

DANILO CLEMENTONI

***INTERSECTION
WITH NIBIRU***

*THE ADVENTURES OF
AZAKIS AND PETRI*



Danilo Clementoni

Intersection With Nibiru

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Danilo Clementoni
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This book is a work of fiction. Any names, characters, places and organisations mentioned are the work of the author's imagination and are intended to make the narrative authentic. Any similarity with real events or persons, living or deceased, is purely coincidental.

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This is the second volume in the series

"The adventures of Azakis and Petri" To fully enjoy this exciting adventure, before starting this book, I would advise reading the first volume entitled "Back to Earth" (Author's note)

To my wife and son, for their patience and their invaluable suggestions, which helped me to improve both my story and myself.

Special thanks to all my friends for their continuous encouragement and support, and for spurring me on to complete this work. Without them it may never have seen the light.

I would like to thank Linda Thody, my translator, for working on this book and for the passion she has shown in completing this translation.

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Introduction

The twelfth planet, Nibiru (the planet of the passing) as it was called by the Sumerians, or Marduk (king of the heavens) as it was referred to by the Babylonians, is actually a celestial body orbiting our sun with a period of 3,600 years. Its orbit is significantly elliptical, retrograde (rotating around the sun in the opposite direction to the other planets) and distinctly tilted in relation to the plane of our solar system.

Each cyclical approach has almost always caused huge interplanetary upheavals in our solar system, both in the orbits and the conformation of the planets it consists of. It was during one of its more tumultuous transitions that the majestic planet Tiamat, located between Mars and Jupiter, with a mass approximately nine times that of the Earth as it is today, rich in water and endowed with eleven satellites, was destroyed in a cataclysmic collision. One of the seven moons orbiting Nibiru struck the gigantic Tiamat, effectively splitting it in half, and catapulting the two sections into opposing orbits. In the following transition (the *second day* of Genesis), the remaining satellites of Nibiru finished off this process, completely destroying one of the two sections formed from the first collision. The debris generated from multiple impacts created what we now know as the *asteroid belt*, or *hammered bracelet* as it came to be called by the Sumerians. This was partly swallowed up by the neighbouring planets. It was Jupiter, in particular, which captured most of the debris, thus noticeably increasing its own mass.

The satellite artefacts of this disaster, including those surviving from Tiamat, were mostly *fired off* into outer orbits, forming what we now know as *comets*. The part that survived the second transition then positioned itself in a stable orbit between Mars and Venus, taking along with it the last remaining satellite and thus forming what we now call the Earth, together with its inseparable companion, the Moon.

The scar caused by that cosmic impact, which occurred approximately 4 billion years ago, is still partially visible today. The scarred part of the planet is now completely covered by water, in what is now called the Pacific Ocean. This occupies about a third of the earth's surface, extending over 179 million square kilometres. Over this vast area there is virtually no landmass, but instead, a large depression extending to a depth of over ten kilometres.

At present, Nibiru is very much like Earth in its conformation. Two thirds of it is covered in water, whilst the rest is occupied by a single continent that stretches from north to south, with a total surface of over 100 million square kilometres. For hundreds of thousands of years now, some of its inhabitants have been taking advantage of the cyclical close approaches of their planet to our own, making regular visits, each time influencing the culture, knowledge, technology and the very evolution of the human race. Our predecessors have referred to them in many ways, but perhaps the name that represents them best has always been *Gods*.

Background

Azakis and Petri, the two lovable and inseparable aliens who are the protagonists of this adventure, have returned to planet Earth after one of their years (3,600 earth years). Their mission? To retrieve a precious cargo that they had been forced to hastily abandon on their previous visit, due to a fault in their docking system. This time however, they have found a very different terrestrial population to the one they left behind. Customs, traditions, culture, technology, communication systems, weapons. Everything was very different to what they found on their previous visit.

On arrival, they came across a pair of terrestrials: Doctor Elisa Hunter and Colonel Jack Hudson, who welcomed them enthusiastically and after countless adventures, helped them bring their delicate mission to an end.

But what the two aliens would have preferred never to have to tell their new friends was that their own planet, Nibiru, was approaching rapidly and in just seven earth days would intersect the Earth's orbit. According to their Elders' calculations, one of its seven satellites would come so close as to almost touch the planet, causing a series of climate disruptions comparable to those of its previous passage, which had been summed up in a single definition: The Great Flood.

In the first part of the story (Back to Earth - The adventures of Azakis and Petri), we left all four of them inside their awe-inspiring spacecraft, the Theos, and that is where we will resume the tale of this fantastic new adventure.

Theos spacecraft

For the last few hours, Elisa had been swamped by such a vast amount of information that she felt like a little girl who had eaten too many cherries. Those two strange but lovable characters, who had suddenly appeared practically out of nowhere, had very quickly undermined many "historical certainties" that she and the rest of mankind had always pretty much taken for granted. Events, scientific discoveries, beliefs, cults, religions and even human evolution itself, were about to be completely revolutionised. News of the discovery that beings from another planet had so skilfully manipulated and guided the development of mankind, since its very earliest days, would have an impact on society like that of the revelation that the Earth was round, not flat.

Azakis and Petri, his trustworthy friend and travelling companion, stood motionless in the centre of the command bridge, their eyes trying to follow Elisa who was pacing nervously around the room, hands in her large trouser pockets, muttering incomprehensible words.

Jack by contrast was slumped in an armchair trying to support his head, which suddenly seemed incredibly heavy, with his hands. But it was Jack who, after a few endless minutes of silence, decided to take matters in hand. He abruptly stood up and facing the two aliens, said in a firm voice "If you chose us for this task you must have had a reason. All I can say is you won't be disappointed." Then he looked Azakis directly in the eyes and resolutely asked, "Could you show us a simulation, with that little bit of wizardry of yours," and he pointed at the virtual image of the Earth that was still slowly spinning in the centre of the room, "of your planet's approach?"

"With pleasure," answered Azakis immediately. He retrieved all the Elders' calculations through his N[^]COM implant and conjured up a graphical representation, right there, in front of them.

"This is Nibiru," he said indicating the largest planet. "And these are its satellites that we were talking about."

Seven, considerably smaller, celestial bodies, were spinning around the majestic planet at very different distances and speeds to one another. Azakis placed his index finger on the one orbiting the farthest away of them all and enlarged it until it was almost as big as himself. Then very solemnly he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to present Kodon to you; this imposing rocky mass has decided to create a lot of trouble for your beloved planet."

"But how big is it?" asked Elisa, intrigued, as she observed the lumpy dark grey globe.

"Let's say that it is slightly smaller in size than your moon, but its mass is almost double." Azakis made a rapid gesture with his hand and the entire solar system appeared before them, with the planets slowly moving in their respective orbits. The trajectories of each one represented by thin, different coloured lines.

"This," continued Azakis, indicating a dark red line "is the trajectory that Nibiru will follow in its approach to the sun." Then he accelerated the planet's movement until it was close to the Earth and added "and this is the point where the orbits of the two planets will intersect."

The two terrestrials watched the explanation Azakis was giving them of the event which, in just a few days' time, would upset their lives and those of all the other inhabitants on the planet, in astonishment, but with great attention.

"How close will Nibiru come to us?" asked the Colonel quietly.

"As I was saying earlier," replied Azakis "Nibiru won't bother you excessively. It's Kodon that will almost touch the Earth and create quite a lot of problems." He brought the image a little closer and showed a simulation of the satellite when it would be at its closest point to the terrestrial orbit. "This will be the moment of maximum gravitational pull between the two celestial bodies. Kodon will only be 200,000 kilometres from your planet."

"Heck!" exclaimed Elisa. "That's a pittance."

"The last time," replied Azakis "exactly two cycles ago, it went by at about 500,000 kilometres distance and we all know what it managed to do then."

"Yes, the famous Great Flood."

Jack was standing with his hands clasped behind his back, rocking slowly back and forth, rising slightly first on his toes then on his heels. Suddenly, in a very serious tone, he broke the silence, saying, "I'm certainly not one of the greatest experts on this subject, but I'm afraid that no terrestrial technology would be able to do anything to counteract an event like that."

"Perhaps we could launch missiles with nuclear warheads against it," hazarded Elisa.

"That only happens in science fiction films," replied Jack smiling. "And anyway, assuming we could land vectors of that type on Kodon, we would risk shattering the satellite into thousands of pieces, causing a deadly shower of meteorites. That really would be the end of everything."

"I beg your pardon," said Elisa addressing the two aliens. "But didn't you say earlier that, in exchange for our very precious plastic, you would help us solve this absurd situation? I hope you really do have some good ideas to help us out here, otherwise we're done for."

Petri, who had been standing quietly on the sidelines, smiled slightly and took a step towards the three-dimensional scenario represented in the middle of the bridge. With a rapid movement of his right hand he conjured up a kind of silver-coloured doughnut. He pointed at it with his index finger and moved it until it was exactly between the Earth and Kodon, then he said, "This might be the solution."

Tell el-Mukayyar — The escape

In the laboratory tent, the two fake Bedouins who had tried to steal the shuttle's precious content from the two aliens, were gagged and securely tied to a large drum of fuel. They were sitting on the ground with their backs against the heavy metal container, facing in opposite directions. One of the doctor's helpers stood guard outside the tent and looked inside, every so often, to check on them.

The thinner of the two, who definitely had a couple of broken ribs from the Colonel's blow to his side, despite the pain which was almost preventing him from breathing, had not stopped, even for one moment, looking around in search of something that might come in handy to free himself.

The light of the afternoon sun timidly penetrated inside the tent through a small hole in the wall, throwing a thin beam of light into the hot dusty air. That sword-like ray of light painted a small white ellipse on the ground, that was moving very slowly in the direction of the two prisoners. The thin guy was watching the slow progress of the bright patch, almost hypnotised, when a sudden flash of light brought him back to reality. Half buried in the sand, about a metre away, something metallic reflected the sunlight straight into his right eye. He moved his head slightly and tried to figure out just what it was, but in vain. So, he tried stretching a leg in that direction, but a terrible stab of pain in his side reminded him of the state of his ribs and he decided to desist. He thought he probably wouldn't reach it anyway and, trying to talk through his gag, whispered "Hey, are you still alive?"

The fat guy was no better off. After Petri had sent him flying, a large bruise had appeared on his right knee, he had a nice bump on his forehead, his right shoulder was killing him and his right wrist was swollen like a balloon.

"I think so," he answered in a small voice, mumbling through his gag.

"Thank goodness! I've been calling you for some time now. I was getting worried."

"I must have blacked out. My head is splitting."

"We've absolutely got to get away from here," said the thin guy with determination.

"But, how are you? Nothing broken?"

"I think I may have a few broken ribs but I can manage."

"How come we let them take us by surprise like this?"

"Never mind now. What happened, happened. Let's try and free ourselves. Look to your left, where that ray of sunshine falls."

"I can't see anything," replied the fat guy.

"There's something half buried there. It looks like a metal object. See if you can reach it with your leg."

The sudden noise of the tent's zip opening, interrupted the operation. The guard appeared and looked inside. The fat guy went back to pretending to be unconscious while the other one remained absolutely still. The man glanced at them, then cursorily checked all the equipment scattered around and, with a satisfied air, withdrew and closed the entrance again.

The two remained still for a while, then the bigger guy spoke first, "that was close."

"So, can you see it? Can you reach it?"

"Yes, now I can. Wait, I'll try."

The burly fake Bedouin began to rock back and forth trying to loosen the ropes that held him a little, then he began to stretch out his left leg as far as he could in the direction of the object. He could just reach it. He began digging with his heel until he managed to uncover a bit of it.

"It seems to be a trowel."

"It must be a Marshalltown Trowel. That's the tool of choice for archaeologists to scratch the ground looking for old crocks. Can you get it?"

"I can't reach."

"If you'd just stop stuffing yourself with all that junk food, you might be a little more agile, you fat ugly thing."

"Now what has my powerful physique got to do with it?"

"Come on then 'powerful physique', let's see if you can get hold of that trowel or they'll find a way to make you lose weight in jail."

Images of unsavoury and malodorous pimps suddenly appeared before the fat man's eyes. That terrible vision released a strength in him that he no longer thought he had. He arched his back as far as he could. A stab of pain shot straight from his sore shoulder to his brain, but he ignored it. With a decisive lunge, he managed to get his heel behind the trowel and, quickly bending his leg, drew it towards himself.

"Done it" he shouted from behind the gag.

"Will you just shut up, you ugly idiot? What are you screaming for? Do you want those two thugs to come back in and punch us up again?"

"Sorry," the big guy replied softly. "But I did manage to get it."

"See? If you put your mind to it, even you can manage to do something useful. It should be sharp. See if you can cut these damn ropes."

With his good hand, the big guy grabbed the handle of the trowel and began to rub the sharper edge on the ropes behind his back.

"Assuming we can free ourselves," the fat guy murmured "how are we going to get away from here? That site is full of people and it's still daylight. I hope you've got a plan."

"Of course I have! Aren't I the ingenious mind of the two of us?" exclaimed the thin guy proudly. "While you were having your cosy little nap, I analysed the situation and I think I've found a way to beat it."

"I'm all ears," replied the other one continuing to run the trowel up and down.

"That chap standing guard looks in here approximately every ten minutes and this tent is the outer one on the east side of the site."

"So?"

"How on earth did I get you as a partner for this job? You've got the imagination and the intelligence of an amoeba; hoping the amoebae don't take offence at the comparison."

"Actually," retorted the fat guy slightly piqued, "it was me who choose you, since the job was given to me."

"Have you managed to free yourself?" cut short the thin guy; the discussion was taking a turn for the worse and his accomplice was absolutely right.

"Just give me another moment. I think it's about to give."

Sure enough, shortly afterwards, the rope used to tie the pair to the drum broke and the big guy's belly, finally free of its constraints, resumed its normal size.

"There, done it!" exclaimed the fat guy satisfied.

"Great. But now let's keep this up until the guard comes back. We have to make everything look the same as before."

â##Okay partner. I'll go back to pretending to be asleep."

The two didn't have long to wait. A few minutes later, the doctor's assistant was back to peep inside the tent. He gave his usual cursory glance around taking in the situation and, not noticing anything strange, closed the zip, then repositioned himself in the shade of the veranda and calmly lit a hand-rolled cigarette.

"Now," said the thin guy. "Let's get moving."

With all their aches and pains, this turned out to be rather more complicated than expected but, after letting out a few dull groans of pain and several curses, they found themselves standing in front of one another.

"Give me the trowel," ordered the thin guy removing his gag. The pains in his right side prevented him from moving very easily but, by laying his open hand on his side, he managed to alleviate some of the pain. He reached the side opposite the entrance to the tent in a couple of steps, knelt and slowly pushed the Marshalltown Trowel into it. The trowel's sharp blade cut through the soft fabric of the east-facing side like butter, creating a small slit of about ten centimetres. The thin man put his right eye close to it and peered through the slit for a few moments. As he had expected there was nobody there. Only the ruins of the ancient city could be seen, about a hundred metres away, where, beforehand, they had hidden the Jeep that was going to be used for their get-away with all the loot.

"All clear," he said, using the blade of the trowel to lengthen the small cut he'd just made down to the floor. "Let's go!" And he crawled through the slit.

"You could have made this hole a little bigger, couldn't you?" muttered the fat man, between one groan and another, while he tried with difficulty to slip outside.

"Come on! We need to get away as quickly as possible."

"Easier said than done. I can hardly walk."

"Give over, hurry up and stop complaining. Remember, if we don't manage to get away, nobody's going to stop us spending a good few years in jail."

The word "jail" always managed to instil extra strength in the fat guy. He didn't say anything else and, suffering in silence, followed his companion who crept stealthily away towards the ruins.

It was the rumble of an engine in the distance that aroused the suspicions of the man on guard. He looked at the now finished cigarette for an instant, then flicked it away with a quick gesture. He slipped inside the tent with decision, but could barely believe his eyes: the two prisoners were gone. The rope lay abandoned untidily next to the drum of fuel, a little farther on there were the two pieces of fabric they had used as gags and on the end wall of the tent a large gash that went right down to the ground.

"Hisham, guys," yelled the man with all the breath he had in his lungs. "The prisoners have escaped!"

Theos spacecraft - The superfluid

The image of the object that Petri had placed in the space between Kodon and earth had left both terrestrials flabbergasted.

"And what's that thing?" asked Elisa curiously, as she went nearer to try and see better.

"We still have not given it an official name." Petri brought the strange object back into the foreground again and watching the doctor, he added "Perhaps you could choose one."

"If you could at least explain what it is, I might perhaps try."

"Our best scientists have been dedicated to this project for some time now." Petri clasped his hands behind his back and began to slowly walk around the room. "This equipment is the result of a series of studies that, partly, go even beyond my scientific skills."

"And I can assure you they're remarkable," Azakis added, giving his friend an affectionate pat on the back.

"In a nutshell, it's a sort of anti-gravity system. It's based on a principle which, as I said, is still being studied but which I can try to summarise in a few simple words."

"I think that would be much better," commented Elisa. "Don't forget we belong to a species which, compared to yours, could easily be defined as underdeveloped."

Petri nodded slightly. Then he approached the three-dimensional representation of the strange object and calmly continued his explanation. "This - what you called a *doughnut* earlier - is geometrically defined as a toroid. The tubular ring is hollow, while what we might simply call the *central hole* contains the propulsion and control system."

"Up to here it's all clear," said Elisa, ever more excited.

"Very good. Now let's see the system's principle of operation." Petri spun the image of the toroid around and showed its inner section. "The ring is filled with a gas, usually an isotope of helium which, cooled to a temperature close to absolute zero, changes state and turns into a liquid with very particular characteristics. In practice, its viscosity becomes almost null and it can flow without generating any friction. We call this characteristic 'superfluidity'."

"Now I'm getting a little lost," said Elisa sadly.

"To put it simply, this gas in its liquid state, appropriately stimulated by the ring's structure, will be able to travel inside it, without any difficulty, at a speed close to the speed of light, and manage to maintain it for a theoretically infinite time."

"Amazing," was all Jack could comment, who hadn't missed even a syllable of the whole explanation.

"Okay, now I think I've understood," added Elisa. "But how will this gadget counteract the effects of the gravitational pull between the two planets?"

"This is where things become much more complicated," replied Petri. "Let's say that the rotation of the superfluid at speeds close to those of light, generates a space-time continuum curvature around it, causing an anti-gravity effect."

"Good grief!" exclaimed Elisa. "My old physics professor will be turning in his grave."

"And not only him, my dear," added the Colonel. "If I have rightly understood what these two gentlemen are trying to explain to us, here we are talking about toppling a good many theories and concepts that several of our scientists have spent their entire lives trying to analyse and study. The principle of anti-gravity has been theorised more than once before but nobody has ever been able to prove it completely. Now we finally have the proof, here in front of us," and he pointed at the strange object "that it really is possible."

"I'd be a little more cautious," said Azakis, dampening the Colonel's excitement a little. "I feel obliged to inform you that this thing has never been tested on large objects like planets, or rather, we

tried it two cycles ago but it didn't turn out exactly as we expected. Moreover, events might occur that we have not anticipated and..."

"There you go, bringing bad luck as usual," said Petri interrupting his companion. "The mechanism has been demonstrated more than once. Our own spacecraft uses part of this principle for its propulsion. Let's be optimistic for once!"

"Because there don't really seem to be many alternatives anyway, or am I mistaken?" asked Elisa in a disappointed voice.

"Unfortunately, I don't think so," said Petri disconsolately, with his head hanging down slightly. "In fact, the only thing I really fear is that, given the reduced size of our toroid, we will not be able to completely absorb all the effects of the gravitational pull and a part of the gravitons will manage to do their work all the same."

"Are you saying that this thing might not be sufficient to prevent a catastrophe in any case?" asked Elisa approaching the alien threateningly.

"Perhaps not completely," replied Petri taking a small step backwards. "From my own calculations, I would say that about ten percent of the gravitons could escape this kind of ploy."

"So, it could all be wasted effort?"

"Not at all," answered Petri. "We'll reduce the effects by ninety percent. There'll be very little left for us to manage."

"We'll call it 'Newark'," said Elisa satisfied. "Now we'd better get a move on. Seven days go by quickly."

Camp Adder air base- The get-away

The two strange characters, still dressed as Bedouins, had just walked into their hideout in town when a faint intermittent sound from the laptop, still running on the living room table, attracted their attention.

"Who the devil's that?" asked the thin guy annoyed.

The big guy, who was limping more than ever now, approached the computer and, after keying in a decidedly complicated password, said: "It's a message from base."

"They'll want to know if the operation was successful."

"Give me a second to decode it."

A series of incomprehensible symbols appeared on the screen then, after entering a combination of codes in sequence, the message slowly began to appear.

General captured and taken to the air base at Camp Adder. Requires immediate rescue operation.

"For crying out loud!" exclaimed the fat guy. "They know already."

"How on earth did they manage that?"

"Well, they've definitely got more direct links than us. They don't miss much."

"And what do they expect us to do?"

"I don't know. It just says here that we must go and free him."

"Dressed like this? I don't think that's a good idea at all."

The tall, thin guy pulled a chair out from under the table, spun it around ninety degrees and then, uttering a series of intermittent groans, slumped on it. "This is all we needed!"

He rested an elbow on the polished surface and looked absently out of the window in front of him. He noticed the windows were decidedly grimy and the one on the right had a crack in it running almost its entire length.

Suddenly, he raised his eyes towards his companion, and with a sardonic little grin said, "I've just had an idea."

"I knew it, I know that look."

"Go and fetch the first aid kit and let me have a look at that bump you've got on your head."

"To tell the truth I'm more worried about my wrist. I wonder if it's broken."

"Don't worry, I'll fix it for you. I wanted to be a vet when I was a boy."

After a little more than an hour and massive doses of painkillers and various ointments smeared everywhere, the two cronies were almost as good as new again.

After looking at himself in the mirror hanging on the wall next to the entrance door, the thin guy said with a grin, "Now we can get going," and slipped into the bedroom. He emerged shortly afterwards holding two well pressed American military uniforms.

"Where did you get those?" asked the fat guy in amazement.

"They're part of the emergency kit I brought with me. You never know."

"You're completely crazy," said the big guy, shaking his head slightly. "And what are we supposed to do?"

"Here's the plan," said the thin guy, with a satisfied air, throwing his companion an XXL. "You'll be General Richard Wright, head of a top-secret government agency that nobody knows about."

"Obviously, if it's top-secret. And you?"

"I'll be your right-hand man. Colonel Oliver Morris, at your service, sir."

"So, I'm your superior. I like this."

"Don't get used to it though, okay?" said the thin man raising his forefinger. "And these are our papers with our identity badges."

"Heck! They look real."

"And that's not all, old chap," and he showed him a sheet of letterhead signed directly by Colonel Jack Hudson. "This is the official prisoner handover request for transfer to a 'safer place'."

"But where the devil did you get that?"

"I printed it out earlier while you were in the shower. Did you think you were the only computer wizard?"

"I'm astounded. It's even better than the original."

"We'll get into the military base and let them hand over the General. If they should object, we could always tell them to call Colonel Hudson directly. I don't think mobiles work in space," and at that they both roared with laughter.

About an hour later, when the sun had dropped behind a high sand dune, a military Jeep, carrying a Colonel and a General in full dress uniform, stopped at the entrance barrier of the Imam Ali air base or Camp Adder as the Americans had renamed it during the Iraq war. Two servicemen, armed to the teeth, came out of the armoured sentry box, and moved quickly towards the vehicle. Two others, at a distance, kept their sights on the passengers.

"Good evening Colonel," said the nearest soldier, giving a smart military salute. "May I see yours and the General's documents, please?"

The tall, thin Colonel who was sitting in the driver's seat, said nothing. He took a yellow envelope from the inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to him. The serviceman spent quite some time reading and shone his torch in both their faces a couple of times. The General distinctly felt the drop of sweat which, starting from just under the bump on his forehead, began to slowly trickle down his nose, to then drop onto the third button of his jacket, which was being unbelievably strained by the mighty thrust of the enormous stomach underneath.

"Colonel Morris and General White," said the serviceman, again pointing the torch in the Colonel's face.

"Wright, General Wright!" answered the skinny Colonel in a decidedly annoyed tone of voice. "What's the matter Sergeant, can't you read?"

The Sergeant, who had pronounced the General's surname incorrectly on purpose, smiled slightly and said, "I'll get someone to accompany you. Follow those men," and with a nod ordered the two servicemen to lead them to the prison.

The Colonel slowly started the Jeep. He hadn't gone barely a dozen metres when he heard a shout behind him, "Stop, Sir!"

The blood froze in the veins of the vehicle's two occupants. They remained motionless for a few very long moments, until the voice continued saying "You've forgotten your documents."

The corpulent General drew such a large sigh of relief that all the buttons on his uniform risked popping.

"Thank you, Sergeant," said the thin man holding out his hand towards the soldier. "I'm getting old faster than I thought."

They set off again in the jeep and followed the two soldiers who, proceeding apace, quickly led them to the entrance of a low and decidedly shabby building. The youngest soldier knocked on the large door and went in without waiting for an answer. Shortly afterwards, a large, completely bald, coloured man, with the stripes of a sergeant and the face of a tough guy, appeared on the threshold and stood to attention. He saluted and said, "General, Colonel. Please come in."

The two officers saluted in response and, trying to ignore the various pains that were starting to reappear, entered the large room.

"Sergeant" said the thin guy with determination. "We have a written order here from Colonel Hudson authorising us to pick up General Campbell," and he handed him the yellow envelope.

The large sergeant opened it and took his time reading the contents. Then, fixing his dark, penetrating eyes on the Colonel's, he sentenced, "I'll have to check."

“Go ahead,” replied the officer calmly.

The large coloured man drew another sheet of paper out of a drawer in the desk and carefully compared it with the one in his hand. He looked at the Colonel again and, without showing any emotion, added, “The signature is the same. Do you mind if I call him?”

“It’s your duty. But let’s try and be quick, please. We’ve already wasted too much time,” replied the skinny Colonel, pretending to be about to lose his patience.

By no means frightened, the sergeant slowly put a hand into the pocket of his uniform and drew out his mobile phone. He dialled a number and waited.

The two officers held their breath until the serviceman, after pressing a key on his phone, laconically commented “he can’t be reached.”

“So, sergeant, shall we get a move on?” exclaimed the officer with a decidedly more authoritarian tone than before. “We can’t stay here all night.”

“Go and fetch the General,” the large Sergeant ordered one of the soldiers who had accompanied the two officers.

After a couple of minutes, a totally bald man, with a large moustache and grey eyebrows, and two small bright black eyes, appeared on the threshold of the door behind the sergeant. He wore the uniform of a General, but one of the four ordinance stars was missing on his right shoulder. He was handcuffed and, behind him, the soldier from before held him at gunpoint.

The General jumped for a moment at the sight of the two officers, then, guessing the plan, remained silent and looked as sad as he could.

“Thank you, Soldier,” said the skinny Colonel, removing his Beretta M9 from its holster. “We’ll take this scumbag now.”

Theos spacecraft - Action plan

"Isn't it exciting to think that the two of us are going to save the Earth, my love?" said Elisa, gazing at the Colonel with the eyes of a loved-up kitten, as she reached for his hand.

"My love? Isn't that moving a little fast?" Jack chided her frowning.

Elisa winced, then when the Colonel smiled affectionately and stroked her cheek, she realised he was teasing her. "Swine! Don't play tricks like that on me again or I'll show you" and she began pummeling his chest with both hands.

"Okay, okay" whispered Jack, hugging her lovingly. "It was just a silly game. I won't do it again."

The sudden embrace had a calming and relaxing effect on Elisa. She felt all the tension she had accumulated up to then, suddenly melt away like snow in the sun. After all that had happened in the last few hours, it was just what she needed. She melted into his arms and slowly closing her eyes, leant her head against his strong chest and let herself go completely.

Azakis, meanwhile, had slipped into the dreadfully cramped H^{COM} booth and was waiting for an answer to his communication request on the holographic screen in front of him.

A series of multicoloured waves, starting from the centre of the screen, began creating an effect similar to that of a stone thrown into the calm waters of a pond. All of a sudden, the waves gradually began to fade and the hollowed and time-marked face of his Elder superior, started to appear.

"Azakis," said the man smiling slightly, while he slowly lifted his bony hand in greeting. "What can this poor old man do for you?"

"We revealed the truth to the two terrestrials."

"A bold thing to do," commented the Elder, holding his chin between his thumb and forefinger. "And how did they take it?"

"Let's say that after their initial legitimate amazement, I think they reacted very well." Azakis paused briefly then said, in a very serious tone, "We suggested using the superfluid toroid to them."

"The toroid?" exclaimed the other, rising to his feet so fast even a youngster would have been jealous. "But it hasn't been fully tested yet. You do remember what happened last time, don't you? We could create an uncontrolled gravity fluctuation with that thing and there's even the risk of creating a mini black hole."

"I know, I know only too well" replied Azakis quietly. "But I don't think there's an alternative. This time, if we don't use drastic measures, Kodon's passage could be fatal for the terrestrials."

"What's your plan?"

"The orbits of the two planets are estimated to intersect in just under seven days. If you could get them to prepare the toroid and have it brought here to me at least a day in advance."

"That's not much time, you know."

"You'll have to leave me a small margin for the positioning, configuration and activation procedure."

"I've got a bad premonition," said the Elder running a hand through his silvery white hair.

"Petri's with me. It'll all be fine."

"You're two clever guys, I don't doubt that, but be very careful. That thing could become a lethal weapon."

"You just try and let us have it in time, leave the rest to us. Don't worry."

"Okay. I'll get back to you as soon as everything is ready. Good luck."

His superior's face vanished from the monitor that went back to showing the same multicoloured waves as before.

Azakis slowly rose from the uncomfortable chair and stood with his hands resting on the top of the narrow desk for a while. A thousand thoughts were flooding his mind and, while a slight shudder ran down his back, he had the distinct feeling they were about to land themselves in a sea of woe.

"Zak," exclaimed his companion in adventure cheerfully, when he saw him emerge from the H[^]COM booth. "What did the old man say?"

Azakis stretched then answered calmly, "He gave us his approval. If everything goes according to plan we'll have the toroid, or rather Newark, the day before the planets' orbits intersect."

"Let's hope we manage it. It's not going to be easy to configure that thing in so little time."

"What are you worrying about my friend?" replied Azakis with a slight smile. "If the worst comes to the worst, we'll just open up a space-time distortion. That'll swallow up the Earth, Kodon, Nibiru and all the other satellites, all in one go."

The two terrestrials, who were standing a little way off but hadn't missed a single word of this conversation, were petrified.

"What are you saying?" Elisa managed to splutter, while looking at him appalled. "A space-time distortion? Swallow up? Are you telling me that if this plan doesn't work, we will be creating the destruction of our people and yours?"

"Well, there is a small risk," commented Azakis quietly.

"A small risk? And you tell us just like that, with that calm, serene look on your face? You must be crazy! And us, more than you."

"Calm down darling," intervened Jack, grabbing her by the shoulders and looking her straight in eyes. "They are much smarter and better prepared than us. If they've decided to go down this route, we cannot do anything other than support them and give them all the help we can."

The doctor let out a long sigh then said, "I need to sit down. Too many emotions today. If this goes on it'll kill me."

Jack took her by the arm and led her to the closest armchair. Elisa fell into it like a dead weight, with a low groan.

"Perhaps we've reduced the percentage of oxygen in the air a little too much," Azakis whispered to his companion.

"I tried to make it as compatible as possible for us all and avoid having to use those awful respirators."

"I know my friend, but I'm afraid they're being affected excessively by it."

"Okay, I'll change the mixture. We can adapt much more easily."

The Colonel, however, didn't seem to be affected at all and was more high-spirited than ever. Action and risk were his bread and butter and he felt perfectly at ease in situations like this. "Well," he exclaimed, as he positioned himself just below the three-dimensional image of Newark, which still rose majestically in the middle of the room. "This thing could save us all or lead us into absolute destruction."

"A succinct but effective analysis," commented Azakis.

"At this point," said the Colonel in a serious tone and with a deep voice, "I believe the time has come to warn the rest of the planet of the impending catastrophe."

"And just how are you thinking of doing that?" asked Elisa from her chair. "Are we just going to pick up the phone, call the President of the United States and say: 'Hello Mr President. Do you know, we are in the company of two aliens who have told us that, in a few days' time, a planet will get here that is going to sweep us all away?'"

"At the very least he'll have the call traced, get someone to come and fetch us and take us straight to the madhouse," answered Jack smiling.

"But don't you have a global communication system like our GCS?" Petri asked the Colonel, intrigued.

"GCS? What do you mean?"

"It's a general communication system, capable of memorising and disseminating information on a planetary scale. We can all access it, at varying levels, by means of an N^{COM}, a neural system implanted directly into our brains, at birth."

"Cool!" exclaimed Elisa, surprised. Then she continued, saying, "Actually, we do have a system of this sort. It's called the internet but we are nowhere near your level."

"And would it not be possible to use your internet to send a message to the entire planet?" asked Petri intrigued.

"Well, it's not quite that simple," replied Elisa. "We could enter information into the system, send messages to groups of people, perhaps even a short video and try to disseminate it as much as possible, but nobody would believe us and it certainly wouldn't reach everybody." She thought for a few seconds, then added, "I think the only way would be with good old television".

"Television?" questioned Azakis. Then, turning to Petri, he said, "That wouldn't by any chance be that system we used to receive images and films when we were on our way here?"

"Yes, I think so, Zak," and so saying, he began to tinker with a series of commands on the centre console. After a few seconds, he brought up some of the sequences on the giant screen that they had recorded earlier. "Is this what you're talking about?"

A multitude of films of all types began to appear in rapid succession: advertisements, news broadcasts, football matches and even an old black and white Humphrey Bogart film.

"But that's Casablanca," exclaimed Elisa in amazement. "Where did you get all this stuff?"

"Your broadcasts also radiate into space," answered Petri calmly. "We had to work on our receiving system a little, but we were able to receive them in the end."

"It thanks to them," Azakis added, "that we managed to learn your language."

"And some other much more complicated ones," commented Petri sadly. "I almost went crazy with all those little drawings."

"However," intervened the Colonel abruptly, "this is exactly what we were talking about, but I don't think even this is the best solution."

"Forgive me Jack," intervened Elisa. "Don't you think it might be best, first of all, to warn your superiors at ELSAD? After all, unless I misunderstood you, none other than the president of the United States himself is at the top of that organisation, or am I mistaken?"

"And how come you know all these things?" objected the Colonel, astonished.

"Well, even I have my sources" said Elisa, mischievously pushing aside a lock of hair that had fallen onto her right cheek.

"Do your women act like this too?" asked Jack, addressing the two aliens who were observing the scene with an amazed air.

"My dear chap, women are the same throughout the universe," replied Azakis smiling.

"However," continued the Colonel after the rather risky joke, "I think you're absolutely right. We need a trustworthy and credible institution to broadcast such serious and distressing news. I'm just a little worried about these external infiltrations which involved General Campbell and the two guys who attacked us. The General was actually my direct superior, but apparently, it would seem he's corrupt and a traitor."

"So, in the end we really will have to make that phone call we joked about before?" replied Doctor Elisa.

"Although it seems absurd, perhaps that is the only solution."

New York - Manhattan Island

In Manhattan, New York, in a luxurious office on the 39th floor of the imposing skyscraper located between 5th Avenue and 59th Street, a rather short man, with a stylish and well-groomed appearance, stood in front of one of the five large windows separating him from the outside environment. He was wearing a dark grey suit, undoubtedly Italian, a flashy red tie and had smooth, sleeked back, greying hair. His deep, dark eyes looked beyond the glass of the window, in the direction of Central Park, scrutinising the magnificent park which, from virtually right under his feet, stretched four kilometres in length and eight hundred metres in width, representing an invaluable green space, a source of oxygen and recreation, for the almost two million inhabitants of the island.

"Mr Senator, may I?" said a small bald man, with an expressionless face, knocking timidly at the elegant entrance door in dark lacquered wood. To the side, a small gilded nameplate in black italics announced, "Senator Jonathan Preston".

"What is it?" answered the man without even turning around.

"There's an encrypted video communication on hold for you."

"Okay, I'll take it from here. Close the door when you leave."

The man walked slowly towards the elegant dark desk and sat down on the soft black leather desk chair. With an automatic gesture, he touched the knot of his tie, placed the earpiece in his right ear and pushed a small grey button located underneath the top of the desk. A large semi-transparent monitor, began to descend from the ceiling with a slight hissing sound, until it gently came to rest on the top of the desk. The man touched the screen and General Campbell's large face appeared before him.

"General, I note with pleasure that you are no longer a guest of the nation's prison service."

"Senator, how are you? I wanted to thank you, first of all, for the rapid and efficient recovery operation."

"I think the credit all goes to the two individuals I can see behind you."

The General instinctively turned around and saw the fat guy and his accomplice, who were trying to get themselves into the webcam's range, just as the public usually does when everyone crowds behind a journalist doing a live television broadcast. He shrugged his shoulders slightly and went on saying, "They're not exactly the brightest sparks but they're very efficient for certain types of work."

"So! Now tell me everything. Your report should have been on my desk more than twelve hours ago."

"Shall we say I've been rather busy lately," answered the General ironically. "Anyway, I can confirm that your intuition on Doctor Hunter's work was spot on and, thanks to your discovery, I was able to personally be present at an event that was nothing short of amazing."

The General paused a moment, hoping to increase the other's curiosity even more, then added, "Senator, I'm not sure how, but our doctor's discovery of the infamous vase with the precious contents, must have somehow activated a system that attracted none other to our planet than..." He stopped, aware that the phrase he was about to say would be a little difficult to actually take in, then took a deep breath and, without further hesitation, solemnly announced, "An alien spacecraft."

The officer tried to keep his eyes fixed straight ahead on the monitor searching for signs of amazement on the Senator's face. But he didn't even blink. He simply rested his elbow on the dark wood of the desk and, holding his chin between his thumb and forefinger, began gently stroking it. He continued doing this for a few seconds then very simply stated, "So, they're back."

The General couldn't help but open his eyes wide in surprise.

So Preston already knew everything about the aliens... How could that be possible?

The Senator rose slowly from his comfortable chair and, clasping his hands behind his back, began to pace around the desk in circles. The General and his two assistants standing behind him didn't dare add even a word. They confined themselves to exchanging doubtful glances and waiting patiently.

Suddenly, Preston went back to his desk, leant both hands on it and, looking the General straight in the eyes, said, "You had a drone with you. Please tell me that you managed to film this spacecraft."

The General turned, desperately searching for a positive response from the pair behind him. The thin guy smiled smugly and puffing out his chest with pride, announced with a satisfied air, "Certainly Senator, more than one. I'll send them to you immediately."

He unceremoniously moved the General aside and, after tinkering a little on the keyboard in front of him, made the shots taken in Doctor Hunter's site appear in a window on the Senator's screen.

Preston placed both his elbows on the desk, leant his chin on the closed fists of his hands and moved as close as possible to the monitor so as not to miss a single frame running across the screen in front of him. First the night images of the stone container discovered buried in the ground, then those of the mysterious black ball inside it and it being transported into the laboratory tent. Then the scene changed. To one of broad daylight. A circular silvery structure, apparently resting on four beams of reddish light coming from the corners of an imaginary square drawn on the ground, was in full view. The whole appeared to be a kind of truncated pyramid which bore a staggering resemblance to the Ziggurat of Ur, which could be seen rising majestically in the background.

The Senator was unable to tear his eyes away from the screen. When he saw the two figures, human in appearance but decidedly taller and bulkier than average, appear in the opening of the silver coloured structure and position themselves, legs wide apart, on what had to be a descending platform, he couldn't help but jump as he felt his heart beating wildly in his chest.

The dream he had been pursuing all his life had finally come true! All his studies, his research, above all, the substantial capital he had invested in this project were finally giving the hoped-for results. Those figures he was watching on the screen really were two aliens who, on board their highly-advanced spacecraft, had crossed interplanetary space to return to Earth again. Now he would be able to show all those people who had always criticised him that his calculations were absolutely accurate. The mysterious twelfth planet of the solar system really did exist! After 3,600 years, its orbit was about to cross the earth's again and there before him were two of its inhabitants who, taking advantage of the ride provided by the planet, had returned to visit and once again influence our culture and our lives. It had already happened who knows how many other times over the millenniums and now history was repeating itself yet again. This time however, he too was there and he certainly wasn't going to let this once-in-a-lifetime chance escape him.

"Good work" said the Senator simply, addressing the three faces looking apprehensively at him from the screen. Then, after spinning his chair around full circle, he added "The fact General, that you allowed yourself to be discovered will complicate things a little. We shall no longer have the possibility of having an authoritative ear within ELSAD but, at this point, we are no longer interested."

"What do you mean, Senator?"

"Our goal now is no longer to discover if Doctor Hunter's assumptions were correct, nor to come into possession of the precious contents."

"Yes, because they were anything but precious anyway," whispered the fat guy.

"We can go directly to phase two" continued the Senator, pretending not to have heard. "We are faced with an incredibly advanced technology and they are handing it to us on a silver platter. All we have to do is simply take it before someone else gets in before us."

"Allow me, Senator," ventured the General timidly. "My two helpers have discovered at their own expense that our two lovable aliens do not seem to be all that willing to cooperate."

"Let's just say they beat us up," added the big guy, rubbing his knee.

"I can imagine the kind of approach you used," retorted the Senator, with just the hint of a smile. "Have you ever wondered how come they entertained such friendly relations with the doctor and Colonel Hudson?"

"To tell the truth it did seem rather strange," replied the General. "With them, they behaved as if they had known them a lifetime."

"Instead, I believe they simply showed themselves to be much more friendly and nicer than you."

"Well, to be fair, it's not like we handled them with kid gloves exactly."

"What has been, has been," sentenced the Senator. "Now just try and concentrate on the next mission. You two, trace the Colonel and his friend. I don't want you to let them out of your sight for even one moment. You've got means and funds available. I'll not accept mistakes this time."

"Now who's going to tell him that those two are having a ride around the Earth?" whispered the fat guy in the thin one's ear, an instant before letting out a low moan caused by the kick on his left shin that his accomplice had just landed on him.

"You instead General, will come and fetch me at the airport."

"Are you coming here personally?" exclaimed the soldier amazed.

"I wouldn't miss this event for anything in the world. If that's their landing base, they'll have to return there, but this time we'll have a nice welcome committee waiting for them. I'll give you instructions when I'm on my way. Good luck everyone," and he ended the conversation.

The Senator remained still a few more moments looking at the monitor in front of him which, after the end of the transmission, was now showing a series of spectacular pictures of the Arizona desert that ran slowly across it, one after the other. Then, as if something had suddenly awoken him, he jumped to his feet, pushed the button on the communicator on his desk and said curtly into the built-in microphone "Have them prepare my plane and call my driver. I want to be in the air within an hour at the most."

Theos spacecraft - The gift

"We must go back down," said Colonel Hudson to the two aliens. "I need to make some phone calls and I really don't think it's possible from here."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," answered Azakis smiling. "You know, if good old Petri seriously puts his mind to it, he can do things you can't even begin to imagine," and he gave his companion a pat on the back.

"Calm down, calm down," answered Petri waving his hands in the air. "First of all, define the concept of 'phone call'."

Jack, a little surprised at the apparently trivial question, turned towards Elisa who, first shrugged her shoulders then, indicating the Colonel's pocket, said candidly, "Show them your phone, no?"

With a quick movement, Jack took out his smartphone. It was a rather dated touchscreen. He had never liked following the absurd tendency of always having the latest mobile phone. He preferred to have something to hand that he knew, without always having to waste a lot of time learning all the new features.

"I'm not an engineer," said Jack as he showed it to the alien, "but with this thing, we are able to talk to another person who has a similar one, simply by dialling their number on this keypad."

Petri took the phone and observed it carefully. "It must be a one-to-one transmission system, similar to our hand-held communicators."

"With the only difference," added Elisa, "that every time we use it, it sucks a whole lot of money off us."

Thinking that his limited knowledge of their language would not allow him to grasp all its concepts, Petri decided to ignore this last statement and continued to analyse the object he was holding in his hand. "I shall need a little time to understand how it works."

"Sure, take your time," replied Elisa disconsolately. "After all, it's not like there's a planet about to crash into us."

Petri looked at her perplexed then, seeing as he hadn't caught on to that quip either, decided to say no more. He simply shrugged his shoulders and slid into the nearest internal transfer module where he disappeared within a few seconds.

"Well, presuming it is possible to get your mobile to work from here, how were you thinking of proceeding?" asked Elisa, while desperately trying to recover from the weakness caused by the lack of oxygen and the thousand emotions she had been through over the last few hours.

"Initially I thought of contacting Senator Preston, General Campbell's direct superior. But as he has never been very convincing in my view, I've decided to go down a different route to get to the President."

"Do you think he might also be involved?"

"Those two devils have never been truthful with me. Rumours have been going around that Preston is even implicated with some decidedly disreputable arms manufacturers. I don't trust him at all."

"So?"

"So, I shall speak directly to Admiral Benjamin Wilson. He was the President's right-hand man for several years and he was also a very good friend of my father's."

"Was?"

"Unfortunately, my father left us almost two years ago."

"I'm sorry..." whispered Elisa gently caressing his left arm.

"Wilson held me on his knees when I was a child. He's one of the few people I trust blindly."

"I don't know what to say. No matter how well you get along with him, I think it'll be difficult to get him to swallow a story like this over the phone."

"I could always send him a few photos of the view of his city from up here."

"With our short-range sensors," remarked Azakis, who until then had remained on the sidelines, "we could even tell him the beats per minute of his heart, in real time."

"Please don't joke about it," exclaimed Elisa, emphasising what she was saying with a gesture of her hand.

"Don't you believe me? Watch this then."

Through his O^COM, Azakis made the view from above of the doctor's base camp appear on the giant screen. In a few seconds, he enlarged the image to bring her laboratory tent into full view.

"What you are seeing..."

"Is my tent," exclaimed Elisa before Azakis could end the sentence.

"Exactly. Now watch this."

All of a sudden, it was as if the tent's cover had disappeared and she could see all the objects inside it perfectly.

"My desk, my books ... incredible!"

"If there were someone inside, I could show you the heat generated by their blood flow and therefore I could also calculate their heartbeat."

Decidedly satisfied with the demonstration he had given them, the alien began to wander proudly around the room.

The Colonel however, who still had not recovered from his astonishment, suddenly seemed to have been hit by a thunderbolt and exclaimed crossly, "What do you mean if there were someone? There must be someone. Where the devil are the two prisoners?"

Elisa moved closer to the screen to get a better look. "Perhaps they've moved them. Can we have a complete view of the rest of the site?"

"Yes, no problem."

In a few seconds, Azakis started running an overview of the camp. The sensors scrutinised everywhere but there was no trace of the two prisoners.

"They must have escaped," said the Colonel laconically. "This means we'll be finding them under our feet again before long. Luckily the General was taken to a safe place by my men. Those three together are capable of doing more harm than the devil himself."

"It doesn't matter," said Elisa. "We've got much bigger problems to worry about right now."

She had barely finished the sentence when the door of internal communication module number three opened. An attractive girl stepped out of it, with soft, sinuous steps. She was holding some sort of completely transparent tray in her hands, on which there were different coloured containers.

"Ladies and Gentlemen" announced Azakis pompously, flashing one of his best smiles. "Allow me to introduce the most enchanting navigator in the entire galaxy to you."

Jack, whose jaw had fallen in amazement, managed only to stutter "Hello" before he received an elbow in his right side, right between his tenth and eleventh rib.

"Welcome aboard" she said in rather faltering English. "I expect you're hungry. I've brought you something to eat."

"Thank you, that's very kind," said Elisa angrily, glaring at her man.

The girl said no more. She placed the tray on a support to their left and her face lit up with a beautiful smile, then a few seconds later, she disappeared once again in the same module she had arrived with.

"Pretty no?" commented Azakis watching the Colonel.

"Pretty? Who? What do you mean?" Jack hastened to respond, mindful of the blow he had just received.

Azakis burst into a roar of laughter then, with a wave of his hand, he invited them to help themselves.

"What on earth is this stuff?" murmured Elisa, while in decidedly inelegant fashion sniffing the various dishes.

"Liver of Nebir," the alien hastened to list, "rib of Hanuk and boiled roots of Hermes, all accompanied by, shall we say, an energy drink."

"It was completely different at the Masgouf restaurant," commented Elisa laconically. "But I'm starving so I think I'll try something."

She grabbed a piece of rib with her hands and, without too much trouble, began to gnaw it down to the bone. "This stuff won't give us an enormous bellyache, will it Zak? You try it as well, my love. The taste is a little strange but it's not that bad really."

The Colonel, who was watching Elisa with horror while she devoured all those strange foods on the tray without restraint, just mumbled, "No, no thanks. I'm not hungry."

His attention was attracted instead by the strangeness of both the tray and the containers used as plates. He grabbed a bright red one and tested its consistency. It was strange and quite cold. Colder than it should have been and, despite this, the food in it was boiling. He lightly ran the tip of his index finger across its surface. It was incredibly smooth. It didn't seem to be of either metal or plastic. On the other hand, how could it be plastic? They used it for completely different purposes. The other decidedly bizarre thing was that, despite the perfection of its surface finish, there were absolutely no reflections in it. The light was like swallowed up by that mysterious material. He put his ear close to the smooth surface and, with the knuckle of his middle finger, began to gently tap it. Incredibly, the container did not make any noise. It was as if he were knocking on a big wad of cotton wool.

"But what are these objects made of?" he asked, greatly intrigued. "And the serving tray? It would appear to be of the same material."

Azakis, somewhat surprised by the strange question, also approached the tray. He picked up another vessel, this time pale green in colour, and lifted it up to the level of his eyes.

"In actual fact, it's not really a material."

"In what sense? What do you mean?"

"What do you use to hold objects, food, liquids or substances in general?"

"Well, we usually use wooden or cardboard boxes to transport materials. To serve food we use metal pans, china plates and glass glasses. To transport or store foods and liquids in general, we use plastic containers in a variety of different shapes."

"Plastic? Are we talking about the plastic we're interested in?" asked Azakis shocked.

"I believe so," replied the Colonel softly. "Actually, plastic has become one of our biggest problems with regard to the pollution of our planet. Even you told us you found disproportionate amounts of it everywhere." He paused briefly, then added "That's why your offer to recover it all appealed to us so much. We may have found the solution to a gigantic problem."

"So, if I have understood correctly, you use plastic as a container and then throw it away without restraint, polluting every corner of your planet?"

"Precisely" replied Jack, increasingly embarrassed.

"But that's madness, it's absurd. You're poisoning yourselves with your own hands."

"Well, if you also consider all the smog caused by our means of locomotion, from our factories and power generation systems we've actually managed to do a lot worse. Not to mention the radioactive waste that we still do not know how to dispose of."

"You're completely crazy! You're destroying the most beautiful planet in the entire solar system. And, unfortunately, it's our fault too."

"How is it your fault?"

"Well, it was us who changed your DNA, a hundred thousand years or so ago. We gave you superior intelligence to any other beings on Earth and what have you used it for?"

"To bring the planet to ruin." Jack spoke with his head down, like a student who is being reproached by the teacher for not having done his homework. "But now you're back! I really hope you can give us a hand to fix the damage we've done."

"I don't think it's going to be that easy" said Azakis increasingly upset. "Thanks to Petri's analysis on the state of your oceans, we've seen that the amount of fish in them has been reduced by over eighty percent since the last time we were here. How did that happen?"

At that point, Jack just wished the floor would swallow him up. "There are no excuses" was all he managed to say almost in a whisper. "We're just a bunch of condescending, arrogant, conceited and silly mindless beings."

Elisa, who had been listening to Azakis' tirade in silence, swallowed the last piece of Nebir liver, wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, then said quietly "We're not all like that you know?"

The alien looked at her in surprise, but she went on with decision "It's those in power as they are called who have reduced us to this state. Most normal people fight every day to protect the environment and all forms of life which inhabit our beloved planet. It's easy to come here from millions of kilometres away, after thousands of years and moralise. You may well have given us our intelligence but you didn't leave us even a shred of an instruction manual on how to use it!"

Jack looked at her and realised he was head over heels in love with this woman.

Azakis was speechless. He certainly hadn't expected a reaction like that. Elisa, on the other hand, continued undeterred "If you really want to help us, you should make all your technological, medical and scientific knowledge available to us, in the shortest possible time as you certainly won't be staying on this devastated planet for very long."

"Okay, okay. Don't get too upset," Azakis tried to answer. "I think we did put ourselves at your disposal, without hesitation, to give you a hand or not?"

"Yes, I know. I'm sorry... You could just have taken your plastic and headed off back to where you came from without even saying goodbye and instead here you are risking your lives together with us."

Elisa really was sorry for her outburst. So, to defuse the situation a little, she exclaimed cheerfully "But the food was delicious!" Then, she approached the alien and looking up at him from below said softly "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have."

"Don't worry, I do understand and to show you there's no hard feelings, I'll give you this." Elisa held out her open hand and Azakis dropped a tiny dark object into it.

"Thank you, but what is it?" she asked intrigued.

"It's the solution to your problems with plastic."

Nasiriyya - The dinner

After the Senator had abruptly closed the conversation, the three of them had stayed there a bit longer, looking at the monitor in front of them, which was showing abstract, multicoloured drawings intertwining one with the other, in endless motion.

"What now?" asked the tall, thin guy, interrupting the sort of collective hypnosis.

"I've got an idea" replied the big guy. "It's quite a while since we had a bite to eat and I can see hamburgers everywhere."

"And where do you think we're going to find a hamburger now?"

"I have no idea but I do know that if I don't eat something soon, I'll pass out."

"Oh, poor thing, he's going to faint," said the thin guy in a childlike voice. Then his tone changed "With all those rolls of fat you carry around on your hips you could spend a month without eating."

"Okay, stop it both of you with all this nonsense," exclaimed the General irritated. "We need to devise an action plan."

"But I can't reason on an empty stomach," said the fat guy softly.

"Oh, all right then," exclaimed Campbell raising his hands in defeat. "Let's go and get something to eat. We'll come up with a plan later, after all we've got quite a bit of time before the Senator gets here."

"Now you're talking, General," exclaimed the big guy happily. "I know a little place that's not at all bad where they make a fantastic mutton stew with potatoes, carrots, peas, flavoured with curry sauce."

"Well, I have to say that after that detailed description, I'm a little hungry too," said the thin guy rubbing his hands together quickly.

"All right, you've convinced me," said the General rising from his chair. "Let's go, but let's try not to get caught. Even if I doubt they've found out yet, to all intents and purposes I'm a fugitive."

"And the two of us aren't?" replied the thin guy. "We escaped from the camp and they'll doubtless be looking everywhere for us. However, for the moment, who cares?"

A few minutes later, a dark car carrying three shady characters sped into the night along the semi-deserted streets of the town, raising a fine cloud of dust as it passed.

"Here it is, that's it," said the big guy who was sitting on the back seat. "It's a bit late but I know the owner. There won't be any problems."

The skinny guy, who was driving, looked for an out-of-sight place to park the car. He drove around the block then slipped it under the derelict roofing of an abandoned hut. He quickly got out of the car and warily observed all the surrounding area with great attention. There was nobody around.

He went around the car, opened the passenger door and said, "All quiet, General. We can go."

The big guy also got out of the car and set off with quick steps towards the main entrance of the premises. He tried turning the handle, but without success. The door was closed but the light inside was still lit. Then he tried to peep through the glass, but the thick coloured curtain didn't allow him to see much. Without wasting any more time, he began to knock vigorously and didn't stop until he saw a little man, with black curly hair, peep out from behind the curtain.

"But who the heck ...," the little man had started to exclaim in an irritated voice, but when he recognised his portly friend, he stopped mid-sentence and opened the door.

"Oh, it's you. What are you doing here at this time of night? And who are these men?"

"Hey, you thieving old fellow, how are you? These are my friends and all three of us are very hungry."

"But the restaurant is closed, I've already cleaned up in the kitchen and I was just about to leave."

"I think this other friend of mine will convince you better than me," and he waved a hundred-dollar bill in front of his nose.

"Well, actually ... I have to admit that very well might" replied the little man, whipping the banknote out of the fat guy's hands and making it disappear into his shirt pocket. "Please, come on in," he said throwing open the door and bowing slightly at the same time. After a brief look back, to check no one was watching them, one after the other, the three sidled into the small restaurant.

There were two rooms which didn't really appear to be particularly well cared for. The floor was made of rough dark slabs. In the larger room three low round tables, each standing on a worn carpet with badly faded colours, were surrounded by cushions which were also a little tatty. However, in the other room the décor was more western in style, and it seemed much more "intimate". Large curtains in warm hues covered the walls. The lighting was soft and the setting was definitely much more welcoming. Two small tables had already been laid, ready for the next day's customers. Each with a dark green tablecloth with multi-coloured embroidery, matching napkins in the same colour, light silver edged china underplates, forks to the left, knives and spoons to the right and, in the centre, a long dark yellow candle in a small black stone candle holder.

"Can we go in there?" asked the big guy pointing towards the smaller room with his enormous right hand.

Without answering, the little curly haired man dived into the smaller room, pushed the two tables together and arranged the chairs then, with a deep bow and theatrical sweeping gesture of his arms, said "Please, take a seat gentlemen, you'll be more comfortable in here."

The three seated themselves at the table and the big guy said, "Make us your special dish and meanwhile bring us three beers." Then without giving him a chance to answer, he added "And don't get too crafty. I know you've got several crates of it hidden away somewhere."

The General waited for the owner to disappear into the kitchen, then he began to comment on the conversation they'd had shortly before. "The Senator is ruthless. We must tread very carefully with him. If anything were to go wrong, he wouldn't hesitate one moment before hiring somebody to get rid of us."

"Brilliant" replied the fat guy. "It seems like everyone is madly in love with us, no?"

"Let's just try and do our work as well as possible and nothing will happen to us" commented the thin guy, who until then had been silent. "I know these sorts, if we don't create problems and do everything we are ordered to do, it will all be just fine and we'll each get our well-deserved reward."

"Yes, a bullet in the middle of the forehead," answered the big guy softly.

"Come on, don't bring bad luck. Everything's worked out fine, up to now, hasn't it?"

"Yes, up to now."

In the meantime, hidden away in the kitchen, the owner of the restaurant was talking quietly in Arabic, on the phone, "It's him, I'm telling you, it's him."

"It's incredible that he's come there without a proper escort."

"He's with two other people. I know one of them very well and I'm sure he's part of some strange organisation that could be linked to him in some way."

"Can you take a picture of him and send it to me? I don't want to get all ready to pounce and then realise it's simply a case of mistaken identity."

"All right, I'll see what I can do. Give me a few minutes."

The man closed the call, turned on the camera on his mobile phone, then placed it in his shirt pocket so the lens was not completely covered and, picking up an aluminium tray, placed three large glasses on it. He opened three bottles of beer and placed them next to each of the glasses. Then he

lifted the tray up with his right hand, took a deep breath, and set off towards the table occupied by the three dining companions.

"I hope the brand is to your liking," he said while handing out the drinks. "Unfortunately we don't have many different types. The laws here are very strict about alcohol."

"Yes, yes, don't worry," said the big guy as he grabbed a bottle and started pouring it for himself, filling the glass with foam.

The man, paying special attention to position himself right in front of the general, picked up his glass, tilted it slightly and carefully poured almost half the bottle into it. Then doing the same with the thin guy's, he exclaimed "There you go! It doesn't need a poor Iraqi to teach three Americans how to pour beer, right?"

Loud laughter erupted spontaneously from the three diners who, raising their glasses, clinked them together in an auspicious toast.

The owner, having bowed slightly, withdrew once again into the kitchen. As soon as he crossed the threshold, having checked that nobody was watching, he looked at his mobile phone to check the recording he'd just made. The pictures were a little shaky but the chubby face of general Campbell was clearly visible. He immediately sent the movie to the number he had called earlier on and then waited patiently. Less than a minute went by and the phone vibrated slightly warning him of an incoming call

"It's him," said the voice on the other end. "We'll be there within an hour at the most. Don't let them leave before we get there for any reason."

"They've only just arrived and they still have to start eating. You've got plenty of time," and he hung up.

Theos spacecraft ## The Admiral

Elisa was still observing the strange little object that Azakis had dropped into her hand when the door of internal communication module number six opened. Petri emerged, a broad smile on his face, holding the Colonel's mobile.

"Done it," he exclaimed "or at least I hope I have." He quickly joined the three of them at the centre of the command bridge and continued "It's a decidedly antiquated system but I think I've identified its operating principle. I've hooked up to one of those satellites that slowly circle around the planet in a much lower orbit than ours and now I think it'll be possible to make a call."

"Well done my friend," exclaimed Azakis. "I didn't doubt you'd manage it."

"Before singing victory, let's see if it actually works," said Jack, taking the phone out of the alien's hands. The Colonel looked carefully at the screen then said in a surprised tone "That's incredible, I've got three notches of signal."

"Go on, try it," suggested Elisa, all excited.

Jack rapidly ran through his list of contacts and found Admiral Wilson's number. But before calling, a doubt suddenly struck him, "what time is it now in Washington?"

"Well, it should be about two thirty in the afternoon," replied Elisa, after glancing at her wrist watch.

"Okay, I'll try then." Jack took a deep breath then pressed the "ENTER" key. The phone rang. Incredible...

He waited patiently and only after the seventh ring a husky deep voice answered, "Admiral Benjamin Wilson, who's there?"

"Admiral. It's Colonel Jack Hudson. Can you hear me?"

"Yes son, loud and clear. It's a pleasure to hear from you after so long. Is everything alright?"

"Admiral... Yes, yes, thank you..." Jack was very embarrassed and didn't really know where to start. "I'm disturbing you about a matter of the greatest urgency, but it's somewhat rather incredible."

"For goodness sake son, don't keep me on tenterhooks. What the devil is going on?"

"Well, it's not easy to explain. You trust me, right?"

"Of course, what kind of question is that?"

"What I'm about to say may sound absurd to you but I can assure you it's the plain simple truth."

"Jack, if you don't tell me straight away, my poor old heart may well stop beating."

"Okay." The Colonel paused slightly, then in a single breath blurted out, "At the moment, I'm orbiting around the Earth. I'm in an alien spacecraft and I have some terrible news to report directly to the President of the United States. You're the only person I trust who can put me in touch with him. I swear on the memory of my father that this is not a joke."

Several very long seconds went by with no sound coming out of the phone's speaker. For a moment Jack feared he had scared the Admiral to death. Then the husky voice on the other end said, "But are you really calling me from up there? How the devil can you do that?"

Wilson really is amazing. Instead of worrying about aliens, he's wondering how I can use my mobile from up here ... Fantastic...

"Well, with their technology they managed to make some kind of connection with a telecommunications satellite. I can't tell you much more than that."

"Aliens. Where are they from? And what exactly is this imminent catastrophe? And why did they choose you exactly?"

“Admiral, it’s a long story that I really hope I’ll have the time to tell you, but for now the most important thing is for you to put me in contact with the President as soon as possible.”

“My dear boy, I trust you blindly, but to get our beloved President to believe a story like that, I’ll need something more than a simple phone call from you.”

“Yes I thought so and it only seems right” continued Jack. “And if I were to tell you that at the moment you are sitting in a dark brown armchair and you have a copy of the New York Times on your lap, would my story be more convincing? Petri had been able to identify the Admiral’s coordinates through his phone signal, he had positioned the Theos right at the zenith of the city and activated the short-range sensors pointing them directly at the source of the emissions.

“Well I’ll be damned,” exclaimed the Admiral jumping up and dropping his paper on the floor. “How on earth do you know that? There aren’t any hidden cameras here. My office is checked and cleared every day.”

“Well, what I’m seeing you with isn’t really a camera. Let’s say it’s an absolutely incredible viewing system. We’re 50,000 kilometres from Earth and I could easily read your newspaper from here. I could even tell you how fast your heart is beating at the moment.”

“You’re joking, right?”

Jack glanced at Petri who immediately changed the display mode.

Now the Admiral appeared as a reddish figure with various yellowish and dark grey nuances. Some numbers appeared to the right at the top of the screen. Jack read them and said, “Your heart beat is ninety-eight beats per minute and your blood pressure is 135/90 mmHg.”

“Yes, I know, it’s a bit high. I take medication to keep it under control but it doesn’t always work. It’s my age, you know...” Then he pondered a moment and exclaimed “But this is absolutely incredible, it’s amazing! Do you think you’ll be able to do the same with the President too?”

“I think so,” replied Jack, looking for a sign of agreement from Petri, who merely gave a slight nod.

“Could you give me a clue at least of what is about to happen to us all? Considering they’ve bothered to come from who knows where to let us know, it must be a pretty damn serious event.”

“Okay, I think it’s right you should know about it.”

Elisa was encouraging him to carry on with sweeping hand gestures and pulling strange faces with her mouth.

“Their planet is approaching ours at breakneck speed. One of its satellites, Kodon to be precise, will come near to hitting us in a little less than seven days and could produce a series of indescribable upheavals. Our orbit and the moon’s, could even be affected. Tidal waves on earth could sweep away submerged land and the waters could carry away millions and millions of people. A catastrophe, in a nutshell.”

The Admiral was speechless. He slumped heavily into his brown armchair and, in a very small voice, just managed to whisper, “Well I’ll be damned.”

“Actually, our friends here, would be happy to make a system available to us that would be capable of containing most of the disastrous effects, but it’s a very dangerous procedure, that has never been completely tested before. Moreover, even if everything were to go in the best possible way, we won’t be able to get through the event unharmed. A part of the planetary influence, although small, unfortunately cannot be contained. Therefore, we should be preparing ourselves to reduce the damage and losses to a minimum.”

“My dear boy” replied the Admiral feebly. “I really think the President should know everything you’ve just told me immediately. I just hope, for both of us, that this isn’t some kind of joke, because neither of us would get away with it although, in my heart, I’m really hoping it is. Perhaps I’ve simply fallen asleep in my chair and I’ll wake up soon realising that this is nothing more than a bad nightmare.”

"I wish that too, Admiral. But unfortunately, this is not a bad dream but the stark reality. I'm trusting in you to get this news to the President."

"Okay. Just give me a bit of time to find the right way to get to him. How can I get in touch with you?"

"I think you can simply call me back on this number," said Jack looking at Petri who, with a rather hesitant expression, shrugged his shoulders. "It should work" continued Jack. "However, if I don't hear back from you within the hour, I'll call you again, okay?"

Agreed. Until later then.

"Thank you very much," said the Colonel and closed the conversation. He remained perfectly still for a few seconds, staring into space then, turning to the three who were literally hanging on his every word, very quietly said "He'll help us."

"Let's hope so," said Elisa a little hesitantly. "I don't think it's going to be easy to convince the President this isn't a hoax."

"Only he can do something like this. Let's just give him a bit of time." Then, turning towards Petri, he said, "try and put on a good show with your sensors or whatever other wizardry you want to use. We must surprise them with something really exceptional, that will leave them all open mouthed."

"Leave it to me," said Petri with a sardonic little smile. "We've got plenty of special effects."

"If you want, I can show you the exact location of the White House, the official residence of the President of the United States of America and of the Pentagon, which of course is the general headquarters of the Department of Defence."

"Well," said Elisa approaching Azakis, "while you two are having fun scaring those poor souls on Earth, I'd now like you to explain to me what this strange thing is that you gave me earlier on."

"Like I said, I think it may be the solution to all your waste problems."

"You're not going to tell me that I can just turn it on to make all the plastic that's laying around disappear, are you?"

"Unfortunately we haven't invented something like that yet but this might help you replace it."

"I'm all ears," and she handed it to him.

"This little object is nothing more than a mini forcefield generator. Thanks to some very simple programming it can take any shape you want."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll show you now. Open your hand." Azakis gently clasped the small dark rectangle between his thumb and forefinger and placed it on her open palm. Not even a second went by and, as if by magic, a beautiful vase in a thousand variegated colours materialised in her hand.

"What the heck..." Frightened, Elisa instinctively drew back her hand and let go of the vase which fell on the floor bouncing untidily here and there, but without breaking and, above all, without making any noise.

"Sorry," was all Elisa managed to whisper regretfully. "I really didn't expect that," and she bent to pick it up again.

She held it, lifted it above her head and began to observe it from all sides. Despite the completely smooth surface, the light did not seem to be reflected on it in any way. To the touch the object was a little colder than she expected and it did not seem to be made of any material known to her.

"This thing is absolutely amazing. How did you do it?"

"It's all thanks to that," replied Azakis, indicating the small black object that seemed to be set into the bottom of the vase. "That's what's generating a forcefield in the shape you can see."

"And could you also do this in the shape of a bottle?"

"Certainly," said Azakis with a smile. "Look." So saying, he rested the fingertip of his index finger on the small rectangle and the vase disappeared. He gripped it again resting his thumb on it and an elegant cobalt blue bottle, with a long, thin neck, appeared out of nowhere.

Elisa was left open-mouthed and it took her a while to recover. Then, without taking her eyes away from the newly created object, she said, in a voice broken with emotion, "Jack come here, you've simply got to see this."

The Colonel, who by now had given Petri all the indications to find the two targets, turned towards her and, with leisurely pace, approached her. He looked absent-mindedly at the object that Azakis was holding in his hand and, in a bored voice, said "a bottle? And what's so interesting to see?"

"Yes, a bottle," answered Elisa crossly. "Only, until a few seconds ago it was a beautiful coloured vase."

"Yeah, come on, stop kidding me!"

"Zak, show him."

The alien performed the same simple operation as before and this time a huge sphere, black as pitch, appeared in his hands.

"Yikes," exclaimed the Colonel jumping backwards.

"You should recognise this, shouldn't you?" said Azakis, hugging the ball which was almost a metre in diameter.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the doctor all excited. "It's identical to the one we found buried at the camp, inside the mysterious stone container."

"And there were three more," added the Colonel, "which then acted as a base for the shuttle's landing."

"Precisely," confirmed Azakis. "We left them behind last time and we used them as a reference for the recovery of the cargo with the plastic."

"Wow," exclaimed Elisa. "Now everything is slowly becoming clearer."

"Forgive me if this is a silly question," said Jack turning to the alien. "But if we wanted to use these things as containers, say for water for example, we'd also have to invent a practical system of opening and closing them. How could we do that?"

"Easy. Simply use another and shape it like a stopper."

"What a fool I am. I hadn't thought of that," said Jack giving himself a little slap on his forehead.

"What do you call these cute little things?" asked Elisa intrigued.

"On our planet they're called Shans," Azakis answered while he again made the ball disappear and gave her back the little dark rectangle.

"So this is a little Shan," said Elisa smiling, holding it between her fingers, as she looked at it very closely. "Can I try to build something?"

"Well, it's not quite so simple. I can do it because I use my N^COM implant for its real-time programming. So, either I implant one in you too or you can use ..." He broke off and began rummaging in a small drawer on the side of the console. After a few seconds he took out a sort of helmet, very similar to the one they had previously used for breathing and, handing it to her, ended the sentence saying "this".

"Do I have to put it on my head?" asked Elisa, hesitating.

"Certainly."

"This thing's not going to blow my brains out, is it?"

Azakis smiled. He gently took her hands and helped her to position it correctly.

"And now?"

"Hold the Shan between your fingers and think of any object. Don't worry about size. It's programmed not to turn into anything bigger than a cubic metre."

Elisa closed her eyes and concentrated. After a few seconds, a fantastic three-arm silver candle holder materialised in her hands.

"My God," she exclaimed astonished. "It's ludicrous. It's incredible." Elisa could not control her emotions. She continued to turn the object over and over in her hands, analysing its every detail. "It's exactly how I imagined it. It's not possible, I must be dreaming."

Nasiriyya ## The ambush

Two large, open top Jeeps, coming from the direction of the Northern part of the city, each with three people on board, drew to a halt at the red light of a seemingly deserted crossing. They waited patiently for the green light and then carried on slowly for another twenty metres, until they reached the entrance of an old abandoned workshop.

A large, portly guy jumped down from the first of the two Jeeps and, armed with a pair of old shears, cautiously approached the entrance and cut the rusty wire holding the big door closed. Immediately behind him, another man jumped out of the second vehicle and joined him. He too was pretty big and heavyset. Together they tried to move the old panel that served as a front door. They struggled for quite a while and then, with a sinister metallic screech, the panel moved. They pushed it sideways with decision, completely flinging open the entrance.

The drivers of the two vehicles who had been waiting, one behind the other, with their engines idling, leaving a large cloud of black smoke behind them, drove into the old workshop and turned their vehicles off.

"Come on," said the one who seemed to be the boss, jumping down from the Jeep, followed by the other three. The two who had been at the entrance joined the little group and all six headed quietly towards the main entrance of the restaurant.

"You three, round the back,## ordered the boss.

All the members of the small assault team were equipped with AK-47 rifles and the typical curved sheaths of the Arab Janbiya knives were clearly visible, hanging from the belts of a couple of them. They weren't very long daggers but their sharp blades, on both sides, undoubtedly made them deadly weapons.

The restaurant owner, aware of the fact that at any moment his companions would appear, continually shuttled back and forth between the dining room and the back entrance, where he peered outside to check for any suspicious movements. His nervousness, however, did not go unnoticed by the General who, crafty old fox that he was, began to smell a rat and realise that something was not right. With the excuse of picking up the bottle of beer, he approached the big guy and whispered close to his ear, "Don't you think your friend is a little too nervous?"

##Actually, I##d noticed that as well,## answered the big guy, also whispering.

##How long have you known him? You don##t suppose he##s organising a nice little surprise for us, do you? "

"I wouldn't think so... he##s always been a dependable sort."

"Perhaps," said the General, rising quickly from his chair, "but I don't trust him at all. Let##s get out of here quick."

The other two looked at one another for a moment, perplexed, then they stood up too and quickly headed towards the owner.

"Thanks for everything," said the big guy, "but we really have to go now" and he shoved another hundred-dollar bill into his shirt pocket.

"But I haven't even brought your desserts,## answered the curly-haired man.

##Better that way, I'm on a diet,## said the fat guy and set off quickly towards the door. He peered out from behind the curtain and, not seeing anything unusual, motioned to the other two to follow him. He barely had time to cross the threshold when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the three bad guys approaching from his right.

##Bastard,## was all he managed to shout before the closest of the three, in very broken English, ordered him to stop. In response, he unhooked a stun grenade from his belt and turning to his companions yelled ##Flashbang!##

The two immediately closed their eyes and covered their ears. A blinding flash of light, followed by a loud bang, shattered the quiet of the night. The three assailants, taken by surprise by the big guy's move, were momentarily stunned by the explosion and the blinding flash from the grenade prevented them from seeing the three Americans as, with a burst worthy of a hundred-metre finish, they fled in the direction of their car.

"Fire," shouted the leader of the aggressors.

There was a burst of AK-47 in the fugitives' direction but, as the effect of the flashbang had not yet vanished, it was lost high above their heads.

"Come on," cried the thin guy, taking his Beretta M9 out of the holster under his armpit and responding to the fire.

As he ran, the big guy had succeeded in removing the vehicle's remote control from his jacket pocket and opening the rear tailgate. With an agile leap he threw himself inside it and grabbing one of the M-16 rifles that he always carried with him threw it to the General. He grabbed an FN P90 machine gun for himself and began firing in the direction of the assailants.

"Come on," he screamed at the thin guy who, keeping his head down, went straight towards the driver's door. While his two friends covered him he climbed into the car. Another burst, from behind him, left a series of untidy holes in the sheet metal wall of the hut in front of him.

Meanwhile, the three aggressors who had gone around the back, emerged from the restaurant's main door and joined their comrades in firing. Their aim was decidedly better. A bullet hit the left-hand rear-view mirror that splintered into a thousand pieces.

"Dammit," exclaimed the thin guy while, instinctively lowering his head, he tried to start the car.

"General, get in," cried the fat guy while firing off another burst in the direction of the assailants.

With the agility of a youngster, Campbell threw himself onto the back seat just as a bullet flew perilously close to his left leg and lodged itself in the open door. With a quick movement, he unhooked the back seat and managed to get into the luggage area. He immediately noticed a series of grenades arranged in a row inside a polystyrene container. Without stopping to think, he grabbed one and, after pulling out the fuse, hurled it in the direction of the assailants.

"Grenade!" he yelled and flattened himself on the seat.

While a new burst of AK-47 firing broke the rear window and destroyed the right-hand side rear light, the hand grenade rolled quietly into the middle of the little group of aggressors who, aware of the impending danger, flung themselves on the ground flattening themselves as much as possible. The grenade exploded with a deafening noise and a blinding glare ripped through the darkness of the night.

The big guy, taking advantage of the General's surprise move, ran to the passenger side, jumped on board and, with one leg still poking out, shouted "Go, go."

The thin man floored his foot on the accelerator and the car, with a huge squeal of tyres, leapt forward right in the direction of the old door of the abandoned hut. The mass of the vehicle launched at speed easily had the better of the rusty sheet metal of the panel, which fell heavily inwards. The car continued its mad race destroying everything in its path. Old earthenware pots, crates of rotten wood, chairs and even two old light fittings were swept up and thrown into the air, kicking up a huge cloud of sand and debris. The skinny guy driving tried to avoid as many things as possible, using the full weight of his body to turn the steering wheel left and right but, despite all his efforts, he wasn't able to avoid the central column in half rotten wood which was holding up the roof, breaking it clean off. The hut shook, creaked, and then, as if an enormous weight had fallen on its roof, literally crumpled up on itself. This all happened exactly at the same time as the three, having also broken down the back wall, flew out of the old workshop, followed by a deafening roar and a huge dark cloud. The car, out of control by now, crashed into a pile of rubbish that had been left at the side of the road and finally came to a halt.

"Bloody hell," said the General, who had already repeatedly banged his head on the armrest of the car door. "Who taught you to drive like that?"

In response, the skinny guy pressed his foot flat on the accelerator again and tried to find a way through all the junk. Various coloured rags were caught up between the wheels and an old television was left hanging off the rear bumper. He had to navigate around all the litter for quite a while before finally reaching the side of the road. With a dull thud the car crossed over the low pavement and the three found themselves back on the main road heading East.

"Who the heck were they?" asked the big guy as he eased himself into the seat and tried to close the door.

"Ask your little friend the restaurant owner," snapped the thin one.

"If I get hold of him again I'll make him swallow all his cutlery, ladles included."

"Well what can you expect my friend? You should know by now that you can't trust anyone here." And as he turned into a side road on the right he added, "At least we managed to eat something."

The dark car set off, roaring into the darkness of the night, but leaving an unusual trail of unidentified liquid in its wake.

Theos spacecraft - The President

"But where do you get the energy to create such a powerful forcefield?" asked the Colonel intrigued, as he carefully observed the candle holder that had just been created.

"Energy is everywhere, in every place in the universe," answered Azakis. "Everything that composes it is made of matter and matter is nothing more than a form of energy and vice versa. Even living beings are nothing more than simple forms of energy and matter."

"We're made of the same substance as the stars," whispered Elisa enraptured, remembering an old quote from someone, whose name she could not recall at that precise time.

"I agree with that, but from here to being able to harness it like this is a big jump forward," said the Colonel.

He was about to ask for further enlightenment when a blues tune, from his mobile, interrupted him.

"Now who the heck's that?" he said aloud while reading the caller's name "Camp Adder prison."

"Colonel Hudson," he answered curtly into the microphone.

"Colonel, finally."

Jack immediately recognised the loud voice of the coloured sergeant who had accompanied him on many missions. "Sergeant, what is it?"

"I've been looking for you for hours. "Where are you?"

"Um, let's say I'm running around like a whirlwind. Anyway, tell me Sergeant, what's the problem?"

"I just wanted to inform you that your request to transfer the General has been carried out without any problems."

"Request to transfer the General? "What the devil are you talking about?"

"I have before me a written order, signed by you, authorising General Richard Wright and Colonel Oliver Morris to collect General Campbell to be transferred to somewhere top secret. I checked and it's your signature."

"But I've never authorised anything of the sort." The Colonel paused briefly then said, "So where is the General now?"

"I have no idea, Sir. The officers I was telling you about took him into custody."

"Damn, he's managed to escape." Then he had an intuition and said, "Sergeant, would you be able to describe the two soldiers who came to collect him, to me?"

"Certainly. One was tall and thin and the other was shorter and rather overweight. They had....."

"Okay Sergeant, that's enough. I understand. Thank you."

"I hope I haven't messed up."

"Don't worry, it wasn't your fault," and he ended the conversation.

"What happened?" asked Elisa worriedly.

"Those two who attacked us, who we caught, have got away and they've also managed to make that bastard General Campbell escape."

"I'm sorry dear, I really am sorry but don't worry too much. We've got much bigger problems to worry about right now, haven't we?"

"You're right." So saying he slipped the candle holder from her hands and, showing it to Azakis, asked "Now, where were we?"

"The source of energy."

"Right. I mean, how the heck does this thing work?"

"Well it's not that simple to explain, but we can say that it absorbs the energy all around it and gives it the shape for which it has been programmed."

"Well," said Jack puzzled. "I can't say I've understood very much really. But the fact is that it works and it does so really well. Do you think this technology could also be replicated on Earth?"

"Absolutely. I don't see any problem. When the time comes, I'll tell Petri to transfer all the information you need, to you."

"Fantastic. I'm just thinking of the looks on our scientists' faces when they are faced with a revelation of this sort. At present, we still can't produce serious amounts of energy except from fossil fuels or nuclear energy. I think your visit is going to revolutionise a lot of things on our planet."

"As they always have," added Azakis with a little smile.

"If I remember correctly," said Elisa entering the discussion, "was it not a scientist called Nikola Tesla, who lived between 1800 and 1900, who imagined a form of energy that permeated the whole cosmos?"

"Wow," answered Jack amazed. "I didn't know you were such an expert."

"There are a lot of things you still have to find out about me, dear," and with a decidedly sassy gesture, she ran her hand through her long hair.

"Actually," continued Jack, "Tesla did a lot more. Apart from the realisation of a whole series of inventions that we still use today, he theorised the possibility of using what he called 'ether' as an inexhaustible source of energy. This substance, which allegedly pervades the entire universe, if properly stimulated, could provide power anywhere, at any time." Pleased by the fact that his beloved was watching him with growing admiration, he proudly continued his explanation "However, after clashing with the hypocrisy and greed of those in power at the time, the scholar stated that humanity was still not ready for an upheaval of that sort and abandoned the project, making all trace of it disappear. Only now, after more than 100 years, our scientists have started to postulate the presence of a 'substance' they call 'dark matter' and also an energy form known as 'dark energy', which allegedly makes up more than 70% of the density of the universe."

"I'm impressed," said the doctor looking at him in astonishment. "I didn't think you were so learned on this subject either."

"There are a lot of things you still have to find out about me, dear," replied Jack with the same quip and the same gesture, although his hair was definitely too short to achieve the desired effect.

"Perhaps we're talking about the same thing," stated Azakis, pleased.

"Unlimited energy, available to everyone, everywhere in the universe and at no cost ... incredible." Jack was engrossed in evaluating all the possible implications of this new earth-shattering revelation, when his mobile started playing the same little tune again.

"And now who is it?" he exclaimed a bit annoyed. Then he read the caller's name and his face lit up. "Admiral, I didn't expect to hear from you so soon."

"Son, I managed to get in touch with the President and I explained the situation to him. He's here now right in front of me. I'll hand you over to him if you like."

"Of course, heaven forbid," he replied rather embarrassed, making sweeping gestures to Petri pointing at his mobile phone. A few seconds went by then a calm, deep voice came over the phone, "Colonel Jack Hudson?"

"Yes Mr. President, that's me Sir. At your orders Sir." In responding he couldn't help but stand to attention, provoking a shy smile from Elisa.

"Colonel, only the respect and trust I have for Admiral Wilson have made this call possible. What I've been told is so absurd that it might even be true."

"Mr President, I'd like you to have the nearest telescope available pointed at the coordinates that I am about to send you."

Petri, who had already moved the Theos onto a parallel closer to the North Pole, in order to allow it to be viewed from an area still in darkness on the Earth, made a series of numbers appear on the giant screen. Jack, very quickly, input them into his mobile and sent them. "This is the current position of our spacecraft. I don't think your engineers will have any problems finding us."

The President nodded briefly at a tall, strapping assistant who was there with him in the White House Oval Office. He showed him the numbers that had appeared on the phone and whispered something in his ear. The man, who was wearing a black suit, a snow-white shirt and a grey tie with light coloured stripes, put his wrist to his mouth and uttered a series of instructions.

"Mr President," went on Jack. "The situation is very serious. Our planet is risking an enormous upheaval and, with the help of these people who have come from so far away, we could do something to avoid it. I fully understand all your doubts but I really am up here and I can prove it to you."

Petri activated the short-range sensors pointing them at the coordinates the Colonel had given him earlier and the view of the Oval Office from above appeared on the screen of the command bridge.

"Sir, at the moment you are leaning on your desk with your right hand, the Admiral is at your side and there are two other people in the room."

The President instinctively looked around him as if to find the intruder who was spying on them. He hesitated an instant then disconcerted he said, "but this is absurd. How do you know all this?"

"Simply because I'm looking at you."

"But that is just not possible. Nothing can penetrate this room's shielding."

"Nothing on earth, Mr President," Jack corrected him. Then Petri approached him and whispered something in his ear. The Colonel opened his eyes wide, then in a decisive voice, said into the microphone, "I don't think this is possible with any of our technology either."

He had hardly had time to finish the sentence when the historic 19th-century desk, known worldwide as the "Resolute Desk", slowly began to rise. The President jumped backwards and looked at the Admiral dumbfounded who reciprocated with an equally amazed look.

"The desk is floating in mid-air," he exclaimed. "It's as if the force of gravity no longer has any effect on it."

The other man in the room, not quite as tall as the previous one but equally heavy build, instinctively pulled his gun out of the holster hidden under his armpit in a gesture to protect his boss. He glanced quickly to the left and right as if he were trying to track down a ghost but couldn't see anything suspicious.

"Put it away," the President said quietly. "I don't think there is any danger. This is the work of our friends up there."

Instinctively, they all found themselves looking up at the room's white ceiling, except the tallest assistant who, after resting two fingers on the headset in his right ear, in a tone that revealed no emotion, said "We have the images, Sir." He took a large tablet out of his bag, tapped some instructions onto the screen, looked at it for a few seconds and then politely held it out towards his President. The man, considered by many to be the most powerful man in the world, took the tablet in his left hand and began attentively looking at the screen. Admiral Wilson, decidedly intrigued, put on his reading glasses, then he approached him and also tried to make out what he could.

The device showed the images coming via satellite from a telescope, not a very powerful one, installed in a small secret observatory built in southern Finland. The sun had already set some time ago in that area and the darkness of the night would make it possible to easily view the indicated point.

"Give me a few more seconds, Colonel. I'm about to display the area corresponding to the coordinates you sent me a short while ago."

The view was still not completely in focus when suddenly, silhouetted against the blackness of space dotted with millions of stars, a small silvery sphere, almost half lit up by the light of the sun, appeared on the monitor.

A few seconds went by and the picture changed. The zoom level had been increased. Now the sphere occupied almost all the monitor and it was possible to admire the many shades of colours, ranging from purple to dark blue, that seemed to blend together on its silvery surface.

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