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The Joshua Files: Apocalypse Moon

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M. G. Harris

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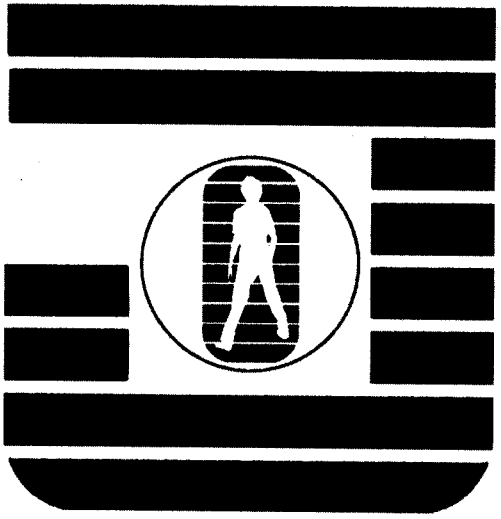
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M.G. HARRIS

THE JOSHUA FILES



APOCALYPSE MOON

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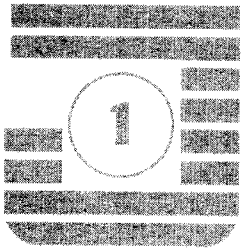
For Reba Bandyopadhyay, thanks for a treasured friendship, all your advice, ideas and support, and the memory of *The Aquitar Files*

BLOG ENTRY: THE JOSHUA DOOMSDAY MANIFESTO OR HOW TO DEAL WITH THE POSSIBLE END OF THE WORLD

1. Keep busy. Learn a skill or trade. Do your exams. Take me, for example: I'm learning to be a pilot. OK, I'll admit that I'm partly doing it to impress a girl, but also, it might come in handy, especially if the end of the world starts to look likely. Mainly, keep your mind off the possible impending doom. The trade/skill/exam thing is just a bonus.
2. Stay in denial. The world is NOT going to end. Tell yourself this a few times a day. Thoughts of what might happen may spring up on you when you're least expecting it. In those moments, you'll need that denial to be rock solid.
3. DO NOT look at videos on YouTube about the world ending. Most of them have got it badly wrong anyway. They talk about asteroids crashing into Earth or the Planet Nibiru or some other rubbish. You won't find much about a galactic superwave and a gigantic electromagnetic pulse wiping out all the computer technologies. That's so much less photogenic. Instead of massive fireballs, there will be a massive no-show. No TV, no interweb, no money going through the banking system and no twenty-pound notes in

the ATMs. No food trucks going to the supermarkets, no power in the hospitals. The whole developed world relies on computer technology. Very definitely don't think about what would happen if there was suddenly a great big OUTAGE.

4. Make a bucket list – a list of all the things you want to do before you "kick the bucket". Quietly. Show it to no one. This is just for you. You'll never have to use it, probably, because the world won't end. It's a just-in-case. Look at it for a long time and think about what really matters, what you really want to DO or BE. You might surprise yourself. I did.
5. Stop reading this blog. How did you find it anyway? What makes you think I'm not making it all up?
6. Trust the adults to sort everything out and save the world. Hey, they usually do, right?
7. If you've tried all of the above and you still wake at three a.m. with a cold, vacant pit where your stomach should be, wondering if civilization is on the brink of destruction – then there's always this: GET INVOLVED.



Lately, I've been having the feeling that people aren't being straight with me. Or some people in particular: my parents.

By "parents" I mean my mother (Eleanor) and her partner, Carlos Montoyo. If it weren't for the fact that my real father died pretty recently, Mum would probably already be married to Montoyo. They fell for each other after a few months. Now they're definitely a couple. But when you marry a widow, I think you're probably meant to leave a polite interval.

Montoyo is an interesting guy and I won't deny that I respect him. He's been on the ruling Executive of Ek Naab – a hidden "invisible city" – ever since the last *proper* Bakab Ix died: my grandfather. Now I'm the Bakab Ix; I'm next in line to succeed to the ruling Executive. When I turn sixteen.

That's if Montoyo will give up his place for me. If ever there was a wheeler-dealer, it's him. About nine months ago Montoyo played a sneaky trick on me. Since then things have gone downhill. Nine months ago, he tricked me into travelling in time in search of an ancient Mayan codex – the

Ix Codex. Montoyo might say he had his reasons for tricking me, but it's not easy to get over being conned into risking your life. It's probably fair to say that if Montoyo could have managed the time-travel bit, he'd have done the deed himself. If he could have touched the Ix Codex, that is. Like my dad used to say, *If we had eggs, we could have ham and eggs, if we had ham.*

Of all the people in Ek Naab, only I can use the time-travel device, the Bracelet of Itzamna. Only I can touch the Ix Codex. It's not a magical power, it's a genetic ability: I was born with it.

Until nine months ago, Montoyo didn't think twice about risking me on a dangerous time-travel adventure. If the Ix Codex went missing, I was the guy for the job. It's what I was born for, after all. Prince William doesn't whine about being second in line to the British throne. And I try not to whine about being what I am, the Bakab Ix – genetically tweaked to be the protector of the Ix Codex.

There's an ancient legend that the world as we know it will end in December 2012. The bad news is that it's true. What is going to happen, has happened before. It will all happen again, too. The good news is that this time, we're meant to be prepared – thanks to the Ix Codex.

The instructions for how to save the world from the coming galactic superwave of 2012 are in the Ix Codex. But the cover of the Ix Codex is impregnated with a poisonous gas. Only a Bakab Ix can touch the book and survive.

There were times when it was very hard to carry all that responsibility. I didn't ask for the job; I was born into it. I wasn't always keen. But I did what was needed; I risked my life again and again. I've been shot in the leg, attacked with knives, experimented on, watched people I care about being hurt by my enemies, seen my father in prison, seen him plunge to his death saving my life.

All to try to protect the Ix Codex, to do my bit to save the world from the galactic superwave.

So when apparently I'm *too young* and *too inexperienced* to play a part in this incredible plan to save the world . . . when I'm completely sidelined and ordered to "Get on with your studies and leave everything to us". . .

I get pretty annoyed. I get a bit suspicious too.

It has something to do with what happened nine months ago, when I time travelled. That's when everything changed. Before that, I felt like I was on the inside, allowed to know what was going on, how the 2012 plan was coming along.

Now – nothing. No part in it for me. I'm surplus to requirements.

On the upside: you can get a lot done in nine months, if you really focus. I had no idea. Nine months of intensive maths coaching and I've covered a decent chunk of the A-levels in maths, further maths, physics.

Not that I was a huge fan of maths before I came to live in the city, but for trainee pilots, maths is essential. My

cousin Benicio passed his pilot exam when he was fifteen. I'm determined to at least equal that.

And there are only six weeks to go before I turn sixteen.

There's a knock at the door to the apartment I share with my mother. Right now I'm here alone – Mum is off with some new friends, teaching them Irish cookery: soda bread, Irish stew, things like that. She and I are the only foreigners, the most exotic people to have lived in Ek Naab for over a hundred years. After months of determined friendliness, my mum seems to have won over even some of the more xenophobic residents, who weren't too happy when we moved in. But after a while, her relationship with Montoyo made her quite popular. It seems people have been keeping their fingers crossed that he'd marry again – either that or leave town. Being alone didn't suit him; that's what I've heard.

I zip up my flight jacket, empty the pockets of lint and a half-eaten flapjack. Still only half-dressed for my flying lesson, I move out of my bedroom and into the living room, open the door. Standing outside is my girlfriend, Ixchel. She's smiling and carrying a basket of something wrapped in a white linen cloth. It smells delicious.

"Surprise!"

"Hey! What are you doing here? I'm supposed to be out. Already late for Benicio."

"You've got time to taste a cookie, though, yes? I just came from your mother's class."

I put my head on one side. "Aw, honey, you baked!"

She grins. "Try one." The grin vanishes for a second, to be replaced by a look of mock ferocity. At least I'm hoping she's joking. "You'd better be nice. It's the first time I've baked anything."

She opens the cloth and hands me a crisp, warm shortbread biscuit. I take a bite and the warm, buttery pastry crumbles in my mouth. I close my eyes and give a long sigh of appreciation. She watches with a hopeful expression. I'm silent, experiencing the delicious sensation of the freshly baked biscuit while I gaze at her shoulders and neck. They're tanned the colour of honey, a wonderful contrast to the strappy purple top she's wearing.

"Good?"

"Amazing. Marry me."

Ixchel is momentarily taken aback. So am I. The phrase just tripped off my tongue, a joke, yet not a joke, because for Ixchel and me, the whole subject is a bit tense.

After a second or two, she recovers her composure. "Josh Garcia, you don't get away with proposing as easy as that."

Thank goodness. We're back to joking about it. "Why not?" I mumble, mouth full of shortbread. "We're already engaged, after all. I'm the Bakab Ix and you're my betrothed. It's all been agreed."

"Engaged, betrothed. Do you even know the difference?"

"Give us a kiss, sweetness, and I'll tell you."

She plants a kiss on my cheek and grins as she pulls away. "Engaged is when you give me a ring and get down on one

knee, and since you're only . . . what age are you again?" Silently, Ixchel pretends to compute my age in her head.

"I'm fifteen, almost sixteen," I growl. "And you're already sixteen, I know, I know."

"It's not that you're a few months younger. It's that we're both too young."

"Who says I even want to marry you, anyway? I'm just being accurate about our relationship."

"'Betrothed' is just something our parents decided on."

"What's going to swing it for you, my good looks or my charm? Or the massive political power I'm going to wield when I'm finally sixteen? They say it makes you irresistible, you know."

She gazes at me. "Josh. Be serious. We both know you don't care about power."

"But they could at least listen to me, right? I know the rules say that a Bakab can join the ruling Executive of Ek Naab when he's sixteen but. . ."

". . .that's never actually happened."

"Right. And can you see Carlos Montoyo letting it happen? He's doing everything he can to keep me out of the planning for 2012."

Ixchel shakes her head in sad agreement. "I know. I've heard that he's going to try to change the law. Make it so you have to be twenty-five. He's arguing that the ancient law exists because life expectancy used to be so short."

"Twenty-five will be about ten years too late. This 2012

stuff is going down in December! *Now* is when they should be asking for my help."

From behind us a voice calls out lazily, "Maybe they don't need you."

Ixchel and I turn swiftly to see my cousin Benicio standing at the door to my apartment. He gives us a sheepish grin and knocks twice on the door jamb.

"Whoops. Knock, knock."

Benicio is fully kitted in his flying gear: black trousers and a navy blue flight jacket that hangs open to reveal a clean white vest underneath. All ready for our lesson: me, Benicio and a Muwan Mark II, the nimble little "sparrow hawk" aircraft based on the technology of the super-ancient, lost civilization the Erinsi, whose writings are inscribed in the Four Books of Itzamna, including the Ix Codex.

"I guess you forgot about the lesson," Benicio says with a nod at my shoeless feet.

"I'm nearly ready. And what do you mean, they don't need me?"

"I'm not denying you're handy when the Ix Codex is around," Benicio says lightly. He's teasing me, but there's just a bit too much truth to what he says. "But what we need now are grown-ups! Experienced soldiers in the battle to save the world from the galactic superwave!"

Ixchel says quietly, "Benicio, don't."

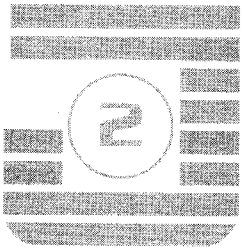
It's too late, I'm already getting annoyed. "People like you, you mean?"

"Hey, buddy, I've saved your life more than once."

"I know. I'm grateful. But you know what I'm talking about. You know I've been in dangerous situations, right? You know I can handle myself, yeah? And Ixchel is, like, this total genius with ancient languages. We should be on the team to decipher all those ancient instructions. We should be helping with the 2012 plan."

Benicio's easy grin falls away, replaced with an expression of caution. "Yeah. Maybe. I couldn't really say." And I know Benicio well enough to recognize this behaviour – hesitant, as though he's afraid to say any more on the subject. This is how he acts when he's been ordered to keep information from me.

"OK, Josh, but right now, let's focus on turning you into a pilot. Today, I'm teaching you a flight manoeuvre that's sure to make you vomit." He snatches a second piece of shortbread out of my fingers before I can put it to my mouth. "So, no more cookies for you."



We all leave together. Ixchel goes to the gym, and Benicio and I head for the aircraft hangar. It's still very bright, even in the underground part of the city, which streams with sunlight filtered through the wire mesh of the artificial ceiling. In the recesses, though, beyond the reach of the wire mesh, the solid rock overhead hems in the light. In such corners of the hidden city, electric lights are already in operation, powered by the city's own generator several kilometres away, on the surface.

Anyone who looked at Ek Naab from the sky would see nothing but a huge plantation of bananas, coffee and vanilla, and the eco-resort section of the city with its cabanas, thatched-roof restaurants and swimming pools.

Just another private estate belonging to another Mexican billionaire; that's what most of the outside world thinks this is. Most of the world has no idea that underneath is a vast complex of caverns and tunnels, and a hidden city of futuristic technology that would make generals in the Pentagon drool.

Only the enemies of Ek Naab have any idea we're here. And even they don't know exactly where.

Some people in Ek Naab want Montoyo to stop keeping Ek Naab's mission top secret. Tell the world, they say. It's too much responsibility for us.

But Montoyo has lived in the outside world. He knows how things operate. He knows that there are people who'll kill us all to get their hands on the advanced technology in this city.

Well, I'm with Montoyo there. My father was captured by the National Reconnaissance Office, a US government organization. They wanted to know the secrets of Ek Naab, too. They faked my dad's death and imprisoned him in Area 51. What happened to my dad is a direct result of the greed for the secrets hidden away in Ek Naab.

Benicio gets on with telling me about the new manoeuvre that he's programmed into the Muwans. But it must be obvious that my mind is half elsewhere.

"Did you hear me, Josh?"

I turn to him, more than a bit embarrassed. "You've programmed a new thing. Yeah, sounds good."

"Listen properly, OK? You need to be focused to fly one of these machines."

"I'm focused."

"No, I don't think so. Something's on your mind."

"Nope."

"What's up, Josh? Still worrying about conspiracy theories? Maybe you think we have spies in Ek Naab?"

"Conspiracy theories. . .?"

"Your blog – *The Joshua Files*. I saw you updated it. A Doomsday Manifesto. . .?"

"Well, you know what, turns out there *was* a conspiracy. . ."

Benicio laughs. "Just because you're paranoid. . ."

". . .doesn't mean they aren't after you. Yeah, I know."

We walk in silence until we get to the entrance of the hangar. The smell of hot grease and sparking metal fills the air. It's intoxicating, a total rush. That's even before I've got into the craft.

"I think you're gonna enjoy this, cousin."

The Muwan Mark II we're taking out is being given a final once-over by a technician named Rafa. He's about thirty-five years old and worked on the design and build of the Mark II. There are rivets on each machine that Rafa put in with his own hands. It's a decent-sized craft, a four-seater in brushed, matt titanium, not as handsome as the Mark I Muwan but smoother, sleek and cunning like a snake's head. We watch Rafa walk around the craft, tapping information into a hand-held computer. I notice that for the first time in any of my lessons, the craft is fully equipped today, including the motorbike that's stowed in the belly of the craft. An innovation of Benicio – who has the most field experience with flying in the outside world.

"The Muwan is fully weighted today," Rafa says. "Full survival kit and bike."

"We need to see you handle yourself with a heavy load," Benicio says.

"But there are only two passengers," I point out. "The maximum load is four."

"Passengers don't change the balance as much as having a Harley in your lower regions," Benicio remarks. "Carrying a motorbike, that calls for a slightly different technique."

He and Rafa exchange a few quiet words about the Muwan. I'd love a cool job like Rafa's. In the outside world, I don't think it would ever have occurred to me to go into engineering. I wasn't good enough at maths. But after a year of living in Ek Naab, with intense study, it turns out I'm actually not so bad. And there are other good things about moving to this city.

When I first moved to Ek Naab I hated it. I missed Oxford, missed normal life. Getting Ixchel to be my girlfriend made all the difference. Before that, she'd been dating Benicio. Now that I'm with Ixchel, I don't much care where I live, so long as she's with me.

Benicio hands me the remote control for the Muwan. I open the cockpit and hit the button. A metal arm pops out and drops an extending steel ladder made of light tubes of metal connected with woven metallic fibres. I climb in first, slide into the pilot seat. Benicio follows me into the co-pilot seat. He takes off his jacket and tosses it into the rear passenger seat.

"You're supposed to keep your jacket on," I remind him. The flight jackets are equipped with essential survival gadgets in case you're forced to eject. Removing them is totally against the rules.

"Ha ha, I know. However, on this occasion, I'm officially allowing you to relax this rule. Go on, take your jacket off. I'm pretty sure you'll hurl. I'd prefer not to worry about a dry-cleaning job."

With some reluctance, I do as he asks and throw my jacket on top of his. If he's trying to psych me out, I realize, it's kind of working. . .

I decide to force myself to ignore Benicio's obvious relishing of the oncoming challenge. Instead I concentrate on going through the start-up protocol. Until a week ago I still had to use a checklist, but now I've managed to memorize it. It's a whole bunch of systems checks that have already been done by Rafa but need a final double-check. As I work through the checks, I'm conscious of Benicio's eyes on me, smirking, judging.

"Something wrong?"

He keeps on smiling. "No, no. Keep going. You're doing great."

Finally I put on my headset, lower the eyepiece and run through the final checks. Benicio lowers his own eyepiece; a yellow light fires up, casts a glow over his cheekbones. Engine is good to go; all routine manoeuvres are up to date in the list of autopilot programs.

"OK," Benicio announces. "So you see how to bring up a list? Hit this button here. Or start typing and it will find one of the system programs. Some basic flight programs are included in the system. These are all the hard-coded systems, stuff that's taken straight from the pages of the Kan Codex."

For a second I can hardly believe what he's doing, going through basics again as though I were some total newbie. "Yeah, Benicio . . . I know all that. Are you going to show me something new or what?"

Benicio pretends to be hurt. "Oh, smart fly-boy too clever for teacher? I'm just making sure you remember your way around the hard-coded systems, and fast. It's been a few weeks since we used one."

"So no more lessons on manoeuvrability?"

"No. You're not bad at that now. But when we ran preprogrammed missions, you were still pretty green."

"Then why go back to the basic preprogrammed stuff?"

He grins, widely and with a glint in his eye. "Who said anything about 'basic'? Today we're gonna start with a personal favourite." In the empty air Benicio appears to press a button. In the display I see that he's typed a C. A list appears, with one title highlighted in neon blue.

CRAZY BENICIO.

"*Crazy Benicio*. Your personal favourite. . .?"

There's a grin in his voice. "Like you cannot believe. . ."

Amazingly, Benicio and I still get on OK. Some guys would be mad if you nicked their girlfriend. But he took it relatively

well. "I guess technically she was always yours," he once told me. "Seeing that you two were supposed to be betrothed."

Very philosophical.

Benicio takes out a hand-held computer and starts clicking with a stylus. "OK, all your systems checks are good. Start the engine and select a program."

I follow his instructions and scroll through some options. Underneath our seats I sense the vibrations of the anti-gravity engine as it gradually warms up.

"Becan 6?" I suggest. It's a launch program that takes the Muwan out of the hangar through a vent which opens in the ceiling, and into a course that flies just six kilometres east of the Mayan ruins of Becan and continues for a hundred kilometres without flying over any populated centre.

"That's fine," Benicio agrees. His voice has finally become serious, businesslike. He loves to joke around, but underneath the playful exterior, I've come to realize, he's actually a very intense guy. Half the time, I have no idea what he's thinking. I think he likes it that way.

BLOG ENTRY: CRAZY BENICIO

My cousin Benicio pulled a gun on me. A real one. And he screamed like a psycho.

I was flying a Muwan Mark II. They're amazing aircraft – they practically fly themselves. The main reason for the many lessons I've had is in case there's ever any trouble with the National Reconnaissance Office, flying aircraft whose technology they stole from Ek Naab.

I'd just turned off the autopilot, about a hundred klicks out of Becan. I'd taken the controls, popped a holographic projection of a satellite map in front of my eyes, and started to fly to the contours of a mountain ridge about a hundred metres below.

Then I heard Benicio say, very coldly, "Land. Now. Quick."

"What. . .?"

He snapped in fury, "Land! Are you deaf? Land, now, or I'll blow a hole through your neck!"

I was so startled that I could only laugh. But words stubbornly refused to follow.

"Land this craft or I'll KILL YOU!" he screamed.

At that point I turned to see that Benicio was pointing a gun at me. He eyes were round, wide and livid. "Land this damn plane, you lousy *pinche gringo*, or God help me I'll. . ."

"OK, OK, OK!"

I began to lower the craft.

"Faster, *cabron*, like you mean it!"

My heart was thudding. So I did what he asked. And said, just to relieve the tension, "Jeez LOUISE, what is your problem? Put the bloody gun away!"

Benicio leaned back, visibly shaking. "*Hijo de. . .*"

"Watch your mouth," I warned. "Say what you like about me, but don't diss my mum."

The craft bounced to a standstill a couple of metres above the ground. I popped out the undercarriage and felt it thud to the stony ground beneath. I lifted my visor to find Benicio had once again raised the gun.

"What's going on?"

"Spies in Ek Naab?" He smiled nastily. "About time you found out."

My mouth dropped open. "What. . .?"

Benicio nodded. He leaned forward and hit the control panel, opening the cockpit. He stood up, towering over me, then leaned back, making space for me to pass.

"Get out."

"After you. . ."

He screamed again. "Get out! *Caray*, Josh, don't you know when you're in trouble?"

I held up both hands and stumbled past him on the way out of the craft. "All right, all right, don't have a cow."

He had to be joking, surely? Why was he going on about spies in Ek Naab? There had been constant rumours and fears that our enemies

might infiltrate Ek Naab, but as far as I knew nothing had ever been proven. It was such a strange thing to joke about. Was he telling me that he knew about spies, or maybe that he was one himself? Or that he suspected that I might be a spy?! My mind raced, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

Before I knew what was happening I was on the ground, with Benicio following me. I glanced over my shoulder to see that he still had the gun aimed straight at my chest. It was beyond surreal. I couldn't even feel fear; disorientation obliterated everything else.

"OK, Benicio," I began. I felt a firm yank at my waist. In the next second I was pulled off my feet, dangling. A surge of panic hit me; I twisted around in the air to see the Muwan rising slowly off the ground. It took me another second to realize that I was connected to the open cockpit by an almost invisible thread, a thin cord that had somehow been attached to my belt. I swivelled back to look at Benicio, grinning and waving at me from the ground. I spotted the Muwan's remote control in his right hand.

"Ha ha, Josh. How do you like Crazy Benicio so far?"