



*BRUNO CATALDO*

# **THE ASTEROID** [HYPERNOVEL]

*Bruno Cataldo*  
**THE ASTEROID**  
[hypernovel]

ENGLISH VERSION  
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PRODUCTION  
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### BACKGROUND.

The Hari telescope was named in honor of Hari Seldon, one of Isaac Asimov's fictional characters who, thanks to his knowledge of science, was able to accurately predict the far off events of thousands of years to come. I read it on Wikipedia this morning, but I would have remembered it anyway, I studied it this year at school, it was part of the astronomy program. And after all that they put it into the papers today, I wouldn't have forgotten it that easily. It all started three days ago. At first it seemed the usual wacky news that the editors of online newspapers use to fill the boxes on their homepages. Like when they attract readers with front page cover pics of rockstars in slippers or photo galleries of strange animals. There was a blurry photo and caption quoting an unknown Norwegian astronomer who claimed to have discovered, documented (and immediately posted on social networks) a slight shadow that was moving on the Imbrium sea. Yeah, well, on the Moon. Frankly, I immediately thought of the usual fakes too. Then I began to get official confirmation from the most well known centers of space observation and what started as a footnote began gaining more and more space in newspapers around the world. Also because the lunar shadow was full of mystery: its origin remained unknown. And over the last few days the situation hasn't changed, the findings have multiplied, but even the most powerful astronomical observation posts cannot identify the object that casts it. The mysterious origin of the shadow has sparked the imagination of the broadcaster. The assumptions have ranged from what I'd call paranoid (a secret Chinese

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star-base ready to take over the world) to eco-science fiction (an old disused satellite out of orbit on its way to pollute the Moon). This morning, however, Tom Wilson, one of the astronomers scrutinizing the depths of space with the Hari radio-telescope, posted a video in which he demonstrates that the shadow on the moon cannot be projected by an artifact of terrestrial nature. On the contrary, by a celestial body with features never seen before. Which nobody will probably ever be able to observe anyway. In the sense that it is not the usual stray rock fragment or a cloud of condensed gas. According to Tom Wilson it is an asteroid composed of an unknown material capable of neither absorbing or reflecting light, stealthily filtering it almost imperceptibly. This is the fascinating part of the news. The terrible part is that the invisible asteroid is heading toward Earth at high speed. And if it strikes us it could destroy all known forms of life.

### DAY 1.

I believe that every one of us, at least once in our lifetime decides to be different or special. We imagine that the world is there just for us.

That there is a grand destiny that awaits us all, that will finally give meaning to our existence. These days it happens to me often. Maybe they're just a guy's dreams, but what else can I do to escape the nightmare coming from outer space? The governments continue issuing reassuring statements. It's impossible to see the asteroid that will destroy us, therefore it might not exist, so why bother? But nobody believes this. This last week the price of fuel has doubled, financial speculation has exceeded all limits of morality and people have filled their cellars with supplies. I think the world is going crazy. If the asteroid crashes on the Earth, what is the point in burrowing like rats? Even if you survive the impact and the following two

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months inside an atomic bunker, then what will you do? Evidently people lose the gift of reason in times of crisis. And my father is no different. He sent me on vacation in Europe at the tender age of 16, with the excuse that I might never be able to see it again.

It is obviously a lie. He is convinced that the asteroid will fall right on Canada, probably in Ottawa, right in the garden of our house. He thinks its galactic punishment for his terrestrial misdeeds. I tried to reason with him, I tried to explain how absurd this idea was, that I would rather spend my last days with my friends and loved ones. Useless, as usual, he wasn't listening. So, I might as well try and enjoy the holiday.

These last few days, roaming around Paris, I seem to be seeing a different city to the one I had imagined. A city I had only known through the glossy images of those romantic movies. The reality, as usual, cancels all illusion. Of course, there are always magnificent nineteenth-century buildings, great imperial monuments and the picturesque spots along the Seine.

But if you don't have a girlfriend by your side, you're struck more by the human wrecks of differing degrees of desperation that you encounter everywhere, both on the main Boulevards and in the outskirts of the city.

Last night I was out late and this morning I could barely get out of bed. It's ten o'clock and I have nothing to eat at home. I go to the nearest caffè bar to find that the croissants and pain au chocolat are already finished. The bartender offers me a packet of biscuits to accompany my usual café au lait. They're so crumbled that when I open the packet it seems like sand falling through my fingers. The TV hanging from the ceiling suddenly stops the video of an overweight rapper to broadcast a special

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edition of the News. No terrorist attack, fortunately, this news is much less bloody. There is an oil rig in the North Sea hosting a secret summit attended by leaders of the 24 most powerful and influential countries on the Earth. Of course, the place wasn't chosen at random. They were discussing the asteroid that threatens our lives and their defensive powers away from prying eyes and ears.

In a few minutes they will send us a joint message from the leaders. The reporter informs us that one of them has been chosen at random to act as spokesman. This is to show that no countries are more important than others and that all men are equal before a catastrophe that could wipe out an entire planet. I don't understand why this should reassure me.

The worldwide live transmission begins. It was difficult to recognize the other 23 heads of state who until recently boasted of being able to decide the fate of the world. Now they are neatly arranged in the background, away from the cameras. Curiously, they are all wearing gray clothes, to blend in better with the wall maybe. In front of them, in the foreground, there is a leader chosen at random: the South African President. He looks like a broken man. He is pale, worn, emaciated. He wipes away his sweat, clears his throat in front of the TV crew who are in charge of the shoot and announces the worst news possible to the world.

– Peoples of the Earth, I speak on behalf of all your leaders, even those who are not participating in this G24. Humanity's most difficult moment is arriving. And I want you to know that in order to face it we will need a solidarity and unity never seen before in human history. There is a celestial body that is moving dangerously close to

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our planet. It has not been possible to identify it because it has an unknown structure that makes it invisible to even our most advanced means. According to the astronomers it is an asteroid or maybe even a planetoid that is not within the classifications adopted so far. It is not easy to measure, but it is expected to be very large, about one-sixth of the Moon. Normally asteroids can reach the speed of 60,000 kilometers per hour. Fortunately, the speed of the celestial body that threatens us is much lower, but its trajectory is erratic and difficult to monitor. It currently has a 96% chance of hitting the Earth. We don't know its nature, but we're certain that it's solid and this excludes the possibility of it disintegrating when it enters the atmosphere. Should it hit the Earth's surface, the consequences could be the dire: it could put an end to all forms of life. According to the astronomers, the asteroid should reach Earth in three days. We have decided to meet in permanent session to explore ways of preventing this tragedy. This is the time to open any barriers and act together for the good of humanity. Don't be discouraged. We're not dinosaurs, we are men and we will not be wiped out by an asteroid without reacting. Every day, at the same time, a leading participant in the G24 will be in front of the microphones to inform you about the decisions we are making to save our planet. We have the technology and resources to avert this terrible threat. But we can only meet this challenge with help from every one of you. What we ask is, do not give up and do not leave your work. Especially if you work in the essential services, in energy, telecommunications and the media. Without you the world will stop and then we really will not have a chance. I have a boundless trust in the possibilities of man, and I think now more than ever you all should have it.

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### DAY 2.

24 hours have passed and it feels like I have been living in apnea. At home there has not been a lack water or electricity. The Internet and the telephone networks have been operating in fits and starts, many broadcasters have disappeared, but the big networks are airing regularly. All in all, for now, the world has resisted. In my opinion, not due to the heartfelt appeal from the South African leader, but for the communal attitude of our own solidarity that we have carried with us from the time we came down from the trees and became human beings.

I look out the window overlooking the courtyard and see the TV on in every house; they have been on continuously since yesterday morning. Although the channels are different, the program is essentially the same: a continuous and exhausting direct journalistic commentary while waiting for the new joint message of the leaders of the G24. From time to time there are also links to distant cities and remote corners of the world. In some countries it is daytime, in others night. It makes no difference, the scenes are still the same, no one has slept and no one will fall asleep before they know if we can save ourselves from the Asteroid. In various talk shows (there is no space for any other programs, even the advertising has almost disappeared) interviews with scientists, astronomers and science communicators follow on back to back. It seems that the pundits are competing to terrorize us. They are explaining in minute detail what will happen before, during and after the impact.

The asteroid approaching the Earth will ionize the atmospheric gases, making them glow. Then we will see a huge projectile falling down on us. If it falls into the ocean (likely, given that the land is only 30% of the earth's surface), it will immediately vaporize the surrounding water,



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creating a large crater 20 times its diameter. The shock wave will probably unleash winds of up to 3,000 km/h and waves hundreds of meters high, which will pour over the neighboring continents. After the impact, the secondary landslides would produce a series of tsunamis with the same devastating power. The residual impact, i.e. rock fragments ejected from the crater, would rain down on Earth burying everything within a radius of thousands of kilometers. This debris, thanks to the friction with the air, will not be pulverized, so it would overheat the sky bringing the outside temperature to over 1,000 degrees and making the earth's surface below incandescent, destroying all forms of life remaining outdoors.

Moreover taking refuge in the basement will not be enough to save us. About 12 hours after the impact, the dust cloud of debris, will climb to the upper atmosphere completely surrounding the Earth, which would prevent sunlight from reaching the surface. There would be absolute darkness that could even last for thousands of years. And without light, there is no life.

My parents tried to call me. I saw the message on the phone. I tried to call them a dozen times, but at the moment it's not very easy to communicate with Canada. After the TV asked for the privatization of open Wi-Fi networks, Skype crashed and hasn't been rebooted. Now in order to communicate with a couple of friends I can only try email and hope that sooner or later it will be transmitted from the PC. It's pretty irritating to think that the only source of rapid and functional information is the TV. I've always considered it the least reliable.

Today, to keep the conversation on world affairs, the Dutch Prime Minister was selected. I see him frozen in front of the microphones, looking worried. Then I realize that I have never seen a political leader, in their

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“natural form” on TV. No makeup, no wrinkle reducing or hair thickening special effects, the tension is visible in the droplets of sweat beading on his forehead and dampening his shirt collar. The Dutch leader seems quite another person to the man of the introductory clip that the editorial staff aired a while ago on TV. He is aged, graying and tired. Yet, when he is placed in front of the cameras and starts to speak, his eyes suddenly light up with hope.

– Peoples of the Earth, first I want to thank all those who have not abandoned their work to avoid the world ending in chaos. Today, if we have any hope in overcoming this terrible moment, it is mainly thanks to you. We have evaluated every practical possibility and we have chosen to send a shuttle load of nuclear warheads against the asteroid to try to divert its route. There will be two pilots at the controls. Two heroes who will be sacrificing themselves for the good of us all and will be remembered forever as the greatest benefactors of Humanity. The preparation for the launch has already started. Within 36 hours the shuttle will depart from the base in Huston. But this is not all. There is also another piece of good news: astronomers have revised their calculations and the arrival of the asteroid is not expected for tomorrow, but in three days time. This will allow us more time for the launch, so as to divert the celestial body at an optimal distance from the Earth. I have boundless trust in man, may you all continue having it too.

### DAY 3.

The world has practically adopted a single time zone. As I'm in Paris, I haven't changed anything: it is my time zone. I wasn't able to speak to my parents again but I received an email from my father, he would have

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preferred to have me there with him. Here in Paris or at home in Canada, it doesn't really matter. It's a bit late though: the flights are all blocked. In the sky all you can see are the darting fighter aircraft. I don't know if I will answer him, I feel frustrated and angry and I don't want to stay in a house that isn't even mine. I get dressed and go out for a walk.

The city has become a surreal place, especially the center, which is usually crowded with people shopping and doing other more activities. Today it seems quite dead. The traffic is non-existent, the public places are all closed, the unadorned buildings that real estate speculation have emptied of families to fill instead with offices are devoid of any form of life. Some mice take courage and run safely across the deserted streets. The weirdest thing of all is the silence. On some streets there isn't even the sound of a TV to interrupt it. I realize that I'm listening to my own feet to see if I can filter out footsteps behind me. I'd better get home. I hadn't turned of the TV. Changing channels is useless; all the stations are only talking about the suicide mission to save the Earth. Most astronomers don't really put much stock in the suicide bomber missions. They believe that it's not sufficient to deflect the course of the asteroid. Or worse, it could fragment it, causing a dense meteor shower that would have the same dire consequences for our planet. But the alternatives are impractical. Some are proposing the launch of a solar mirror to heat the water contained in the rock of the asteroid, which would shift its trajectory producing a cosmic comets tail. Others are talking about solar sails or motors with plasma engines to push it sideways. There is also a gravity tractor project: a spacecraft that would be positioned a few hundred meters from the celestial body, which would change its route using the force of gravity of the asteroid. Great ideas, one small defect, that they need decades of work to construct them. Finally it's time for the link to

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the G24. Today it's the Swedish prime minister's turn; he appears behind the microphones looking visibly upset. He repeatedly touches his beard and straightens his glasses, he squints his eyes nervously and begins to read the collective message.

– Peoples of the Earth, the preparations for the launch of the shuttle are almost done. But the most important fact is that the asteroid has slowed down. According to the new calculations, it is expected to hit the Earth in four days. We do not know what has affected its speed; the astronomers postulate that the slowdown is due to the balancing effect of the gravitational forces in our solar system. At the moment we have no certainty about this. We can only hope that the asteroid will continue to decelerate. But we cannot exclude it recovering its initial velocity. In any case, the danger remains very high. The route that the asteroid is taking continues to threaten the Earth and the possibility that it will destroy our planet is the same as it was three days ago. Of course, the Shuttle launch will be continually reprogrammed according to new findings. That is all for now. Together we continue to place all of our trust in man and in his abilities.

### DAY 4.

Now it is clear why man is the dominant animal on this planet. It's not about strength or intelligence. It is our adaptive capacity that makes us superior. In the past millennium we have adapted to extreme weather conditions and right now, I see people adapting to the possible end of the world. One after another, the factories have reopened, as well as the businesses and offices. The city has come back to life and the faces that I meet on the street don't show resignation, but rather, a kind of apathy. As

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if all that is happening and all that could happen concerns someone else. I am reminded of the fierce authoritarian regimes of the past centuries. I was convinced that what blocked the rebellious uprisings of the subjugated populations was the cruelty of the dictators, a fear of reprisals on their loved ones and the innate fear of dying. But now I am beginning to believe that, beyond a certain limit, the human mind is no longer able to endure frustration and in self-defense it diverts attention away from the problem. Like now, people simply continue day to day life.

It must be said, however, that this nightmare we are experiencing has also had positive side effects on our daily life. In some ways, the world today is better than it was a week ago. All the muggings and scams have almost disappeared, as have the various outbreaks of conflict and even racist attacks seem to have vanished. However, there is increased sexual violence. Evidently for the maniacs despair is a good excuse to let go.

The victims have fewer scruples. Instead of a useless complaint to the police, they prefer to seek help from boyfriends, husbands, relatives or friends for a more expeditious private revenge. Internet speed is back to acceptable levels, so I can turn off the TV and follow the events on blogs and newspaper sites that I trust more. I read imaginative and suggestive hypotheses about the immediate future. According to several astronomers the new speed of the asteroid could prevent an impact with the Earth, it would merely brush past us by a few thousand kilometers. Some argue that it could also be sucked into Earth's orbit and become a second satellite to be admired on a clear night. Bah. It is approaching the hour of the daily joint statement of the 24 leaders so I turn on the TV.

The journalist reveals that the Chinese leader (the one who will be going on air in a minute) had asked to move the conference by a few

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hours in order to accommodate his own people who were amongst the most adversely affected by the time zone. However the Western leaders had pointed out, that without adequate notice, the viewers would have interpreted the delay as a signal of surrender to the imminent end of the world. It would have unleashed chaos. Clearly, the President of the Republic of China had willingly accepted the objection because I see him smiling front of the microphone, ready to talk to the world.

– Peoples of the Earth, I'm happy to bring good news, even though its not as good as I hoped. The latest data confirms that the asteroid is continuing to slow down. Unfortunately not as gradually and as steadily as we all desire. Meanwhile, its route has become much more irregular and the risk of impact with the Earth continues to persist. Albeit with significantly reduced percentages of risk. At the moment, the Shuttle mission to deflect the trajectory of the asteroid is on stand-by. If the danger of an impending impact materializes, there will be plenty of time to reschedule the launch. Our confidence in mankind is stronger than ever.

### DAY 5.

It seems impossible, but the optimism of 7 billion people is turning into euphoria. It's not so hard to imagine this distorted reality, you just have to look at the inanely happy faces of the protagonists on TV ads and think that people believe that life is really like that. For everyone. Even the G24 seems contaminated with thoughts of grandure. Today the leader chosen to read the joint message has not provided any relevant news. The asteroid is continuing its irregular slowdown and the risk of a devastating impact with the Earth continues to decline. No mention of the Shuttle's kamikaze mission. Maybe tomorrow we'll get to learn more about our fate.

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### DAY 6.

When the designated leader appears before the microphones I could see straight away that the danger had finally ceased. The Spanish Prime Minister is jiggling with excitement, he keeps straightening his tie nervously. He smiles serenely even after having tipped over the lectern with his impetuosity. Behind him, as usual, the other 23 leaders are all lined up. Today, however, none of them are wearing those anonymous gray suits, they have all taken great care to be noticed. The Spanish leader cheerfully looks for the right tone and finally begins to read the joint statement.

– Peoples of the Earth, we can finally give you the news you've all been waiting anxiously for, the asteroid is no longer a danger. It has now stopped its terrible descent towards our planet and is currently orbiting the Earth at a distance of absolute safety. Unless there are any unforeseen events, this will be our last joint message for you and the work of this remarkable G24 will be considered concluded. Tomorrow, each leader will return to their own country and to their daily tasks, although this terrible experience has changed us profoundly. Many political differences have been ironed out, and many grievances have been set aside to deal with an important common cause. We all want to keep this magnificent world harmony that has been established, it is the basis of a new and long era of peace on the Earth. Because we all know that it is not with hatred that the future is built, but with confidence in the ability of mankind.

### DAY 7.

When I open my eyes the clock of the mobile phone displays a quarter past three in the afternoon. I think it's the first time in my life that I ever woken up so late. But how could I have missed the grand celebrations

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yesterday? It was like New Year's Eve in Edinburgh and the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, mixed together. The festival began almost immediately after the joint statement of the leaders and continued - everywhere, incessantly - over the next 24 hours. At night, Paris and many other cities turned off their lights in order to allow the inhabitants to observe the two celestial bodies that now orbited above our heads. But despite the relative proximity of the asteroid to the Earth, its structure continues to render it invisible to human eyes. The Internet is going viral with comments on the global celebrations. The most important sites speak of nothing else. However, on a blog that I had bookmarked because it seemed to be an interesting commentary and not part of the usual chorus, I find a story that leaves me speechless. In these last few days I had always found this blogger to be reliable, his source seems to be one of the technical staff from the oil rig which was being used for the G24. In his last post he says that while the leaders were preparing to return to their countries, commander Polland (the person responsible for organizing the logistics and services for the G24) had received some extremely confidential information and within a few minutes he had gathered the Heads State in the large meeting room. On their emergence, they all cancelled their departure. What could have changed those leader's minds? According to the blogger, all the space agencies have registered strange movements around the asteroid. It seems that a smaller craft has departed from a hidden portal and is now heading towards the Earth.

I look for any kind of confirmation. Today a joint statement by the leaders was not expected and indeed there is no sign of any official announcements. State-run televisions tranquilly skate over the subject. And even the online editions of the most hostile governments do not



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report anything.

Maybe it's just another hoax. I look for news on search engines and soon reports and footage of the alien spaceship that has detached from the asteroid and is heading towards us begin to blossom. Not that this proves anything. I know how easy it is to falsify a film. Yet I feel a certain uneasiness.

I've been on the Internet for three hours and by now they're not talking about anything else. Even the major television networks have capitulated and now broadcast films of the alien spaceship that they have downloaded from the net. My favorite blogger claims that the leaders had decided to obscure the news, since it was impossible to destroy it with the usual counter-information tactics. These days, people are looking at the sky more than at the Earth. They are selling more telescopes than bikes despite it being repeated over and over again that they are useless for observing the asteroid. Under these conditions it was impossible for the ship not to have been identified immediately.

According to the blogger, while we all have our noses in the air, the leaders are scrambling to try and contact the aliens to try and hammer out beneficial agreements before they arrive on Earth. Well, we know our leaders, and this news does not surprise me at all.

### DAY 8.

I have stopped reading the online newspapers; now I just follow the updates of my favorite bloggers. And I will continue to follow them until they get closed down, because I know that it will happen sooner or later. The alien spacecraft has arrived near the Earth's surface and stopped in the stratosphere. According to the blogger, the leaders agreed to make

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a common cause and meet the visitors together. And then, when they returned to their quarters, they all pressurized their own space agencies to contact the aliens before the others.

Up until now, without any success.

I turn on the TV for some channel surfing. I find a rerun of the first episode of *Mork & Mindy* and block the remote fascinated by the explosive congeniality of Robin Williams. It's an old seventies television series, it hasn't been on TV for years, but a friend showed it to me on YouTube and I've watched dozens of episodes. But not this one. This is a special episode where Mork meets some of the stars from *Happy Days* (another cult series of the time). As I follow the absurd dialogue between The Fonz and Mork, the program stops suddenly. The screen goes blank for a few moments, and then, three curious and not one bit human creatures, materialize staring at me without speaking. Could it be an alien transmission? I switch channels rapidly but although the number of the channel changes, the image is the same. The aliens are live on unified networks. Well, maybe not live, it seems to be a movie recorded without audio.

You can only see these three humanoids on a whitish background. They look a bit taller and leaner than us, they have close narrow, slit eyes, flat ears, no hair, and no nose but two side openings in the top of the neck. They wear a kind of white or very light gray garment, which is smooth and shapeless, with a high collar, tight, long sleeves and no visible signs or decoration. Their arms seem to be rather short compared to their height and they have six fingers on each hand. The sixth finger is a second opposable thumb located after the other four central fingers. The aliens do not speak, they just move their arms awkwardly: they are trying to imitate

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the classic human greeting, even if it is not a familiar gesture to them. Above these images a message written in perfect French rolls past. Out of curiosity I tune in to a channel on American news. The images are the same, but here the text is in English. I begin to read it.

[TERRESTRIALS, DO NOT BE AFRAID, WE ARE EXPLORERS AND A PEACEFUL RACE. WE LOVE AND RESPECT ALL FORMS OF LIFE IN THE UNIVERSE. OUR EXPLORATION OF THE COSMOS HAS LED US TO DISCOVER YOUR WORLD AND WE ARE HAPPY TO FIND THAT THERE IS INTELLIGENT LIFE ON EARTH. WE WOULD LIKE TO UNDERSTAND YOUR HABITS AND CUSTOMS, YOUR CULTURE AND YOUR HISTORY BETTER. BUT WE CANNOT STAY HERE ON YOUR PLANET, YOUR ATMOSPHERE IS LETHAL TO US. YOU ARE AN EVOLVED RACE AND YOU ALREADY HAVE A VAST BODY OF KNOWLEDGE. WE CAN HELP YOU TO EXTEND IT. WE CAN SHARE OUR SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES AND OUR KNOWHOW WITH YOU. WE DO NOT WANT TO BOOST YOUR EVOLUTION WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT. WE WILL HELP YOU ONLY IF YOU CONSIDER IT TO BE USEFUL. OUR SHIP WILL REMAIN IN ORBIT FOR AN ENTIRE ROTATION OF YOUR PLANET. WE WILL AWAIT A DECISION REGARDING OUR PROPOSAL FROM YOUR LEADERS AND WE WILL ANNOUNCE IT PUBLICLY. TRANQUILITY TO ALL OF YOU.]

After the alien message, the broadcast resumes regularly. The first image that appears on the screen is the face of the bewildered journalist who is suddenly back on the air with his talk show. It's almost more fun than *Mork & Mindy*.

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### DAY 9.

24 hours have passed and the world has not stopped for a moment to question whether or not to accept the alien offer. The vast majority of people (including myself) see mainly benefits to the above. Certainly there is no shortage of critics, with no concrete footing for their thesis, who often end up quoting science fiction, seriously risking sliding into the absurd. According to my favorite bloggers, even the leaders of the G24 have been in deep discussion in order to arrive at a unanimous decision.

So, at the established time, the Japanese Prime Minister is on air for the press conference. He is a quiet man, and concealing his emotions he speaks very slowly.

– Peoples of the Earth and space, before deciding whether to accept the proposal of our visitors we have had to discuss it very seriously. We know it could be a very big leap for human evolution. Maybe even too big. But we want to and must risk it. I cannot even imagine all the benefits that this choice could lead humanity to. By drawing on the alien knowledge and technology we could make great strides in medicine, biotechnology, in the exploitation of renewable energy, and in physics. We would have the opportunity to understand the laws that govern the universe. And one day we could also leave for a voyage in the discovery of other life forms too. These extraordinary and generous extra terrestrials are offering us the fulfillment of all our dreams. We welcome this offer with great enthusiasm and we will be eternally grateful. If our friends from space want to make direct contact now with the leaders to clarify how this exchange of knowledge will take place, we are ready to work out the details with you and communicate these to the rest of the world. Tranquility to you all.

I spend the next half hour imagining what this opportunity

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might mean for me and for my generation, then I realize that progress takes a long time, even when stimulated externally. Decades are needed for a great innovation to become available to the majority of human beings. The real benefits of this adventure will be seen maybe by my children (if I ever have them). It's really sad to feel outdated at 16. I go back to watching TV hoping that the aliens will ignore the blatant invitation of the leaders for a private negotiation.

The aliens do not disappoint me. They do not even consider the Japanese leader's proposal to meet away from the media, preferring to have a much larger audience. They interrupt television programs from around the world to send a new message. It seems to be the same movie as yesterday again, the same three humanoid beings who continue awkwardly waving their arms to greet the audience. On the screen, however, there is a different text rolling.

[TERRESTRIALS, YOUR CHOICE WILL BENEFIT THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE. WE ARE HAPPY THAT YOU HAVE ACCEPTED OUR SUPPORT AND WE ARE HONOURED TO BE ABLE TO HOST YOUR DELEGATES IN OUR HOME, ON THE ASTEROID WHICH WE CALL WITH A WORD THAT COULD BE TRANSLATED ON EARTH AS: LIFE. WE ALREADY KNOW THAT YOUR ATMOSPHERE IS LETHAL FOR US BUT OURS COULD BE THE SAME FOR YOU. SO ON OUR LIFE, WE HAVE RECREATED THE SAME ENVIRONMENTAL CONDITIONS AS YOUR PLANET IN A LARGE FULLY INSULATED AREA. THE AIR, WATER AND FOOD WILL BE EXACTLY THE SAME AS IT IS ON YOUR PLANET. YOU CAN THINK OF IT AS A LARGE CAMPUS IN WHICH OUR GUESTS WILL LIVE FREELY FOR THE ENTIRE

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PERIOD OF THEIR TRAINING. THE TRAINING WILL LAST FOR TWO ECLIPSES, WHICH CORRESPONDS TO ABOUT 24 EARTH YEARS. THE TERRESTRIALS WHO WILL PARTICIPATE IN THE COURSE SHALL BE 6 MALES AND 6 FEMALES. IN ORDER NOT TO PUT THEIR COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT AT RISK, THE TRAINEES MUST BE BETWEEN 14 AND 16 YEARS OLD. WE KNOW THAT 24 YEARS SOUNDS LIKE A VERY LONG TIME, BUT IT IS NECESSARY IN ORDER FOR THE FLOW OF KNOWLEDGE NOT TO DAMAGE THEIR MINDS. THEY WILL ALSO TRAVEL TOGETHER WITH US AND WILL MEET OTHER PEOPLE AND OTHER CIVILIZATIONS WHICH ARE AS EXTRAORDINARY AS YOURS. ON THEIR RETURN THEY WILL BE READY TO DISCLOSE ALL THAT THEY HAVE LEARNED WITH US TO THE REST OF MANKIND. SO CHOOSE YOUNG HUMANS WHO ARE SUITABLE FOR MAKING A BRIDGE BETWEEN OUR CIVILIZATIONS. WE ASK YOU TO SELECT AT LEAST 18. BEFORE LEAVING WE NEED TO BE SURE FOR THEIR OWN SAFETY THAT THEY HAVE THE PHYSICAL AND MENTAL REQUIREMENTS FOR SPACE TRAVEL AND TRAINING. A SPACESHIP DESIGNED FOR TRANSPORTING HUMAN BEINGS HAS ALREADY DEPARTED, TOMORROW IT WILL REACH THE AREA WHERE YOUR LEADERS ARE GATHERED AND THE DAY AFTER IT WILL TAKE THE CHOSEN TERRESTRIALS TO OUR WORLD. LIFE WILL STILL ORBIT YOUR PLANET FOR ANOTHER 12 DAYS OF YOUR TIME TO ALLOW THE TRAINEES TO ADAPT TO A DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT FROM THE EARTH. DURING THIS PERIOD, IT WILL STILL BE POSSIBLE TO

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COMMUNICATE WITH THEM THROUGH AN AUDIO-VISUAL LINK AND YOU WILL BE ABLE TO SAY GOODBYE AGAIN BEFORE OUR DEPARTURE FOR DEEP SPACE. WE KNOW THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED, THIS IS NATURAL. BUT YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR, WE WILL LOOK AFTER THEM WELL. THESE ARE YOUR CHILDREN, AND THEY WILL BE SO ALSO FOR US. WE WILL SEE THEM GROW INTO ADULTHOOD, WE WILL HELP THEM IN THEIR PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT. WE WILL EMBRACE THEIR IDEAS AND INDULGE OURSELVES WITHIN, NO MATTER HOW STRANGE. WE WILL BE AT THEIR SIDE IN TIMES OF TROUBLE. WE WILL SUPPORT THEIR PASSIONS AS MUCH AS WE CAN AND WE WILL TRANSMIT ALL OUR KNOWLEDGE TO THEM IN ORDER TO GIVE THEM AND ALL OF HUMANITY A BETTER FUTURE. ISN'T THAT WHAT PARENTS ON YOUR PLANET DO? THEY WILL LEARN HOW TO DEFEAT THE DISEASES AFFECTING YOU AND DISCOVER HOW TO BLOCK CELLULAR AGEING TO ELIMINATE OLD AGE, WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE HUMAN BODY, WHICH CANNOT EXCEED 190 OF YOUR YEARS. YOU WILL BE ABLE TO REAWAKEN LIFE IN THE DESERT AREAS AND MULTIPLY YOUR AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTION TO HAVE FOOD IN ABUNDANCE. BUT YOU WILL HAVE TO TRY TO LIMIT THE POPULATION DEVELOPMENT, BECAUSE IT WILL BE DIFFICULT FOR THE EARTH TO FEED MORE THAN 50 BILLION HUMAN BEINGS. WE WILL TEACH THE TRAINEES HOW TO USE ALL THE POTENTIALS OF THE MOST PREVALENT ELEMENT IN THE UNIVERSE: ENERGY. WE WERE

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SURPRISED TO SEE THAT, DESPITE YOUR TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS, THE EARTH STILL DEPENDS SO MUCH ON LIMITED AND DANGEROUS ENERGY SOURCES. FINALLY WE WILL SHOW YOUR YOUTH HOW TO MOVE QUICKLY IN THE GALAXY BY USING TEMPORAL-SPACE SHORTCUTS. A NEW ERA FOR THE EARTH IS BEGINING AND WE ARE VERY PROUD TO HELP YOU BLOOM. TRANQUILITY TO YOU ALL.]

### DAY 10.

It's seven o'clock and the thumping sound that makes me jump out of bed is not the alarm (because here in Paris, I stopped using it), but the videophone. Trudging to the door I see the agitated faces of my parents on the black and white screen. In Paris? I look again, and it's really them. I open the front door and as they climb the three flights of stairs, I try the best I can to rearrange the room. The doorbell rings and I'm still in my underwear, but the bulk of the clothes that I had lying around, are all now piled high in the closet. I open the door worriedly (in fact I haven't actually contacted them for a while) but they jump on me, embracing me with a previously unknown affection. My mother hasn't even noticed my attempts to look neat, she stares into my eyes and begins to cry silently. My father leads me to the couch trying to tell me something, but I can't understand him: he mumbles, stutters, stops sentences halfway and starts again on another track. Something must have happened that he still doesn't know how to explain. He drinks a glass of water then tries again with more strength of purpose.

– Vincent, you have seen the aliens' transmission for yourself. Then you will know that the leaders have to choose 18 boys to send 12 into



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space. What you do not know is that, immediately after the alien message, many countries came to the brink of war, threatened each other, leaders trying to secure at least one safe place amongst the Chosen.

Maybe I'm still half groggy from sleep, but what my father says seems to make little sense.

– Dad, frankly it seems absurd that civilized countries are unleashing a war for an internship.

– Wake up Vincent, you're too gullible. The leaders are well aware that those who leave with the aliens will return with a wealth of knowledge of inestimable value. In 24 years, the 12 interns will be the true masters of the world. And every leader wants at least one of them from his own country. Those who do not have a son or daughter the right age have several "major sponsors" who have put unimaginable pressure to send their offspring into space. The agreement that has been finally reached is that the 12 Chosen for the apprenticeship with the aliens would come from half of the most powerful countries: the U.S., Russia, China, UK, Germany and Brazil. While the other 6, after an extraction of the 18 countries left, come from India, France, Italy, Japan, South Africa and Sweden. To have the right to choose the 6 youngsters as reserve, a new draw was done from all 24 participating countries. Japan, Argentina, Spain, Australia, Brazil and Canada were drawn.

– Dad, I don't want to be a defeatist teenager; all this is interesting, but was it really necessary to travel all the way to Paris at seven in the morning to tell me? In a week I'd have been back in Ottawa and you could have told me about this at home.

– No Vincent, in a week you could be on Life.

I look at my mother and I see her turning away to hide her tears.

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I get up from the couch and go slowly to the kitchen to fill a glass with water. I'm not thirsty, but walking helps me to collect my thoughts. I knew I was descended from a wealthy and highly respected family in Canada, but not that much. My parents never boasted about their associates, but I remember that a few years ago I saw a photo of my father in a newspaper chatting merrily in a restaurant with the person who was to become our Prime Minister. I go back to him and I ask the question that echoes in my head:

– But why me?

– Vincent you're our only child, think how painful our choice was.

At this point my mother can't hold back anymore and rivers of tears gush, my father avoids looking at her and continues.

– I had to put pressure of every kind to get you into the 18 Chosen. And it might be worth nothing. Maybe the aliens will take the Chosen 12 and cheers to those who remain. But it was a unique opportunity and I couldn't let it go.

I remain with the doubt whether the opportunity is more for me or for him. In 24 years he will be 65, and with the knowledge that the aliens promised to give us he could live for at least another century. But it's useless dwelling on it. I start packing; in two hours we leave for the North Sea.

The flight is long and to pass the time I try to imagine how things really went at the G24. I can just imagine the leaders after hours and hours of threats, retaliations, secret deals and betrayals of all kinds, managing with great difficulty to reach an agreement. At that point, it wasn't necessary to have any more time to choose those to send into space. The names were already written. All they had to was get them to oil rig as

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quickly as possible.

Nothing could be easier: if you have no spending limits, you can reach any corner of the world in a few hours.

We are among the last to land on the platform on the North Sea. A tanned muscular thirty year old comes to meet us and holds out his hand to introduce himself.

– I'm lieutenant Jardin, assistant to commander Polland. I hope you had a good trip. If you allow me, I will accompany you to your accommodation. I apologize for the lodgings that have been reserved for you: they will certainly not be comparable to the standards you are used to. This oil platform was chosen to isolate a limited number of people comfortably. Now we must also accommodate 18 of the Chosen youngsters as well as their families, so space and comfort are a bit limited.

Lieutenant Jardin takes us to a small room with three bunk beds, each with a metal cabinet. The bathroom is shared with 3 other families from down the hall. In fact, the comfort and personal space is less than that offered by a hostel. I think back to our house in Ottawa. Most likely my mother is thinking the same, but she doesn't show it, all her attention is directed at me.

Having arranged our luggage as best we could, Jardin asks me to follow him to a small meeting room. There are 14 other kids there. Only the two Brazilians and the Chinese girl are missing. They will arrive soon. Lieutenant Jardin leaves us alone to become familiar with one another. However, its difficult to break the ice, the right spirit is lacking. Everyone looks gloomy and heavy with melancholy; nobody can share the excitement of the world that is watching us with baited breath. Of course, an adventure that we had never ever imagined living awaits us. But the

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faces that I see around me are just scared and sad.

Within an hour, the last of the three Chosen arrived.

To mask our mood we try and introduce ourselves spiritedly. I have a problem with my memory, I struggle to remember people's names. In fact I find it hard to remember all sorts of things, but this is the most embarrassing. I try to force myself to memorize the names of my fellow adventurers, I would like to avoid making some other gaffe in space. I begin with the girls. The French girl (whom I have to admit, has a smile that does not leave me indifferent) is called Jo-Jo. That is, you call her Jo-Jo, but her real name is Josiane. Then I meet Taisiya (Russian), Meera (Indian), Hisa (Chinese), Cleo (Italian), Jill (South African), Camila (Argentina), Fernanda (Brazilian), and lastly Kunie (Japanese).

Mentally I repeat the name a few times and then I focus my mind on fixing the names of the guys. The first that comes to mind is Rolph (American), and Till (German), Eric (English), Rui (Brazilian) Sven (Swedish), Hiro (Japanese), Diego (Spanish), and the funniest, Jed (Australian).

I am trying to memorize them when one of them (I'm pretty sure it's Sven, or perhaps Till) asks us to come to the window. In the sky a dark spot has appeared which drops and progressively grows bigger. It is the ship that will take us into space. It does not land on the water but remains floating, a few inches from the platform. On one side, a piece of fuselage folds back and disappears inside, this is surely the tailgate. An alien emerges from the opening. It is wearing a loose white spacesuit which appears to be quite comfortable. A helmet with a transparent front window covers its head. The alien does not speak vocally. It communicates directly into the minds of those around it using a device around its forehead, it is a sort

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of elastic metal band, which it defines as a “brainwave transmitter.” The device transmits thoughts to everyone within ten feet of the alien, a bit like Bluetooth. It asks us very politely to take off all of our terrestrial objects (clothes, watches, jewelry, piercings, etc.) and to only wear the clothing that it has brought to us. This are sufficient to dress 12 people only, so only the Chosen wear them. I watch them with prudence, the clothes are shapeless tunics. Here, in the middle of the North Sea, the cold is biting, but the alien claims reassuringly that these garments are made with a thermal regulator fabric, that can stabilize the internal temperature according to the body temperature, regardless of the external weather conditions. Once ready, the 12 youngsters enter the spacecraft for the test that will assess their physical condition. Not even an hour has passed and the alien emerges from the same door and tells us (mentally again) the names of the youngsters who have passed the exam. There are only 11. Rui, for some obscure reason, is not within the parameters of their physical abilities to face the internship and must be replaced. Rui is the son of the Brazilian Premier and the fact that he was discarded saddens his father immensely.

Perhaps not only for the lost opportunity. If the aliens have discarded him perhaps it is because they have found some sort of cellular malformation that terrestrial instruments are more likely to discover way too late. The Brazilian leader tries to get an explanation, but the alien stares at him silently and returns to its ship while waiting for the replacement. The substitute is me.

The leaders during the scuffled allocation of the Chosen, had also concerned themselves with drawing up a list of 6 reserves. In order, the males are: the Canadian (me), the Australian (Jed) and the Spanish (Diego), the females are: the Japanese (Kunie), the Argentine (Camila) and

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the Brazilian (Fernanda). The aliens were very clear; they absolutely want exactly 6 males and 6 females. A male was excluded and is to be replaced with a terrestrial of the same sex. So now it's my turn to undress, put on the thermal tunic and climb onto the ship for the test. Although it doesn't look like anything I had imagined, this is certainly not a tourist spaceship. It seems rather like a freighter. The cockpit, isolated from the hold by a transparent screen, preserves and regenerates the alien atmosphere. There is a second alien sitting at the controls. The pilot observes me distractedly, then turns to devote himself to the instruments. Apart from the cockpit, the entire spacecraft is saturated with our very own breathable oxygen, on entering there is no danger and we can breathe freely. I climb on board and the alien tester tells me mentally to get into a vertical concave and transparent cabinet. It's a kind of large tube cut in half. As soon as I settle in, the casket closes becoming completely opaque. After less than two seconds it reopens. Fact. Sounds like a joke, but the alien tells me that I have passed the test and from now on I'm part of the Chosen 12. The second and last test we have to undergo is an intelligence test. The alien tells us that we must go up onto the ship one at a time and solve a number of questions in a predetermined time, then it tells us the order in which we have to face the test. I will be last.

Except for Hiro, the Japanese guy, all the other Chosen passed the intelligence test. Jed, who was named to replace Hiro, successfully passed both the physical and the intelligence test. Jed is a typical guy who jokes about everything, but tends towards exaggeration. Thus, his attempts to play down or ridicule someone often backfires and becomes embarrassing. The alien who oversees the test moves in a strange way: walking with extreme slowness and stiffness, at each step it moves all of

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its weight onto the leg resting on the ground, as though it limps with both legs. As we descend from the ship, Jed realizes that we are watching him and imitates the alien's walk. However, the salt and the humidity made the metal walkway very slippery and on the third step Jed slips and is in danger of tumbling into the sea. The laughter from the audience on the platform is inevitable.

A flash of satisfaction gleams from the alien's eyes. After about three hours of a grueling wait, finally it is my turn. I board the ship and the alien shows me a wall upon which the test to be challenged is being projected. To indicate the correct answers, I just have to touch them with a finger. Before I begin to answer the questions, they recommend that I read the instructions carefully.

THIS IS NOT A TEST TO MEASURE YOUR EFFECTIVE INTELLIGENCE RATHER IT IS A TOOL THAT ALLOWS US TO EVALUATE YOUR MENTAL READINESS AND YOUR LOGICAL SKILLS. YOU WILL NEED TO ANSWER 24 QUESTIONS IN 24 MINUTES. GIVE A LOT OF ATTENTION TO THE ANSWERS YOU INSERT, AS YOU WILL NOT HAVE A CHANCE TO CHANGE THEM. AT THE END OF PRESET TIME IF YOU HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO COMPLETE THE TEST OR IF YOU HAVE GIVEN MORE THAN 3 INCORRECT ANSWERS, YOUR MENTAL REACTIONS WILL NOT BE CONSIDERED SUFFICIENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS TRAINING COURSE ON LIFE. ONCE YOU HAVE STARTED THE TEST, IT MAY NOT BE SUSPENDED.



**THE ASTEROID**  
[ HYPERNOVEL ]

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