

Chapter 1

Middle of Nowhere

20 years later.

“Remind me again, how did you convince me to come here? To the middle of nowhere?” Maxwell French asked.

The rumble of the Japanese-made four-by-four - that seemed so beaten up and dirty that it had gone through several world wars - on the rough pot-holed gravel road jerked Max up and down and side to side almost non-stop. Sitting in the back seat only made him feel more motion sick; the flight from the United States the day before had already been turbulent enough, and he had barely recovered from jet lag before starting the 10-hour car ride.

Max was now in his forties. He was in good shape for an academic who spends most of his time in the office or observatory, but clearly someone who enjoys a nice steak every once in a while. He had fully embraced his midlifeness wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow pads, light blue shirt, and beige trousers that screamed unadulterated boringness from miles away. His face was pale - the scholar’s suntan combined with mild motion sickness, and his light brown hair was unwashed and messy from the flight.

“Trust me. You need see this.” Said Nadjeschda Novikova in her thick Russian accent from the front seat, turning

backwards as she spoke. She was in her early 30s, short, slim, and tiny in every way. Her mouse-like appearance was a far cry from the stereotypical long-legged, voluptuous Russian temptresses from the James Bond movies. Nadja's hair was originally dark brown but now sun-bleached from weeks of working in the open, her face suntanned. She wore an attire of khaki slacks and an ill-fitting dark brown cross-patterned blazer that didn't give her many compliments, either.

“See what?” Max asked, as he had done several times already in the past few days. “We're only a few miles from Go Speckle Tiipii. Can't you tell me already?”

“Is Göpekli Tepe. Better I show you. Not long now.” Nadjeschda said.

“Fine. Have your secrets, Nadch... Nadjias...”

“*Na-djesch-da*. Call me Nadja, easy for you.”

“Nadja. Got it.” Max said.

As the four-by-four crested a hill on the winding gravel road, the rolling hills of south-eastern Turkey opened to them in a spectacular green and brown vista. Sun was already low on the afternoon behind them as the car trundled to a halt down the hill in front of a chain-link fence gate. A thick chain was pulled between the gates and a slightly rusting, but massive padlock kept the gate shut.

“Wait here.” Nadja said as she climbed out of the car and walked to the gate. She opened the lock, pulled the gate open and closed it back again after the car had gone through. She

hopped on the front seat and said something to the chauffeur, who drove the car on top of the hill to a gravel patch that doubled as a parking lot and a stockpile for various construction goods.

“Come, this is Göpekli Tepe,” Nadja said, pointing towards the hilltop next to them. There was a tarpaulin drawn over the dig site. “What we find here change history.” She continued as they started walking towards the dig.

“How so?” Asked Max.

“Many think civilization start six-thousand year ago, only hunter-gather before this, no city, no town. Göpekli Tepe is eleven thousand year old.” She beamed as she led Max towards the dig.

The site was still mostly covered in rubble, but there were several large stones - megaliths - dug out already. Few of them as tall as a two-story house, most cut in a peculiar, stubby T-shape. All the megaliths had intricate carvings on them depicting mostly animal forms, but one caught Max’s eye.

“What’s with the handbags?” Max asked.

“*Shtoh?*”

“These here,” Max said, pointing at the largest pillar. “Three handbags carved next to each other. They were idolising Prada?”

“Ha! We not know, no analyse yet.” Nadja laughed. “Here. Look! High-relief. Take lot of work to do.” She pointed towards an animal figure that was head-down downwards towards its prey. “No caveman make this!”

“Absolutely not.” Said a booming voice from behind Max in near perfect BBC English, with only a hint of an accent Max couldn’t figure out. Max and Nadjeschda turned toward the voice and saw a man ducking his head under the edge of the tarpaulin, straightening himself and walking towards the two.

“It certainly was not made by a crude, barbaric hunter-gatherer group, but by members of a well-organised and complex pre-historic society with specialised professions and trades.” The man said and extended his hand to Max. “Good evening. I am Mehmet Öztürk, the director of this archaeological dig at Göbekli Tepe and the representative of the Turkish National Museum.” He said, falling to a practiced rhythm of speech.

“And good evening to you as well, Sir.” Max said, nodding and extending his arm. He shook hands with a man with a farmer’s body and arms, dark olive skin, hair shaved all off, wearing a dusty white linen robe reminiscent of those commonly worn by Arabs.

“Did she show you around already? But I wanted to be the tour guide this time!” Mehmet said with a fake pout.

“*Da*. My turn this time. You next.”

“Deal!” Mehmet said. “And I’ll hold you up to your word this time.”

“But,” Mehmet said to Max, his voice more serious, “The pillars are not the reason we brought you here, no matter how spectacular they are. We... Found something here, something rather unexpected. Well, more unexpected than proof

of a civilization that dates back several thousand years earlier than though possible, that is.” He continued and waved his hand towards a row of shipping containers lower down the hillside that had been turned into a temporary barracks building. “Come, this way.

“We have been excavating this site for a half a dozen years now, after a farmer had hit a massive carved rock buried in the ground while ploughing his fields. He alerted the local museum, and after an initial examination, the rock was deemed to be an ancient megalith.” Mehmet said as they walked down the path. “The National Museum of Turkey took over the excavations, and I have been running it since.”

“That still doesn’t explain why you need an astrophysicist here.” Max said. He felt more intrigued than annoyed having been flown across the globe to a remote village in Turkey. Max guessed his recent appearances on the “Archaic Aliens” TV-show had garnered him some fame in unexpected circles. The show was famous for its depictions of interstellar aliens as the builders of most prehistoric wonders and megalithic sites across the planet, most famously the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt.

“Are you familiar with the concept of Archaeoastronomy, Mr French?” Mehmet asked.

“I have heard the word, but never paid much attention to it. Let me guess: it’s the study of the history of astronomy?”

“Well, you are not far from the truth. It is a sub-discipline of archaeology that focuses on how ancient, and specifically

prehistoric, cultures incorporated astronomy and astrology to their buildings, city planning, and burial sites.” Mehmet said. “You know about the Stonehenge?”

“In England? Of course. Aren’t there some hippies dancing around it every summer?” Max asked.

“Yes. There is.” Said Nadja, laughing as she tried to keep up with the men with their long legs. “No hippies; druids dance on Summer Solstice, Sun rise behind Heel Stone. Is solar calendar.”

“Precisely!” Mehmet affirmed, akin to a schoolmaster to his star pupil. “The Stonehenge is in particular interest to archaeo-astronomy, but it is far from the most prominent site on the planet. There are an ever-increasing number of sites that are accepted to have been built to astronomical alignments. Many are aligned with the true north of the planet, or towards certain celestial objects, or even specific constellations. We found several such alignments here, most of which are pointing towards the Orion. Come in.” Mehmet opened the door at the end to the barracks, walked in and flipped the light-switch.

The mention of Orion jostled Max. The Signal he had discovered almost two decades ago was coming from around the Orion’s Belt, a three star asterism that makes up the waist of the main constellation of Orion. In the following years, the International Astronomical Union (IAU) determined the signal had been of natural origin. The official story was that of a highly irregular pulsar, a fast spinning neutron star that emits radio-waves from its poles, pointing at the Earth at intermittent times, creating the illusion of a message.

The barracks had a massive square table in the middle of the main room, where a massive pile of tools, papers, and artefacts were piling up. There were massive shelves with endless stones and pottery fragments, several tables with computers, fax machines, and landline phones. Walls were covered in maps of the local area and of the dig site, and the large table covered in everything mentioned above. There were bedrooms, toilets, and washrooms on both sides of a small corridor at the end of the building.

There was something on the central table that stood out to Max. A circular object wrapped in white linen cloth the size of a dinner plate sat on its own in the middle of the far-side of the table; it seemed to have been excavated from the office rubble that covered the rest of the table.

“He notice it already.” Nadja said. “See, this is reason we bring him here.”

“So it would seem.” Mehmet said to Nadja, walked to the farside of the table and picked up the object. It seemed very heavy to Max. “This is what we dug out of a ground layer dated to almost ten millennia ago, placed in a small stone box just large enough to hold it in, on a pedestal in one of the burial chambers.”

“What is it?” Max asked.

“We... Do not know.” Nadja said. “Never seen before. Nothing like this anywhere.”

Mehmet turned the object upside down, placed it back on the table and pulled the cloth open as if the object was his newborn baby. A last light of the afternoon sun hit the object as

Mehmet manoeuvred the disk and the reflection blinded Max for an instant.

“Jesus Christ! Is it gold?” Max asked.

“Yes. Very pure and finely polished. Nearly perfectly flat, with no visible tool marks. Other than the engravings, of course.” Mehmet said. “There is no record of any similar artefact from anywhere in the world. All other ancient gold disc has tool marks and imperfections on it, and they are much thinner than this one is.”

Once Mehmet had uncovered the disc, Max could see that it had intricate, yet disassociated, carvings all over. He thought of a school desktop from a bad neighbourhood, so disjointed and random the carvings seemed to be.

“There’s... animal figures, geometric symbols, there’s flowing lines, tons of tiny figures like writing or numbers, it’s a mess!” Max said.

“Turn upside down!” Nadja said to Mehmet.

As he did, Max saw both sides were carved in similar fashion, but with different motifs. Dot-and-line carvings on the back that appeared like constellations. Something was itching at the back of his mind, but couldn’t quite figure out what.

“Have you made any sense of this?” Max asked.

“No. Well, yes. The more natural figures here do not correspond to any know animal, present or past. Even the stone-age wall-paintings depict concurrent animals: sabre-tooth tigers,

buffalo, hyenas, or hunting parties. But other than that, we have not been able to decipher any of it.”

“*Njet*. We have. Look, this circle.” Nadja pointed at the edge of the disc, where a constant circular line of horizontal and vertical lines went around the circumference. “Does it look you know?”

“No... It’s just a line of, well, lines. But there’s no order to... No, wait...” Max’s eyes widened. “It can’t be what I’m thinking.”

“Is your signal, is not?” Nadja said.

“Signal? What signal? What are you talking about?” Mehmet asked. “Nadja. You said he was an expert in planetary and stellar alignments!”

“No. Well, yes, kinda.” Max intervened. “But I discovered a radio signal from outside our solar system when I was a grad-student, it seemed artificial at first - from an intelligent source that is, but it was nothing but a weird natural phenomenon.”

“No. Is same message here!” Nadja interjected. “Look!”

“Nadjeschda. Explain. Now.” Mehmet said.

“*Blyat*... Wait.” Nadja said and ran to her desk, opened a drawer, and pulled out a pile of papers. “Wait... *Pizdets*... Here!” She took one paper, dropped the rest on her desk, and skidded back to the central table. “Here. This is Signal. On disc. Start here.” She pointed at the disc on a point.

“You cannot be serious. Nadja, who is this man?”

Max was lost in thought. He remembered the pattern of the signal by heart and now that Nadja had pointed out the start point, it was clear as day.

“It is the same pattern of symbols. It... Looks like my Signal.”

“*Da!*” Nadja exclaimed. “Sorry, if I tell, you not allow him here. Disc is from space.” She said to Mehmet.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions here. It’s the same pattern, yes. But there are several other explanations here.” Max said. “Sir, are you sure of the disc’s age?”

“Yes. Well, as sure as I can be. The ground layers were untouched before our dig for thousands of year. No question that it predates written record.” Mehmet said, now wondering how he was the one being questioned.

“How it’s so clean if it’s thousands of years old, then?” Max asked.

“That is the reason gold is so valued, it never tarnishes or rusts. It shines for ever.” Mehmet said.

And then Max remembered what was gnawing in the back of his mind. He had seen such an object before. Not with his own eyes, but a photo because there is no living person on the planet who could see it now.

“It is a message.” Max mumbled to himself.

“See! I tell you.” Nadja was beaming.

“What? From whom? And to who?” Mehmet asked.

“I don’t know, and I don’t know. But I can show it to you. You have access to the Internet?” Max asked.

Once the computer was booted up and the dial-up modem had ceased its buzzing noises, Max started Netscape Navigator and typed in ‘<http://www.askjeeves.com>’.

“Why not use Google?” Nadja asked.

“Nah, it’s a fad. It’ll die off soon.” Max said while typing in his search term. After a few excruciating moments, he found what he was looking for, clicked on the link, browsed an archival page and clicked on a jpg image.

An image of two golden plates appeared on the screen [1]. One was rectangular, the other circular, both had intricate engravings on them. The rectangular plaque depicted a man and a woman, something resembling an explosion (or several converging streaks of tiny horizontal and vertical lines), and several geometric designs. The circular disc depicted the Solar System engraved on it along with much of the same engravings as the rectangular disk but without the human forms.

“These are the Pioneer 1 and Voyager 1 disc, designed by Carl Sagan for NASA as messages to other intelligent civilisations, literally called ‘Message in a Bottle’. They were attached to the spacecrafts that are now travelling away from our solar system.

“You have found one buried in the ground.” Max said.