

# PREFACE

Former teacher of Italian, living in Ireland for over half a century, Concetto La Malfa has been active in journalism since he founded a periodical (ITALIA STAMPA 1983-2014) for the Italian community in Ireland 1983, which is still running as an online magazine (ITALVIDEONEWSTV.NET 2014 – to-date).

As a journalist he has also contributed to Italian newspapers and Radio stations (Corriere dello Sport, Rome, La Voce degli Italiani, London, RAI Gr3 and RTL 102.5).

As a writer he has 12 books to his credit (short stories, novellas and plays).

This book is a republication of two of his most significant and loved novellas.

The first one, “A Stain on the Sun” (Una macchia nel Sole), was first published in 1993 as an Italian-English parallel text. Published in this book is the English version which was the work of Prof. Cormac O’Cuilleain to whom go renewed thanks from the author for his kind assistance.

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**Concetto La Malfa**

# **TWILIGHT**

**Two Novellas**

**“A STAIN ON THE SUN”**

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**“APOCALYPSE TOMORROW”**



***A STAIN ON THE SUN***



# I

Jon's flight was twenty minutes late. Lighting a cigarette, Boriz moved into the large, glassed hall beside the departure area. From there he would be able to see the planes taking off and touching down.

“Exoter airport, in the capital of Invernica. Such a long time, since... it feels like yesterday...”

He stared through the glass windows at the few planes standing on the apron. The pale sun, like a vague cloud amid the greyness of the sky, brought a faint gleam to the silvered paint on the fuselages. A setting sun, timid, feeble, meagre. He imagined the dazzle with which those fuselages would have shone under the blue sky of Farland, the country where he had been born, the memory of which was now as distant and cold as that same sun.

Just here, on this same tarmac, twenty-five years earlier, had landed the aeroplane which had borne him from the temperatures of thirty degrees Centigrade in his native land to the six degrees of Exoter. He had been wearing – he clearly remembered – a blue summer suit, of extremely light material. The moment he alighted from the aircraft, he had felt the freezing in his veins. And now he felt the same chill gripping his mind and his soul.

He was just a boy back then, with pitch-black hair. He was young, wild. He remembered that his presence among the people of Exoter, where he had come to work for a time and to learn the Invernian language, had been a cause of curiosity. And he had felt like a fish out of water. But back then, he would never have imagined that time was going to change nothing, and that after years he would still feel a stranger. Ten years had passed, then twenty, then twenty-five, but nothing had changed, save perhaps the colour of his hair.

He had left Farland with a few coins in his pocket and an empty

space in his heart, in a whirlwind of emotion. But it was his strong spirit of escape that had driven him to leave home.

He had never succeeded in ridding his mind of one particular image which continued to haunt him: the innocent, unbelieving face of his brother Jon at the moment when they said goodbye at the station. He could not forget the sadness in those eyes or the movement of his brother's hand waving to him as the train pulled slowly away along the track of no return. He had abandoned Jon, his only brother, who was just eleven years old, at the point when, as his elder brother, he should have been there with him to fill up the void left by their mother, who had died only a year previously.

Lost in these thoughts, Boriz felt a tear sliding down his cheek, but the deafening loudspeaker announcement of a departing flight startled him, dragging him back to reality. He glanced at his watch; half an hour had already gone by. His brother's flight, he read on the board, had already touched down. He hurried to the arrivals hall. He couldn't wait to see Jon once more.

His brother's character was the opposite of his own; he was what could be described as reason personified. Together with eagerness to see him again, Boriz was pervaded by a sense of insecurity.

How was he going to cope with the inevitable barrage of questions from Jon after so many years without seeing him?

"I know one thing," Boriz thought, "he'll frown at me just like Dad used to frown at us when we were kids".

At last, among the crowd of unknown travellers filtering intermittently through the automatic doors of the arrivals hall, he saw his brother's face. Recognising Boriz, Jon did not frown. Walking faster, he hurried to meet him. The two brothers embraced without a word, their tongues tied by their feelings.

"Was your journey all right?" Boriz asked, his eyes shining with tears and a lump in his throat.

"Yes, absolutely fine," Jon replied.

"Come on, let's get in the car. It's this way, along here. Not too far. Here we are..."

Boriz opened the car door to let his brother in. After locking the



suitcase into the boot, he took his own place behind the wheel.

“How long is it since we last met? Ten years, eleven years?”

“Exactly twelve years and one month,” Jon replied promptly, lowering his head to avoid Boriz's gaze.

His brother, from Jon's tone of voice, understood that this could be a reproach, although he knew that his brother, in spite of everything, had always had a deep respect for him.

“How are the family? And your son? I can just imagine how big he must have grown”.

“Everybody's fine,” replied Jon.

In saying that, the expression on his face became calm.

“Tor is thirteen now”.

A silent pause followed, while the car carried the two brothers swiftly between rows of trees through which filtered the pink light of sunset, intermittently lighting up their faces.

“How long is it since you've heard from Dad?” Jon asked in a tone of disconsolate curiosity.

Boriz looked at him for a moment. He heaved a sigh. He knew that sooner or later Jon was bound to mention their father.

“Did you hear that he had two heart attacks?” Jon went on in an emotional tone.

Boriz knew about his father's heart attacks; he had heard about them some months previously.

“Am I supposed to feel responsible for that too?” he mused to himself, while, sitting at the wheel of his car with his brother on board, he drove like a robot without realising that it had already grown dark. Jon had to remind him to switch on the headlights. Already the stars were prickling weakly behind a veil of grey clouds which, almost as if for a punishment, was hiding their mysterious charm.

At a traffic light he was too late in stopping and went through the lights as they were turning red. A few yards further on he realised, glancing in his rear-view mirror, that a policeman on a motorcycle was following him. The motorcycle overtook him and, blocking his path, forced him to stop.

“Here we go!” Boriz thought, “more trouble with this fellow now!

He's going to tell me I went through on the red, then he'll ask for my licence, pull out his notebook and tell me I've broken the rules of the road, and that I'm to be summonsed to appear in court”.

“You normally go through red traffic-lights, do you?” the motorcycle cop said with a truculent air.

“Well, to be accurate, it's not exactly normal,” Boriz replied.

“Don't get smart,” the policeman went on in an increasingly truculent tone. “First name, surname and address!”

Boriz, powerless before this figure of authority, bit back his words. Then, in a voice choked with fury, he spelled out his identification. Since coming to live in Exoter he had always found the policemen's conduct hard to accept. Although he always complied with the law, he unintentionally had found himself in other situations like this: knowing that he had never committed serious offences, he saw discrimination in policemen's behaviour.

After complying with the burly traffic cop's demands, he went back and sat at the wheel beside his brother, who had witnessed the scene in silence without getting out of the car.

Jon looked at Boriz as he started up the engine again to continue on their way and read in his face an expression of suppressed fury, his cheeks pale with anger. But in his eyes he perceived a sense of sad, calm resignation. What Boriz would have liked to do was to lift up the policeman by his collar and, with blazing eyes, let out a howl so loud that it would resound in every corner of the planet, until all the world's bullies heard it and fled in terror to seek refuge like herds of wild beasts in the jungle at the first lightning-flashes of a storm. But instead, he had not reacted at all, indeed had behaved like one who is willing to turn the other cheek. Was this powerlessness, or was it the last gasp of moral exhaustion? That policeman was just one example of coercion of oppression which one human being feels entitled to inflict upon another. Society needs rules, it is true, but they must not oppress the innocent.

By now, Boriz was living his life without even the will to ask the reason for every action, resigned to the cruelty of the inevitable, to an apathetic sterility of the mind in reacting both to good and to evil. Although he would have wished to love so much, he was no longer

capable even of hatred.

“We'll be home in a couple of minutes,” he said, with a half-smile to his brother, after a long silence.

They arrived at the opening of the long gravel driveway which led to the house; along the driveway the car wheels made stones crunch and fly on all sides.

The two brothers got out of the car. Boriz busied himself with opening the boot, to lift Jon's suitcase out, while Jon stretched, yawned with his hand covering his mouth, and looked around. He had not known that his brother lived in such an isolated area, so far from the city centre. He knew though that he lived in a rented apartment, because he had told him so in a letter many years before.

Meanwhile, amid the high fleeting clouds, the moon's timid outline could be glimpsed, and the rustling of the tops of nearby trees, swaying in the wind, mingled with the hooting of a distant owl.

Jon felt a shiver in the cold autumn evening. He glanced again at the house.

“Strange,” he thought, “all dark”.

He asked nervously: “Is there nobody in?”

Boriz did not reply at once. With Jon's suitcase in his hand, he took out his keys to open the door. After a few moments he made up his mind to respond.

“No,” he said in a flat, detached tone which held no promise of further explanation.

“And your wife?” Jon went on with natural curiosity.

“Oh, Cleo,” Boriz said, with some embarrassment “well, she's not at home, she's gone to Fixter to see her mother. She may spend a few days with her because she's not well”.

“So you're on your own,” said Jon, somewhat preoccupied.

Boriz did not reply. Then he slowly raised his head and looked him in the eye.

In his brother's brown-eyed gaze, Jon found an indefinable expression of abandonment, a boundless sadness, behind which was hidden who knows what terrible secret. That expression was like an abyss into which he could feel himself sinking.

They went into the house. Placing the suitcase on the ground, Boriz took off his jacket and laid it on a chair. Jon did likewise. The room contained nothing but a table, a sofa, two chairs and, off to one side, a fridge and a two-ring cooker. Slowly, Boriz went over to the fridge and took out a bottle of wine, some left-over vegetables and some cheese. Then he placed bread, cutlery and two glasses on the table.

“Sit down, Jon,” he said, “let's have something to eat, you must be hungry after your journey”.

They sat down, facing each other. Boriz had not yet answered the question about Cleo, and Jon, after swallowing a mouthful of wine, asked again:

“How's Cleo?”

Boriz was chewing slowly on a mouthful of bread and cheese. The food filled his jaws giving him an expression of even greater severity and annoyance, like somebody who was set to explode at any moment.

For a few moments, still chewing, he raised his eyes to meet his brother's gaze, but he did not answer.

He lowered his head. He grasped the bottle to pour himself more wine, but the moment the neck of the bottle touched the rim of the glass, his hand shook and he poured more wine on the table than in the glass. Clenching his teeth in rage, he placed his free hand on his arm to stop the shaking.

Jon observed his brother's action and expression. He shuddered. “Poor Boriz,” he thought, “he's unrecognisable”.

Setting out for Exoter, he had been greatly excited by the idea of seeing him again. During the journey, he had imagined seeing the same Boriz of old, nervous but full of vitality. “Maybe he'll have a few white hairs,” he had mused, “but it will still be him, Boriz, with his open character and love of life.” What he had least expected to meet was the vexed, hunched man sitting opposite him now.

But why was he so unwilling to speak about his wife? He felt his heart gripped in a vice. He realised that it would be indelicate to ask further questions on that topic – in any case he would only receive enigmatic answers.

He looked around, feeling miserable and wondering where he was

going to sleep. Boriz, without doing so deliberately, was quick to satisfy his curiosity.

“Maybe it's time to go to bed,” he said, rising to his feet and starting to clear the table hurriedly. “You can sleep here in the living-room, on that sofa-bed. I'll be in the bedroom next door. I'm afraid there's no guest room; there's only one bedroom in this place”.

He spoke in a flat but not unfriendly tone, intended merely to express a bare fact.

He opened out the sofa until it was a bed, and fixed up sheets, blankets and a pillow slip in a rough and ready way.

“Leave it, I'll do it,” said Jon, trying to take his brother's place and save him the trouble of making the bed.

Boriz, however, paying him no attention, completed the task he had begun. Then he gave his brother a half-embrace.

“Good night, Jon” he said in a tired voice. “The bathroom is back there if you need it”.

“Good night,” Jon replied, feeling embarrassed by the idea of spending this first evening in the home of his brother, whom he now had difficulty both in recognising and in understanding.

Boriz went into his room and switched on the light. He left the door ajar for a few moments, just long enough for Jon to see the disorder in the room. He could see the double bed with blankets and pillows rumpled on one side only, while on the other side they were in perfect order, with the pillowslip still tucked under the pillow: a sign that Boriz had been sleeping alone in that bed for some time. On the table at his side of the bed, there were hundreds of sheets of paper in a messy heap.

Boriz switched off the light and closed the door without a word.

Jon lay down lazily on the sofa-bed without taking his clothes off. Crossing his arms behind his head, he stared at the ceiling: it was crisscrossed with cracks, and patches of damp showed here and there. From the centre hung half a metre of blackened wire with a bare unshaded bulb throwing a feeble glow over the room. There was a window in the wall opposite the main entrance. Getting up slowly from the bed, he went over to the window. He looked out and saw a small unkempt garden bounded by a low half-ruined wall, beyond which he

could see a steep wooded incline. Between the trunks of two trees, he thought he saw something gleaming. Cupping his hands like a visor against the glass he was able to make out the source of the light: a stream, perhaps a pond, reflecting the moon. And as he watched, the treetops, ruffled by a sudden gust of wind, shook in a sad, mysterious, moonlit dance. He looked at his watch: exactly ten o'clock. After his journey he should be feeling tired, but instead an inexplicable sense of suffering and agitation was keeping him awake. He had come to see his brother in a foreign country where he had never been before, so he should be feeling relaxed, warmed by the thought that he had finally succeeded in fulfilling this little dream. But no: all around he saw a depressing squalor. The pleasure he had felt in seeing Boriz again had lasted only a few hours: his brother's enigmatic behaviour, the house he lived in, that cramped garden, the mystery of the night outside, almost caused him to curse himself for making that journey.

Taking off his clothes and putting on his pyjamas, he switched off the light and lay down again, pulling the blankets over him. He had almost fallen asleep when he was awoken by indistinct noises which sounded like weeping. The noises were coming from his brother's room. He got up and went over to the door so as to hear better. It was Boriz, tossing and turning, in the grip of a nightmare, stammering senseless monosyllables.

“No.... mh... nooo... sto... mh...”

Jon turned the handle of the door and opened it a crack. He saw Boriz, shaking his head frantically, with copious perspiration covering his face and pouring down to his neck. He wanted to go over to him, hug him, comfort him, wake him up from that terrible nightmare, but he decided to do nothing. “What on earth can he be dreaming about?” he wondered, deeply concerned. He went back to bed, seized by an inexpressible sense of discomfort and, at the same time, pity for his brother. Then he switched off the lamp beside him and got under the covers. Closing his eyes, he drifted off to sleep with his mind still filled with the vivid picture of Boriz's delirious face. As if by magic, that vision was quickly transformed into a dream of his own which began from the precise moment when Boriz's nightmare had ended. Once

again he saw his brother in bed, gripped by that nightmare, and then suddenly he could make out a female figure swathed in veils who approached his bedside and sat down on the edge of the bed. She was an astonishingly beautiful woman, slender, with red-blond hair and heavenly features. Her presence lit up the room with a dazzling light. All traces of perspiration disappeared from Boriz's face, and the bristles on his unshaven jaw also vanished. That nymph who had materialised from nowhere leaned over Boriz's mouth and kissed it, while her almost transparent body blended into his brother's body and made it fade from sight, so that there was no trace of anything left on the unmade bed.

In a state of agitation, Jon woke up with a start. The room was now illuminated by a feeble light. Was it still moonlight, or the first glimmer of dawn? He turned his eyes to the window, and through it, in his half-waking state, he saw or thought he saw the fleeting silhouette of a human figure dressed in white, with loose hair streaming in the wind. He shuddered. Was this the same female figure which he dreamed about a few minutes earlier?

“Impossible,” he thought to himself. Was this the same woman that had appeared in his dream, joined to his brother in a heavenly embrace? He could not understand it. And that silhouette, out there in the garden, in the darkness of the night... like an apparition, a ghost!...

A whirlwind of conflicting emotions overwhelmed him, and, exhausted, he fell back into a deep sleep.

## II

Next morning Jon was awakened by a clattering sound. It was Boriz, who had got up early and was making breakfast.

“Did you sleep all right?”

“Yes,” Jon nodded. He wanted to talk to him straight away about all that he had seen, heard, dreamed. He wanted to tell him that during the night he had had a terrible nightmare, but he decided to say nothing about it.

After making his brother some toast and coffee, Boriz, with his cup in his hand, dragged himself over to the garden door, unlocked it and went outside, walking slowly over to the boundary wall, where there was a gap leading to the meadow and the stream. He went as far as the gravelled edge, sat down, lit a cigarette and started sipping his coffee in a meditative way.

Jon followed him and sat down by his side.

Boriz glanced fleetingly at him.

“Poor Jon,” he thought, “still the same.” That habit of following him around like a faithful puppy reminded him of the time when his brother, just eleven years old, used to hang on his every word. He remembered the anxiety with which Jon waited for him, and the joy he felt on seeing him again, when he came home from university to spend the weekend at home with his family.

Nothing had changed. Now that he was over forty years old, Jon was still following him around as though he needed his big brother in spite of his years, needed something that had been denied him, and that it was now too late to give.

A sense of infinite sadness came over him. With faraway eyes he stared at the slowly flowing water.

Jon questioned him.

“What's the matter?”



“Nothing, nothing at all,” Boriz mumbled, recovering from his trance-like state.

“Come on,” he said, getting up, “let's go to town, I've got a few things to fix up.”

They went back into the house. Boriz gave the cups a quick rinse, tidied up the sofa-bed, and went out to the car, followed by Jon.

Getting in, they set off slowly. As they rounded the curve of the driveway which went down from the house, Jon saw that from this point one could enjoy the panorama of the whole city. The evening before, in the darkness, he had not noticed that.

“How many people live in Exoter?” he asked innocently.

“More than a million,” Boriz responded at once, “and the funny thing is that one-third of the entire population of Invernia lives in Exoter. Invernians don't like living in the country; little by little they're all moving into town”.

They drove swiftly along the ring-road leading to the airport, in a dirty and disreputable part of the city. Jon noticed that many houses two or three storeys high along the road were in ruins or burned out. He realised, without having to ask his brother to confirm his impression, how poor this area was. He could see this partly from the beaten-down look of the people walking along the pavements, each going about their own business. They looked to him like vagabonds moving around without any definite goal in mind. They made him think of beings who had never asked to be born and who, once they had come into the world, were condemned against their will to live, dragging themselves along in their shells, like so many snails.

“This area,” Boriz said, “is one of the roughest in the city. If you park your car here and leave it, when you come back you'll find it gone”.

“So they steal cars here too?” Jon asked.

“Never mind stealing them; they take them away, smash them into a wall or a lamp-post, and then if nobody disturbs them, they set fire to them”.

This exchange of remarks about petty urban crime was merely a pretext for Jon so that he could avoid speaking and embarrassing his brother by asking questions on the topic which he had barely broached

on his arrival in Exoter.

Why was Boriz living alone? Where was his wife, Cleo?

Last night's terrifying dream came back to his mind.

They came to a part of the city which Jon found somewhat more elegant, but still gloomy under the dark, threatening sky. Boriz parked close to the pavement outside a huge building with enormous glass panels.

“Do you mind waiting here in the car for a few minutes?”

“Not at all,” Jon replied.

Then Boriz entered the building. Jon could not make out what it was. At first sight it looked like just another cold, faceless government office. Sitting in the car, obedient to his brother's request, he saw people going in and coming out: people of all ages, badly dressed, with a defeated air, troubled, depressed faces, tennis shoes, patched jeans and shapeless pullovers. In their hands they held a kind of pink card and, when they came out of that place, as well as the pink card they were holding pieces of paper which they stopped for a moment to count and then stuffed into their pockets, walking quickly away down narrow side-streets.

He could not make out what was happening, and this made him restless. His brother too had gone into that place. Why?

Leaning out the window, he craned his neck to get a better view into the office. He could see long queues of people in front of counters.

Jon got the message. That place must be some kind of centre for paying out social security benefits.

The scene reminded him of his days of military training in the country, when he was in the army, and the long lines of his fellow soldiers in front of the cook who, one by one, filled their tin bowls with hot soup.

It was not long before Boriz re-emerged. As the others had done, he too stopped to count some pieces of paper that looked very much like banknotes; he put them quickly into his pocket before coming back to the car.

“Sorry if I kept you waiting a long time,” he said, climbing in.

“Where have you been?” Jon asked innocently.

Boriz looked at him while he started the car, then shrugged his shoulders with a heavy sigh.

“Oh, I didn't mention that I'm unemployed. I was collecting my dole. I go every Tuesday. Here in Invernia they pay you if you have no job”. He said nothing more.

Jon gave his brother a tender glance, then turned to look out the other window, towards the street, so as to conceal the feeling of suffering which suddenly gripped him.

“Poor Boriz,” he thought, “unemployed! Boriz, of all people, after all that studying and even getting a degree! Now that he should be feeling well-established, with a secure position, with no problems – unemployed! What on earth can have happened to him?”

He knew that in his youth Boriz had been an unquiet and dissatisfied person, somebody who had no patience with rigid rules or conventions, who always saw grey where others saw just black and white. Now, however, he was a mature man, who should have harvested the fruits of all that study, all that experience. But no. He was unemployed, a displaced person among so many other displaced persons, with no future prospects. His mind flashed back to the moment when he had met his brother at the airport. After so many years without seeing him, he had been faced with an unrecognisable man, visibly marked by a cruel fate to which he seemed resigned, with no way out. In the context of the people whom he was now meeting in that foreign land and had been since he had set foot there, Boriz seemed to him like an alien creature, groping through the darkness of his own alienation. He saw him acting like an automaton, moving by inertia, driven by an unconscious internal force which was gradually consuming itself and was ill-suited to the physical situation around him.

Jon could no longer stand the torment weighing him down. Covering his face with his hands, he burst into sobs.

“Why, why?”- he said in a voice filled with tears.

Boriz, deeply disturbed and at the same time surprised by his brother's unexpected outburst, felt as though he were paralysed. With a sigh of dismay, he gave Jon a half-embrace.

“What's come over you? Are you crying over me?”

Jon made no reply; he put his hand in his right-hand trouser pocket and pulled out a handkerchief to dry his tears. Then he forced a half-smile

onto his lips, to cheer up his brother.

“Nothing, I’m sorry; it’s just that it hurts me to see you in this state.”

“In what state?”

“After so many years, I’ve come to Invernia... I was expecting to find you happy... and now!”

“But Jon, don’t take it that way, come on! You’re worried about me? I assure you I’m not worth worrying about”.

“What do you mean, you’re not worth worrying about? You’re my brother, aren’t you? It makes me sad to see you this way. Since coming to Exoter I no longer recognise you. You’re not the man you used to be. What’s happened during all these years that I know nothing about?”

“What should I have told you?” Boriz asked, his eyes glistening for a moment with tears. “I’ve made so many mistakes in my life, including the mistake of leaving Farland and abandoning you. But you know, I’ve paid for all that”.

Jon looked at him in disbelief.

“But that happened ages ago. Everybody’s forgotten about it. And then you got married so soon, you set up house”.

Boriz did not answer. He accelerated, changed direction, and drove towards the southern edge of the city.

“Tell you what, Jon, I’ll take you to see Exoter Bay. We’ll go to the beach. We’ll take a walk there”.

They turned onto a coast road with a view over the sea, passing houses painted in many colours and well maintained, conveying an ostentatious sense of prosperity. Jon observed all this with considerable interest.

“This must be a wealthy part of town. Am I right?”

Boriz felt relieved that he had managed to divert his brother’s mind away from gloomy thoughts.

“Yes, it’s a reasonably well-to-do area; the people who live here are mostly professionals.” He said “professionals” in a tone of obviously disenchanted sarcasm.

“How strange,” Jon said, “here the sea has no sea smell like at home”.

Boriz looked at the sky under its mantle of grey clouds and shrugged his shoulders with a long-drawn-out sigh.

“How could it smell? There’s no sun. It’s the sun that heats up the sea

water and causes it to evaporate. That's why you get the smell of salt in the air”.

Boriz satisfied his brother's curiosity by providing the obvious scientific explanation for his query, but he did so without much conviction, as though he wanted to avoid saying what he privately felt about that sea.

They reached the carpark beside the beach. Turning off the engine, Boriz got out and motioned to Jon to do the same.

They went onto the beach after passing through the cordon of rocks that marked it off.

The sky, meanwhile, was growing ever darker; a blanket of threatening clouds was thickening on the horizon. The booming siren of a distant ferry echoed in the air like the raucous lament of someone dying. It was the sound of detachment, of oblivion, that same sound that Boriz had come to know all too well. The two brothers set out with slow steps along the strand. The tide, now receding, had just deposited the wrack of primeval conflicts.

An awkward light illuminated the faces of the two brothers, who now walked in silence, the only measure of time being the rhythmic breaking of the waves.

Jon glanced at Boriz, who was moving forward slowly on his right-hand side with his head down. For a moment he seemed to see him enveloped in a dim circle of light, as though this were an integral part of his physical dimension. Then, suddenly, silence fell even among the few wailing gulls wandering on the beach. He felt ice in his veins and recalled the strange sensation he had had the night before.

Recovering, he pressed on with a question on the matter uppermost in his mind.

“When will we be able to see Cleo?”

Boriz looked at him with an impatient air.

“You'll see her, you'll see her, don't worry. Meanwhile I'm here with you; isn't that good enough? Didn't you come to Invernica mostly to see me?”

He said this with an almost dismissive air.

“Just another way of deflecting my questions,” Jon thought to himself.

Boriz looked at his watch, which showed the time as one o'clock.

“Shall we go and get something to eat, Jon?”

“Why not? Where shall we go?”

Boriz made no reply.

They walked quickly on towards the car-park. When they had gone a hundred metres, the sky, already swollen and angry, broke into torrential rain which soaked them from head to toe.

“Damnation! Something else we could have done without,” Boriz said, quite crossly.

Jon said nothing. Somewhat amused, he tried to restrain an involuntary smile of surprise at the fact that Boriz, having lived in that country for so many years, could get annoyed with the weather, as though he were still unused to it.

Before the two brothers reached the car, a gust of wind swept everything up into the air, including a sheet of newsprint which, after an ungainly aerial pirouette, came to land just in front of Jon's feet. He could not help looking at it. It was the front page of a local daily paper, and although he did not know Invernian, its enormous headline seemed to be reporting a stunning item of local news. He drew Boriz's attention to it, and before the rain-soaked sheet of newsprint could melt away, Boriz managed to read the headline: Strange Solar Phenomenon.

“What's it about?” Jon asked anxiously.

“I don't know,” Boriz replied, his curiosity stirred. “Come on, there's a newsagent near here. Let's buy a newspaper”.

They got into the car and drove along the seafront. Then, turning right, they came after a few minutes to a little square containing three shops, one of them a newsagent. Boriz went in and bought the newspaper. Coming back to the car with short steps, he took a look at the front page. Jon saw his brother's face turn pale.

Sitting at the wheel, Boriz started reading with great excitement.

“What's it about?” Jon asked once again, rather alarmed.

Boriz, still absorbed in reading, silently gestured to his brother to hold on for a moment. Then, coming to the end of the news item, he gave him a concise translation of it.

“They've discovered an unexpected and alarming increase in the level

of solar activity, and scientists are saying this could have a disastrous effect on planet Earth”.

Obviously well informed on this topic, he went on: “As you know, sunspots and cyclonic explosions on the surface of the sun have always influenced the climate here on Earth. These phenomena recur regularly every seven or eleven years. Now the radio telescopes have registered an extraordinarily high level of intensity in the radiation emanating from the explosions”.

Jon could see that this was a serious matter, and in order to show his interest he put in a question.

“Is there imminent danger to the Earth?”

“Nobody knows,” Boriz replied, “the article has nothing to say about that. It only says that atmospheric conditions will certainly be the first to suffer the effects, and this could happen at once.”

Starting up the engine, Boriz set the car in motion, merging into the traffic that flowed slowly in the rush-hour. The wind was still sweeping black clouds westward, while in the east the sky was brightening.

Suddenly there was a sound like the murmur of a huge swirling crowd; the traffic came to a halt, people got out of their cars and set off almost at a run towards the low boundary wall of the seafront.

Everybody, seized by an inexpressible agitation, was pointing at a spot in the sky. It was the sun, its shining outline visible despite a thin veil of mist, but now there was in its centre an ugly, dark, irregularly shaped stain of considerable proportions.

Boriz and Jon too got out of their car and joined the throng of stunned bystanders.

At that same instant there fell over everything, the road, the cars, the trees, people's faces, a mysterious rose-coloured light which then vanished, yielding to a brilliant glare that brightened the sky.

When everything seemed to have returned to normal, Jon was deathly pale; in a split second, borne on his own mind, he must have flown back home to his family in Farland, to hug them close and be with them during that terrible moment. Not even his brother, his own flesh and blood, was more important.

Boriz, however, had remained unperturbed in the face of that uncanny

phenomenon. The expression on his face had betrayed an unusual serenity. If only for a few moments, all his three-dimensional worries had vanished, while he reflected that nothing less than a solar explosion could silence the selfishness and wickedness of man.

He had behaved, during that critical moment, as though he were not of this world, as though he were used to cataclysms among the stars, or as though nobody was more aware of them than he. For he seemed to have crossed the boundaries of the knowable some time before, living now in an inner life which had little to do with the physical life of the senses.



### III

At lunch that afternoon, in the small Farlandic restaurant, the two brothers talked about nothing but sunspots.

A friend of Boriz's came and sat at their table. From the way in which Boriz introduced him, Jon could see that he was someone who did not appeal to his brother. His name was Rogan and he was one of those self-centred people whose only achievement in life is to get rich quick, and that gave him the right to brag.

In greeting him, Boriz appeared cold although he was not disdainful; and so Rogan decided to speak to Jon.

“You see,” he said with a smirk, “your brother is still living the life of a tramp because he wouldn't listen to me. I've been telling him for ages that he should chuck it all in and go into business and...”

Before he could finish his sentence Boriz jumped up with his eyes blazing and, grabbing him by the lapel, made as if to punch him in the face, but Jon held him back. Then his feelings poured forth in words:

“What do you know about what I should have done or what I shouldn't have done with my life? You understand nothing but money, you were born with dollar signs in your eyes, like Donald Duck, and what's more, you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth, and the spoon was dollar-shaped too! Apart from money, you know nothing. But I'll tell you something, I wouldn't swap a crumb of my poverty for a hundred bags of your money”.

Rogan, who did not expect that reaction, blushed and, covered with embarrassment, tried to answer back as best he could, with a timid glance of complicity at Jon.

“What a sensitive chap you are! I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, honest!”

“There's a time and place for your jokes,” Boriz said after simmering down a bit, “and some jokes, especially among friends, are out of place

even if they're said as a joke. Because behind the joke there's always a real opinion, a personal belief which, in your case, is mistaken. I can understand that everybody has an opinion about things in general, about life, about reality, and to each of us this may seem correct, perhaps the most correct. But I said 'seem', because what seems to be isn't what really is. So if you express your opinion about somebody, you must simply hope that this person's opinion of himself or herself is the same as yours, or similar to yours. And in this case, which got my goat a minute ago, your opinion of me is a thousand light-years away from my own opinion of myself. Do I need to explain what a light-year is?"

Rogan took all this without a word, then, looking at his watch, he left with a cold goodbye.

Jon, who had witnessed this incident, simply listening silently to it, gazed intensely at Boriz who, after Rogan's retreat, had recomposed himself in his measured but mysterious calm. He did not want to raise the topic of Rogan again.

Even though Jon found it increasingly difficult to make sense of his brother, the man now sitting opposite him, at least he could understand his state of mind and comprehend to some extent his outburst at the expense of a friend like Rogan.

After a few minutes' silence, he broke the ice with a hackneyed expedient.

"What time do you make it? My watch must have stopped".

"Half past two," Boriz replied flatly. He had succeeded in putting himself in Jon's shoes and felt some inner discomfort at having exposed himself, through his tirade, to his brother's judgement.

"You must excuse me, Jon, but when people tread on my corns I see red. People, some people, aren't smart enough to avoid treading on other people's corns, so they've got to be prepared to get that kind of response, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes," said Jon approvingly, "I know exactly what you mean".

A long silence followed. Jon's embarrassment blended with Boriz's behaviour, which was at once mysterious and defiant.

"This brother of mine," Jon pondered to himself, "must have his nerves all shot to pieces".

Without warning, from below the ground floor came a kind of heaving which turned into an echoing roar; the walls of the restaurant were shaken by terrifying vibrations, and everything hanging on them was thrown on the floor, while flashes of shuddering brightness awkwardly lit the room. The diners, numbering about twenty men, women and a few children, caught by an indefinable panic, ran howling in all directions, trying to shelter under the tables. Jon did the same in a spirit of self-preservation, after urging his brother to follow him. But Boriz had remained untouched by the extraordinary happening. Sitting with his elbows on the table, he calmly poured wine into his glass. Jon grabbed him by the legs and tried in vain to get him to crawl under the table.

“Come down here, can't you see there's an earthquake outside?”

At the same instant another violent shock made everything shudder.

Boriz sprang to his feet and, without batting an eyelid, moved to the door, opened it and went out. He took a few steps along the street towards the light and stopped at a point where he could still be seen from inside the restaurant.

Slowly, emboldened by what seemed an act of courage on Boriz's part, the customers, including Jon, got out from under the tables and groped their way over to the open door to see what was happening. They saw Boriz from behind: with his arms outstretched and his face upturned, he seemed to be holding a conversation with some invisible being. They looked at the sky which just then was lit up with a dark pink glow. Nobody could see Boriz's face, but from the slight movements of his head it was clear that he was moving his lips, murmuring something.

Jon was beside himself with bafflement. What was he to think of his brother now?

Before the pink glow began to fade, a child seemed to step out of the darkness of a narrow side-street. He was no more than about eighty centimetres in height. He moved close to Boriz and, with his head upraised, shook him, pulling him by the trousers.

Boriz looked at the boy and stretched out his right hand to him. The boy took it in his two hands and smiled at him. Although the glow was fading away to nothing, everybody could see the child's dazzling smile. Then it was dark. A terrible booming noise was heard and the customers

still clustered at the entrance to the restaurant scurried off in all directions like frightened animals.

Jon felt lost. He really thought the end of the world had come. His troubled mind flew for a moment to his own family whom he had left behind in Farland. He saw them as though in a momentary vision in which they too, in the grip of panic, seemed to be howling for help with their arms stretched upward, although their voices could not be heard. He wanted to run, to escape, but his legs were paralysed. With his senses trapped in a frightening vortex, he thought the end had really come. He closed his eyes and, just when his worn-out heart seemed about to burst, all at once he found himself sitting in the car beside his brother. Boriz, on seeing him, reproached him for having kept him waiting so long.

“Where did you get to? I've been here in the car waiting for you for half an hour”.

Jon looked at his watch. It was half past seven. How could five hours have gone by since they were in the restaurant? He could not believe his senses. He felt disorientated. Then he made up his mind to reply.

“Are you serious? Didn't you see?... were you?... and was the sky?...”

“What on earth are you saying?” Boriz replied quietly.

Jon felt he was losing his mind. He raised his hands to his head, then to the back of his neck. What was happening? He wanted to pepper Boriz with questions, but Boriz's manner cowed him into a respectful silence. He had left behind a world of calm, of rationality, with everything in its place, he had got on an aeroplane with inexpressible impatience to see his beloved brother who lived in such a faraway country, and he now found himself in a world which he could not understand, in a pitiless place, an unstable reality, made up of nightmares, knowing no boundary between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. Even that chill, insidious breeze, which had lashed his face ever since he had arrived in Exoter, was like the breath of a ghostly world. But all in all, where was the ghostly realm and where the reality? The thought struck him that the life he had lived up to that moment was not his real existence and that the image of his brother, as he remembered him, or as he liked to remember him, had never really existed, and the suspicion flashed into his mind that what he was seeing now was the real Boriz, the Boriz who had always

existed. But then, who was he, Jon? Did he represent the subjective determination to be what he wanted to be, including the subjective construction of what he wanted other people to be? And if there is no objective reality, where does that leave rationality? Is that too a subjective factor? Some philosophers claim that the beautiful is that which pleases. Does that mean that objective reality is what one wishes reality to be?

In Jon's mind, a frightening void had opened up. When he surfaced from these thoughts, he realised that the car in which he was travelling, driven by his brother, had almost reached home. During the whole journey, Boriz had not spoken to him at all, leaving him buried in his thoughts.

## IV

The second night that Jon spent in his brother's house was, like the first, a troubled one. Boriz had gone to bed, leaving him free to prepare something to eat before settling down on the divan. He did not want to eat, however, because now he was beginning to hunger not so much for food as for knowledge. But he was also aware that Boriz, in an incomprehensible way that he could not yet decipher, held the key to every mystery.

After a night divided between meditation, nightmares and half-sleeping, he was woken at seven o'clock by the strident cawing of a crow.

Boriz had already gone out, leaving the garden door open.

"He must have gone to the stream," Jon thought.

He got dressed quickly and went looking for him. Yes, there he was, sitting on the bank like an Indian, intent on staring at the slow flowing of the clear water and listening to its murmuring, as though that stream were an oracle from which he must await a response to all the questions of his life and a forecast of his destiny, which might come at any moment.

He noticed for the first time that on the opposite side of the stream lay a little meadow bounded by a row of elms.

What could there be beyond those trees?

His curiosity aroused, he crossed the stream at the point where a sequence of rocks laid out like stepping stones allowed him to do so with short jumps.

Then, crossing the meadow, he went over to the trees. From there he had a commanding view of the entire city. But all detail was obscured by a low cowl of smog from which the smoking towers of some industrial plants emerged tall and solitary.

He stood there looking for a few moments. Then, little by little, the thinning smog began to reveal to his horrified sight the view of a city

shattered and left as a skeleton. Everything was razed to the ground; of the buildings and the houses nothing was left but fragmented stumps, covered here and there by heaps of rubble and death.

“Boriz, Boriz,” he shouted with all the strength he could muster, attracting his brother's attention with agitated gestures.

Boriz rose to his feet but stayed, motionless, in the place where he had been sitting.

Fording the stream, Jon ran to him and threw his arms around him, with unspeakable terror in his eyes.

“Boriz, Boriz, there's nothing left, the city... the city's been destroyed, come and look!”

Saying this, he pulled him by the arm to get him to go and see for himself, but Boriz did not move.

“I know”, he said, “it's the beginning of the end. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Now you'll see the survivors heading up towards the mountain. You will see, many of them will come by here, on the road leading to my house and up to Mount Agor. You will see, they will be like an army of faceless people, guided by a single leader: terror. There will be the ordinary people, the poor who will certainly accept this disaster with resignation, and then the powerful, the arrogant ones, who may perhaps feel remorse for having abused their power, and wonder, too late, if they will ever be able to remedy their misdeeds”.

He embraced Jon, who had been reduced to a state of complete collapse by the succession of so many terrible events. Supporting him with an arm around his waist, he moved towards the house.

Meanwhile, from the uphill road nearby came a rapid succession of indistinct sounds. Hundreds of Exoterians, with tattered and dusty clothes, carrying bundles or travel bags, were moving in single file with their heads down and with slow paces, towards Mount Agor. Leading them, at the head of the line, was a child who brought a shiver of amazement to Jon. Was this the same child whom he had seen the previous afternoon approaching Boriz on the road outside the restaurant, during that extraordinary occurrence which he had witnessed?

The child was wearing a wheaten-coloured toga which bore on its front, in enormous lettering, the words: Sic historia facta est.

The two brothers, standing still on the edge of the road at the turn into the lane leading up to the house, observed the slow progress of the sad procession. There were adults of all ages, with cadaverous faces which lacked identifying features because they were wrapped in a dense mist which was for all in the world like cobwebs.

They walked like robots, taking no heed of anybody looking at them. At a certain point, Jon seemed to see among them the face of Cleo. He looked at Boriz with staring eyes; he wanted to shout something to him to catch his attention, but he could not. Then he moved away from his brother to approach that woman, but when he reached out his hand to touch her he was repulsed by the dense aura of dust which surrounded her, as though it were a magnetic screen.

“No, Jon, no!” shouted Boriz in alarm as, pulling him by the arm, he dragged him away from those tramping creatures.

When he had got some of his voice back, trembling with fear, Jon embraced his brother.

“What is all this, Boriz? Who are these people? Didn't you see that Cleo was among them? Didn't you recognise her?”

Boriz bowed his head; then, heaving a sigh, he cast his eyes up to heaven and tried to explain.

“What you see and what you think you see are two different things”.

“What do you mean, ‘different’?”

“Reality is not just what our eyes see,” said Boriz. “There is also another reality which our eyes don't see and which is perceived by our unconscious. And our unconscious is like the unending universe which has no limits either in space or in time”.

Although worn out by the confusion of his mind, Jon hazarded a question.

“How can you say the universe is limitless in space and time?”

“But how can you think it's anything else?” Boriz retorted. “If we set spatial limits on the universe, we could only say that beyond those limits, beyond those boundaries, there's nothing. And after that nothing another nothing, and so on. But nothing is still something”.

“But even if that's true,” Jon objected, “why should the boundless universe have no limits in time?”



“Because unlimited space,” Boriz declared, “is synonymous with unlimited time, which means eternity”.

“So,” Jon deduced, “if the universe has no timeframe that means it has neither a beginning nor an end. But if there never was a beginning and there will never be an end, how can God the creator be explained?”

Boriz made no reply: he simply looked at his brother, showing more approval than surprise at the conclusions which Jon had reached.

Jon's words were immediately swamped by a chorus of indistinct lamentations coming from the melancholy cortège of untouchable beings who were proceeding before his eyes. They were like the utterance of condemned prisoners making their way to Calvary, in chains and with slow steps, praying or cursing their condition.

Jon felt himself slipping into unconsciousness. Half-closing his eyes, he felt that he was at the centre of a terrible abyss.

At that precise moment he was woken up by a voice. It was the stewardess on the aeroplane in which he was travelling. She was saying: “Please fasten your safety-belt, sir. We're about to land in Exoter”.

Pale, and with rivulets of perspiration pouring down from his temples, he fastened his safety-belt. Then, putting his right hand in his jacket pocket, he pulled out a sheet of paper. It was a telegram which read: BORIZ'S FUNERAL 3 PM – STOP – WILL MEET YOU AIRPORT ARRIVALS CLEO.



# ***APOCALYPSE TOMORROW***



# I

I died in the early hours of the 1st of April 2050, aged 70. It was a balmy day in the village of Niblad in the north-western hemisphere. The Sun and supernova Betelgeuse had just risen in the sky.

Some of the men and women of the village had gathered around my wizened body, lying on a slab in apartment 75.

“Strange to see him like this,” said Omar.

Frius had it right, as always. “Well, what do you expect? His emaciated body could not last forever!”

The blocks of apartments had an eerie air about them that day. Outside it was utter desolation. A few stumps of buildings stood here and there. Halfway down a dusty path leading to the hilltop rose a small old church.

It was a sort of social club with tables and chairs, where a solar-powered pad kept showing clips of information about the goings on in the world including the catastrophic events which took place affecting about three quarters of the planet, as well as the destruction of most means of communications, power lines and transport infrastructures.

It was in those years that nuclear weapons were used in a military confrontation. It was the result of a complex middle eastern cocktail of political, economic and forced human migrations following the destabilization of that area and the insurgence of the latest evil in world history called Islamic State group that, since the early century, had gained momentum and had caused

the greatest upheaval known to humanity, with senseless killings in various capital cities in Europe and in other parts of the western world. Just like Adolf Hitler had dreamed of a world essentially dominated by the Aryan race, the Islamic State aimed at forcibly converting the world to their distorted Muslim creed which had nothing to do with the Koran.

Their ever increasingly successful ability to radicalize youth, their killings and suicide bombings were met with stern reaction by the nations affected, that found no other alternative than using the might of their military power to combat them. All this happened against a background scenario of an unprecedented refugee exodus towards Europe from destabilized northern African countries as well as Iraq and Syria, the stronghold of the Islamic State movement. Millions of refugees, the majority of Muslim persuasion, created upheaval in those European countries who had initially offered to host them but that found it increasingly impossible to do so, due to their sheer numbers. Internal conflicts between refugees and locals were inevitable, playing into the hands of the Islamic State group, stirring conflicts between western and eastern countries and throwing Europe into disarray. Nuclear confrontation was caused by a tit-for-tat military confrontation affecting the Islamic State, Syria, Israel, Iran with the inevitable involvement of the USA, Russia and China. In other words a World War III and one which had disastrous consequences for the entire planet.

Apart from the destruction through nuclear confrontation, castigation for this man-made catastrophe came from the sky. Between 2032 and 2036 three sizeable asteroids hit the earth in three different locations, destroying everything within a radius of thousands of miles.

The sky was permanently of a murky grey colour, impregnated with the dregs of radioactive dust mixed with the dust clouds

lifted by the asteroids impact.

Apart from these extra-terrestrial phenomena, natural ecological disasters and wars, many countries under so-called democratic, capitalistic regimes had witnessed unprecedented social unrest. Behind the pretence by governments proclaiming egalitarian social policies catering for all the citizens of their countries, against the backdrop of depraved and corrupt capitalism, money being God, inequality between those who had and those who had not reached a breaking point. Eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant used to say that democracy was the summation of the limitation of individual liberties for the common good. But common good did not exist anymore in the XXI century, as it was replaced by greed, the enrichment and profiteering by a few at the expense of most of the national populations with the blessing of condescending governments.

Riots, violent clashes between people who had enough of this situation and the police were very frequent, resulting in injuries and death.

Besides, in the USA, in 2016, a pure racist came to power as President, who hated both Blacks and Muslims. It was no wonder that Blacks and Muslims teamed up against the government and America witnessed the most violent social unrest in its history which resulted in thousands of dead.

## II

In Niblad there was a large pond near the church, which was off limits for everyone as it was filled with toxic water.

At times some children would escape their parents' control and dip into that water. The consequences were quite severe. In the space of a few days horrible blisters appeared all over their bodies, which lead to death.

There was no proper medical service or even doctors or nurses in the village. There were only two villagers who owned an ointment which, when applied on wounds, would heal them, and who were able to perform some rudimentary surgical interventions.

Friendship amongst the villagers had been reduced to a sorrowful, silent interaction, each carrying the burden of family losses, permanently marked by death and desolation.

I, for one, was a bachelor and the only survivor of a family scattered in three countries who had all died during the apocalyptic events.

Man's inhumanity to man had survived destruction though. From time to time we were visited by dreaded bands of gruesome, long-haired criminals, who came to create havoc and killed innocent villagers for no reason at all.

Food was in short supply in Niblad. Every week we welcomed the visit of some vendors of flour and a few types of vegetables, bottles of water and cuts of meat, generally fowl or game.

They came from Darkynell, the nearby main town, where I used to live.



Although there was an ATM machine in the village which had been functioning for a while, villagers like myself who had been settled in Niblad by the authorities had a private reserve of our money stashed away to buy enough food for frugal meals.

In a corner of the apartments each individual villager or family unit kept lots of various little objects, trinkets and memorabilia which they had brought with them when they fled the places where they came from.

They were valuable items of barter for food and water when they run out of money. From time to time there were violent scuffles due to real or presumed thefts of these items, which resulted in horrible injuries and even death.

There was a shelter with wooden benches and tables where a group of villagers, kind of charity monks, prepared daily hot meals for the neediest.

Niblad was a village reserved by the government for elderly, invalids and orphans who had free accommodation. Life was quite primordial there. Sanitation was a problem. Due to insufficient water supply, we had to wait for rain to collect enough water for washing ourselves. There was a large, deep trench where rubbish was brought to be buried and periodically incinerated.

As for burying the dead, there was a large field with rectangular slabs protruding from the ground, once the hatches of earth-to-air missiles with underground compartments.

Now in these compartments, which, as part of an isolated military installation, had once hosted missiles, the bodies of those who died were laid to rest. It was a kind of makeshift cemetery. That's where I too was buried without any religious or ceremony of any kind.

My health had been poor, due to exposure to nuclear radiation when the island of Hesiride was attacked just before an asteroid

hit the north-west of continental Europe causing tsunamis which flooded and submerged some of the large coastal cities.

These floods were only an addition to those started from the beginning of the century due to unchecked global warming.

In 2035 I got early retirement due to my state of health. I had been lucky to survive some terrible events, a deadly cocktail of disastrous astrophysical events and man-made destruction, though the use of sophisticated conventional and nuclear weaponry as well as biological warfare.

Not far from the village there was a very high mountain. Villagers periodically walked to the top which overlooked a vast area of bleak landscape, a small lake and the sea on the horizon. On relatively clearer days those who went to the mountain top stared at the distant sea and mournfully remarked at the disappearance of coastal cities where their families once lived.

It was like a visit to a cemetery on All Souls Day.

Nights were never quiet. Sometimes, from the apartments where we lived, one could hear either animated discussions, shouting or moaning from those who were very ill or about to die.

It was customary that when someone died he or she would be laid on a four-post bed in the middle of the little square outside the apartments block. There was no religious ceremony organized by the villagers or cremation. The body would be kept there for a day until it was buried in the cemetery.

Once, during one of these primitive wakes, a young villager brought the news that we were going to be visited by some Pilgrims.

Pilgrims were a breed of new age messengers or post apocalyptic preachers who wandered from land to land, from village to village, to bring the good news as it were, just like the apostles did after Jesus Christ's death. They came to inhabited centres with a view of recruiting people. They rarely succeeded,

for they were met with utter suspicion and resentment. Their trying to convince people that not all was lost didn't go very far. On one occasion, in 2045, Remis, the leader of a visiting group of such messengers, sent for me as he wished to talk to me. Somehow, he knew I was a physicist and a lecturer in matters concerning philosophy and astrophysics. We sat to talk over a cup of tea at the shelter run by monk-like attendants.

Remis was of formidable build, tall, with sallow skin and a salt and pepper short beard. He had piercing, almost hypnotic, eyes capable of reading one's thoughts at a glance.

"Bruce," he said, "we know you were a physicist and a philosopher. We are trying to put together a team for a revival of learning after so many years of destruction."

"What use can I be to you?" I asked.

"Well, the very young surviving the past dreadful events are far too traumatised to understand and cope with what has happened to all of us. In Greenland we have founded a colony for young children and teenagers, especially those who have been orphaned. They come from different countries of the world."

"How did they manage to get to Greenland?" I queried.

"We have Pilgrims in most parts of the world whose task is recruiting children, teachers and scientists. That's why my group is here."

I asked: "How do you get to Greenland from here?"

"We walk to Darkynell. From there we'll go on a boat."

"Are you taking many children from here?" I asked.

"Only a few orphaned ones. I'll take five of them."

"Very well," I said, "when are we leaving?"

"Tomorrow."

### III

The following morning, after a meagre breakfast with coffee and bits of bread, we set out on the journey to Darkynell. Remis and I, laden with a heavy knapsack, led the pack of four other Pilgrims and five children aged ten to eighteen.

On our way I queried Remis.

“Where do you come from yourself?”

“I am Finnish.”

“Wasn’t Finland inundated?”

“Yes, badly, losing one third of its land. I lost my parents, wife and children. I was lucky to escape as I was working in a town one thousand meters above sea level.”

“What did you work at?”

“I was a maths teacher.”

Darkynell was only ten miles away from Niblad. Two hours into our walk we took a rest, on account of me as the most senior in the group and not in good health. We sat on boulders and drank some water.

“What’s wrong with your health?” Remis asked.

“Well, years ago I was exposed to some radiations. Mine wasn’t a severe case. I was treated for it in hospital, but the treatment came to an abrupt end when Darkynell, where I lived, was hit by a tsunami which destroyed most of the standing structures in the town, including hospitals. When I fled to Niblad I took with me a supply of tablets which lasted a couple of months only, and I have been out of them for a long time now.”

“Pretty tough, eh?” Remis responded with genuine compassion. In the meantime, a threatening dark purple cloud suddenly approached from the West.

“Here comes the rain!” I said.

Since the recent major disturbance of the Earth’s atmosphere, the sky clouded up without warning and rain came down unceremoniously.

Luckily, not far from where we were sitting, there was the stone opening of a shallow cave where we all went for shelter. The squall was short-lived, and a pale sun re-emerged in the sky.

As we were about to resume our journey, we heard the noise of a vehicle speeding towards us. It was a small band of those familiar, long-haired criminals heading for Niblad.

“Take cover, take cover...,” I shouted.

We all scattered back to the cave, but one of the band managed to shoot at us from the speeding vehicle, hitting one of the children. Remis rushed to his side to attend to him. He was a beautiful ten-year-old child with blond hair and blue eyes who had been hit in the upper stomach area. He showed no sign of life. All Remis’ attempts to revive him failed. One of the pilgrims practiced CPR on him but to no avail.

“He is gone!” Remis said, his face ashen with sorrow. “Criminals!” he shouted at the top of his voice.

There was no point in taking the dead body back to Niblad, so we dug a ditch as deep as we could and buried him there.

We then resumed our journey and some six hours later, when we reached Darkynell, it was already dark.

While walking, Remis, still angry over the killing of the boy, made some comments:

“This sort of criminality,” he said, “is something that needs to be stamped out. I will inform the police in Darkynell about this.”

He took his phone from his pocket and made the call.

It was quite emotional for me to see the place which once was my home, only that now it had reduced in size. There was a kind of bay area with large boulders on one side in the form of a harbour. Moored there was a fishing boat with enough space for a few people. A ragged, pock-marked skipper waited on deck to get us on board.

I asked: "Is this the boat?"

Remis looked at me in commiseration.

"This is it," he said, "it's not a transatlantic but it will do!"

"How long will it take us to get... to...?" I queried.

"Our destination is the Centre, on the newly formed shores of Greenland," Remis said, "it will take us about eleven hours to get there. Weather permitting. But we'll stay put here for the night; we'll sail early tomorrow morning."

I was curious. "What's there in the Centre?"

Remis explained. "We have been able to construct a large building devoted to teaching and science. It consists of a number of experimental labs with scientific equipment which we were able to salvage from destruction."

It was rather cold and damp aboard the vessel, but the skipper gave us blankets and served us bread and cheese and cups of tea all night long.

We hardly closed an eye that night. The cold and the idea of facing a long journey on an inadequate boat kept us awake.

We sailed at about six the next morning. The sea was eerily calm for the first four hours of the journey. Then it got rough, and we realised how perilous the rest of the journey would be. A squall broke out from nowhere. The elements tossed the boat like a twig in the wind.

Some of us, including myself, and three children vomited our guts. Luckily the storm didn't last long and on a calm sea we reached our destination.

It was dusk and I was amazed at what I saw. It was a large five-storey building with huge glass windows. Most of the rooms were lit up.

“Has this place got accommodation for us?” I asked Remis.

“Sure, it has!” he replied, “we have to check in first. I will introduce you to the Director, he is a nice Swedish guy.”

As we entered the main hall the Director was there with a female assistant as they were waiting for our arrival.

The assistant asked the children to follow her, while Remis, the other four pilgrims and I shook hands with the Director.

“This is Bruce from Niblad,” said Remis.

“Pleased to meet you, Bruce, I am Offlan, the Director of the Centre.”

While the pilgrims dealt with paperwork at the desk, attended by two young women and a man, the Director took Remis and me on a tour of the building.

“I will show you this place,” said Offlan, “and your accommodation as well.”

The entire basement and ground floor consisted of small and large rooms for guests. I was shown mine, so was Remis. On the same floor there was also a canteen.

The director informed us that the other floors consisted of classrooms and laboratories of all kinds.

I could not believe my eyes. To think that in between catastrophic events they were able to build such a place.

“Tomorrow morning at ten,” the Director said at the end of the quick tour, “we’ll meet in the canteen for a preliminary briefing. Afterwards I’ll show the rest of the building. For now I wish you a good night sleep... you must be tired... and by the way if you are hungry you can still go to the canteen I showed you for a bite. See you tomorrow...”

I went to the room assigned to me. It was a small room with bare

fittings and a tiny bathroom. Somehow it was not dissimilar from my accommodation in Niblad. Although tiredness had taken its toll on me, I had a restless and sleepless night. I was in a sweat for hours, experiencing feelings of doom. My mind raced through the most harrowing events that had affected me in the recent past, both physically and mentally. In a nightmarish dream I could see myself running for shelter towards a hill to escape the tsunami, at a time when my health wasn't the best, following an earlier exposure to nuclear radiation from a bomb that had been dropped on France.

Images of dead or dying people, men and women in distress and crying children, crowded my mind.

Then the thought of being brought to an extraordinary place like the Centre haunted me. For what? What could I do for them, except give lectures on astrophysics and philosophy. Or was there another reason for my recruitment?

At about nine I got up, washed myself and got dressed. I went to the canteen where I found Remis having breakfast on his own.

I picked a bowl with something which resembled porridge, and a cup of coffee, and sat at his table.

“Did you have a good sleep?” he asked.

“Not really, every time I change bed I do not sleep well.” I said, trying to hide the real reason for my restless night.

“Tell me Remis,” I asked, determined to get a straight answer, “what will I be doing here for the Centre. I mean, what will my duties be?”

Remis replied with a heavy sigh.

“Well, you, with your experience as a physicist and a thinker, will be of great help to us. You will be doing some hours of teaching with the older children.”

“What age?” I asked.

“Thirteen to eighteen years old. You will impart to them the most



advanced notions of physics, astrophysics, always referring to the recent nuclear deflagrations, global warming and asteroid impact our planet has experienced. I know it sounds like a tall order to teach such advanced stuff to young people, but I am sure you will manage to explain these things to them in simple terms.”

“You see,” Remis went on, “through the succession of events over the last few years these kids, apart from losing their parents, have had their schooling disrupted, and above all they have been so traumatized that they are not able to comprehend what has happened to the world. In fact, a briefing in very recent history and social and political upheaval will do them no harm.”

“And apart from teaching, what else is asked of me?” I interacted. “The other most important task is to join forces with other astrophysicists to study and monitor some extraordinary findings from outer space. Apparently, a stone from one of the latest asteroids fallen on Earth has revealed extraordinary property. It is behaving like a Galeno stone of communication with a mysterious source from deeper space.”

There was a minute of silence. Offlan, the Director, appeared and joined us at our table.

“Slept well?” he asked.

“Very well,” Remis and I replied in unison.

“Ok, Bruce,” turning to me, “I am sure Remis has briefed you on the work here. This Centre has been created as a learning revival and awareness project. This is not the only one, there are five more located in different areas in what Europe is now. We primarily cater for children as we want to educate them to be the future leaders of a new and better world.

“How many students do you have under your care here?” I asked.

“One hundred here, but there are nine hundreds of them in total, including the other Centres. They are the chosen ones to represent our future humanity. There are two levels of classes for them,

junior up to the age of twelve and senior from thirteen to eighteen. The junior students will learn the same subjects as at the once-conventional schools with a lot of very recent history; the senior students will get a crash course whereby they will learn all they need to know about global warming, the universe and astrophysical events, nuclear power and its use.”

“Remis told me that I will also have to teach philosophy,” I said. “Yes, they will be taught philosophy in that they will be taught and warned about the train of thought humanity has gone through over the last few decades leading to almost total annihilation of the world.”

“Your other assignment is participation in the work that some eminent scientists have already started in the exploration of space. Actually, your contribution will be appreciated in solving the puzzle of interstellar communications, following the discovery of mysterious properties of a piece of asteroid which has fallen on Earth.”

Having said that Offlan stood up.

“Come on,” he said, “I will show you a class in progress and then I will introduce you to some of the scientists. You come along as well, Remis, after all you are Bruce’s mentor.”

We took a lift to the first floor and Remis and I followed Offlan along the corridor.

He knocked at the door of one classroom. As the door opened we saw the heads of about fifteen teenagers turning to us.

“Good morning, Freda,” Offlan said to the red-haired teacher.

“Good morning,” she replied, summoning the students to say the same.

“Carry on as normal, Freda,” Offlan said, “we are here to watch your class in progress for a short while.”

Offlan, Remis and I sat on the last row in the theatre classroom, and watched Freda conduct her class for about ten minutes. She

talked about the Solar system, with projected presentations on the latest research and discoveries.

We left the class very quietly, without words. Only Offlan waved his hand to salute and thank Freda.

After watching those few minutes of the lesson, I was quite impressed. I was familiar with what the red-haired teacher said, with the exception of some observations on Sun flares, backed by formulas written on the board, which sounded like a prediction on the future trends of these flares which was quite new to me. I realised that during my retirement years studies of the Sun had progressed so much.

“Pretty scary stuff,” I remarked, while following Offlan and Remis along the corridor.

Offlan smiled.

“This is only the tip of the iceberg,” he said, “there is more, much more, you will see.”

We took a lift to the second floor. The brightly lit rooms along the corridor were highly advanced scientific laboratories attended by scientists wearing white gowns.

Offlan entered one of the rooms. He introduced Remis and me to a senior, white-haired man who had all the looks of a professor. He explained to us that in his lab they were studying the effects of nuclear radiations on people, trying to find an appropriate antidote. He said they had not arrived yet at a definite solution but that they were hopeful they would pretty soon.

The professor’s name was Breskin. He couldn’t help noticing marks of radiation effects on the skin of my face and asked me about them.

“How long have you had these marks?”

“For a good few years,” I replied.

“Well,” he said, “I am sure you have been treated with conventional tablets. I can give you some new drugs which might

help you get rid of them.”

“Thanks,” I said, while he put a few large tablets in a tub for me. “Here you are,” he uttered, “the best of luck.” He then took leave of us and we left his lab.

The most interesting encounter for me was when Offlan took us to a large laboratory that specialized in astrophysical research.

There were about ten scientists working there headed by Dr Steiner, a rather young man in his late forties.

“Dr Steiner,” Offlan said, “this is Bruce, a physicist, who will be working with you.”

Dr Steiner shook hands with me and immediately proceeded to brief me on the work at his lab.

“We are studying solar radiations, but we are also monitoring a very distant mass which we might call planet, other than Kepler-425b. But the greatest puzzle we are trying to solve is deciphering mysterious signals emanating from a black rock, a chip from the latest asteroid which fell on Earth.”

“I leave you here in good hands,” Offlan said turning to me, “have a good chat, and I hope you will find your work here interesting. See you soon.”

Having said that, he and Remis left me there in Dr Steiner’s company.

“Dr Steiner,” I asked, “what kind of signals are you getting from the black rock?”

“Come,” he said, “I show you.”

We turned around the corner of the spacious lab, and there it was, a very shiny black rock of about twenty pounds in weight in the centre of the lab’s computer environment.

After activating a virtual computer monitor, Dr Steiner explained that the rock had been at the centre of attention of physicists and astrophysicists for nearly a year. Placed in a computer environment, it would activate quite several coded signals in the

form of two-way transmissions accompanied with rhythmic blips. After one year's work, the two mathematicians and three astrophysicists working at the lab were in no way near to solving the puzzle.

“As we are in constant communication with NASA,” Dr Steiner went on, “the suggestion has been made that the source may be the planet, Kepler-452b, a larger and older Earth, located around a star 1,400 light years from Earth. It is the first terrestrial planet found in the habitable zone revolving around a star just like our sun. NASA said it is about 60 percent larger than Earth and lies in the constellation of Cygnus.

The exact nature of the planet is not known specifically, but NASA's modelling suggests it is a rocky planet, about five times as massive as Earth, orbiting its star once every 385 days.

The planet's star is 1.5 billion years older than our own and is now growing hotter and brighter - as our star will do in about a billion years. At NASA they also have a piece of asteroid like the one we are studying at the Centre which behaves in similar fashion in terms of transmitting and receiving encrypted messages from the source. We are assuming that this planet is the source in deeper space, which for some reason conveys and receives and transmits messages only through the asteroid piece I just showed you. The problem is that neither NASA nor we have been able to decipher these messages.”

Having said that, he introduced me to the other five scientists with whom I had quite a stimulating discussion on the matter.

“Could these signals be in any way connected with the two-way Mars-Earth communication system?” I asked concerned.

“The coding pattern has been completely different so far and full of figures and symbols which are pretty new,” Fred, one of the mathematicians, said. “We have analysed all the signals coming even from the latest probes launched for the exploration of the

solar system and beyond, but no comparison can be drawn with them, their frequency being quite alien.”

“Could these signals come from a distant civilization trying to communicate with us?” I chanced the question.

Astrophysicist Rob promptly responded.

“It is not unlikely. The point is that we have not been able to interrogate the source of these signals, for the stone has taken over, acting as a transmitter, activating coded replies to messages which are still a mystery. It is unlocking the key of these messages that we are finding hard to do.”

“Have radio telescopes picked up any signals from space over the last year? I asked candidly.

“They have registered occasional buzzes,” Rob said, “but nothing to this level.”

The preliminary briefing, I got was quite enough for me to keep my mind going for the whole day. I went to the canteen, followed by Fred, for a cup of coffee.

While we were chatting, we heard the alarm bell going off in the building.

“What’s happening?” I asked alarmed.

“This is to do with some unwanted intruders,” Fred explained.

“We have to stay put here, our trained security are dealing with it.”

Apparently, we were informed later, one or two individuals, like those criminals we had encountered on our journey to Darkynell, had infiltrated the building but they were immediately caught by security and taken to the nearby police station.

Remis joined us at the canteen.

“Our security,” he said, “have just caught two of those animals who entered the building with God knows what intention! This evening I will call to the station where I have been asked to identify them as two of the perpetrators who killed that innocent

child.”

Fred and I returned to the lab.

I was given a desk and instructed on how to activate the virtual computer monitor. There staring at me were those indecipherable strings of codes which they had showed me earlier. I knew I would be working on them for months.

I explored the full log of communication messages between Earth and the station that had been installed on Mars and on the Moon, hoping to find some clue or link.

I met Remis at dinner that day. There were a myriad of questions I wanted to ask him.

“Remis,” I asked, “what’s the latest news on the manned spaceship travelling to Mars?”

“It will reach the planet in about two months,” he responded, “the five astronauts are in good shape and ready for this unique adventure.”

“So, NASA is still active, isn’t it? I queried.

“Yes, in spite of what has happened to the world, since the end of the hostilities the Americans have been forging ahead with plans to start building on Mars the necessary structures to support life and allow return to Earth. Of course, all their plans have suffered considerable delay but are still on course.

“Do you think it’s all worth it?” I asked.

“Let’s face it,” Remis replied, “humanity always wanted and needed to go to Mars, and for several reasons. For one, there’s the spirit of exploration, setting foot on a new world and exploring the next great frontier – like the Apollo astronauts did in the late 60s and early 70s.

We also need to go there if we want to create a backup location for humanity, in the event that life on Earth becomes untenable due to things like climate change and other reasons we know only too well. We could also go there to search for additional resources

like water, precious metals, or additional croplands in case we can no longer feed ourselves.

In that respect, Mars is the next, natural destination. There's also a little local support, as Mars does provide us some raw materials. The regolith, the material which covers the surface, could be used to make concrete, and there are cave systems which could be converted into underground habitats to protect citizens from the radiation.

Business magnate, inventor and investor Elon Musk has stated that the goal of SpaceX project is to help humans get to Mars, they're designing rockets, landers and equipment to support that. Musk would like to build a Mars colony with 80,000 people. Which is a good choice, as it's probably the second most habitable place in our Solar System. Real estate should be pretty cheap, but the commute is a bit much. And then there's the great vistas to think about. Mars is beautiful, after a fashion. It looks like a nice desert planet with winds, clouds, and ancient riverbeds. But maybe, just maybe, the best reason to go there is because it's hard! There's something to be said about setting a goal and achieving it, especially when it requires so much hard work and sacrifice."

"Are there any reasons for not going to Mars? I interacted.

Remis had his answer ready. "Yeah, Mars is great... if you're not made of flesh and don't need to breathe oxygen.

Otherwise, it's incredibly hostile. It's not much more habitable than the cold vacuum of space. First, there's no air on Mars. So if you were dropped on the surface, the view would be spectacular. Then you'd quickly pass out and expire a couple minutes later from a lack of oxygen.

There's also virtually no air pressure, and temperatures are incredibly cold. And of course, there's the constant radiation streaming from space. You also might want to note that the soil is toxic, so using it for planting would first require that it be put



through a decontamination process. Having said that, artificial atmosphere can be produced.”

“Right...Remis, going back to the black stone, what’s your personal opinion about the mysterious coded signal coming from deeper space?”

“This is a fascinating question,” he replied, “and one which might turn out to be an extraordinary revelation. I wouldn’t be surprised if a distant civilization is trying to communicate with us. After all, we scientists have always believed that it’s practically impossible that we are the only expression of intelligence in the universe, such is its expanse! Then multiply it by two or an infinite number of parallel universes, and the number of possibilities is mind boggling! Mind you, if this is the case, these signals might be travelling for billions of years to reach our galaxy and Earth. Which means that a given civilization somewhere in the Universe could have been capable of sophisticated transmissions billions of years before we ever devised a similar method. Not to mention the fact that, if this is so, right now it might be capable of time travel, in which case its presence could virtually be with us or around us.”

“Fascinating stuff!” I remarked.

“Yes indeed!” said Remis.

Then, as it was quite late, he took leave of me.

“Well Bruce, time to go to bed now, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.” I replied, my eyes transfixed, trance-like.

I went to my room and before lying in bed I had a look through the window at the large moon in the sky. Not far from it on the left the round glow of Betelgeuse the supernova which, in November 2022 appeared in the sky. Since the beginning of the century astrophysicists had predicted the explosion of this star in the constellation of Orion into a supernova. They had also said that it would be visible from the Earth almost as a second Sun for

a number of years without any danger of radiation due to its 642 light years distance from our planet. Due to the catastrophic events the Earth had suffered, this extraordinary event did not have the same impact on people as it would have had if it had happened fifty years earlier.

I couldn't help staring at the large craters on the Moon and thinking that the asteroid which may have wiped out the dinosaurs on Earth was probably somewhere between 2 and 10 km in size. I thought that an asteroid that large striking the Moon would release a large amount of energy and it probably would eject some of the moon rock into space and that the bits would be quite small. So if they happened to be going in the right direction to hit the Earth they wouldn't cause too much damage.

Around 15 meteorites found on Earth had been identified as originating on the Moon, although this is a tiny amount relative to the total number of meteorites found on the Earth.

I lay in bed hoping to fall asleep. I had a relatively quieter night, although my mind raced through speculative thoughts about the asteroid mystery.

## IV

The following day, after breakfast, I took a tour of the other labs in the building. There were three more, other than the one devoted to astrophysics, directed by Prof. Breskin, where they were conducting research studies on metal and stone composition, and two medical labs one of which was an infirmary with state-of-the-art equipment and machinery.

Back to the astrophysics lab, after breakfast, I went straight to my desk where Prof. Breskin joined me. He told me that overnight he had received some coded messages from the mysterious source, this time relayed by the transmitter on Mars.

“I cannot understand,” he said, “why the messages show in part a different pattern from those coming straight from the source.”

“So, is there a common pattern within the difference?” I asked.

He sighed. “Yes there is, although this is an additional puzzle which we will have to solve. On the other hand, it’s likely that what seems a further complication now, may turn out to be a help. Only time will tell.”

He left me while I stared at this new data which flashed before me on my virtual monitor.

I had to hold my first lecture at eleven that day. After making acquaintance with my fifteen to eighteen-year-old pupils, I started talking about the universe and all the discoveries to-date. I included a presentation on asteroids, especially those which had hit the Earth in recent times. I couldn’t but mention the mystery surrounding the special properties of a chip from one of the three

asteroids which was the subject of study and research at the Centre. I wrote on the white board and submitted to their attention one string of the coded messages which had been received, which contained some unusual mathematical symbols.

“Now, here is a nice task for you.” I said to them. “Just using your power of imagination, write down your opinions on these symbols.”

This novel challenge was enthusiastically received by all the students, who, after pondering for twenty minutes, started writing. At the end of the class I collected their scripts telling them I would have a look at and discuss them during the next class three days later.

At the end of the class, I went to the canteen for lunch, carrying under my arm a folder with the students’ scripts.

I started reading them and was amused at the imaginative suppositions. One thing struck me though. The scripts of two of the twelve students were extraordinarily similar in the interpretation of the symbols submitted to them. They both thought that they were concealing a message about a space journey.

After lunch I went to the Astrophysics Lab to talk to Dr Steiner. “Doctor, I had my first class with teenagers this morning,” I said, “to whom I submitted a string of the mysterious coded messages pertaining to the black stone. I asked them to give me their opinions in writing on the meaning of the unusual mathematical symbols the messages contained.”

“Really?!” the professor interacted, rather amused.

“Yes, I may have given them an impossible task,” I said, “but they showed great interest in the challenge.” Now, I have read their scripts, and found that two of them came up with the theory that the symbols in the string might refer to a space journey. Quite amazing that two, not one of them, would express almost the same

opinion, don't you think?"

I handed the scripts to the professor, who eagerly read them.

"Extraordinary!" he said, "We must analyse the messages using this assumption, no matter how outlandish it may sound. You'll never know!"

The professor then got up and took leave of me.

I worked in the lab until dinner time. I then returned to the canteen where I sat at Remis' table. I couldn't wait to tell him about the students in my first class.

I informed him on the scripts and their contents.

"Well, well," he remarked, "imagine that! I wouldn't be surprised at all if they are right!"

"Do you think," I asked, "that the supposed distant civilization has been sending messages announcing the arrival of a spaceship at our planet? If so, and if the source is, say, thousands of light years distant from Earth, these messages could have taken quite a long time to reach us.

"Well," said Remis, "from what we know about measuring distances in the universe, you are dead right. Unless we are talking about speeds well over and above that of light, black holes, parallel universes and the lot. Have you spoken with Professor Breskin?"

"Yes I did."

"And what did he have to say?"

"He found the whole thing quite intriguing, and said he would use the assumption of a space journey as the basis for analysis of all data in store."

## V

Three weeks went by during which I discussed, as promised, the scripts with my students, praising them for their vivid imagination, without disclosing the fact that some of their assumptions were in fact taken onboard as a new basis of analysis at the lab.

I also worked quite hard in analysing the data concerning the black stone on the new assumption without reaching any concrete conclusion.

On Friday, at the end of my third week at the Centre, there was excitement at the Astrophysics Lab.

Dr Steiner gathered all the scientists for a major announcement. “Dear colleagues,” he said in an emotional tone, “it’s with great pleasure and sense of pride that I wish to inform you that we have finally deciphered the coded messages so far recorded in the Astrophysics Lab concerning communications involving the black asteroid stone.

Working on the assumption that these messages, to and from a distant source in deep space, might have been a kind of progress reports on a journey undertaken by a spaceship launched by an equally distant civilization, travelling towards the solar system, we have been able to compile a kind of alphabet with the new symbols contained in the messages to the point that the whole communication system has finally made sense. And by the way, we have concluded that the asteroid stone has been acting as a relay for these messages.”

Remis raised his hand to interrupt the professor.

“I am sorry, doctor, for interrupting you. If we are talking about messages through the stone, what and where is the source?”

Dr Steiner was quick in answering.

“The source is planet Kepler-452b. It has been sending messages on the various steps of a long journey undertaken by a spaceship, followed by messages from the spaceship itself. These messages are filled with information on the situation, as it were, of the solar system, with mention of every project in space exploration we have undertaken on our planet, including information on our plan to colonize Mars.”

Offlan, the Centre director, asked a question.

“If you have broken the encryption of these messages, are you now communicating in the source’s encrypted language or our own language? Also, with regard to the spaceship, do you have you information about when it is supposed to arrive here?”

“We are now communicating in our own language,” Dr Steiner replied, “and as to the spaceship, it’s supposed to be in the vicinity of Mars just a couple of days before NASA’s spaceship is due to land on the red planet. NASA will soon be deciding whether whoever is in charge of communication onboard the ship would agree to rendezvous with our manned spaceship on Mars or whether it would be better to get it to land on Earth first. At this stage, from now on, everything will be directed by NASA who will keep all our Centres posted.”

There was a minute silence and then a big, sustained applause from all of us.

After this announcement, the mood among those working in the lab changed from frustration to excitement and sense of purpose. At the canteen at breakfast, lunch and dinner the extraordinary news about the alien spaceship was the subject of conversation and speculations for all the scientists at the Centre.

I, for one, found the whole thing extremely exciting and hoped, in my heart, that I would live long enough to witness such event. Eventually, NASA broadcast images of the aliens in conversation with Earth. It was a momentous event, as everybody wondered what they looked like. To everybody's amazement, the aliens were like talking light globes that kept reassuring their interlocutors that were capable to assume any form and shape to suit the humans, announcing that, when the rendezvous time came, they would take the shape of humans.

With a second broadcast we were informed that arrangements had been made for a rendezvous on Mars in exactly two months' time. At one meeting at the Astrophysical Lab I asked a pertinent question.

"What about," I asked, "these aliens' intention? Do we know what's their mission?"

"We were told by NASA," Dr Steiner replied, "that in two days' time they will give details on their plan. Their conversation with NASA will be broadcast to the Centres."

Two days went by very quickly and at the appointed time we were all gathered in front of our virtual screen waiting to hear what they had to say.

We saw one of the light globes turning into a human being. He looked like a middle-aged man dressed in a kind of blue diving suit, his face expressing a benign demeanour, who spoke very clearly in perfect English.

"Friends," he said, "we come from planet ZERK, that you have discovered and call Kepler-452b."

Everybody was dumfounded at the notion that they already knew that we had discovered their planet.

"Our planet," he continued, "which is 9 billion years old, twice as old as the Earth, is 1.4 thousand light years distant from your planet. We have knowledge of your human race since its



beginning. We have been exploring and monitoring, unseen to your eyes and devices, your evolution and all that has happened to Earth.”

The NASA Director interrupted the conversation by asking: “Can you tell us if you have knowledge of other planets hosting other civilizations in the universe? Also, how far have you explored the universe?”

The Zerkan responded immediately. “We have knowledge of a good portion of the universe. No one has knowledge of the entire universe, as it is boundless, just as time is infinite and therefore eternal. What you call the Big Bang is only one of an infinite number of Big Bangs. The universe, as we know it now, is the result of the present Bing Bang, but there have been and will be other Big Bangs, not to mention parallel universes at any given time.

We have knowledge of another civilization 1 billion light years from us, which flourished for 3 million years but was extinct 1 million years ago. It was a civilization less advanced than ours but several times more advanced than yours, which existed on a planet called IXON. Responsible for its extinction was the impact on the planet of a very large asteroid. Perhaps this is not the time to tell you, but Earth will soon have the same destiny.”

This announcement caused indescribable consternation among those listening at NASA and all monitoring Centres. They were all speechless.

The NASA Director had so many questions to ask.

“We on Earth have devised ways of diverting the trajectory of asteroids travelling on the Earth’s path. We have been successful with some but not with all of them. Surely you seem to be advanced enough to be able to do that more efficiently. If, as you said, a very large asteroid is bound to hit Earth in the near future, why don’t you save human race by diverting its trajectory? Also,

if I may ask the question, in terms of asteroids, we have been battling with a puzzle concerning your communications involving a black stone, a chip from one asteroid fallen on Earth. They were coded messages of which we didn't know the language, which would have enabled us to decipher them. Could you not have made it easier for us, considering that communicating with us in our own language is no problem for you?"

"As to your first question," the Zerkan responded, "we could divert the asteroid to prevent collision with your planet, but there would be no point in doing that, as you humans will continue destroying yourselves with wars, natural disasters like CO<sub>2</sub> emissions with subsequent destructive floods, social unrest and all the rest. Besides, there will soon be an unprecedented increase in volcanic activity and powerful sun flares to the point of total annihilation of your race. We have no control over planets' volcanic activity or sun flares. Secondly, with regard to our messages, we deliberately waited until you deciphered our code, a kind of test for your intelligence!"

Other questions followed.

"If your planet is 1.4 thousand light years away from Earth, when did you start your journey? Surely, it hasn't taken you 1.4 thousand year travelling at the speed of light, to get here! We on Earth have been hypothesising the possibility of time travel, but it is still science fiction, unless we manipulate the fourth dimension! We have reached the conclusion that by interfacing "Einstein's general relativity and quantum mechanics, time travel, at least theoretically, could be possible. I am sure you know who Einstein was!"

The Zerkan replied: " Yes we know all about Einstein, and you are quite right. To time travel we have used wormholes, which are bridges through time and space. This has made it possible to shortcut journeys through space."

All those listening were once again speechless, while the NASA Director kept on asking questions.

The NASA Director asked the most pertinent question.

“Can you tell us why are you visiting us?”

“We are coming in peace,” the Zerkan said, “to save you from destruction. We will help most of your surviving population to relocate on Mars. But let me tell you one thing. The condition for that is that the word “war” will have to be erased from your vocabulary and your lives. We have the means to annihilate entire worlds, if we wished to. So, once on Mars, your actions will be monitored, and any breach of this condition will be promptly punished.”

At these words, an uncontrollable sense of fear descended on all those who were listening. Although we all felt like children scolded by big daddy, we realised that the day of reckoning had come.

Something was happening that was both unexpected and extraordinary.

## VI

Since this announcement two months went by, during which all those working at NASA and at the Centres were extremely busy analysing and recording data in preparation for the manned spaceship's landing on Mars and the rendezvous with the aliens. On the appointed landing day, we were all glued to our monitors. NASA started transmitting just one hour before touchdown time. The landing of our spaceship was smooth and trouble free. On and off, for two days, we were able to watch our five astronauts walking about the area surrounding their landing site and listen to their constant communications with NASA. They spotted an area behind rocks, which, in their opinion might be ideal for the aliens to land on. At the end of the second day, just as planned, the Zerkan spaceship appeared as a distant small dot in the sky, which, travelling at an extraordinary speed, soon entered our atmosphere and smoothly landed exactly on the spot that our astronauts had pointed out. It was something that left all of us at the Centre agog!

It was a shiny sphere, about thirty meters in diameter, with a long and narrow lit up window.

A hatch opened from its lower section from which a footboard stretched downward to touch the ground. Ten tall, human-shaped aliens, wearing a sort of blue diving suits, stepped out of the ship. One, who - we thought - must have been the leader, was wearing a silvery suit.

Our astronauts in their spacesuits and sealed helmets approached

them. The aliens, in contrast with our astronauts, seemed to manage without helmets, as if they were used to breath Mars' atmosphere and, amazingly, they naturally responded to their hand shaking.

They invited our astronauts onboard their ship, who were surprised at the minimalistic control dashboards and fittings they saw. The aliens had no drink or food to offer, as they did not drink at any given time during the day and every day like humans. As they informed our astronauts, once a week they swallowed a capsule which constituted food and drink in one.

At the meeting between the two groups which lasted for about five hours, they were all standing as in the ship there was no sign of chairs. The leader of our five astronauts was wired to NASA and its Director who kept prompting him on the questions to ask the aliens, who were able to satisfy their friends from Earth's obvious curiosity, giving details of their planet and their civilization.

"Does your planet revolve around a star?" the NASA Director asked.

"Yes, Zerk revolves around a star called Xor," the alien replied, "which is 1.5 billion years older than the Sun and as has almost the same temperature but 20% more luminous.

"Would human be able to live on Zerk? our astronaut asked.

The Zercan did not hesitate in replying.

"Only in artificially created atmosphere as you have to on Mars." The questions went on.

"Apparently you can take any shape you like. What's your life span? Tell us about your life in general."

"We are shaped like light globes," he replied, "as we are energy and need only energy to survive. We get this energy from Xor. To do things we have what you would describe psychokinetic powers and we do things through these powers. We have also the

capability of taking on other shapes, as we have done with you now. Only when taking the shape of humans, we need to eat, not in the way you do, but by ingesting a capsule every week which is enough to give us food and water as required by humans. We live for exactly 100 of your years, but after death most of us regenerate, and this is how we multiply. But those who are constantly time travelling, like us, never die. Our lives are devoted to exploring and monitoring the universe as you know it or are aspiring to know it.

For us moving back or forward in time is no problem. Time for us has no meaning. We know that you on Earth have had philosophers who said that time is only a category of your mind. They were right. Also, the existence of parallel universes that your scientists have theorized as “multiverse” is real, just as real is the existence of an infinite number of universes.

The five astronauts were struck by these extraordinary revelations, so were all the others on Earth witnessing such conversation.

A second astronaut engaged the aliens with other questions:

“Do you believe in a God?” he asked.

“God? the alien replied, “The god or gods your race have believed and are still believing in, are the result of your limitedness as beings. You have always needed them, for comfort, although your mere impossibility to explain God should have been your religion. You, for example believe in creation by God. As we said before, space and time are infinite. So there was no beginning and there will be no end. If you can understand and believe in that, the notion of a God creator has no sense.”

The philosophical nature of this conversation caught most of the listeners quite unprepared.

The NASA Director thought he would change the subject of conversation and said: “When you land on Earth, you will be

guests at our United Nations centre, where you'll meet all the heads of state in our world. You can then present all the plans you have in store for us."

"Thanks for saying that. We were going to suggest it," the alien said. By the way, when we travel to Earth, we would like to go to you Moon first. We would like to meet your people and see your installations there."

"No problem for us," was the answer.

## VII

The events which followed were to have a tremendous impact on mankind and above all on the astrophysics community. We were dealing with an advanced civilization, capable of the most incredible feats which went beyond our wildest imagination.

A few minutes before departing from Mars, with the our astronauts onboard, the Zerkans gave them some special capsules to take. "Swallow these capsules," their leader said, "you wouldn't survive the speed of our journey without taking them." Most likely the capsules contained some potent substance which would make them hibernate or put them in some form of suspended animation. At least that's what we thought. In the realm of science fiction to-date, we had hypothesized the necessity for astronauts to hibernate during very long space journeys. In spite of the aliens' revelations and explanations, the gap between their level of advancement and ours was far too great for us to fully appreciate, let alone understand. We really felt somewhat belittled and humbled, fearfully respectful of our visitors. It was as if we were immersed into an ocean where our limitedness was drowning. These thoughts went through our minds while we watched the departure from Mars of the Zerkans' spaceship.

Then the spherical craft gently and silently lifted off and when it reached the altitude of about one thousand meters, it sped up so much that it disappeared into infinity. The Zerkans were so considered as to transmit the outside views of space all around,



sharing with us on Earth the wonder of time travel in a phantasmagorical array of colours and fourth dimensional structures whizzing past the ship.

It was going so fast that it seemed it was slowing going backward. No matter how incomprehensible this may have looked, it was, in some strange way, in line with our simple formula of velocity that equals space over time, with the result that the higher is velocity the shorter is time.

So - we thought - if these guys are travelling at an incredible speed, time is so small that goes into negative figures which means it is going backward.

We were utterly mesmerized; it was mind boggling stuff.

It was a week after that the aliens' spaceship reached the vicinity of the Moon where the fifteen astronauts inhabiting our installations, waited for its landing.

They had followed all the events and communications regarding planet Zerk and the ten Zerkans travelling to the solar system, whom they were very anxious to meet. They got the coordinates of their landing which enabled them to installed video cameras around the touchdown spot in order to record everythink, although the aliens managed to broadcast all their moves without external video cameras.

Finally their space ship landed, slowly, silently and with incredible precision.

The ten Zerkans and our five astronaut emerged from the open hatch and were warmly welcomed by our representatives on the Moon.

They all adjourned to one of the large installations nearby where one of the fifteen hosts, a physicist, queried the Zerkan leader with some questions.

“We have learned about and watched you with great interest and marvel. What your civilization has been able to achieve is well

beyond our wildest imagination. We are also grateful for your benevolent intentions about us and our planet. I would like to ask a question about Mars. A respected physicist and author, John Brandenburg, has claimed that intelligent life once flourished on Mars – but was annihilated by a nuclear attack so intense it left the planet cold and lifeless.

The author has urged that a human mission to the planet be mounted immediately – in case we are in danger from the attackers who ‘killed’ Mars.

Brandenburg said that many of the nuclear isotopes in Mars’s atmosphere resemble those from hydrogen bombs on Earth and hypothesises in a new book, ‘Death on Mars’, that a humanoid race once lived there but was wiped out.

According to Brandenburg this Martian civilization apparently perished due to a planet-wide catastrophe of unknown origin, citing craters visible on the surface near the Curiosity Rover. Many physicists believe that an event such as an asteroid strike may have robbed Mars of its magnetic field, and thus its atmosphere, in the distant past – but Brandenburg believes that the planet may have been killed by another civilisation or even a rogue artificial intelligence.

He also warns that we could be next. Also, the Astronomer Edward Harrison has suggested one major factor cutting short the lifetime of civilizations was older predatory civilizations who would wipe out young civilizations once they became detectable through radio broadcasts. He said that the motivation for such genocidal actions would be to avoid later competition. What’s your knowledge about the red planet as we call it?”

The Zerkon leader responded with authority.

“Mars was inhabited once by a civilization which had an evolution somewhat similar to yours but flourished one million years before yours. Its extinction was caused by the impact of a

giant asteroid, just like the one that will hit Earth. But before the impact, the atmosphere on Mars was already drastically depleted due the same mistakes you have been making on Earth, although there were no nuclear wars. In your solar system Mars and the Earth are the only two planets which share a presence of life and a similar destiny.”

Our physicist was dumfounded at this revelation.

Conversation continued inside the Moon installation on technical details about the Zerkans’ plan to relocate a good section of the population on Earth on Mars. The announcement was made that, once they landed on Earth, many more huge spaceships will follow to pick up people from Earth from six different locations on the globe, while as many more spaceships would go directly to Mars with the necessary installation material to build proper housing for the Earth’s colonizers. All this would be completed in the space of a month.

Preparations were made to continue the journey to Earth, and it was decided that the Zerkan spaceship would land on a plain in Arizona. A delegation from NASA and the American government would be present at the landing to pick all those onboard and bring them to New York for a reception at the UN.

The Earth-bound spaceship with the twelve Zerkans and five astronauts onboard departed five hours after its landing on the Moon. The journey three days hours at the speed the spaceship was capable of travelling, although that was a more moderate speed for the Zerkan.

Due to the extraordinary event, at the designated landing site near Phoenix, Arizona, there were hundreds of TV crews, scientists and ordinary people, anxiously awaiting the Zerkan spaceship’s landing.

It was with extreme curiosity and wonderment that all those present watched a dot in the sky which, travelling at incredible

speed got closer to Earth and then gently approached the landing site.

They were all gobsmacked at the silent, effortless and precision of the whole operation.

When, with trepidation, they all saw the hatch open and the ten Zerkans, followed by our five astronauts, walk out on the footboard, they all broke into applause.

The Head of NASA, sided by the American President, two high ranking military men and a couple of scientists approached them to welcome them to Earth.

The Zerkans, although closely scrutinized by all bystanders, took a back seat, as it were, as only our astronauts entertained the media with brief interviews.

Then a convoy of limousines took the welcoming party and the astronauts to New York where, the following morning, a big meeting was planned at UN building. The aliens were asked to go along with them, but they declined saying they preferred to stay put in their spaceship and that they would be present at the UN meeting, as they did not need any vehicle to take them there, teleporting being in their capabilities. They were so accommodating that, once the New York bound convoy moved off, they allowed all the people and media representatives present at the site to visit their spaceship if they wished to. Which they did after the departure of the welcoming party.

## VIII

Every television station in the world reported the amazing event and every page of all newspapers was filled with photos and articles featuring the amazing event.

The following day New Your city was in a frenzy in expectation of the grand meeting at the UN.

The whole affair caused indescribable commotion as the media divulged fort the first time all the details of the extraordinary encounter since the beginning, the nature and shape of the visiting aliens and their benign intentions and plan.

We, at the Centre, spent days and nights watching all the live broadcasts, feeling proud of our latest achievement in deciphering the aliens' codes as a successful "test of our intelligence", as the Zerkans had put it.

I, for one, felt honoured for participating in this mighty test, although quite apprehensive at prospect of not living long enough to witness the completion of the salvage operation of our human race, while accepting the fact that I, like so many like me, would be excluded in the relocation on Mars.

But right now, we were all waiting for the most important event, the meeting and the historical conference delivered by the Zerkans at the UN, which we were able to watch on our screens.

There was palpable expectation at the UN's huge hall, which was packed with all the world's heads of state and eminent scientists. The podium area was empty until, to everybody's amazement, we could see ten flickering lights appear, which soon materialized

into the bodies of the ten Zerkans, in the shape of tall humanoids dressed in tight diving suits.

Everybody witnessed this startling incarnation with murmurs of wonderment.

The Zerkan leader started his address.

We did not know exactly what to expect. But his speech soon revealed itself to be the most powerful sermon ever delivered.

“Dear friends, representatives of the human race,” he said, “I am sure you know why we are here on your planet. We come from planet Zerk, which is 9 billion years old, twice as old as the Earth, 1.4 thousand light years distant from your planet. For a long time we have been monitoring life on Earth and your behaviour as the human race. All the advancement which has been taking place in your civilization has been accompanied by destructive and negative downside actions. This is because, since the very beginning, you have preferred war to peace, arrogance to humility, profiteering to social equality. Now most of you who have survived a series of catastrophic events, most of which of your own doing, will have a chance to redeem yourself and adopt a peaceful approach to your finite lives. We are providing this chance, while relocating you on planet Mars. But let me be clear; you will definitely have to change your way of thinking and living for the better, otherwise we will have to power of totally annihilating you.”

A sense of guilty embarrassment was felt by all those listening.

“You have built doctrines,” the Zerkan leader continued, “around Gods as superior beings in whom you believe, but only to compensate your inadequacy in understanding the purpose of your existence. There have been special men among you who have revolutionize the way of thinking for the better, I would in fact mention your Jesus Christ, for example, who, as a man, left a legacy of love instead of hate, peace instead of war, humility

instead of arrogance, generosity instead of greed. You made him the father of a whole creed only to behave in a way contrary to his teaching. In his name you have killed, you have committed the most heinous crimes, you have waged war against one another. Swords and spears were replaced by guns and cannons, guns and cannons were replaced by nuclear weapons, always used to kill each other. You have had evil individuals capable of wanting to conquer entire continents, spreading destruction and despair among millions of people.

And, in what you call civilized modern world, you can also kill others, not necessarily with physical weapons, but intellectually and psychologically. Your race is doomed, what you think is civilization is backward evolution. Cause, if left to your devices, you would slowly turn into brutes. But all seeds in your race are not bad, there are some which could be salvaged and that is why we are here, to help you regenerate in the right way, although this will entail relocation on to another planet of most of you who have survived catastrophes of your own doing as well as cosmic ones.”

With these words the Zerkan leader concluded his speech, handing the audience over to the Director of NASA who proceeded to give details on the relocation plan.

Ramblings of disconcert were felt in the big assembly hall. This was by far the most sensational speech ever hosted at the UN.

Two hours later the assembly disbanded only to form consultative groups of scientists and politicians.

There were frenzied discussions on the immediate future plan, including the drafting of lists of those allowed to be included in the relocation from Earth to Mars. Transportation of people to Mars by Zerkan spaceships would commence in a month time, after the necessary hosting installations were completed on the red planet. It was quite a short time in human terms to achieve all

that, but although the Zerkans were capable to do all that in a fraction of the time, they knew that somehow had to accommodate time and motion schedules which were consistent with the human race.

The ten Zerkans departed for Mars, taking with them twenty-five of our representatives including engineers and astrophysics.

There were a few daily broadcasts we could watch at the Centre, concerning the arrival of huge Zerkan spaceships on Mars and the erection of installations in record time, directed by the Zerkans with the involvement of our own team. It was quite amazing to see how huge pieces of construction structures were lifted and assembled without cranes, as the Zerkans uses their psychokinetic powers to move objects no matter their size.

I stayed at the centre for the whole month during which special NASA and government agents came to our centre to pick up all the young and the personnel up to the age of 30 and take them to the designated collection point in Hungary for the whole of Europe. From there a month later huge Zerkan spaceships began they transportations.

Operations like these took place in four other continental pick-up points.

As there was no necessity for me to stay any longer at the Centre, I sounded Remis and the Centre Director Offlan about my position.

They said that I could stay for a year, as the Centre would soon be depleted of scientific personnel, and I could be useful in the research work they had started.

A week went by during which I monitored what was happening with the arrivals of the Zerkan spaceships and the construction of installations on Mars. One morning a report was broadcast on a terrible event which took place in the island of Sicily. There was a massive eruptive explosion on one side of Volcano Etna, which



destroyed several towns and part of the city of Catania. This was also the cause of subsequent tidal waves which submerged several towns and villages along the eastern coast of the island. About one million people died. The Zerkans were soon on the scene, not so much to prevent the happening, for, as they had said, they had no control over the Earth's volcanic activity, but to help salvage what could be salvaged and look after the wounded with special drugs in the form of capsules to be taken orally.

This dreadful event made me ponder. Was this the beginning of an increase in volcanic activity on the Earth as the Zerkans had prophesized?

This, together with what we all heard the Zerkans say at the UN assembly, gave me sleepless nights.

The Zerkans' speech had a profound impact in all of us. It dug deep into our consciences. Each one of us must have gone through our past lives, and see where we went wrong, and see what we should have done that we didn't do and what we did that we shouldn't have done. We had been through calamities after calamities, for most of which we were responsible and I thought that, perhaps, we paid the toll for our misdoings by being subject to other catastrophes for which we were not responsible.

In the meantime, my health was markedly deteriorating. I wasn't sure whether I could stay for one more year at the Centre. I planned to have a good talk about it with Remis, who was temporary away for two weeks. On his return, I approached him at the canteen.

"Remis," I said, "I do not feel great. I am having more and more sleepless nights and my health is deteriorating by the day. I would feel more comfortable if I could return to Niblad. Would it be possible to be taken there? I really do not wish to inconvenience you..."

"Well, Bruce," Remis responded, "if you can wait one more

week, I can make arrangements for some of our Pilgrims to accompany you to Niblad.”

“Thanks Remis,” I said, “you are a friend!”

“Oh, don’t mention it,” he replied, “I understand perfectly. After all your contribution at the centre has been very valuable and it is I who has to thank you!”.

We left it at that and, after consuming my lunch, I took leave of him.

## IX

A week went fast at the end of which I met Remis again at breakfast. He was with three of his Pilgrim friends.

“So, Bruce,” he said while introducing them to me, “this is Joe, Max and Terence. I have talked to them about accompanying you to Niblad and they are ready to undertake the journey with you. I have also informed our boat man who will be waiting for you to take you to Darkynell. Would you be ready to leave tomorrow at, say, nine o’clock?”

“That’s great, Remis,” I replied, “I will be ready after breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Then Remis left, while I entertained the three Pilgrims. We talked about what we had witnessed over the last few weeks, although they said that they missed some of the broadcasts as they were travelling on other missions.

They had missed the most important broadcast on the Zerkan leader addressing the UN assembly, and I was able to fill them in on the extraordinary message he delivered. Upon hearing the details of the Zerkan’s condemnation of humanity’s behaviour, they lowered their heads in a submissive way, pondering on the significance of what they heard.

“We must admit they are right,” Max said, “take our catholic religion, for example, based on Jesus Christ’s teaching, we have made a mockery of the whole thing, and we seem not to have learned anything about good heartedness, charity, love, respect for our fellow beings, humility which he preached. We have built

a structured empire around him and on his name, we have killed in his name, practiced depravation under his mantel. The same can be said of other religions. Man has behaved and continues to behave on the side of evil in every aspect of life, politically, economically and socially. Greed and money have become the real gods. People are just numbers.”

I couldn't but agree with Max. There was an air of discomfort all around us and all those who had been following the latest events. The intervention of an alien civilization was the last thing we could have envisaged on top of the calamities we had witnessed in the world. Although we all knew by now that they had come to “rescue” us, the conditions they had set out for this arrangement were scary. Did we deserve all this? Human nature being what it is, we felt a lot of resentment. There seemed to be no way out.

The following morning Joe, Max, Terence and I set out for Niblad in inclement weather which, once again, made the sea crossing, on the same boat which had taken me to the Centre, quite perilous. When we reached destination, all those I knew in the village welcomed us. The frightened look of their faces said it all. Sitting at the shelter, surrounded by a good number of villagers, young and old, I asked all sorts of questions. They all knew that I had been away to work in an astrophysical environment with other physicists and that I was quite reliable source of information. I answered all their questions, filling them in on the recent encounters.

“Is it true,” a senior villagers asked, “that these aliens are transporting to Mars only young people up to the age of thirty?”

“True,” I replied, “I suppose it makes sense, doesn't it?”

“So,” the villager retorted, “people like you, me and millions like us will be left behind!”

“I am afraid so,” I replied, “but think that the end of life on Earth, prophesized by the aliens will happen in a distant future. We will

be all dead by then unless some of us continue reproducing.”  
These and other questions kept us busy for a few hours. The three Pilgrims stayed in the village overnight. The following morning after breakfast the bid farewell and left.

At that moment I felt quite a void in my heart. Somehow, I missed their company which reminded me of dear Remis and the interesting people I had become acquainted with at the Centre. For a moment I thought that my recent encounters were only a dream.

I spent many days, weeks and months keeping abreast with the aliens’ plan. My health, in the meantime took a turn for the worse. Less than a year later I died. I spent my last few hours thinking of all that had happened wondering what the future held in store for all those who survived me.



