Manifest Destiny

Faster than Light Starship ORSS Fence Jumper
November 18th 2171
1700 IST

Saturn loomed large out the main windows. The rings our vessel skimmed across created a horizon, like a flat plain extending towards the vast infinity of space. The view was humbling, to say the least.

The intercom squawked and I was broken from my reverie, a faint smile on my lips. “Captain, we’ve got a message from JCOM, they approved the mission.” The smile broke into a broad grin.

“I’m on my way to the bridge. Start getting her warmed up, I want to hear those engines purring by the time I arrive.” I pulled on my cap and buttoned my shirt. Provided everything went well, we would all walk away with shiny medals having pulled off the most daring rescue in history.

I exited my quarters, pushing myself effortlessly down the zero-g corridor. A lot of the dirtborns couldn’t spend five minutes in zero-g without getting green in the gills; I was always amused by that.

I had a good crew, and we had a good ship. The Outer Ring StarShip *Fence Jumper*, eighth ship to be built with a faster than light drive. It had taken me every ounce of goodwill accumulated over the years to swing this assignment, but this was the dream really. I lived in space, I had a ship that could traverse the solar system in a heartbeat, I didn’t have much to complain about really. I could have tea with the queen of Mars, and be home to Saturn in time for dinner.

Our task today was a bit more serious than the usual fare of missions though, and it was one I had a personal stake in. 460 AUs away, traveling at tens of thousands of kilometers an hour relative to us, the generation ship *Manifest Destiny* had suddenly gone dark.

It had taken three days for their radio signals to traverse the space between them and Earth. Two days ago, the signal had simply gone out, like someone had thrown a switch. 50,000 people just stopped talking. Some of those people were relatives of mine, descendents of my grandparents’ siblings. I had been looking forward at using the FTL capabilities of the *Fence Jumper* to perform trade runs between the generation fleet and the solar system. If something had gone wrong aboard the generation ship, I wanted to know.

The second the ship went dark, electronic gears ground into motion. Through a chain of digital messages between AI agents and human operators, hundreds of people were instantly notified of the problem, including me. Something had to be done of course, but no one had

been able to put forward a plan. We could reach the ship using a series of faster than light jumps, but it would have so much relative velocity we would never be able to catch up.

I saluted Tom Jeffries, my second in command, as I floated onto the the bridge, still lost in thought.

“Systems are hot, drive is spooled and ready sir.” He said as I sunk into the captain’s chair.

“Tasha, how far are we off apokrone?” I asked Natasha Odest, our navigator and pilot. She was a small severe woman of eastern European heritage.

“ We’ll pass through apokrone in eight minutes sir.” She answered, craning her head out the windows as the rings of saturn skimmed by beneath us.

“Alright, close enough for government work. Bring us about to 180 off our inertial vector, prep for retro, give me 1 G until we’re suborbital.” I cracked my knuckles on the arms of my chair. It was time to get to work.

“Aye sir initiating Z axis rotation at 1 radian per minute.” Odest answered fluidly.

“Jeffries sound thrust alarms, prepare for acceleration.” I said turning to the fair skinned Jeffries.

The problem was, how did you build up enough velocity to catch something moving that fast? It would take too long, even under high acceleration, to try and match velocities in the traditional manner. Conservative estimates said 9 years at 5 Gs of acceleration to catch it at sublight. An FTL ship was the obvious choice, but how precisely could it to be done? Well after today, they would probably name this maneuver after me.

Alarms began to sound as the giant system of interlocking bolas and gyroscopes in the ship began to spin. An electric hum went through the air and I could taste copper. Powered by the strange superheavy element that floated in the atmosphere of Jupiter, the massive over-unity thruster hummed to life. The force built rapidly, and I could feel myself being pushed back into my seat as what I had been considering a wall abruptly became the floor.

“Acceleration stable, we’re spooling green across the board. We’ll be sub-orbital in nine minutes. Are you sure this is a good idea sir?” Odest asked hesitantly. “Normally we want to avoid falling into the planet’s gravity well.”

I chuckled, climbing out of my chair and stretching my legs in the temporary absence of weightlessness. “Anything goes wrong, we just jump into interplanetary space. We’ve got this.”



Saturn began to grow in the bridge windows as we finally completed our burn and weightlessness returned. We were now suborbital. The trick was, it was velocity we needed, not acceleration. *Fence Jumper* could pull 5 Gs in a sprint, we could easily match acceleration with the lumbering generation ship, we just needed to get the speed from *somewhere* in the first

place. Something like the giant planet that was now expanding to fill more and more of the center windows.

"Time to impact, 68 minutes, 17 seconds." Natasha replied tensely.

"Is that for the edge of the atmosphere?" I asked.

"Yes sir." She whispered shortly.

"Alright. Take us back onto our prograde vector. At 1 G constant prograde acceleration, how long until we hit atmo?"

"Twenty seven minutes sir." She answered.

"Alright, that will be our profile, we move at 1 G acceleration prograde to the geodesic, and we'll loop the track between our pre-op apokrone and the atmosphere. *Fence* given above parameters, how many loops will it take to match relative velocities with the *Destiny?*"

"Process will require 29 individual jumps. However, given the decrease in the duration of the trip, after jump 25, the ship will be moving too quickly to plot a jump before impact with the atmosphere occurs." The smooth, automated voice of the ship's computer responded to my question.

"We can compensate for that." Jeffries provided as an addendum. "We just alter the profile so we skim the atmosphere and pass through a new perikrone."

"And overshoot the planet and burn off all our speed." Odest countered. "Fence, just start calculating all the jumps now. The profile should be simple enough as long as there aren't any hitches. We just go as soon as the spooling on the FTL completes, and set our fall height so the time it takes to fall is the duration of the FTL spooling."

"Preliminary modeling suggests this method is viable." The computer stated.

"Do it then," I said. "Jeffries you have the bridge, I'm going to grab coffee. twenty seven minutes Tasha?"

"Actually its more like twenty one now sir."

"I'd best be quick then." I said pushing out of my chair. Jeffries took my seat as I drifted back out and down the hallway. I pushed off hard down the hall and landed at the base of the tunnel as the acceleration alarms started up, and the tunnel transformed into a vertical shaft.

We just needed to get a good running start in order to catch the *Manifest Destiny.* With FTL it didn't matter where we got that velocity, just that we had it. So we would intentionally deorbit ourselves; then, just before hitting the atmosphere, we would jump to the location of our previous apoapsis and start falling again. Because momentum was conserved through the jump, the faster we were moving when we went in, the faster we would come out. It was the equivalent of rolling a ball down a hill, then just before reaching the bottom, teleporting the ball back to the top with all of its angular momentum intact. We would repeat this procedure over and over, building up more inertia with each fall. Then after we'd nearly matched velocities, we would perform another series of twelve FTL jumps to reach out to the distant ship, and endure almost nine hours under a grueling 4 Gs of acceleration to actually intercept the damn thing. It didn't matter, we could handle it. The plan was solid, the ship could take it. I reached a gangway

that extended above the generator cavity. Massive concentric rings of metal rotated silently through the glass beneath me, generating torque that powered electrical elements that than powered itself. The over-unity thruster was a thing of wonder, and I loved listening to her purr.



"Alright, I'm backing off on the acceleration, we've matched velocities. Radial velocity -3 meters per second, transversal velocity 0.02 meters per second, distance 37 kilometers. We've matched velocities, prep for approach." Natasha Odest said, relaxing in her seat.

I let out a sigh as I felt my body unglue itself from my chair. I pulled my hands back. After hours at 4 Gs, I felt lighter than air.

"Alright Jeffries, what do we have on the sensors?"

The officer leaned over the console, frowning. "No heat signatures. Its completely cold. I'm getting some background off the terahertz, but there's no active transmitters. No infrared, no visible light. Its completely cold and dead.

I frowned, pushing out of my chair and walking to the window. The massive ship was impossible to see at this distance. A dark spot in the darkness. Something pulled at the thread of my mind. I looked down to my feet and realized what it was.

"We're still under acceleration." I said flatly.

"Right." Natasha supplied automatically, "Because the *Manifest Destiny* is accelerating at 1 G…" Her voice trailed off.

"What kind of engines does that thing have?" I asked, straining to see into the darkness.

Fence automatically provided the information. "The *Manifest Destiny* was constructed in 2110 as part of the original Generation ship fleet. It features an a hollow cylinder design, and contains a nuclear fusion torch thruster."

I frowned. "We should see that. If that thing was still under 1 G of acceleration, we should see its thruster candle from here."

Jeffries shook his head. "I can't explain it sir. There's no heat signature, no thermal backscatter, nothing. According to all the passive sensors, that thing is a dead rock in space."

"And yet it's under 1 G acceleration. I don't like this." I said.

"Should we abort approach and hold current distance?" Odest asked.

"No, take us in to 10 klicks off their starboard bow, Jeffries, lets go active. Microwave RADAR and LIDAR sweeps of the whole thing. Lets see if anyone is home."

One by one the stars winked out, blocked from view by the darkened hulk of the generation ship. "Hold us at 10 klicks out. Tom, take us active."

"Aye sir." He said, and the computer systems made a automatic ping sound to let us know a signal was being broadcast.

"Get me wide band." I said picking up the microphone attached to my chair. "ORSS *Manifest Destiny*, this is ORSS *Fence Jumper* broadcasting in the blind from 10 kilometers off

your starboard bow. If anyone is there please respond." I set down the microphone. "Fence, loop that once every 60 seconds until you get a response."

"Sir, something is seriously wrong here." Jeffries said frowning deeply. "I'm getting some weird feedback off the microwave backscatter, consistent with structural damage. It's like she was torn open. If the ship vented to space Sir…"

I waved him off. "Let's find out what happened here. There could still be survivors. Anything on radioisotopic?"

"Negative. No alpha or beta particle decay, though I am getting a strong gamma trace." He offered."

"Is it safe?" I asked.

"No way of knowing sir." He answered.

"Alright, Tasha, ease us in. Hold at 2 klicks out and prep a team for boarding. Full LIDAR sweeps of the entry area I don't want any surprises." I said finally.

"Aye Sir."



Marine privates, Matterson, Girardeau, and Westly carefully clung to the exterior hull of the *Fence Jumper.* Three tiny grey insects, wrapped in their urban camo spacesuits. They detached their harnesses from the ship and tethered together. In the middle distance, the darkened hull of the *Manifest Destiny* hung like a wall of shadow across the sky. Spotlights from the rescue ship played across the hull, instantly leaping the distance between *Fence Jumper* and *Manifest Destiny*. One spotlight hung motionless on the distant outline of an airlock.

"Alright, ready?" Matterson said to his squadmates. They nodded grimly and as one, pushed off the gleaming metal surface of their mothership. Three tiny specks soared across the empty void between the stars. Grains of life, suspended in the realm of pure physics. The trio braced themselves for the impact with the derelict, but the hull gave way when their boots slammed into it. Darkness swallowed them up as a cloud of rust drifted out into the space where they had struck. I held my breath on the bridge as the cameras and spotlights focused in on the newly made crater. My stomach churned uneasily as we waited for them to report.

"Gravity is present, anomalous acceleration verified. Direction of thrust appears inverted "

This was the first thing the *Fence Jumper* heard after what felt like an eternity of silence. Something seemed horribly threatening about that darkened hulk, and I forced my breathing to remain steady as the adrenaline threatened to overwhelm me.

My eyes went to the front windows, taking in the dark bulk as a whole. "*Fence,* can you give me an outline of the hull on the overlay based off the radar return?"

“Yes sir.” The AI reported, and then as the ship became visible, it felt like my insides as all deflated. The ship was scarred, as if impossibly huge claws had raked over the metal hull. The vessel was moving at 1 G of acceleration tail first, with the engines dead.

The two men and one woman dusted themselves off, shining their headlamps into the darkened interior of the ship. “This place is completely oxidized. Everything is rusted right through.” Girardeau reported, shining her light out into the hole they had made. Her headlamp flickered out of the dust cloud and I finally let out my breath.

“What the hell happened here?” Came Matterson’s voice, barely above a whisper. The grisly image of withered skeleton appeared on monitors across the gap of space as Matterson’s headcam went on.

“It appears to be mummified.” the shipboard AI offered unhelpfully.

“How is this possible?” I asked to now one in particular. Silence answered me, not even Fence had an explanation.

“Do we proceed or fall back?” Matterson’s voice asked, and in that one moment, I chose to defy reason, under the blind hope I still lived in a universe which made sense.

“Proceed to the bridge.” I said in a loud whisper.

I watched with baited breath through the cameras as the three marines kicked a door in, opening the rusted passage into the main interior cavity of the ship. The massive volume was nearly three kilometers across, with houses built into the walls of the vessel. Now that interior was darker than the deepest caves. The lights of the marines barely penetrated the gloom, but what we saw was enough to turn our hopes to ash in our mouths. It was as if the ship had rusted solid and was turning to dust, taking the people with it. The impossibility of what I was witnessing ran on a continuous loop through my mind. What could have done this? What had the *Destiny* encountered out here in the darkness?

There were bodies everywhere. They were scattered all through the inverted city-ship, as if they had all suddenly dropped dead where they stood. It was as if the life had been sucked out of them, leaving only wilted husks. But such a thing was impossible. All of this was impossible.

The marines did well, making the twelve kilometer hike through the city-turned-tomb to reach the bridge in a little under four hours. After the first hour, I finally decided that the strange glow coming from the hollowed out eye sockets of the *Destiny’s* crew was an afterimage on my eyelids and couldn’t possibly be real. I blinked rapidly, and the afterimages persisted in my field of vision. By the third hour of rust and death, I could barely keep an eye on the screen while keeping down the bile in my throat.

The doors didn’t resist their passage much. Despite being rusted shut, the material had become so thin and brittle that one kick would shatter it. There was little wonder the vessel had depressurized in this state, though the question of how this happened to the material hung heavily with us.

All but the hardiest systems on the bridge had degraded to uselessness. Wires hung down from what had been the floor, consoles dangled from the wall by their cords. A few of the bulkier screens provided scrambled but somewhat readable information. I took it all in through the cameras, trying to make sense of what I was seeing. I rubbed my eyes as I sipped my way through the third pot of coffee I'd had in as many hours.

"It appears the ship's fusion reactor is offline and the ship is operating only on emergency batteries." *Fence* supplied, interpreting the data for me. "And although it does not explain the source of the thrust, the accelerometers also report it."

I watched Odest chew her lip as I tried to keep myself from pulling my hair out. "Alright, pull back. There's nothing more you can do there." At this point, the best we could do was report back to Saturn and plan the next move. More ships would need to be sent out here. This mystery would be solved in time, but I wanted my people out of that tomb. A horrible churning had settled into my gut as we approached. Some primitive animalistic part of my mind screamed to run away. I pushed down the feeling and took a long breath.

It was another six hours before things started to go seriously wrong. The marine team had marked their path from the outside of the hull to the bridge, and had timed their route. But, after following their own markers for almost six hours, they admitted that something strange was happening.

"We've passed this marker before, I'm sure of it." Girardeau said, crossing her arms and stopping in her tracks. "I don't know how it happened, but we're going in circles."

The fight or flight response continued to roil just below the surface of my mind. I was getting impatient. "Can you cut a straight line path out of the hull with your equipment?" I asked them.

"Yeah." Westly responded. "Should be easy enough, this place is practically crumbling already." He pulled out his plasma torch and began to cut a path forward, and they started moving. Spatially they shouldn't have had that much ship to pass through, but as I watched through the cameras as the tunnel got longer and longer, I realized something was very, very wrong.

"Captain, you should look at this." Jeffries said, drawing my eyes away from the strange impossible view the cameras gave me. "We've been getting a slowly rising output off the rear areas of the ship in the terahertz frequency since we arrived. Initially it was barely above the background, but now…" He trailed off.

"Put it on the overlay." I said, my eyes going to the windows as the screens built into them projected a strange glow off the back of the ship, with organic-looking tendrils tracing up the length of the hull before trailing off into the aether.

I looked back to the screens at the impossibly long tunnel the marines had carved. They had already gone more than the width of the ship, how was this happening? I swallowed the acid on my throat as my coffee fueled mind tried to find a solution.

“We need to pull range.” My brain spit out as the obvious course of action. “Back us off to 10 Kilom--” It was that point that the torch drive on the *Manifest Destiny* exploded, sending a cloud of shrapnel flying into us and launching our ship into an uncontrolled flat spin. The distance between our vessels began to climb rapidly as Odest fought to regain control of the systems.

When she finally stabilized us, we were 47 kilometers from the generation ship, and 7 kilometers outside of radio range. As we carefully came back into communications distance, we tried to reestablish contact, but I knew in my heart that they were already dead. We never regained their signal.

I didn’t have to tell Odest what to do, she swung the ship in towards the derelict once more, rotating and angling the searchlights into the location of the blast.

There was nothing there though. The rear of the ship was simply gone, swallowed up by the darkness between the stars.

“Where’s the rest of it?” The pilot asked unnerved. The rear half of the ship was just gone, there was nothing left at all.

“What are we getting off RADAR and LIDAR from that area? A whole section of starship can’t just vanish.” I asked, turning to Jeffries.

“Nothing sir. No backscatter, no return trace. Sensors just read empty space.

“Put the terahertz overlay back up.” I said, wincing through my words as my fingers dug into the arms of the chair.

A vast and impossible horizon appeared off our bow. A great wall of *something* extended to infinity in all directions. It wasn’t a smooth surface, it seemed to undulate and ripple, with great arms reaching outward towards our ship. A vast branch of the whatever it was had reached out from the surface to embrace the *Manifest Destiny* and swallow her up. It was like the space itself was eating her.

“And we’re only getting this in the terahertz range?” I spat back at Jeffries.

“Yeah and it’s barely above background levels.”

I narrowed my eyes as a thin tentacle of the terahertz radiation source was pulling away from the *Destiny,* and reaching out across the void towards us. My eyes widened.

“Tasha jump us the fuck out of here right now!” I shouted as, in the visible spectrum, a band of stars winked out one by one as the darkness came closer to the ship. And then there was a flash as the FTL drive chugged into operation and we were suddenly thousands of kilometers away.

My heart raced as I looked into the distance. The horizon of faint terahertz radiation sources remained imposing even now, but at least we were further from the impossible to see surface of whatever was slowly consuming the *Manifest Destiny*.

“Put telescopes on that ship. Forward screen.” I said softly, standing up in my chair, heart still racing. The starfield zoomed in, and the stars gave way to darkness.

I watched through the screen as the darkness between the stars sent tendrils of nothingness arcing across the surface of the doomed vessel. The darkness simply opened its mouth, and swallowed the ship whole. The sensors reported nothing right up to the moment the ship vanished into the abyss, taking my men with it.

"Where's the edge?" I asked blankly.

"It doesn't have an edge. It's too faint to make out over the background, but it extends as far as we can detect on a smooth curve." Jeffries said, running his hands through his hair in frustration.

"What would the diameter of that be if you extrapolated it into a full sphere?" I asked the computer.

"Extrapolating from the curvature of the currently observable surface, the anomaly has a radius of roughly 475 AUs, with the sun located at the center." Fence said emotionlessly.

"We're in a…" Odest started.

"Don't say it." I interrupted her. "I don't want to hear it. We'll get back to Saturn and figure this out."

"Yes sir," she mumbled, spooling for the next jump. I felt the ship shudder as the FTL kicked in, and we began the trip home.

We realized the problem quickly at least.

Despite making three faster than light jumps toward the sun, the wall of terahertz generating material seemed to maintain a fixed distance from us. We were closer to the sun, but not as close as we should have been.

We started transmitting emergency signals then, in the hope that someone, somewhere, would receive them.

"We are gaining distance, I must point that out." *Fence* said abruptly. "In each progressive jump, we gained several thousand kilometers of distance. In addition, because we have maintained 1 G of acceleration, we are rapidly moving from the prior location of the *Manifest Destiny.*"

"What am I seeing then." I angrily asked the computer. "Why is it still so close to us? We should be AUs behind it not thousands of kilometers."

"Our inertial vector is still unfortunately carrying us outsystem." The fake human voice said pleasantly."

I ground my teeth as the image of a vacuum eating a carpet jumped into my head.

"Why is that happening? We should have been able to reverse our inertial vector with the FTL jump. What happened?"

"It appears that the anomaly is distorting the local fabric of space time in some manner." The AI said uselessly.

“I need specifics, what is actually happening?” I said.

“A wide cone of inertia vectors are now leading back towards the surface of the anomaly.” The voice with equal blitheness.

“Put it on screen.” I whispered. A starburst of trajectories appeared overlain onto space, and I felt my heart drop. It was as if space was bent. All our paths traveled in great impossible loops and turned back towards the darkness of the interstellar void. A narrow cone of trajectories though, still managed to reach out towards the solar system.

“We are still losing it right?”

“Yes, but that acceleration is slowing. It appears the anomaly is accelerating towards us. It will match velocities in 4 minutes at current rate.”

“Tasha crank us up to 2 Gs and take us straight towards the sun.” I half sat-half fell into my chair as the acceleration began to press me into the cushioning.

“Anomaly expansion is no longer at risk of overtaking the ship. At current acceleration, I calculate we can be 1 AU from the surface within a year--”

“A year?!” I growled. “Under 2 Gs?”

“I calculate that anything less would result in the anomaly overtaking us.” Fence said blithly.

“And the FTL?” I said, turning to Natasha.

“Jumping is imprecise. The jump takes us out of the safe cone and we come out just a bit further then we started.” She said mechanically, eyes still glued to the windows.

“How far is a bit?” I asked, eyes narrowing.

“10,000 kilometers each in the last three.”

“I’ll take that. So we jump out bit by bit. Get far enough away under acceleration to get out of the field and return to Saturn. *Fence* what can you give me using that as a factor?”

“Making full use of FTL, at 2 Gs of acceleration it would take 9 months to gain 1 AU of distance from the anomaly. At that range, I predict we will be outside of the effects of the geodesic deformation.” The computer answered.

9 months, that was too long, we needed to get back sooner and warn the system.

“What can you give me with 4 Gs?”

“Captain…” Jeffries cautioned. We both knew that prolonged high G acceleration was very hard on the human body.

“Under 4 Gs of constant acceleration and taking full use of the FTL, we will be clear of the anomaly in 4 weeks.” Fence offered.

“Four weeks. We can do four weeks.” I said breathily.

“Amanda don’t even think about it. Four weeks at 4 Gs? Are you insane? We’ll break every bone in our bodies before the first week is up.” Jeffries complained.

“Crash couches. Nobody gets up, we ride it out. Its rough but manageable.” I said.

“We need at least some people to crew the ship. As XO, I can’t authorize you to put the crew through that.” He said stubbornly. The trouble was he was right.

“What’s the highest we can pull for long durations?” I asked.

“Three. But even that is dangerous, the human body isn’t built for--”

“How long?” I interrupted.

“Twelve weeks at 3 Gs of acceleration.” The computer mechanically regurgitated.

“We’ll take it.” I said defiantly. My eyes fixed on the wall of impossible darkness that loomed behind us.



Twelve weeks at 3 Gs. You try to prepare yourself. You think it’ll be okay at first. The exoskeletons fit well, and it doesn’t seem too bad at in the beginning. And then the days go on, and on, and on. You feel yourself sinking deeper and deeper into your chair. Your body seems to press into the plates of the exoskeleton, leaving dark bruises and welts.

I broke my hand 37 days in. I then dislocated my elbow and shoulder and broke my leg due to the unwieldiness of the cast. I wasn’t even the worst injured, but I was considered the final straw. I was put into a crash couch, and Jeffries stepped our acceleration down to 2 Gs.

The 84 days stretched into 158 days. When we finally were able to ease up on the acceleration, we were approaching a fraction of C. It was no concern at that point. We ran towards the sun with our tails between our legs.; hanging in blissful weightlessness as we performed the 19 FTL jumps it took to finally get us home.

When our ship at last flickered into existence above the rings of saturn, they passed by us in a flash. We were moving fast enough to cross the solar system in a matter of hours. It would take a long series of FTL step-downs and gravity assists to slow us into a heliocentric orbit, and even longer to circularize. But we were close enough to transmit, and we instantly began transmitting the message.

It was too late to help though. Time is a harsh mistress. We had been missing for over nine years due to the relativistic effects of our trip. Plans were made to stop and evacuate the remaining generation ships, but they never materialized in time. Over the course of the two weeks following our departure, the rest of the generational fleet went dark, never to be seen again. We had arrogantly launched ourselves into the darkness between the stars, and the darkness had swallowed us up.

FTL ships had gone, but we were the first to actually return. Something is lurking out there, in the darkness between the stars, something dark and unnatural. I am not a religious woman, but I can only pray to whatever gods might exist that the darkness stays out in interstellar space. I fear though, that it may only be a matter of time. Five years after our departure, the Kuiper Belt colonies began to go dark, one by one. Even now, the darkness is still pursuing us. How long can we safely huddle in the warm light of the sun, before whatever monster is lurking between the stars comes looking for its next meal?