vessels appeared from pseudo-jaunt.

“I wish he would shut the hell up,” Belial said.

“All weapons bear on my attackers and fire!” Abhir commanded over the net.

At that instant the sky grew thick with pseudo-jaunt flashes as millions of Nukpana integrated into subluminal space around them. “Today will be your undoing, o Great One!” Nalsa thought over the net as his Starfire appeared in local space.

Bug after bug continued to appear into local subluminal space. Abhir commanded all of the local fleet to the battle, but the Army of the Seven Stars was not great enough to repel all of the Nukpana.

The battle raged for weeks, but in the end the Nukpana overcame even the great Abhir, Emperor of the Kingdom of the Seven Stars—the Nukpana and the three rebels had taxed him until his power grids failed.

Nalsa, Belial, Jacob, and the Nukpana managed to capture Abhir in a force bubble and then pseudo-jaunted to the core of the galaxy, where the supermassive collapsed stars reside. Jacob broadcast over the entire Kingdom net the sentencing of Abhir.

“For treachery, genocide, and countless atrocities against millions of peaceful species in this galaxy,” Jacob began, “we condemn you to fall forever through the bottomless dark pit of despair of the galactic core. No connection will be sent into the pit with you and therefore your fate is sealed. Now the Kingdom can live in coexistence with other races and will be free to govern itself as it sees fit on the individual planetary scale. Protection and affiliation with the Kingdom will only be through voluntary circumstances and there will no longer be made offers that cannot be refused!”

“Well spoken, Jacob.” Nalsa smiled.

“Long live Jacob, leader of the free Kingdom!” Belial cheered.

Jacob gave the bubble enclosing Abhir a final push and it plunged through the event horizon of the supermassive collapsed star. Abhir vanished from realspace and was banished forever to the giant bottomless pit.

* * * * *

With Nalsa and Belial's help there was no doubting who the true ruler—the One True King—of the humanoid section of the galaxy was. The paradise starship was undergoing repairs and transformations and Jacob was having the signs and symbols of eons of Abhir's reign removed from it. Jacob wanted there to be no part of the free Kingdom to portray any of Abhir's grotesque philosophies.

Jacob's scientists had finally deciphered Abhir's encryption to the Pit of Despair's connection pad and Belial was aiding Jacob in setting the right prisoners free. And a new courts system was aiding in supplying the Pit with new war criminals. Belial found the remainder of his race and began going by his original name once he found a female named Tabitha. Anson and the rest of his species found a world of their own and started a new civilization allied to Jacob's Free Kingdom.

King Jacob had the few Abhir loyalists that were not killed in the Final Conflict rounded up and held for trial. Two of the Great Generals fared well and were not sentenced to the Pit—instead they were busted to enlisted rank and placed on the fringe. Four were destroyed in the Final Conflict. And Michael was sentenced to eternity at the lowest level of the pit.

Elijah knelt before Jacob and pledged his allegiance. Jacob told him that that would be up to him and his people, but he would prefer that Elijah go home to his family. Jacob wished he could go home to his, so Nalsa took Elijah home and together they announced their liberation. Elijah offered to coexist with Nalsa's remaining people, but Nalsa desired to search for a place of their own. Jacob was able to accommodate them.

* * * * *

In the billion or more years that would follow of King Jacob's reign, he never once assimilated a species without their consent. And on any given day in Paradise you can hear some creature exclaim, "All Hail to Jacob, He who set us free!"

