

DANILO CLEMENTONI

BACK TO EARTH



*THE ADVENTURES OF
AZAKIS AND PETRI*



Danilo Clementoni
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The adventures of Azakis and Petri

Original title: Il ritorno

Translated by: Melanie Rutter



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.

BACK TO EARTH

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To my wife and son, for their patience and their valuable suggestions, which helped me to make improvements to both my story and myself.

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##We were on our way back. Only one of our solar years had passed since we had been forced to leave the planet in haste, but for them, in Earth years, it had been 3,600.

What would we find?##

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 relative 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 of 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, especially, 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 is now positioned 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 there is a large depression extending to a depth of over ten kilometres.

Currently, Nibiru is 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, some of its inhabitants have been taking advantage of the 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**.

Theos spacecraft $\hat{\#}$ 1,000,000 km from Jupiter

Azakis was stretched out comfortably on his dark, auto-moulding armchair. It had been given to him as a gift some years before by an old Craftsman friend who had made it with his own hands on the occasion of his first interplanetary mission.

$\hat{\#}$ It will bring you luck, $\hat{\#}$ he $\hat{\#}$ d told him that day. $\hat{\#}$ It will help you to relax and make the right decisions when you need to. $\hat{\#}$

Indeed, he had taken many decisions while sitting there, and luck had often been on his side. So he had always recalled that cherished memory when doing so, in spite of the many rules that would prevent its use, especially on a category Bousen-1 starship such as the one in which he now found himself.

A blue-tinged wisp of smoke rose rapidly and vertically from the cigar he held between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, while his eyes tried to trace the 4.2 AU^1 that still separated him from his destination. Although he had now been making these voyages for several years, the charm of the darkness in the surrounding space, and the thousands of stars it was speckled with, were still able to capture his thoughts. The large oval-shaped opening right in front of him afforded a complete view in the direction of travel, and he was still surprised at how that

gossamer-thin forcefield could protect him from the sidereal cold of space, prevent the sudden escape of air, and stop him being sucked into the void outside. Death would be almost immediate. He took a quick drag on his long cigar and continued to gaze into the holographic display in front of him, in which he could see the tired, unshaven face of his travelling companion. In another part of the ship, Petri was repairing the control system on the discharge ducts. He amused himself a little by distorting the image in the centre, blowing the smoke heâ##d just inhaled, creating a wave effect that reminded him so much of the sinuous movements of the exotic dancers he had often gone to see when he finally returned to his home town and could enjoy some well-deserved rest.

Petri, his friend and companion in adventure, was almost thirty-two, and this was his fourth mission of this kind. His large and imposing physique commanded the respect of all those who met him. With black eyes like the space outside, his dark, long and dishevelled hair that fell to his shoulders, his stature of almost two metres thirty, and the powerful chest and arms capable of effortlessly lifting an adult Nebir², he still had the soul of a child. The sight of a Soel flower³ blooming in the sun would move him, and he could sit for hours, enraptured, while watching the waves breaking on the ivory coast of the Gulf of Saraan⁴. An incredible individual, trustworthy and loyal, who would readily give up his own life for his, without a momentâ##s hesitation.

He would never have left without Petri at his side. He was the only person in the world whom he trusted blindly, and whom he would never betray.

The ship's engines, adjusted for navigation within the solar system, transmitted the classic and reassuring biphasic hum. To his expert ears, that sound meant that the ship was functioning nicely. With his sensitive hearing he would be able to perceive a variation in the adjustment chambers as small as 0.0001 Lasig, long before the sophisticated automated control system picked it up. If was for this reason that, as young as he was, he had been placed in command of a Pegasus category ship.

There were plenty who would have given an arm and a leg to be in his position. But here he was.

The O[^]COM intraocular implant caused the newly recalculated route to materialise in front of him. It was remarkable how an object of a few microns could perform all those functions. Inserted directly into the optic nerve, it was able to view an entire control console, superimposing the image over the one he actually had in front of him. At first, it had not been easy to become accustomed to such wizardry, and more than once the nausea had threatened to become unmanageable. Now, however, he could not work without it.

The entire solar system wheeled around him in all its fascinating majesty. The small blue dot near to massive Jupiter represented the position of their ship, and the thin red line, slightly more curved than the now faded previous version,

indicated the new trajectory towards Earth.

The gravitational attraction of the largest planet in the system was alarming. It was essential to remain at a safe distance, and only the power of the two Bousen engines would enable the Theos to escape this mortal embrace.

“Azakis,” croaked the portable communicator attached to the console in front of him. “We have to check the state of the couplings in compartment six.”

“Haven't you done it yet?” he replied in a playful tone that he knew would infuriate his friend.

“Throw that stinking cigar away and come and give me a hand!” thundered Petri.

I knew it.

He had managed to wind him up and was enjoying it like crazy.

“I'm here. I'm here. I'm on my way, my friend, don't get worked up.”

“Get a move on. I've been in the middle of this crap for four hours and I'm not in the mood for joking.”

Grumpy as ever, but nothing and no one would ever be able to separate them.

They had known each other since their childhood. He was the one who had saved him more than once from a certain beating (he had been much bigger as a child), using his respectable size to intervene between his friend and the usual gang of bullies, for whom he had so often been a target.

As a boy, Azakis had not been sure that he would be the type the more attractive members of the opposite sex would fight over. He had always dressed in a slovenly manner, with his head shaved, a slim physique, and constantly connected to the GCS⁵, from which he would absorb vast amounts of information ten times faster than most. At ten years old, thanks to his outstanding academic performance, he had already been granted level C access, with the option to acquire knowledge that was not available to most of his peers. The N^COM neural implant, which provided him with this kind of access, had several minor side effects, however. The acquisition phase demanded full concentration. Since most of his time had been spent like this, he had almost always had an absent look, staring vacantly into space, completely cut off from what was going on around him. The truth was that it had commonly been thought, despite what the Elders claimed, that he was a little retarded.

It had never mattered to him.

There had been no limit to his thirst for knowledge. He had even remained connected at night. Although while sleeping the capacity of acquisition, precisely because of the need for absolute concentration, was reduced to a mysterious 1%, he had not wished to lose even a moment of his life without taking the opportunity to develop his cultural background.

He awoke with a slight smile and made his way to compartment six, where his friend was waiting for him.

Planet Earth ### Tell el-Mukayyar ### Iraq

Elisa Hunter tried yet again to wipe the accursed drops of sweat from her forehead. They seemed determined to fall slowly towards her nose and drip into the hot sand beneath her. She had already been on her knees for several hours, with her inseparable Marshalltown Trowel⁶, gently scraping the ground without causing any damage, trying to unearth an object that looked like the upper part of a tombstone. She had, however, remained unconvinced about this theory from the start. She had been working for almost two months near the Ziqqurat of Ur⁷. Because of her reputation as an archaeologist and her expert knowledge of the Sumerian language, she had been allowed to work there. Since the first excavations at the beginning of the XX century, several tombs had been found, but never had an artefact such as this been seen in any of them. Due to its square shape and considerable size, it seemed more like the ###cover### of some kind of container than a sarcophagus. An object buried there thousands of years before, to protect or hide something.

Unfortunately, having so far uncovered only a small section of the upper part, she was not yet able to establish how tall the supposed container might be. The cuneiform engravings that covered the entire visible surface of the cover did not resemble

anything she had ever seen.

Translating them would take her several days and as many sleepless nights.

###Doctor Hunter.###

Elisa raised her head. Placing her right hand over her eyes to shield them from the sun, she saw her assistant, Hisham, hurrying towards her.

###Professor,### he repeated, ###there###s a call for you from the base. It sounds urgent.###

###OK. Thanks, Hisham.###

She took advantage of this forced break and enjoyed a sip of water, by now almost boiling, from the flask she always carried in her belt.

A call from the base... That could only mean something was wrong.

She stood up, patted clouds of dust from her trousers, and walked purposely towards the tent that served as a research base.

She opened the zip that held the field tent half open and went inside. It took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the change in light, but this did not stop her from recognising the face of Colonel Jack Hudson on the monitor. He was grimly staring into space, waiting for her to appear.

The Colonel was officially responsible for the strategic anti-terrorist squad stationed in Nassiriya, but his real duty was to coordinate a scientific research programme commissioned and monitored by the phantom ELSAD⁸ department. This

department was shrouded in the usual mystery that enveloped all organisations of this kind. There were few people who knew the precise purpose and aims of this organisation. All that was certain was that the operational command reported directly to the President of the United States.

Elisa did not attach much importance to all this. Her real reason for accepting the offer to participate in one of these expeditions was that she would finally be able to return to the place she loved most in the world, doing the work that she loved. In spite of her relatively youthful age (thirty-eight), she was one of the most accomplished in her field.

“Good evening, Colonel,” she said, wearing her best smile. “To what do I owe this honour?”

“Doctor Hunter, there’s no need for affectations. You know very well why I’m calling. The permit you were granted to complete your work expired two days ago. You can’t stay there any longer.

His voice was firm and decisive. This time, not even her undeniable charm would be enough to secure any further extension. She decided she would play her last card.

Since 23 March 2003, when the coalition led by the United States had decided to invade Iraq, with the express intention of deposing the dictator Saddam Hussein, accused of holding weapons of mass destruction (an allegation that subsequently proved to be unfounded), and of supporting Islamic terrorism in Iraq, all archaeological research, already difficult enough in

times of peace, had suffered a setback. Only the formal end to the hostilities on 15 April 2003 had rekindled the hope of archaeologists around the world that they would once again be able to access the site where one of the most ancient civilisations in history had developed, before spreading their culture across the globe. The decision of the Iraqi authorities, in late 2011, to reopen the excavations in some sites of inestimable historical value, in order to "continue to enhance their cultural heritage", had finally turned hope into certainty. Under the auspices of the United Nations, and numerous authorisations previously signed and confirmed by countless authorities, several research groups, selected and supervised by appropriate commission staff, would be able to work for a limited time in the most significant areas of archaeological interest on Iraqi territory.

"My dear colonel," she began, leaning as close as possible to the webcam, so that her large emerald green eyes would get the results she was hoping for. "You are absolutely right."

She knew that giving face to her caller would put him in a more positive frame of mind.

"But we're so close now."

"Close to what?" thundered the colonel, sitting up in his seat and placing his fists on the desk. "You've been repeating the same old story for weeks. I can't support you any longer unless you come up with something concrete."

"If you'll do me the honour of joining me for dinner

tonight, I should be delighted to show you something that will make you think again. What do you say?â##

A beautiful smile revealed her white teeth, and she ran her hand through her long blond hair. She was certain that she could convince him.

The colonel frowned, trying to maintain an angry appearance, but even he knew that he would not be able to resist this offer. He had always liked Elisa and the idea of a dinner for two intrigued him.

Despite his forty-eight years, he was still an attractive man. With an athletic body, angular features, closely cropped, greying hair, a sharp, decisive look in his intense blue eyes, a broad general knowledge that enabled him to converse widely on a variety of topics, and the indisputable charm of the uniformed officer, he was still an â##interestingâ## man.

â##Okay,â## snorted the colonel. â##But this evening youâ##ll have to bring me something sensational, otherwise youâ##d better start getting all your junk together and packing your bags.â## He was trying to use the most authoritative tone he had, but he wasnâ##t doing too well.

â##Be ready by eight. Iâ##ll send a car to pick you up at your hotel.â## He cut off the communication without saying goodbye.

Hell, I have to hurry. I only have a few hours before it gets dark.

â##Hisham,â## she called, peering out from the tent. â##Call the whole team together. Iâ##m going to need all the help I can

get.â##

She hurried across the few metres that separated her from the excavation area, leaving a series of dust clouds behind her. Within a few minutes everyone was gathered around her waiting for instructions.

â##You, please remove the sand from that corner,â## she ordered, pointing to the side of the stone furthest away. â##And you help him. I suggest you take care. If itâ##s what I think it is, this thing might well save our asses.â##

Theos spacecraft â## Orbiting Jupiter

The small, but very comfortable, spherical, internal transfer module was travelling, at an average speed of around 10 m/s, along conduit three, which would lead Azakis to the entrance of the compartment where his companion, Petri, was waiting for him.

The Theos, which also had a spherical shape and a diameter of ninety-six metres, had eighteen tubular ducts, each being a little more than three hundred metres in length. These had been constructed as meridians spaced ten degrees apart, so that they covered the entire circumference. Each of the twenty-three levels was four metres high, with the exception of the central hold (eleventh level), which measured twice as much. They were easily accessible by means of the stops that each conduit made at every floor. Effectively, moving between the two most widely separated points on the ship would take fifteen seconds at the most.

The braking of the module was barely perceptible. The door opened with a slight hiss, and there stood Petri, his legs apart and his arms folded.

â##I've been waiting for hours,â## he said in an unconvincing tone. â##Have you finished clogging up the air filters with that stinking crap you always carry around?â## The allusion to the cigar was only slightly veiled.

Ignoring this provocative remark with a smirk, Azakis pulled the portable analyser from his belt and activated it with a flick of the thumb.

“Hold this. We need to hurry,” he replied, passing it to Petri with one hand while trying to position the sensor inside the coupling on his right with the other. “Our ETA is about 58 hours and I’m getting worried.”

“Why?” asked Petri, a little surprised.

“I don’t know. I have a feeling that something is wrong.”

The device that Petri was holding began to send out a series of sounds with varying frequencies. He examined the object, with no idea what this meant. Looking up at his friend's face, he searched for some sign of an explanation, but found none. Azakis, moving cautiously, placed the sensor into the other coupling. Another series of indecipherable sounds came from the analyser. Then silence. Azakis took the device from his companion, looked closely at the results, then smiled.

“Everything's fine. We can proceed.”

Only then did Petri notice that he had stopped breathing for a while. He sighed deeply and felt an immediate sense of relaxation. However minor, a fault in the couplings would have compromised their mission irretrievably, forcing them to turn around and go back. It was the last thing they needed. They were almost there.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” said Petri, trying to

shake off a little dust. A visit to a conduit is always like this... and twisting his upper lip, he added an education!

Azakis smiled. I'll see you on the bridge.

Petri called the capsule, and a moment later he was gone.

The central system announced that they had passed safely out of their orbit around Jupiter and were heading smoothly towards Earth. With a slight but rapid eye movement to the right, Azakis once again requested that his O[^]COM show him the route. The blue dot moving along the red line was now positioned a little further towards the Martian orbit. The count-down showed that their ETA was precisely 58 hours, and that the ship's speed was 3,000 km/s. He was growing increasingly nervous. On the other hand, the spacecraft in which they were travelling was the first to be equipped with the new Bousen engines, whose concept was completely different from anything previously used. The designers claimed that these would be able to propel the ship at velocities close to a tenth of the speed of light. He had never dared to try this. For now, 3,000 km/s seemed more than enough for a maiden voyage.

Of the fifty-six crew members who would normally have been accommodated on board the Theos, only eight had been chosen for this first mission, including Petri and Azakis. The reasons given by the Elders were not clear. They speculated that this had been due to the nature and destination of the trip. There would be obvious difficulties and it would be better not to put too many

lives at risk.

So we're expendable? What kind of talk is that? It would always end up like this. When it came to risking someone's neck who would they put forward? Azakis and Petri.

In the end, however, their propensity for adventure, and their remarkable ability to find answers in the most challenging situations, had enabled them to obtain a few concessions.

Azakis lived in an enormous building in the beautiful city of Saaran in the south of the continent, which had formerly been used as a warehouse for local Craftsmen. Because of these concessions, he had managed to get permission to modify it to his own taste.

The south wall had been completely replaced with a forcefield like the one used on the spacecraft, so that he could admire the wonderful view of the gulf below from his inseparable, self-moulding armchair. If necessary, however, the whole wall could change into a gigantic three-dimensional system, on which one could see as many as twelve GCS transmissions simultaneously. More than once, this sophisticated supervision and management system had enabled him to gather crucial information in advance, meaning that he could neatly resolve even the more far-reaching crises. He would not have given it up.

One entire wing of the ex-warehouse was reserved for his collection of souvenirs from various space missions over the years. Each one of them reminded him of something specific, and every time he found himself among this strange jumble of

objects, he could not help being thankful for his good fortune, and especially for his faithful friend, who had saved his skin on more than one occasion.

Petri, who had also been academically outstanding, was no fan of push technology. Although able to pilot almost any kind of aircraft, and although familiar with almost every kind of weapon or local and interplanetary communications system, he preferred to rely on his instincts and manual skills to resolve the problems that presented themselves. There had been a number of times when he had quickly transformed a shapeless heap of scrap metal into a means of transport or a fearsome weapon of defence. It was remarkable. He could make almost anything he needed to. This was partly something he had inherited from his father, an ingenious Craftsman, but it was mainly due to a passion for Art. As a boy, in fact, he had always been in awe of the way that the Craftsmen were able to transform helpless matter into items of great utility and technology, whilst also creating objects of "beauty".

A loud, unpleasant and intermittent sound jolted him back to reality. The automatic proximity alert had been activated.

Nassiriyya â## The hotel

It certainly wasnâ##t a five star hotel, but for someone who had spent weeks in a tent in the desert, even a shower could be considered a luxury. Elisa let the cold, refreshing water massage her neck and shoulders. Her body welcomed the chill, and a series of not unpleasant shivers ran down her back.

One realises how important some things are when one no longer has them.

It was more than ten minutes before she decided to get out. The vapour had steamed up the mirror, which had clearly been hung incorrectly. She tried to rectify this, but as soon as she let go it returned to its crooked position. In the end she ignored it. Wiping away the water that had settled on her with a strip of towel, she looked at herself admiringly. When she had been few years younger she had often been offered work as a model or actress. Maybe she could have been a cinema diva or a footballerâ##s wife, but money had never interested her much. She preferred to sweat, eat dust, study ancient scripts and visit forgotten places. For her, adventure meant the blood and emotion involved in finding an ancient artefact, unearthing some vestige from thousands of years before. Nothing else compared with this.

She drew closer to the mirror, looking at the small, accursed lines at the corners of her eyes. Her hand moved automatically to her make-up bag, from which she pulled her anti-ageing cream.

###Visibly fewer wrinkles in less than one week###. She spread it carefully over her face and gazed at herself attentively. Were they claiming to perform miracles? It did say the effects would only be visible after seven days, however.

She smiled at herself, and at all the other women who passively allowed themselves to be duped by such advertising.

The clock on the wall above the bed was showing 7.40 pm. She would never be able to get ready in just twenty minutes.

She dried herself hurriedly, leaving her long, blond hair slightly wet, and stood in front of the dark wooden wardrobe, in which the few smart clothes she had managed to bring were hanging. At other times she would have taken hours to decide which outfit best suited the occasion. That evening, however, the choice was limited. Without thinking too much, she opted for a short, black dress. It was pretty, definitely sexy, but not vulgar. It had a flattering neckline that would certainly emphasise her voluptuous figure. Taking it out, she threw it onto the bed with an elegant sweep of the hand.

7.50 pm. It may have been a lady's privilege, but she hated being late.

Looking out of the window, she saw a dark, glossy SUV right outside the hotel door. A youth dressed in military clothing, who must have been the driver, was leaning against the bonnet, and making the most of his wait by calmly smoking a cigarette.

She did her best to enhance her eyes with pencil and mascara, quickly painted some gloss on her lips. Whilst trying to spread

it evenly by throwing kisses into the air, she put on her favourite earrings, struggling somewhat to find the holes again.

It was actually some time since she'd gone out for an evening. Her work took her around the world and she had never found a stable relationship with anyone. Her relationships were usually over within a few months. She had always ignored the innate maternal instinct she had felt from being a girl, but now, with the approach of biological maturity, she was becoming increasingly aware of this. Perhaps this was the time to think seriously about being part of a family.

She quickly banished the thought from her mind. She slipped on the dress, stepped into the only pair of high-heeled shoes she'd brought with her, and sprayed her best perfume onto each side of her neck with a generous movement. Silk scarf and spacious black handbag. She was ready to go. One last check in the stained mirror on the wall near the door assured her that her make-up was flawless. After a quick twirl she left the room with a satisfied expression.

The young driver, after repositioning the jaw that had dropped at the sight of Elisa walking out of the hotel like a model, threw away the second cigarette he had just lit and rushed to open her car door.

“Good evening, Doctor Hunter. Shall we go?” he asked, hesitantly.

“Good evening,” she replied, trying out her best smile.
“Yes. I'm ready.”

“Thank you for the ride,” she added as she climbed into the car, knowing that her skirt would slide up and show just enough of her legs to embarrass the soldier.

She had always liked being admired.

Theos spacecraft proximity alert

The O[^]COM system rapidly materialised something in front of Azakis, a strange object whose outline was not yet clearly defined due to the low resolution obtained by the long-range viewers that were picking it up. It was definitely moving, and was heading for them. The proximity alert system estimated that the probability of impact between the Theos and the unknown object would be greater than 96% if neither altered course.

Azakis hurriedly climbed into the nearest transfer module. Bridge, he barked curtly at the automatic control system.

Five seconds later, the door opened with a hiss and there, on the huge central screen of the control room, was displayed the blurred image of the object on a collision course for the ship.

Almost at the same time, a breathless Petri rushed out of another door.

What the devil is going on? he asked. We shouldn't be encountering meteorites in this area, he exclaimed, staring at the big screen.

I don't think it's a meteorite.

If it's not a meteorite, then what is it? demanded Petri, visibly anxious.

If we don't change course immediately you'll see for yourself, when we find ourselves splattered all over the bridge.

Petri fumbled with the navigation controls and set a slight variation in the previously planned trajectory.

â##Impact in 90 seconds,â## said the warm, female voice of the proximity alert system, without emotion. â##Distance from object: 276,000 kilometres and falling.â##

â##Petri, do something! And do it quick!â## shouted Azakis.

â##I am doing something, but that thingâ##s moving too quickly.â##

The estimated impact probability, visible on the screen to the right of the object, was slowly dropping. 90%, 86%, 82%.

â##We're not going to make it,â## whispered Azakis.

â##My dear friend, the â##mysterious objectâ## that can smash up my ship has yet to be invented,â## assured Petri with a mischievous smile.

With a quick manoeuvre that momentarily threw them both off balance, Petri reversed the polarity on the two Bousen engines. The ship shuddered for several moments. It was only the sophisticated artificial gravity system compensating instantly for this alteration that stopped the crew from being flung against the wall in front.

â##Nice move,â## called Azakis, giving his friend a sharp slap on the shoulder. â##But how are we going to stop this spinning?â## The objects around them had already begun to rise and were whirling around the room.

â##Just a moment,â## said Petri, who was still pressing buttons and fiddling with controls.

“I just need to...” Beads of sweat were slowly seeping from his forehead.

“To open the...” he went on, while everything in the room continued to fly around out of control. Even the two of them were beginning to lift off the floor. The artificial gravity system could no longer compensate for the immense centrifugal force that had been generated. They were becoming increasingly lighter.

“...Tailgate three!” shouted Petri finally, as every object in the room fell to the ground at the same time. Azakis was prevented from making a dull moan by a heavy refuse container that hit him between the third and fourth ribs. Petri fell from the height at which he was hovering onto the console, landing in an unnatural and ridiculous posture.

The impact probability estimate had fallen to 18% and was still decreasing rapidly.

“Everything okay?” gasped Azakis, trying to conceal the pain in his right side.

“Yes, yes. I’m fine, I’m fine,” replied Petri, trying to get onto his feet.

An instant later Azakis was contacting the crew, who promptly informed their commander that there was no damage to any property and no one wounded.

The manoeuvre they had just performed had deflected the Theos slightly off course and the pressure drop caused by opening the gate had been immediately counterbalanced by the automated system.

6%, 4%, 2%.

Distance from object: 60,000 km,

They both held their breath, waiting to reach the 50,000 km distance, beyond which the short-range sensors would be triggered. These moments seemed interminable.

Distance from object: 50,000 km. Short-range sensors activated.

The blurred image in front of them suddenly came into sharp focus. The object appearing on the screen was distinct, every detail visible. The two astronauts looked at one another, their eyes wide open, each searching the face of the other for an answer.

Unbelievable! they exclaimed in unison.

Nassiriya â## Masgouf restaurant

Colonel Hudson was nervously pacing up and down the hallway in front of the main dining area of the restaurant. Virtually every minute, he checked the tactical watch he always wore on his left wrist. He didnâ##t even take this off to go to sleep. He was as excited as a teenager on a first date.

To help pass the time he had ordered a Martini on the rocks with a slice of lemon. The moustached barman watched him from beneath his thick eyebrows while lazily drying a set of long-stemmed glasses.

Alcohol was not permitted in Islamic countries. That evening, however, an exception had been made. The small restaurant had been completely reserved for the two of them.

As soon as heâ##d finished his conversation with Doctor Hunter the Colonel had contacted the owner, requesting the Masgouf house special, from which the restaurant took its name. Because of the difficulty in obtaining the main ingredient, which was tiger sturgeon, he had wanted to make sure that the establishment could provide it. Knowing that it required at least two hours of preparation, he had insisted on its being cooked unhurriedly, to absolute perfection.

As his camouflage uniform was inappropriate for the evening, he had decided to dust off his dark Valentino suit, which he combined with a silk regiment-style, grey and white striped tie.

The black shoes, polished as only a soldier knew how, were also Italian. The tactical watch certainly had nothing to do with this, but he could not have done without it.

â##They're on their wayâ##. The crackling voice came from the receiver, similar to a mobile phone, which he kept in his breast pocket. He switched it off and looked out through the window.

The big, dark car swerved to avoid a crumpled bag that was suspended in the breeze and rolling lazily along the street. With a quick manoeuvre it drew up right outside the restaurant entrance. The driver allowed the dust raised by the vehicle to settle back onto the ground, then cautiously got out of the car. The â##all clearâ## came from the headset concealed in his right ear. Carefully, he glanced at all the previously agreed positions, until he was certain that he had identified each one of his fellow soldiers who, in combat gear, would take care of the security of the two diners for the duration of the dinner.

The area was secure.

He opened the rear door and gently held out his right hand to help his passenger out.

Elisa thanked the soldier and elegantly stepped out of the car. She looked upwards as she filled her lungs with the clear evening air, pausing for an instant to contemplate the magnificent view that only the starry sky of the desert could provide.

The colonel waited for a moment, unable to decide whether to go out and meet her or stay inside and wait for her to come in.

In the end he chose to remain seated, in the hope that this would make him appear less nervous. Then, with feigned indifference, he walked over to the bar, perched on a high stool and, resting his left elbow on the dark wooden surface, downed the last drop of the beverage that remained in his glass, watching as the lemon seed fell slowly to the bottom.

The door opened with a slight squeak and the military driver looked around, checking that everything was in order. The colonel gave a slight nod, and the escort showed Elisa in, inviting her to walk ahead with a generous sweep of the hand.

“Good evening, Doctor Hunter,” said the colonel, rising from his stool and displaying his best smile. “I trust that the journey was comfortable?”

“Good evening, colonel,” replied Elisa, with an equally dazzling smile. “Very nice, thank you. Your driver was very kind.”

“You can go now, thank you,” he told the driver in a voice of authority. With a military salute, the young man turned on his heels and disappeared into the night.

“Can I offer you an aperitif, professor?” asked the colonel, calling the moustached barman over with a wave of the hand.

“Whatever you’re having,” replied Elisa without hesitating, pointing to the glass of Martini that the colonel was still holding. Then, she added, “Please call me Elisa, colonel. I’d prefer it.”

â##Certainly. And you can call me Jack. â##Colonelâ## is just for my soldiers.â##

This is a good start, thought the colonel.

The barman skilfully poured the second Martini and handed it to the new arrival. Lifting her glass, she clinked it with that of the colonel.

â##Cheers,â## she said in a lively tone, taking a sip.

â##I must say youâ##re looking splendid this evening, Elisa,â## said the colonel, running his eyes quickly up and down his guest.â##

â##Well, you donâ##t look so bad yourself. A uniform may have its charms, but I prefer you like this,â## she said, smiling devilishly and tilting her head to one side.

Somewhat embarrassed, Jack turned his attention towards the contents of the glass he had in his hand. He stared at it for a while, then threw the whole lot down in one gulp.

â##Shall we go to our table?â##

â##Good idea,â## exclaimed Elisa. â##Iâ##m starving.â##

â##Iâ##ve ordered the house special. I hope youâ##ll like it.â##

â##Donâ##t tell me you persuaded them to cook the Masgouf!â## she asked, stupefied, widening her lovely green eyes as much as she could. â##Itâ##s almost impossible to find the tiger sturgeon at this time of year.â##

â##Only the best for a guest like yourself,â## said the colonel smugly, on seeing that his choice seemed to have gone down well.

He held out his right hand politely and invited her to follow him. Still wearing the mischievous smile, she let him lead her to the table.

The venue was attractively decorated in a style that was typical of the region. The lighting was warm and subdued, and the enormous curtains extending from the ceiling almost covered the walls. A large carpet with Eslimi Toranjdar designs covered virtually the entire floor, whilst other, smaller ones had been placed in the corners of the room, as if to frame the whole. Of course, according to tradition the meal should have been consumed whilst lying on the soft, comfortable cushions on the floor, but as a typical westerner the colonel had preferred a more "normal" table. Even this was carefully laid, the colours chosen for the tablecloth matching the rest of the building perfectly. Background music, in which a Darbuka⁹ with a Maqsum¹⁰ rhythm accompanied an Oud¹¹ melody, gently filled the room.

A perfect evening.

A tall, slim waiter approached them politely, and with a bow, invited them to take a seat. The colonel let Elisa sit down first whilst he concentrated on arranging his chair, then he sat opposite her, taking care not to let his tie slide onto the plate.

"It really is very nice here," said Elisa, looking around her.

"Thank you," said the colonel. "I must confess I was a little worried that you wouldn't like it. But then I remembered

your passion for this area and I thought it would be the best choice.â##

â##You guessed correctly!â## said Elisa, showing off her marvellous smile yet again.

The waiter uncorked a bottle of champagne, and whilst he was filling both goblets, another arrived, carrying a tray. â##Would you like to try a Most-o-bademjun¹² â##.

The two diners looked at one another with delight. Picking up their respective glasses they toasted once again.

In a dark car approximately one hundred metres away from the restaurant, two strange people were tinkering with a sophisticated surveillance system.

â##Have you seen how the colonelâ##s pampering that chick? â## said the decidedly overweight one in the driverâ##s seat with a grin. He was chewing an enormous sandwich and filling his belly and trousers with crumbs.

â##It was a brilliant idea, inserting a transmitter into the professorâ##s earring,â## replied the other, much thinner one, who had large, dark eyes and was sipping coffee from a large, brownish paper cup. â##We can hear everything theyâ##re saying from here.â##

â##Make sure you donâ##t mess this up, and record everything,â## scolded the other, â##otherwise theyâ##ll make us eat those earrings for breakfast.â##

â##Donâ##t worry. Iâ##m very familiar with this equipment. We wonâ##t even miss a whisper.â##

“We have to find out exactly what it is that the lady has discovered,” added the fatter one. “The boss has invested a whole lot of money to follow this research in secret.”

“That certainly won’t be easy considering the tight security structure the colonel has put in place.” The thin man looked up at the sky as if in a dream, then added “If they gave me even a fraction of that money right now I’d be stretched out under a palm tree in Cuba, and the only thing I’d have to worry about would be whether to order a Margarita or a Pina Colada.”

“And maybe even a few girls in bikinis to smear you with sunscreen,” said the big man, who burst out laughing, making the crumbs fall off the belly that was wobbling up and down.

“This appetiser is delicious.” The professor’s voice was slightly distorted by the small speaker on the panel. “I must confess I never thought there’d be such a sophisticated man hiding behind that hard, military exterior.”

“Why, thank you, Elisa. And I would never have thought that such a highly qualified academic, as well as being beautiful, could be so friendly and charming,” said the colonel, whose voice was again somewhat distorted, but slightly lower.

“Listen to them flirting,” exclaimed the big man in the driver’s seat. “I reckon they’ll end up in bed.”

“I’m not so sure,” asserted the other. “Our doctor is clearly a clever woman, and I don’t believe that dinner and a sleazy compliment like that will be enough to make her fall into

his arms.â##

â##Iâ##ll bet you ten dollars they do it tonight,â## said the fat man, extending his right hand towards his colleague.

â##Okay, youâ##re on,â## agreed the other, shaking the large hand that had been offered.

Theos spacecraft

The mysterious object

The object that had materialised in front of the two astonished travellers was like nothing that nature could ever have created, in spite of its infinite imagination. It had the appearance of a metallic flower with three long petals and no stem, and a central, slightly conical pistil. The rear side of the pistil took the form of a hexagonal prism, the basal surface of which was slightly larger than that of the cone positioned at the opposite side, which served as a support for the whole structure. The rectangular petals branched out from the three evenly-spaced sides of the hexagon, with a length of at least four times that of the base.

“It looks like some kind of old windmill. Like the ones they used in the big eastern prairies centuries ago,” cried Petri, without removing his eyes from the object displayed on the large screen.

Azakis felt a shiver run down his spine. He was remembering some old prototypes that the Elders had suggested he study before their departure.

“It must be a space probe,” he concluded. “I’ve seen a few of these with more or less the same design in old GCS archives,” he went on, hastening to extract as much information on the matter as he could from the N^{COM}.

“A space probe?” asked Petri, turning towards his companion with a look of astonishment. “And when would we have launched it?”

“I don’t think it’s ours.”

“Not one of ours? What do you mean?”

“I mean that it was neither built nor launched by inhabitants of the planet Nibiru.”

Petri’s expression was becoming increasingly dazed. “What do you mean? Don’t tell me you believe this bullshit about aliens as well?”

“What I do know is that nothing like this has ever been built on our planet. I checked the GCS archives and nothing corresponds to the object we have here. Not even among the plans for projects that were never realised.”

“That’s not possible!” cried Petri. “That N[^]COM of yours must be out of phase. Check again.”

“I’m sorry, Petri. I’ve already checked it twice and I’m absolutely certain that this isn’t our work.”

The short-range viewing system generated a three-dimensional image of the object, meticulously reconstructing every minute detail. The hologram floated in the centre of the control room, suspended half a metre above the floor.

With a movement of his right hand, Petri began to rotate it slowly, closely examining every detail.

“It would appear to be made of a low density metal alloy,” he remarked in a decidedly more technical tone

than the one adopted moments before when he'd been overwhelmed with amazement. The engines must be powered by those three petals. They seem to have been covered with some kind of light-sensitive material. He had finally begun to fiddle with the system controls. The pistil must be some kind of radio antenna, and the hexagonal prism is definitely the brain of this thing.

Petri was moving the hologram increasingly quickly, turning it over in all directions. Suddenly he stopped, and called out "Look here. What do you think this is?" he asked, zooming in on a small area.

Azakis approached as closely as he could. "They seem to be symbols."

"I'd say there were two symbols," Petri corrected, "or better still, one drawing and four symbols close together."

Azakis was still eagerly searching on the N^COM, trying to find something on the GCS. Yet there was absolutely nothing that matched the object in front of them.

The drawing represented a rectangle composed of fifteen horizontal red and white stripes. In the upper left-hand corner was another blue rectangle containing fifty white five-pointed stars. To the right of this were four symbols:

JUNO

"It seems like some kind of writing," Azakis guessed. "Maybe the symbols represent the name of the people who made the probe."

“Or maybe that its name,” argued Petri. “The probe is called JUNO, and that coloured rectangle is the symbol of its creators.”

“Whatever it is, it wasn’t made by us,” declared Azakis. “Do you think there could be some life form inside it?”

“I really don’t think so. At least, nothing that we know. The only place where there could be something is the rear capsule, and that’s too small to accommodate a living being.”

Even as he spoke, Petri had already begun to scan the probe, looking for some sign of life inside it. After a few moments, a series of symbols appeared on the screen, and he quickly tried to translate these to his companion.

“According to our sensors there’s nothing living inside. There doesn’t seem to be any kind of weapon either. From a preliminary analysis, I’d say that this thing is some kind of scout ship exploring the middle part of the solar system, in search of who knows what.”

“It could be,” agreed Azakis. “But the question we should be asking is: Sent by whom?”

“Well,” said Petri, “if we rule out the presence of mysterious aliens, I’d say that the only ones capable of constructing something like that would be your old terrestrial friends.”

“But what are you saying? The last time we left them they were still travelling on horseback. How could they have reached

this stage in their development in such a short time? Sending a probe to go roaming around in space is no small feat.###

###Short time?### said Petri, looking him straight in the eyes. ###Don't forget that, for them, almost 3,600 years have passed since then. Considering that their average lifespan is fifty to sixty years at the most, at least sixty generations have come and gone. Maybe they've become much more intelligent than we imagined they would.###

###And perhaps that###s why the Elders were so worried about this mission,### added Azakis, attempting to follow his friend###s line of reasoning. They###d expected this, or at least considered the possibility.###

###Well, they might have mentioned something to us. The sight of this thing almost gave me a stroke.###

###This is mere speculation,### said Azakis, rubbing his chin with his thumb and forefinger, ###but it seems to make sense. I###ll try and contact the Elders. Try to get some more information out of them, if they have any. In the meantime, you try to find out more about this thing. Analyse its current course, velocity, mass, etcetera, and try to make some predictions about its destination, when it left and any data it###s recorded. I want to know as much as possible about what###s waiting for us there.###

###Okay, Zak,### agreed Petri, while colourful holograms with an infinite number of numbers and formulae fluttered in the air around him.

And don't forget to analyse the part you identified as an antenna. If it really is as you say, it will also be able to transmit and receive. I wouldn't be happy if our encounter had already been communicated to whoever sent that probe.

Having said that, Azakis made his way to the H^{COM} cabin, the only place on the ship equipped for long-distance communication. It was located between gates eighteen and nineteen of the internal transfer modules. The door opened with a slight hiss, and Azakis slid into the narrow cabin.

Goodness knows why they made this thing so small... he wondered, trying to settle into the equally narrow seat, which lowered automatically. Maybe they didn't want us to use it too often...

While the door reclosed behind him, he began to make a series of commands on the console in front of him. It took several seconds for the signal to stabilise. Suddenly, in the holographic display similar to the one he had in his room, the hollow, lined face of his Elder superior began to take shape.

Azakis, said the man, smiling and slowly lifting a bony hand in acknowledgement. What has made you call a poor old man with such urgency?

He had never managed to find out the exact age of his superior. No one was permitted to know such private information about the Elders. They had certainly witnessed many revolutions around the sun. In spite of this, his eyes were darting from left to right with even more vitality than he possessed himself.

“We have made contact with something surprising, at least to us,” began Azakis, dispensing with preliminaries, trying to look straight into the other’s eyes. “We almost collided with an unidentified object,” he continued, studying the expression on the face of the Elder.

“An object? Tell me more, my boy.”

“Petri is still analysing it, but we think it could be a kind of probe, and we’re certain that it’s not ours.” The Elder’s eyes widened. Even he seemed surprised.

We found some strange symbols engraved on the hull in a language we don’t know,” he added. “I’m sending over all the data.”

For an instant, the Elder looked absent. Using his O[^]COM he analysed the flow of information coming in.

After several long moments, his eyes turned to look at Azakis. Finally, in a tone that belied no emotion, he replied, “I will call an emergency meeting of the Council of Elders. All indications are that your initial deductions are accurate. If this is in fact the case, we will need to revise our plans immediately.”

“I’ll await instructions,” and so saying, Azakis broke off the communication.

Nasiriyya ## The dinner

The colonel and Elisa were already draining their third glass of champagne, and the atmosphere between them had become decidedly less formal.

##I must say, Jack, this Masgouf is divine. I won##t be able to finish it. It##s huge.##

##Yes. It##s truly wonderful. We should send our compliments to the chef.##

##Maybe I should marry him so he can cook for me,## said Elisa, laughing a little too excessively. The alcohol was already beginning to take effect.

##No. He will have to wait in line. I was first.## He risked making this joke, hoping it would not be too inappropriate. Elisa pretended not to notice and continued to nibble at her sturgeon.

##Are you really not married?##

##No. I##ve never had the time for that.##

##That##s an old excuse,## she said, giving him a sly look.

##Well actually, I came very close once, but the military life doesn##t work too well with marriage. And you?## he added, changing a subject that was still painful to him. ##Have you ever been married?##

##Are you joking? And who would put up with a woman who spends most of her time going around the world digging underground like a mole and enjoys desecrating thousands of

year old tombs?â##

â##I see,â## said Jack, smiling bitterly. â##Youâ##re obviously not cut out for marriage.â## And raising a glass, he offered a melancholy â##To us.â##

The waiter arrived with a few more Samoons¹³ fresh from the oven, which fortunately interrupted that moment of sadness.

Grateful for this interruption, Jack tried to quickly banish a series of memories that had suddenly come into his mind. It was water under the bridge. Right now he had a beautiful woman sitting with him and he had to pay attention to her. This was not proving too difficult.

The gentle background music around them was just right. In the light of the three candles positioned at the centre of the table, Elisa looked wonderful. Her hair had gold and copper highlights, and her smooth skin was bronzed by the sun. Her penetrating eyes were of the deepest green. Using her soft lips, she was trying to pull a piece of sturgeon off the bone that she was holding between her fingers. So sexy.

Elisa was certainly not going to let the colonelâ##s moment of weakness go by. She placed the bone on the edge of her plate, and sucked the juice from her thumb and fingers with apparent nonchalance. Lowering her head, she gazed at him so intensely that Jack feared that his heart would leap out of his chest and land on his plate.

Realising that he was no longer in control of the situation, the colonel tried to pull himself together. He was much too old to

behave like a lovesick school boy, but there was something about her that he found irresistibly attractive.

Taking a deep breath, he wiped his face with his hands and tried to say "Do you think we can finish this last piece?"

She smiled, gently took the last morsel of sturgeon and, leaning forward in her seat, moved it towards his mouth. In that position, the neckline of her dress fell away slightly, revealing her generous breasts. Jack, visibly embarrassed, took only a bite. He did not, however, manage to avoid her touching his lips with her fingers. He felt a growing sense of excitement. Elisa was playing with him like a cat with a mouse, and Jack was unable to defend himself.

Then, with the air of an innocent girl, she sat back in her chair as though nothing had happened and signalled to the tall, thin waiter, who arrived promptly.

"I think it's time for some nice cardamom tea. What do you say, Jack?"

Still recovering from the previous incident, he stammered something like "Er, yes. Okay..." Straightening his jacket, he tried to adopt a more casual tone, adding "I believe it's great for the digestion."

He realised he had said something ridiculous, but at that time nothing else came to mind.

"This is all very pleasant, Jack. It's been a lovely evening. But we mustn't forget the reason for our meeting tonight. There's something I have to show you, remember?"

In that moment, the Colonel was thinking of anything but work. She was right, however. There were more important things at stake than a foolish flirtation. The truth was that, to him, the flirting did not seem foolish.

“Sure,” he replied, trying to recover his authoritative expression. “I can’t wait to find out what you’ve discovered.”

At this point, the fat man in the nearby car, who was listening to everything, shouted “What a bitch!” Women are all the same. First they make you feel like they’re going to take you to the moon, then they drop you as though nothing had happened.

“I think your ten dollars will soon be lining my pockets,” said the thinner guy, following up his comment with a hearty laugh.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn who gets into bed with the professor. Don’t forget that we’re only here to find out what she knows.” While he was trying to find a more comfortable position in his seat because his back was beginning to ache, he added, “We should have found a way to place a camera inside that damn restaurant.”

“Yes, under the table, even. That way we’d have got a good look at her thighs.”

“Idiot. Which asshole picked you for this mission?”

“The boss, my friend. And I advise you not to insult him. He knows about bugging devices and he may even have bugged

this car.â##

The big man winced. For a moment he thought his heart had stopped beating. He was looking to build a career, and insulting his immediate superior was not exactly the way to get ahead.

â##Stop talking bullshit,â## he said, trying to sound serious and professional. â##Just think about getting on with the job, and letâ##s get back to base with something concrete.â## As he was saying this he was staring at a point in the night darkness, not well-defined through the slightly steamed up windscreen.

Elisa removed her beloved computer from her bag. Placing it on the table she began to scroll through the photos. The colonel, whose curiosity was aroused, tried to focus on something, but the angles did not allow it. Having found what she was looking for, she got up and moved to the seat next to him.

â##Now,â## she began. â##Make yourself comfortable. Itâ##s a long story. Iâ##ll try to summarise as much as possible.â##

Scrolling rapidly down the screen of her computer, she found a picture of a tablet engraved with strange drawings and cuneiform writings.

â##This is a photograph of one of the tablets found in the tomb of King Baldwin II of Jerusalem,â## Elisa went on. â##He is thought to have been the first to open the Cave of Macpela, also known as the Cave of the Patriarchs, in 1119. This is where Abraham and his sons Isaac and Jacob are believed to be buried. These underground tombs were found beneath what today is

called the Mosque, or the Sanctuary of Abraham in Hebron on the West Bank. At this point, she showed him a picture of the mosque.

Inside these tombs, in addition to many other things, the king found a set of tablets that would have belonged to Abraham. It's even believed to represent some kind of diary that he kept, where he recorded some of the most significant events in his life.

His travel notes, Jack suggested, hoping to make a favourable impression.

In one way, yes. For someone of that period of history he wrote a lot down while he was travelling.

She scrolled to another photo and continued to explain. The greatest experts on the language and graphical representation of the time have tried to translate what has been recorded on this tablet. Obviously, opinion is divided in some respects, but everyone agrees that this, she continued, enlarging a detail on the photo, may be interpreted as vessel or amphora of the gods. Then there are the words burial, secret and protection, which are also quite clear.

Jack was beginning to feel a little confused, but he kept nodding his head to convince Elisa that he had understood perfectly. She looked at him for an instant, then continued. This symbol, on the other hand, she said, adjusting the screen to make the image as clear as possible, would,

according to some, represent a tomb, and the tomb of a god. Whereas this part probably describes one of the gods warning or even threatening the people gathered around him.â##

The colonel, partly due to the alcohol and partly due to the intoxicating perfume emanating from Elisa, and perhaps partly due to his being lost in her eyes, was no longer following what she was saying. In spite of this, he went on nodding, as if all was clear.

â##To put it simply,â## said Elisa, who had noticed that Jack was becoming ever more perplexed, â##experts have interpreted the contents of this tablet as being a depiction of an event confirmed as having occurred during the time of Abraham, in which the alleged god, or broadly-speaking gods, would have hidden or buried it near one of their tombs. It was something very valuable, at least to them.â##

â##That seems like a bit of a leap of logic,â## Jack began, trying to have some say in this matter. â##Saying that something valuable was buried near the tomb of the gods. Itâ##s not as though they provided GPS coordinates. It could refer to almost anything, anywhere.â##

â##You're right, but all inscriptions, especially those dating from so long ago, have to go through a process of interpretation and contextualisation. Thatâ##s what the experts are there for. And Iâ##m one of them, by the way.â## As she said this, she pretended to be a model posing in front of paparazzi cameras.

â##Ok, ok. I know how clever you are. But right now, try to

make this clear to us mere mortals.â##

â##Essentially,â## Elisa continued once she had composed herself, â##having analysed and compared all kinds of historical finds, including facts, legends, rumours, and so on and so forth, the consensus of the greatest minds in the world is that there is an element of truth in this reconstruction. On this basis, they unleashed archaeologists from all over the world to search for this mysterious object.â##

â##But where does ELSAD fit into all this?â## The colonel was beginning to regain his cerebral function. â##What they told me was that this research was aimed at recovering some imaginary alien artefacts.â##

â##And maybe thatâ##s exactly how it is,â## replied Elisa. â##Itâ##s now widely believed that these â##godsâ##, who in ancient times were wandering around Earth, were none other than humanoids from a planet outside our solar system. Because of their technological superiority, particularly in medicine and science, itâ##s quite possible that they were mistaken for deities capable of performing miracles.â##

â##I see,â## interrupted Jack. â##If I appeared in front of a tribe in the middle of the Amazon in an Apache combat helicopter and started launching missiles, even I could be mistaken for an angry god.â##

â##This is precisely the effect that they would have had on the people of that time. There are some who even believe that it was these aliens who implanted a seed of intelligence into Homo

Erectus, thus transforming them, in just a few tens of thousands of years, into those we now call Homo sapiens sapiens.â##

Elisa looked carefully at the colonel, whose expression was one of astonishment, and decided to sink a low blow. â##To tell the truth, as the person in charge of this mission, Iâ##d have thought youâ##d be better informed.â##

â##I'd have thought so too,â## Jack blurted out. â##Obviously, those in authority follow a â##less said the betterâ## philosophy.â## Anger was beginning to take the place of his former schmaltz.

Sensing this, Elisa placed her computer on the table and brought her face so close to the Colonel's that for a moment he held his breath, thinking that she even wanted to kiss him. â##Now for the best part,â## she said.

Returning to her seat with a swift movement, she showed him another photograph. "While everyoneâ##s been throwing themselves into the search for this notorious â##Tomb of the godsâ##, by going off to rummage through the Egyptian pyramids, the tombs of the gods par excellence, Iâ##ve been formulating a different interpretation of whatâ##s engraved on the tablet, which I believe is the correct one. Look at this,â## she said, complacently showing him an image that depicted the text according to her own interpretation.

The two cronies listening to the conversation of the diners would have given anything to be able to see the photos being shown to the Colonel.

â##Damn!â## cried the larger one. â##We have to get our hands on that handheld device.â##

â##Letâ##s hope that at least one of them reads it out loud,â## replied his thinner companion.

â##Letâ##s hope that this â##romantic dinnerâ## is over soon. Iâ##m sick of sitting outside in the dark, and whatâ##s more, Iâ##m starving.â##

â##Starving? What dâ##you mean? Youâ##ve just eaten my share of the sandwiches.â##

â##Not all of it, my friend. Thereâ##s one left and I intend to gobble it up.â## Smugly, he turned to remove it from a bag on the rear seat. In turning, however, his knee hit against the power button on the recording system, which gave out a faint beep and died out.

â##You clumsy idiot! Are you trying to attract attention?â## The thin guy hastened to switch the instrument back on. â##Now Iâ##ll have to restart the system and that will take at least a minute. Just pray that theyâ##re not saying anything important, otherwise this time Iâ##ll kick your fat ass to the Persian Gulf!â##

â##Sorry,â## said the fat guy in a quiet voice. â##I think itâ##s time you went on a diet.â##

â##The gods buried the vessel with precious contents to the south of the temple, ordering the people to stay away from it until they returned, for fear that some terrible calamity would otherwise befall all nations. Four blazing guardians were

stationed there to protect the site.

“This is how I translate it,” said Elisa proudly. “In my opinion, the correct name for it is not ‘tomb’ but ‘temple’, and the Ziqqurat of Ur, where my research was carried out, is none other than a temple erected for the gods. There are certainly a number of Ziqqurat in this area, but none of them are this close to the house belonging to the person who, presumably, was the one who inscribed the tablets: dear old Abraham.”

“Very interesting.” The Colonel was scrutinising the text. “The place that everyone has identified as the ‘House of Abraham’ is only a few hundred metres from the temple.”

“Also,” Elisa continued, “if these beings really were aliens, imagine how interesting this ‘vessel’ could be to the military. Perhaps even more so than the ‘precious contents’.”

Jack was pensive for a moment, then he replied, “that’s the reason for all this interest on the part of ELSAD. The buried vessel might be much more than a simple earthenware container.”

“Well done. And now for the moment of truth,” cried Elisa theatrically. “Ladies and gentlemen, I now present what I found this morning.”

She touched the screen and a new photo appeared on the device. “But it’s the same symbol as the one on the tablet,” exclaimed Jack.

“Exactly. But I only shot this photo today,” replied Elisa, feeling pleased with herself. “Apparently, Abraham used the same symbol to represent the ‘gods’ as the Sumerians had already used: a star with twelve planets around it, and, incidentally, it’s the same as the one I found engraved on the cover of the ‘container’ that we are in the process of unearthing.

“That might not mean anything,” remarked Jack. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence. That symbol could have hundreds of meanings.”

“You think so? How about this one? What do you think it is?” she asked, showing him the last photo. “We took this from the outside of the container, using our portable X ray equipment.”

All Jack could do was stare in amazement, his eyes wide open.

Theos spacecraft â## Data analysis

Petri was still absorbed in his analysis of the probe when Azakis returned to the bridge. â##They said theyâ##ll get back to us,â## he said.

â##Which means theyâ##re going to discuss it amongst themselves,â## remarked Petri bitterly.

â##More or less what we expected, eh?â## replied Azakis, patting his companion on the back. â##So what can you tell me about this hunk of metal?â##

â##Apart from the fact that there is very little of the hull that hasnâ##t had the paint scratched off, I can assure you that no message has been sent from our three-bladed friend. The probe seems to have been designed for the sole purpose of studying celestial bodies. A kind of lone space traveller, recording data and transmitting it periodically back to base.â## He pointed out some details of the antenna in the hologram that hovered in the room.

â##We probably flew by too quickly for it to record our presence,â## ventured Azakis.

â##Not only that, old friend. Its on-board instruments are programmed to analyse objects at distances of hundreds of thousands of kilometres. We passed so close that, had we not been in a vacuum, our slip stream would have left it spinning like a top.â##

“And now that we’re further away, do you think it might reveal our presence?”

“I really don't think so. We’re much too small and quick to be of any interest to them.”

“Good,” said Azakis. “At last we have some good news.”

“I tried to analyse the data transmission method on the probe,” continued Petri. “It doesn’t seem to be equipped with light vortex technology like ours. It’s still using an old frequency modulation system.”

“Isn't that the one used by our predecessors before the Great Revolution¹⁴?” asked Azakis.

“Exactly. It wasn’t too efficient, but for a long time it enabled us to exchange information throughout the entire planet, and it definitely helped us get to where we are now.”

Azakis sat down in the command chair, chewing his finger in a moment of reflection, then he said “if this is the communication system currently in use, maybe we could also pick up some transmission of theirs.”

“Are you hoping to see what porn films they’re making?” joked Petri, sticking his tongue out to the left of his mouth.

“Cut out the bullshit. Instead, why not try and adapt our secondary communication system to this technology? I want to be as well-prepared as possible when we get there.”

“I understand. I expect I’ll have to spend several hours in that cramped compartment.”

“What about getting something to eat first?” suggested Azakis, anticipating his friend’s next question, which, he imagined, would have followed soon after.

“That’s the first sensible thing I’ve heard you say today,” replied Petri. “All this excitement has given me an appetite.”

“Okay We’ll take a break, but it’s my turn to decide what we have. That Nebir liver you chose yesterday got stuck in my poor stomach so long that it seemed to be taking root.”

Ten minutes later, while the two travelling companions were still busy consuming their meal, a young engineer in the NASA Mission Control room on Earth was picking up a strange alteration in the course of the probe he was monitoring.

“Sir,” he said into the microphone attached to his headset, which hung a few centimetres from his mouth. “I think we may have a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” the engineer in charge of the mission asked anxiously.

“For some unknown reason Juno has suddenly shifted slightly off its set course.

“Shifted?” By how much? Due to what? Already he was feeling a cold sweat. The cost of this mission was exorbitant. Nothing should be going wrong.

“I’m analysing the data right now. The telemetry is indicating a deviation of 0.01 degrees with no apparent explanation. Everything seems to be functioning normally.”

“It could have run into a rock fragment,” ventured the older engineer. “It’s not actually that far from the asteroid belt.”

“Juno is pretty much in Jupiter’s orbit now, and there shouldn’t be any,” said his younger colleague, tentatively.

“So what’s happened then? There must have been some kind of malfunction.” After a few moments of reflection, he said, “I want a couple of checks run on all on-board instruments. I want the results on my computer in five minutes,” he ordered, closing communication.

The young engineer was suddenly aware of how much responsibility he had been given. He noticed his own hands trembling, but chose to ignore them. With the help of a colleague, he carried out a differentiated check-up on the probe, keeping his fingers crossed. The computer began to run the programme controls sequentially, and within a few minutes the results of the analysis appeared on the screen.

Check-up complete. All instruments operational.

“Everything seems fine,” remarked his colleague.

“So what the devil happened? If we don’t find anything in the next two minutes, the chief will have both our asses.” Feverishly he began typing commands into the keyboard in front of him.

Nothing. Everything was working perfectly.

He absolutely had to come up with something and fast. He began to drum on the desk with his fingers. He continued for

about ten seconds, then decided to resort to the first unwritten rule of the workplace conduct manual: never contradict the boss.

Switching on the microphone, he said "Chief, you were right. It was a small Trojan asteroid that sent the probe off course. Luckily, it wasn't a direct hit. It just passed close by. Evidently, the asteroid exerted a small gravitational attraction on Juno, making it alter its course slightly. I'm sending you the data now," he said, holding his breath.

After an interminable length of time, the proud voice of his superior reached his headset. "I was sure of it. My dear boy, you can't out-do the instincts of an old salt." Then he added, "Try to activate the engines on the probe and correct its course. I won't accept any errors." So saying, he switched off. A moment later, he came back, adding "Nice work, son."

The young engineer noticed that the blood had begun to flow around his body once again. His heart was beating so hard that he could hear his pulse in his ears. After all, this could actually have been the correct explanation. Turning towards his colleague, he gave him the thumbs up. The other relaxed, and winked at him. They were in the clear, at least for the time being.

Nasiriyya After dinner

The recording system reactivated with a soft beep. The professor's voice could once again be heard from the small speaker inside the machine. "I think it's time we were leaving, Jack. I have to be up early in the morning, to continue with the excavations."

"Okay," replied the colonel. "I'll go and thank the chef, then we'll go."

"For heaven's sake!" cried the thinner of the two listeners. "Because of you we've missed the most important part."

"Oh, come on. I didn't do it on purpose," said the fat one, defensively. "We could always say that there was a system malfunction and that we didn't manage to record all of the conversation."

"I always end up having to cover your ass," claimed the other.

"You'll thank me. I already have a plan for getting our hands on that handheld device." Squeezing his nose between his thumb and forefinger, he said "We'll go into her room tonight and copy all her data without her even noticing."

"And what do we do if she wakes up? Sing her a lullaby?"

"Don't you worry, my friend. I have a few tricks up my sleeve," he replied, narrowing his eyes.

Meanwhile, Jack and Elisa were preparing to leave the restaurant. The colonel switched on his handheld communicator and spoke to the escort. "We're on our way out."

"Everything is quiet outside here, colonel," a voice responded into the earphone.

Cautiously, the colonel opened the door of the building and scanned the area around him. The soldier who had accompanied Elisa earlier was still standing near the car outside.

"You can go, son," ordered the colonel. "I'll take Doctor Hunter back."

The soldier stood to attention, saluted, and saying something into his communicator, disappeared into the shadows.

"It's been a marvellous evening, Jack," said Elisa as they left. She inhaled the fresh night air deeply, adding, "It's been a long time since I spent an evening like this." Thank you so much," she said, with another of her wonderful smiles.

"Come on. We're not too safe standing out in the open here," and so saying, he opened the door of the car and helped her in.

With the colonel at the wheel, the big dark car pulled away quickly, leaving an appreciable cloud of dust behind it.

"I had a good time as well. I would never have thought that an evening with a presumptuous professor could be so much fun."

"Presumptuous? Is that what people think?" and she turned away, pretending to be offended.

Presumptuous, yes. But also very understanding, intelligent and definitely sexy. Seeing that she was facing away, he took the opportunity to stroke the hair at the back of her neck.

The contact sent a series of shivers along her spine. She could not surrender so soon, she thought. But she could not help but feel a growing sense of anticipation. Not wishing to say anything, she allowed herself to enjoy this short, soothing massage. Jack, encouraged by the lack of reaction to this gesture, continued to stroke her hair for a while. Suddenly, he began to slide his hand towards her shoulder, then ran it down her arm until he gently reached her fingertips. Still facing the window, she took his hand and squeezed it firmly. It was a large, strong hand. The contact made her feel safe.

Not far away, another dark car was following the couple, its passengers trying to eavesdrop another interesting dialogue.

"I think that ten dollars is now going to end up in my pocket, old friend," said the fatter one. "He's taking her to the hotel, she'll ask him up for a drink, and that will be it."

"I hope it doesn't end up like that, or else how are we going to copy the data on that handheld device?"

"Man. I never thought of that."

"You never think of anything that isn't going to wind up in that bottomless stomach of yours."

"Come on, don't let them get too far away," said the fat guy ignoring the provocation. "I don't want to lose the signal"

again.â##

For a while, they remained hand in hand, without saying anything, both staring through the windscreen. The hotel was getting nearer and nearer and Jack began to feel awkward. This wasnâ##t the first time he had been out with a woman, but that evening he felt the shyness that had tortured him in his youth resurfacing. He had thought heâ##d overcome that. He felt paralysed by the prolonged contact. Perhaps he should have said something to break the embarrassing silence, but, fearing that whatever he said would ruin the magical moment, he chose to postpone this.

He was grateful for the automatic, which meant that he didnâ##t need to remove his hand to change gears and drive in the night.

As for Elisa, all the so-called â##men in her lifeâ## were starting to come into her mind, one by one. So many stories, dreams, plans, so much joy and happiness, but always ending up in disillusion, bitterness and pain. It was as though destiny had already made its decision for her. On a professional level, she had certainly led a life of satisfaction and recognition, but it seemed to be a foregone conclusion that no one would be at her side to share it. Now she was there, in a foreign country, travelling hand in hand with a man who, until that day, she had considered merely as an obstacle to her plans, but who was treating her with such tenderness and affection. More than once she asked herself what she should do.

“Is everything all right?” asked Jack, worried at seeing her eyes become increasingly damp.

“Yes. Thank you, Jack. Just a moment of sadness. It will soon pass.”

“Is it my fault?” asked the colonel anxiously. “Have I said or done something wrong?”

“No, quite the opposite,” she replied suddenly. Then, in the softest of voices, she added “Stay close to me, please.”

“It’s okay. I’m here. You don’t have to worry about anything. I’m not going to let you come to any harm, okay?”

“Thank you. Thank you so much,” said Elisa, whilst she tried to wipe away the tears that were slowly rolling down her cheeks. “You’re a real treasure.” Jack remained silent and held her hand even more firmly.

The hotel sign appeared at the end of the road. They travelled from one end to the other without a word. Eventually, the colonel slowed down and pulled up just outside the entrance. The two looked at each other intensely. For several long moments, neither dared to speak. Jack knew that it was up to him to make the first move, but Elisa beat him to it. “Now you should tell me that it’s been a lovely evening, and that it would be wonderful if I invited you up for a drink.”

“That would require a little practice,” said Jack, a little blown away by her words. “That’s how it would go if you were like all the others, but that’s not what

I'm thinking. He took a breath, and continued. I think you're a very special person and spending this evening together has given me a chance to get to know you better, and I've discovered many things I would never have expected to find in an archaeologist.

"I'll take that as a compliment," she said, trying to lessen the drama a little.

Behind that outer image of a strong and indestructible woman, I think there's a tender, frightened puppy. You're a delightful person, with a sensitive nature. Perhaps he would later regret what he was about to say, but he took courage, and went on. Frankly, I have no interest in one night of sex that would then be filed away, as pointless as many others, leaving me feeling nothing other than an immense emptiness. I need more from you. I confess I've always liked you. Now he could no longer stop himself. He took her hands in his own and, squeezing them, continued. "Since the first time we met in my office, I've known that you were something special. At first, I was attracted to your beauty, but then your voice, the way you spoke to me, the way you moved, the way you walked, your smile..." He paused for a moment, then added "I've been bewitched by your charm. You've stolen my heart. I didn't know how I would live without you any longer, and this evening hasn't changed my mind."

Elisa, who was not expecting a declaration of this kind, was speechless for a moment. Then slowly, without looking into his

eyes, she drew close to him. She hesitated for an instant, then kissed him.

It was a long and lingering kiss. Emotions, both old and new, were resurfacing in both of them. Suddenly Elisa pulled away. Staying only a few centimetres away from him, she said "Thank you for your kind words, Jack. I wouldn't have wanted our meeting to end up as a sleazy night of sex either. This evening has given me the chance to find out more about you, and to appreciate what kind of man you are. I would never have thought that behind that severe 'colonel' there was a tender and sensitive person. I must confess that I haven't felt my heart beating so fast for a long time. I know I'm not a girl any more, but I wouldn't like to ruin everything by making you come up with me now." She paused for a long time, then said "I'd really like to see you again."

Kissing him again, she got out of the car and ran into the hotel. She was worried that if she turned back she would not be able to keep her word.

Jack watched her until she disappeared beyond the revolving door of the hotel. He remained there, immobile, watching the doors windmilling around until they came to a complete stop. Then, casting a last glance at the flickering hotel sign, he stepped on the accelerator and, with a sharp squeal of the tyres, he vanished into the darkness.

The two shady characters who had been watching the couple parked at the back of the hotel and took great care not to be seen.

From this vantage point they were able to see Elisa's room. After not even a minute, a light went on.

"She's gone inside, and she's alone," said the fat man.

The thinner one was quick to remind the other that he'd lost the bet. "Time to cough up, my dear friend," he said, rubbing his fingers together in that gesture that meant he was ready to be paid.

"Well, everything went as I expected until now," replied the fat one. "Our dear colonel seems to have developed a crush."

"Yeah, and she seemed quite forward herself."

"A nice little couple," remarked the fatter guy, with his usual laughter. "Now all we have to do is wait for the chick to go to bed, then we'll go in and copy all her data." Getting out of the car, he added, "in the meantime I'll get the equipment ready. You keep checking to see if she's switched the light off."

Elisa was tormented by the thousands of things on her mind. Had she done the right thing, letting him go like that? How had he taken it? Would he really want to see her again? In the end, though, it had been he who had suggested that they postpone. He had given an undeniably convincing show of being serious. He had seemed quite sincere in the way he had expressed himself in such a touching way. Was this merely a strategy to make her fall into a skilfully woven net? Something that would lead to another amorous disappointment, more pain, further suffering.

She decided to try and take her mind off it for now. Her main objective for the evening, however, had met with success: the colonel had granted a further two weeks for completion of her research. The rest of it remained to be seen, and by now she had learned not to be under too many illusions. She could not permit herself to make another blunder. This time she wouldn't recover.

Slipping off her clothes, she threw herself onto the bed. The alcohol had clouded her thoughts somewhat. Her only priority now was to get a good night's rest. She switched off the light and instantly fell asleep.

In the meantime, Jack was driving back to the base, thinking more or less the same things. Had she been deluding him? Would she really want to see him again? Despite these doubts, he felt sure that he had made a good impression by passing up the chance to go to bed with her in such a noble fashion. Few others would have done so, and he was certain that she would have greatly appreciated this. In the end, if there was going to be something between them, they had all the time in the world to be together. A day or so more would not make any difference.

She switched off the light, said the thin man in a low voice, as if frightened to wake her. He took hold of a large travelling bag. We can go in.

Moving cautiously, the pair made their way towards the hall of the house attached to the hotel in which they had rented a room. We absolutely have to do this now, said the fat one.

She takes that damn handheld device everywhere, as if it were her underwear. The only time we're going to get hold of it is when she's asleep.

They crept slowly up the stairs, taking care not to make any noise. One click of the lock and the door opened with a creak. The room was full of boxes, cartons and equipment of all kinds. It had the look of an abandoned storeroom. One wall lamp, soiled with the dust of many years, lit up the surroundings dimly.

We'll get in by climbing over the partition between our balcony and hers," said the fatter of the two.

WE will get in? You mean I will get in," exclaimed the other. "How do you imagine you're going to climb over to the other side with all that extra flesh you're carrying?"

Perhaps you're underestimating my athletic prowess?"

No, I can imagine. I wouldn't want to think about it," replied his thinner colleague sarcastically. "Stop talking bullshit and pass me that rope. If I slip, at least try to hold on. I don't want to die splattered over the pavement of this seedy town."

Don't worry, I've got you." He wound the rope around his waist and wrapped it once around the handrail of the fence as well. "Here. Take this," he added, passing him a small dart gun with laser pointer. "One pinprick of this stuff and our young lady will be sleeping like a baby all night. The needle is so tiny that, at the worst, she'll just think she's

been stung by a mosquito.â##

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