The Messenger

V. M. Vivek Mohan
He looked at the vast expanse before him, his face barely protected by a cloth drawn across it, the sunglasses shielding his eyes from the shard-laden desert sand that the fierce winds kept whipping about, making it difficult for him to breathe or to open his mouth.

"Are you ready?"

He looked at the figure that emerged from the cavernous building – a young woman barely in her thirties, but who had seen a lot more of life than he had, than he ever would, whose deep green tired eyes peered at him over the veil that covered her face.

He smiled and nodded. His journey back home had begun.

"Just a bit more," Mark willed himself.

The boys were a little further off, silently watching. Dark clouds were gathering in the distance, a storm was heading that way. Mark frowned. There had been nothing about it in the forecast. He reached the boys and turned around. He could see Alice on the beach playing with their kids – Jane, all of four years, and Jaden, nine.

He treded over the water for a while, watching them. Alice looked up and waved to him.

"Time to head home," he said to himself. He started towards the shore. He needed to get them to the hotel before the weather got worse.

He was still a couple of yards from the shore but imagined he could already feel the stones and sand beneath his feet.

One moment he thought he was there and attempted to stand, the next, the earth was pulled away from beneath his feet. He felt an overwhelming force dragging him towards the waves and out into the open sea. He tried to fight back, but the current was stronger.

His wings screamed for oxygen but he gritted his teeth and, kicking out with his legs, twisted his body around and swam upward and into the current. He broke the water's surface and gulped in the much-needed air. He knew every second he wasted reduced his chances of survival. He was panting hard. His chest hurt like hell. The seawater invaded his nose and mouth and he could barely see through the rain.

He kept swimming, but knew he wasn't winning. The powerful currents were pulling him further out into the sea.

Then he realized. He knew every second he could breathe in, which he did. The seawater invaded his nose and mouth and he could barely see through the rain.

It hit him. Every square inch of his body felt the blow. His ears rang. His breath was knocked out of him and he was pushed under the water, his body pirouetting in its force. He battled his way upwards, only to be pushed down before he could surface.

Where were they?

Then it hit him. He was no longer on the beach. There was no sea in sight, just sand that glimmered in the sun and the wind. He looked around, stunned and then saw them.

They were staring at him like he was some creature from another planet. They were covered from head to toe in what could, at best, pass for discards, only parts of their faces showing through veils and masks, even their eyes hidden by goggles. Mark looked oddly out of place in his trunks.

"What do we do with him?" someone asked behind him.

Mark turned … and stared. The guy held a huge gun-shaped device with complicated dials and knobs which terminated in what looked like two tuning forks fused together. He took a step backward.

"Nothing for the moment," a woman spoke this time, "not until we figure out who he is and where he's from."

"And besides, the weather's getting worse," said a man in spectacles, who had been looking intently at a hand-held console, "sandstorm approaching. Category five … or worse."

"Let's move!" the woman ordered. No arguments. Everyone obeyed.

Mark struggled over the sand to reach the woman.

"Where am I?"

She marked onward.

"My wife and children, have you seen them?"

Still no reply. Mark blocked her path.

"Where are they?" he repeated.

"You will get your answers in due course of time. Right now, we're got to go."

She gripped his arm and propelled him towards a convoy of vehicles where the others waited. They got into one of them and set off.

"Alice!" he thought, dragging himself up. They were nowhere to be seen. He turned around and looked. Not there either.
Before he could realize what was happening, he hit the water. He surfaced quickly and saw that he was quite close to the shore.

He struggled to the beach and checked the bag – the contents were undamaged.

"Just a while back. I was swimming and..." she turned around to face him.
"I meant which year."
"What?"
"Which year, Mark?" she asked emphatically.
"2011 of course," Mark replied, perplexed.
"Where were you?" she asked.
Mark told her all that had happened from the time he left the hotel with his family to when he met her.
"I'm sorry Mark, but we really don't know where your family is. You've been separated from them," she said, hanging into her seat as the jeep scaled one sand after another, "let's just hope they stayed out of the water."
What was she talking about?
"I don't understand."
She sighed and shook her head.
"I know it's going to be difficult, Mark, but this isn't 2011, and it isn't Queensland, it's Johannesburg."

They had reached their destination, a huge abandoned airfield. Sharon stepped out of the jeep and faced Mark.
"Welcome to your future," she said softly, "Welcome to 2030."

Mark's head swam. The massive hangars seemed to rush forward to engulf him.
And then, the storm was upon them.
They were inside a huge hangar as the storm raged on outside. Most of the others were sleeping when he walked up to where she sat.
"I need some answers and I need them now."
Sharon looked up at him with large green eyes that caught the flickering light of the fire. They seemed to be filled with so much sorrow and yet seemed stunningly beautiful. She patted the ground beside her. Mark sat down. She took a stick and poked at the fire, staring intently into it.
"So, what do you want to know?"
"Everything, Mark. For starters I don't believe we're in Johannesburg. It's impossible. So where exactly am I?"
Sharon shook her head slowly.
"Yes, indeed Johannesburg, not the Johannesburg as you knew it, but the one it shall become..."
"Stop being..." Mark interrupted, but she held up her hand.
"I want to complete. I know it will be difficult for you to accept, but hear me out."
"Like I said, this isn't 2011. It's not the world as you knew it. It's seen a lot in 30 years and may have just seen the last of this drama.
"What do you mean?" Mark asked.
"A Nuclear Apocalypse," she said softly.

Neither of them spoke for a while. All that could be heard was the crackling of the fire and the moaning of the winds outside.
"How?" Mark asked, finally finding his voice.
"Exactly the way many of us had foreseen – water. The abuse of drinking water was rampant in the age that you come from," she said, glancing briefly towards Mark, "and sooner or later, it was bound to take a turn for the worse."

Her tone had the feel of ice. The howling of the wind outside did not drown out the accusation in her voice.
"Good drinking water soon became scarce. The problems of global warming had by then increased significantly. Rivers and streams started drying up, ice in the poles melted faster than you could say 'Hello!'
Groundwater levels were either dangerously low or polluted and in a short span of a decade, more than 80% of the world was reeling under a severe water crisis. That was when we were brought into the picture, we had to convert the sea's plentiful but brackish water into good drinking water on a larger scale and at a much quicker rate than ever before and store it underground, in large vaults, capable of withstanding everything from earthquakes to nuclear bombs, built all over the globe."

"We were here in Johannesburg then. The leader of our project had been a wise man. He had seen trouble brewing and, after filling two out of four cavernous chambers of the vault with water, he had asked the third vault to be filled with provisions to last the group a long while and, just as soon as the first nuclear bomb had been dropped, had herded us into the final chamber, blocked off the tunnels that would have carried the water to the surface and locked us inside. We were completely cut off from the outside world and would have remained ignorant of the final days of the war, had it not been for Karl," she said, looking towards a guy who sat in a separate vault, "After the war, had it not been for Karl," she said, glancing briefly towards Mark, "and sooner or later, it was bound to take a turn for the worse."

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"He managed to hack into the security system of one of the first countries to be obliterated in the war and took over it's spy satellites and, unknown to the rest of the world, used them as our eyes while we spent the days inside the vault hoping and praying for the madness to end. We would sit huddled around a couple of laptops looking at the grim pictures the satellites provided. We watched in dismay as the nuclear war..."
raged on towards its tragic conclusion and one by one the lights of civilization were extinguished.

"The laptops we were using were also developed by Karl. They survived on any source of light – torches, fires, tubelights, anything, with a back-up battery-life of over 10,000 hours. But, eventually, that too was over, cutting the satellites adrift and plunging us into absolute darkness. We soon lost all track of time. We were unwilling to step outside, having no idea how much radiation was still present in the atmosphere, but knew we couldn't stay in there forever. So, one day, our leader took the brave decision to step outside. We all agreed, wanting to get out of there. The seal of the deer was broken, and our efforts … fruit, in the form of that," he said, pointing towards the gun-shaped object.

"We were stunned by what we saw would be the first place. To say that we slowly opened our eyes. To say that we were expectant, what we would see would be an understatement. There was nothing left, just a huge expanse of sand with shards of glass formed during the nuclear explosions – remains and reminders of the holocaust. The sun beat down mercilessly from the sky, not a cloud in sight and no sound save the wind – a barren place filled with the silence of death and destruction." Sharon's voice choked, but she managed to continue.

"Karl was able to get back into the satellites' system, which was thankfully OK. He kept looking for any signs of life, but failed. In the meanwhile, with whatever limited resources he had at hand, Karl had been working on his pet-project – that of creating a time machine. As the days dragged on, one thing became clear to us: we couldn't let the human race die out this way. Karl put everything into his dream and the rest of us pitched in with our help and our efforts … fruit, in the form of that," she said, pointing towards the gun-shaped object.

"It was meant to open up a portal in time for us so that we could go back to try and prevent mankind's destruction, but apparently we failed. We really hadn't much time to work on it. That coupled with the strong magnetic and radioactive forces at play here have caused the portal to be formed, not here, but in the past, which should explain how you got here in the first place."

"And besides, the portal's entrance is getting weaker, it won't be able to transport you by yourself." Shahid nodded. He sat dumbfounded, and then slowly nodded.

The trek over the sand was long and exhausting, but by the end of the day, they got there – the remains of a village in the middle of nowhere. Karl tracked down the source of the signals to a crumbling well in the centre of the village. Mark peeped over the edge and stood transfixed. There was no bottom – a black form swirled on its depths, a slight draft blowing towards it. He fell, catching a glimpse of Sharon's triumphant face.

"Go home! Spread the message of peace! Don't let our deaths be in vain!" She shouted as he kept falling.

His last vision was that of Sharon's face surrounded by the others. Then, there was a bright flash.

Before he could realize what was happening, he hit the water. He surfaced quickly and saw that he was quite close to the shore.

He struggled to the beach and checked the bag – the contents were undamaged. "Mark!" someone shouted. "Dad, dad…!"

He saw Alice and his kids running towards him in fear. Alice flung herself into his arms, sobbing. The kids clung to him.

As the tears stung his eyes, Mark knew what he had to do. He wouldn't let Sharon and her friends' sacrifice be in vain. He had more than his family at stake.

He would be their messenger.

"I won't," he said firmly.

"I won't, unless you come with me, all of you." Sharon smiled. Suddenly her face went pale. "Alice!" she gasped, staring past Mark. He wheeled around. Where? He felt a sharp push and spun back around as he fell, catching a glimpse of Sharon's face.

"So how am I to go back?" Mark asked anxiously.

"Karl's doing his best. Have faith in him," Sharon said, looking at Mark, "may be you should get some sleep now."

Mark nodded and went back to his rucksack and pulled a flimsy blanket over his head. He wasn't too sure he could fall asleep, but exhaustion soon got the better of him.

Mark awoke with a start. He sat up and saw Sharon, Karl and a few others talking animatedly. She saw him and came over.

"Karl's done it! He managed to put the time machine in order. The entrance has opened in our world, but its some distance away. He tracked it with the help of the satellites. So, are you ready?"

He sat dumbfounded, and then slowly nodded.

"So, you ready?"

"Ready when you are," he replied.

She looked at him sadly and shook her head.

"I'm sorry Mark, but you'll have to go by yourself."

"But why?" he asked, surprised.

"Our lives are almost at an end. We've been exposed to God alone knows how much radiation. Our team has been working, scythed down to half its strength due to it and the rest of us are in a bad state. We don't have too long to live. We might as well die here beside our comrades' graves. And besides, the portal's entrance is getting weaker, it won't be able to transport us all."

Mark listened in silence.

"But we want you to take this," she continued, handing him a bag, "it contains a documentation of all that has happened on this planet over the last couple of years. Get that to your world. Wake them up! Stop them before it's too late, please!"

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