

# THE GREAT MIRACLE

**Michael A Burstein**

A DF Books NERDs Release

Copyright ©2001 by Michael Burstein

First published in Analog, December 2001

It gets dark early this time of year, the time of the winter solstice, and it gets cold far too early as well. I feel that cold much more in my bones nowadays. It gets under my tunic and into my blood, no matter how many layers I wear. Perhaps it comes with old age, as inevitable as the wrinkles on my face and the aches in my joints. But despite the chill, on this particular winter solstice night I stood outside among the ancient Temple ruins to watch the setting of the Sun.

My daughter knew of my desire to stand out here on this particular night, as I've tried to do every year since we finally returned to Earth. Some years I've been too ill, and some years the harsh weather convinced me to stay inside. But I suspected that this solstice night would be my last. As the Sun finally disappeared below the horizon, I looked up at the stars, grateful to God that I had lived to enjoy this holiday season one more time.

The chill wind started to howl more fiercely, and dusty snow began pelting my face. I began to cough, so I hid my head deeper within my parka and walked back through the darkness to the shelter of my family dwelling, just a hundred meters away. The temperature started to dip far below freezing, but I did not regret my decision to come outside. After all, this night was special, and not just because of the solstice. This night was also the anniversary of our victory over the Leyens.

The door of our home slid open slowly and got stuck, so I had to push it to get it to open all the way. My son-in-law had been meaning to fix it, but other, more necessary repairs had taken precedence. I walked inside and discovered my daughter standing in our foyer, waiting for me with a slight scowl.

? *Abba* ,? she said, cutting past me to push the door closed. The word means ? father? in our ancient holy language. Hannah only calls me that when she's annoyed.

? Yes, daughter?? I said with a smile.

? You shouldn't go out at night. I was getting worried. We all were.? She helped me remove my parka and she ushered me towards the retaining fireplace, where a small log burned and gave off a mild heat.

? I don't have many more nights left, Hannah. Let me enjoy them.?

? I was afraid you wouldn't come back,? she said softly. She hung my parka in the closet. ? We need you tonight. For the telling of the story.?

? I know, I know. I'm here, aren't I??

She adjusted the kerchief that covered her hair. ? Come. The others are waiting.?

As we walked into the parlor, the smell of frying potato pancakes wafted in from the kitchen, filling my nose. My mouth watered. The smells mixed with the sounds of my seven grandchildren, shouting with glee from the circle on the floor where they played their game of spinning tops. An oil lamp bathed the

room in a dull glow.

As Hannah scurried past me to the kitchen, I tiptoed around the circle and settled in my easy chair, near the parlor fireplace. Just as I fell onto the cushions, my grandchildren looked up from their game.

? Grampa's here!? little Jacob shouted, and he jumped towards me, laughing. A grandfather shouldn't play favorites, I suppose, but I've always favored the youngest. Every new grandchild reminded me that the human race would go on.

Jacob hugged me and tangled his fingers in my white beard. I picked him up and put him aside so I could grace each of my grandchildren with a hug. When I was done, the circle of children had reformed, gathered around me. Hannah came in from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a worn blue cloth. Her husband Shimon followed her in. The two of them sat in the wooden chairs near the table and smiled at me. I smiled back.

? Jacob,? I said, ? what night is it??

? The first night of the Festival of Lights!? he replied.

I addressed the oldest, who was fifteen. ? Shmuel, what do we do for the Festival of Lights??

Shmuel had answered this question many times before. ? We play the tops game. We eat potato pancakes and other fried foods. We light the candles. And we tell the story.?

I nodded. ? Do you want to hear the story??

The children clamored for the tale, and so I began.

\* \* \* \*

The story begins long ago [I said], back when I was a very young man. Almost as young as all of you. It was a bad time for the human race. Some of us had spread out among the stars, but most of us lived on Babylon, a planet many light-years from here. And no matter where we lived, none of those planets were home.

Put your hands down; I know you ask why we left Earth. And the answer should strike fear into all your hearts. It was because of the Leyens.

Many years ago, as many years before I was born as have passed since, the Leyens came to Earth and conquered our home. These pale, shriveled, large-eyed aliens came to each member of our race with a choice-either be driven into exile, or have our genes altered so we would become like them. The Leyens had no sense of morality, and no sense of individuality, and most of us rejected their misguided offer.

Some of us were weak, though, and I spit on their memory. Those who became assimilated started taking the Leyen point of view, wondering why we were so attached to this ball of dirt we called home. They were the ones, these Leyen-Human hybrids, who drove us into exile on the planet Babylon.

And so, from my grandfather's time until my own, we lived on a planet that we did not know, strangers on an unfamiliar world, where spring, summer, winter, and autumn did not mean what they had here on Earth. We scraped out a life for humanity, and wept for the world we had once known.

One day, we heard news that filled us with both fear and joy. The Leyens were not the only aliens out there. Far from here, closer to the center of the Milky Way, the Leyens were fighting with another race, one that they had tried to assimilate but that had not grown as weak and complacent as we had.

The war had come, and with it, our opportunity.

My father, Matthew, the Governor of our planet of exile, called me to his office one morning and said, ? Judah, this is our chance. ?

? What is?? I asked him.

He looked around the room as if checking for electronic spying devices. ? At the cost of many lives, we've managed to secure six Leyen ships capable of hyperspace. I've heard that the Leyens have pulled their forces away from Earth, and even the hybrids have left. This is our chance to take our planet back. ?

You have to remember that I knew nothing of Earth, except what my grandparents had told me. Like my father, I shared a desire to go back, but I honestly never expected it to happen in my lifetime. So I calmly replied, ? Really? Take our planet back? That's wonderful news. ?

My father cocked his head at me. ? I'm glad you think so, Judah, because I'd like you to lead the fleet. ?

That stopped me cold. ? Father,? I said, ? I'm a physics teacher. I'm not a soldier. ?

? None of us are soldiers,? my father replied. ? But you are my son. Your name will inspire our people and lead us into victory. ?

I had never heard my father speak that way, and I thought I saw tears begin to well up in his eyes. He wiped his face, however, so if he had been crying he quickly stopped. ? Will you do it, Judah??

? Well,? I began, ? I-?

The door opened, and one of my father's aides interrupted us. ? Governor Hammer,? he said with a nod. ? Forgive the interruption. ?

? What is it, David??

David glanced at me and said, ? We've just gotten a report confirming that the Leyens have temporarily abandoned Earth. It's ours now if we want it. ?

? Thank you, David.? David left and my father turned back to me. ? You see, Judah? You don't have to worry about being a soldier at all. Just lead the fleet back to Earth, and begin to recolonize home. ?

Father's words convinced me, and I agreed to take on the task. He put me in charge of the most important ship of all, the largest and most powerful, called the *Luminary* . We jumped into hyperspace behind the other five, to protect them on our trip to Earth.

And protect them we did. Because what we didn't know at the time was that the Leyens had set up a trap.

My grandchildren, my biggest hope for you is that you never know the terror of a battle. Shortly after the jump into hyperspace, we discovered that the Leyens had expected us. They had left one ship hidden near Babylon, just in case, and when they saw our six vessels, that one ship came in behind us for a surprise attack.

We were hit first, with a huge energy burst that knocked out our life support and lights for a moment. By the time my crew had gotten the systems working again, the Leyens were firing random bolts at our other five ships.

Over the hyperspace radio, I ordered the other five vessels to hightail it towards Earth as fast as possible. The Leyens must have overheard, because their ship turned around and sped towards us.

We came in fast and engaged the Leyens in a volley of bursts, blasts, and bolts. I can't remember the number of times we hit them or the number of times we got hit ourselves. The *Luminary* shook constantly, the lights dimmed and brightened over and over, and the control panels expelled sweet-smelling smoke. Finally, with our last dregs of energy, we managed to hit the Leyen ship dead center, and it exploded in the eerie silence that accompanies such things in hyperspace.

I felt exhausted; sweat covered my face and a bloody gash cut across my cheek. But my father had placed me in command, so I had to secure the *Luminary* before getting some rest. My crew reported on the damage, which mostly sounded fixable, until I got a call in from my engineer.

? Captain Hammer, we need you down here.?

I remember shaking my head in amusement at being called ? Captain Hammer,? but after making sure that there were no other crises for me to deal with, I headed down to engineering. The Leyen hyperspace engine filled the chamber from top to bottom, about ten meters in height. The engineer, a woman about my age named Rebecca, pushed a button on the side of the engine that popped out a cube the size of my palm. She took it and handed it over to me.

? Here's the problem, Captain.?

I turned the cube around in my hands. ? It's the fuel pod.?

? Look at it closely,? Rebecca said. ? It's fused. Inoperable.?

I examined it; sure enough, the normal bright glow of the fuel pod had dimmed to a milky-white paleness. I passed it back to her. ? Why did it fuse? We didn't run the ship that hard.?

Rebecca nodded. ? That last energy burst, the one that didn't shake the ship-it must be some new sort of weapon. My guess is that it targeted the engine chamber, and sapped the fuel pod.?

? Well, put in a replacement.?

She shook her head and pushed a button to open up the replacement drawer. ? Can't.?

Now, children, this is the part that you must understand. The *Luminary* was different from the other ships. The other ships could run for months on a standard fuel pod, but the *Luminary* used that much power in a day. Since we knew it would take eight days to get to Earth, we had brought eight extra fuel pods with us in the drawer.

Only now, what Rebecca showed me was a drawer with only one working fuel pod. The other seven were as fused as the one from the engine, beyond repair.

? Powerful weapon,? I said.

? Yes.?

? So what do we do now??

Rebecca looked at me as if I were a fool. Come to think of it, maybe I was. ? What do we do now?? she parroted. ? That's what I'm asking *you* . You're the captain.?

I nodded and stared off into the distance, while trying to think of an idea. ? Can we borrow a fuel pod

from one of the other ships??

Rebecca shook her head. ? You ordered them forward, and they've already gone far ahead. They're out of hyperspace radio range.?

? Maybe they'll come back for us.?

? Unless they assume we've been destroyed.?

I thought some more. ? Well, we have one working fuel pod. Let's use it to go back to Babylon and get more.?

Rebecca rolled her eyes. ? There are no more, Captain. We took all the fuel pods we had. There was no reason to leave any behind.?

? So,? I said. ? We'll just go home, then. We'll let the other five ships retake the Earth.?

Rebecca looked around the chamber for a moment, and then, staring at her feet, she said, ? With all due respect, sir, that's not a good plan.?

? Why not??

? Because the trap implies that the Leyens know we're coming. If our intelligence is wrong and more Leyens are waiting for us near Earth, our other five ships won't stand a chance against them. They need us.?

I sighed. ? Rebecca, you're telling me that whatever we do, we've lost.?

? I'm afraid so, sir,? she said. ? Unless we can get one fuel pod to do the work of eight.?

Children, the way Rebecca said that triggered something in my mind. I opened up the engine's fuel compartment and studied the way the wires connected from the fuel pod into the rest of the engine. I had never seen a Leyen power converter before, but it looked similar to power converters we used on Babylon. I studied the electronics intently and came up with an idea.

? Rebecca,? I said, ? what if we hook up the wires so it doesn't drain the fuel pod as quickly as usual? What if we adjust the rate at which power is drawn? Flip the wires around so the exhaust fuel goes back into the pod, and keeps it powered??

She bit her lip. ? We'd have to skirt very close to the laws of thermodynamics. But if we did as you suggest-? She punched a few buttons on a nearby computer panel, checked the result, and smiled. ? We'd have enough power from the one fuel pod to last us all eight days, plus a little more besides.?

And that's what we did. We arrived at Earth shortly after our other five ships, and just in time to set up a defensive perimeter around the planet. When the Leyens and the hybrids came back, in their weakened condition we managed to take them out ship by ship. Eventually they realized that it wasn't worth it, and they left us behind to rebuild our lives the way we wanted.

But my story, as always, ends with a warning. We may have been back home for decades now, but even today, we must still watch out for the Leyens. Their empire might be crumbling, but we know they are still out there, and they would assimilate us again if they had a chance.

\* \* \* \*

My story was done except for one final part of the ritual. All of the other children turned to look at little

Jacob, the only one young enough to not remember the punch line.

? Grampa, that was the story of the Great Miracle, right??

? Yes,? I replied, smiling.

? So what was the Great Miracle??

? What was the Great Miracle?? I laughed. ? Isn't it miracle enough that we won our planet back??

? Seriously, Grampa, what was it??

Still smiling, I sighed. ? The Great Miracle was that I was wrong.?

? What do you mean, you were wrong?? Jacob asked.

? The technique I came up with for getting more power out of the fuel pod-it couldn't have worked. After the battle had been won, we checked the power converter and discovered that it was the wrong kind. It wasn't able to drain the power off slowly; what I had thought was a sliding power scale actually only had two settings, on and off. The physics just wasn't there. It shouldn't have worked.?

Jacob looked confused. ? But it did work, Grampa.?

I smiled. ? Ah, yes, it did. And that is why we call it the Great Miracle. Come, let us light the candles.?

My children followed me over to the mantelpiece, where Hannah had already set up the candelabrum. We lit the eight candles using the flame of a ninth, and recited those ancient words, ? *Nes Gadol Hayah Po* -A Great Miracle Happened Here. ? Then my daughter called everyone else over to the table to eat the potato pancakes, while I went to my room for a rest.

As I changed into pajamas, I gazed for a long time at the photo of Rebecca, the engineer I had met on the *Luminary* so long ago. I hoped she would be proud of the way I told the story to our grandchildren.

I was just settling into bed when I heard a knock at my door, and little Jacob came in. ? Grampa, is that a true story? How can one fuel pod last as long as eight?

He jumped onto the bed, sitting next to me. I tousled his hair, making sure not to knock off his skullcap, and sighed happily.

? Grandson, I don't know what to believe. But I do believe my senses. Look around you. We're here, back on Earth, and we have a second chance to make things go right. ?

First published in Analog, December 2001