

The Maxwell Signal

A NOVEL BY

SEYMOUR ICE



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THE MAXWELL SIGNAL

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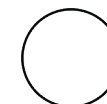
FOR MY MOTHER AND LATE FATHER.

"Ένα μόνο σπυρί σιταριού σε ένα μεγάλο χωράφι είναι τόσο παράξενο όσο ένας μόνος κόσμος σε ένα άπειρο διάστημα."

-Μητρόδωρος ο Χίος,
4ος αιώνας π.Χ

"A SINGLE GRAIN OF WHEAT IN A LARGE FIELD IS AS STRANGE AS A
SINGLE WORLD IN AN INFINITE SPACE."

-Metrodorus of Chios,
Greece, 4th century BC



PROLOGUE

The Wow!

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AUGUST 15, 1977
OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY — ‘BIG EAR’ RADIO OBSERVATORY

AN OWL HOOTED somewhere in the nearby forest as Maxwell French peered through the small, hobbyist-size telescope attached to the main reflector of the Big Ear radio telescope. He checked his watch: fourteen minutes, twenty seconds past five a.m., the moment the telescope pointed directly at Betelgeuse, and took out his notepad to mark it down.

The lead on his pencil broke at the first line drawn.

“Would something ever work here?” Max felt through the pockets of his beige shirt and gray slacks for a replacement pencil, to no avail. He made a mental note of the time, repeating it several times.

The sky behind him shimmered pale yellow and pink as dawn crept in. He straightened his lanky, over-six-foot frame until his back cracked,

then exhaled after so long at the eyepiece. Something shot past in the half-light. The notepad slipped from his fingers before he registered what it was.

An owl — the owl — perched silently on a metal truss that formed the radio telescope's skeleton. Endless sheets of steel mesh covered the ten-story-tall structure that spanned the length of a football field. The owl hooted and looked Max directly in the eyes.

"Oh, hey there, little buddy. What ancient wisdom do you bring us tonight?" The owl flapped its wings. "Sorry, I got no mouse to feed you. You'll have to find your own." Max re-tied his short, black ponytail as he spoke.

The owl turned its head from side to side so fast it seemed to spin all the way around, then spread its wings. It hooted once more and took flight without a sound, save for a small rustle of leaves as the downwash from its wings swept the ground.

"What was it?" Max stepped onto the aluminum-plate-covered field between the two reflectors, each similar in size. A semi-underground bunker lay between them, where the secondary curved reflector focused the radio waves. "Fourteen minutes, twenty seconds." He repeated it to himself as he hurried to the bunker.

As soon as he step-danced down the stairs, the slow, constant rattle of a dot-matrix printer in the small underground room filled his ears. The drone had begun as annoying and distracting a few weeks earlier, but now it soothed him.

"Fourteen minutes, twenty seconds," he said to the small, wispy man in a plaid vest and beige pants at the telescope's main control panel.

Robert Howell was Max's fellow student at the university. Together, they had spent countless nights discussing the finer points in life with philosophy professors Jack Daniels and Jim Beam.

"Haven't seen you around before. You come here often?" Robert repeated their running joke; it had been only fifteen minutes since Max had been out. Robert pushed his long, unkempt hair off his thick glasses and wrote the numbers down.

"Happy now? Don't you trust the instrumentation at all?"

"Just to be sure." Robert crunched numbers with his pocket calculator.

The unpainted walls of the fifteen-foot-square, bunker-like room were covered in electronic machinery, most of it resembling the love child of a refrigerator and a car radio. Endless rows of switches, knobs, analogue dials, and readouts covered the control panels of the gray-painted machinery. A central table sat cluttered with papers, pencils, calculators, rulers, and operating manuals for the electronic gear stacked across the room.

Max strolled to the table where the coffee maker and dot-matrix printer shared space, and picked up the continuous paper fed from a box below. A cascade of zeros, ones, twos, and a few threes filled the perforated paper in monotonous repetition.

"*Nada*," Max said. "Not even a blip."

"That's the M78 nebula, right?" Robert asked.

"Yeah, in the Orion constellation," Max said from the printer. "Definitely something there, though. We're getting sixes and sevens on the printout, nothing in the alphabets yet, though."

Every few seconds, the printer clacked a new row of alphanumerics on the paper. Each column represented a range of radio waves. Higher numbers meant stronger signals, and letters from A to Z meant stronger signals still.

"Could you check the fourteen-twenty?" Robert said. The hydrogen emission bandwidth of fourteen-hundred-twenty megahertz cut through interstellar dust clouds and could reveal phenomena hidden from optical telescopes.

"*Nada*," Max read the leftmost column of the printout.

"OK. Let's just leave it there for a while," Robert said. "Wanna cup of coffee?"

"*Sí, gracias*."

"I really hate when you do that." Robert smirked, scooting over to the stained coffemaker. "Your name is French, and yet you reply in Spanish. Have you tried '*merci beaucoup*'?"

"*Oui*. I didn't like it."

"It's ONLY FIVES and sixes. Let's move on," Max said, checking the printout again and sipping his coffee.

Robert scooted over to the main reflector control panel on his office chair and meticulously turned a knob that controlled the declination of the telescope.

As the small, thimble-sized knob was turned, horse-sized electric motors at the base of the main reflector rotated accordingly, turning gears at the base of the city-block-sized structure, tilting it toward the intended target.

“O’ Great Hunter, Orion, reveal thy secrets!” Robert trumpeted as he fine-tuned the alignment.

“Hah! Orion himself should come down and give us a hand. We’ve been on the hunt for, what, four weeks now without luck,” Max said.

“He’ll show us the way.” Robert fine-tuned the alignment. “If there’s anything in this constellation to be found, we’ll be the first.”

As the hundred-yard-long primary mirror tilted by just a few inches, countless new stars came into its view.

“Hey! Did you see that?” Something had caught Max’s eye, and he snapped his head toward the oscilloscope on a shelf high up in the corner of the room. The black screen next to a series of knobs and buttons displayed a bright green, slightly undulating line.

“See what?”

“The oscilloscope, it jumped. Go back just a little.” Max got up from his chair and approached the apparatus.

“Something there?”

“Maybe. Might have been a glitch.”

Max turned on a pair of speakers he had wired up to the oscilloscope earlier, creating a rudimentary audio monitor of sorts. Just the usual static, crackles, and beeps filled the room. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“Check the readout,” Robert said.

Max hurried to the printer. “Whoa! We just got an 8BA9. Near the fourteen-twenty. There’s something there! Keep scanning!”

A loud noise filled the room, resembling a cross between a boiling teakettle and a rusty old V8 engine turning over. The noise ceased as abruptly as it had started.

“Stop! Right there,” Max said.

“Damn, lost it. Went too far... Where is it...”

“Maybe it’s an intermittent signal,” Max said.

“Maybe.” Robert turned the knob ever so slightly and then left it be for a moment. He repeated the process several times, as if trying to open a combination lock by ear.

“There!” he said, as the noise finally returned to the speakers, only to die out again soon.

“Would you look at that! We got a 1CA, the strongest signal so far,” Max said.

Time stood still for the two young men. If the signal didn’t repeat in a few minutes, they’d have to wait until the next night to observe it again, as Earth’s rotation would overcome the lateral control they had over the Big Ear’s alignment.

The speakers burst into noise once more after five minutes — five eternities for the two young men. The signal faded again.

“There! It’s coming through only at the hydrogen line,” Max said. “That’s not normal, right?”

“Could you check for any local phenomena, like a Soviet spy satellite?” Robert asked.

“If it were that, it would’ve moved past already.”

“Oh yeah, true,” Robert said. “But it was definitely a narrowband signal, right?”

“Less than ten kilohertz bandwidth according to the printout.”

“Nature abhors narrowband, right?”

“Pretty much. I haven’t heard of a natural narrowband radio source,” Max said.

“So, um, what are we looki—”

The speakers burst with the loudest noise so far. It didn’t stop. It continued, and grew louder.

“What the hell is that thing?!” Robert shouted over the ear-splitting static.

After a full minute of it, the noise died off just as Max was reaching up to disconnect the speakers from the oscilloscope.

He stepped back to the printer. On the perforated paper, '6EQUJ5' had just been printed in the leftmost column of the hydrogen bandwidth.

"*Madre de Dios!*" Max said.

"What?"

"It went up to U level of strength!" Max exclaimed, grabbing a red Sharpie. He circled the signal and wrote 'Wow!' in the margin.

"Mark the exact time and date on it. Nothing else we can do about it tonight — it's gone beyond our range now."

THE SIGNAL HAD been going on and off for a few days. With the help of several other radio telescopes around the world, Max and Robert had verified it as something real, not a malfunction or a glitch in their own system.

They could observe the signal only for a few hours per day, so colleagues from different time zones kept track of it and sent in their findings by fax.

"We've recorded about a dozen of these signals, all around the same strength, no noticeable pattern, no modulation, all at the 1420 line, all narrowband..." Max said, more to himself than to Robert. "Do you know of any object that would behave like this?"

"No, can't think of any. It's definitely not a star or a black hole, that's for sure."

"*Sí*. Those would be continuous broadband signals," Max said.

"Do we have enough to determine the distance?"

"Not accurately, no," Max said. "But from the lack of redshift, it's within our galaxy, and, interestingly, moving towards us."

"Moving towards us?" Robert asked.

"Well, I mean, it's moving with the galactic flow, but still millions of years away at current speed."

Silence fell over both for a moment, broken only by the occasional beep of the IBM 1130 computer in the corner — tiny in comparison to the

electronic computers of yesteryear, only the size of an office desk instead of an entire room.

"So, I've been reading this book about extraterrestrials contacting us..." Robert said eventually.

"I mean, it's definitely extraterrestrial," Max said, and continued in his best snarky nasal voice, "Extra means 'beyond' and terrestrial means 'earth,' so it literally means outside of Earth."

"You know what I mean!" Robert fake-threw an eraser he had lying close by.

Max dodged by instinct, stood back up with a mischievous smirk and said, "OK, if it were that, what's the purpose of the signal? Why transmit a single intermittent frequency to a random point in space?"

"Could be a beacon. Like a lighthouse, I mean, only pointed towards us occasionally?"

"I don't think it's that. The signal hasn't been regular," Max replied.

"No, it hasn't..."

"Could it be, umm... Wait a second..." Max rose and started rummaging through all the printouts and faxes from the other observatories.

They had accumulated a small book's worth of papers, all bearing a similar layout. Every page had several columns of numbers and letters, each corresponding to the detection bandwidths of telescopes from around the world.

Max selected only the printouts that had time and date stamped on the columns, indicating the moment of detection, and began correcting the times to match their Big Ear observatory's time zone with a red Sharpie.

"Hey, do you have the scissors?" Max said.

"No, they're there to your right. No, the other right. What do you have in mind?"

"Just cleaning out the data." Max fumbled the scissors, dropping them onto the floor. They landed upright; one blade stuck on the gray and darker gray checkered linoleum flooring. "Would you look at that!" He picked up the scissors and began cutting away the excess noise from the papers.

"Could you draw a line on the blackboard with hour marks every two inches or so? Let's build a timeline," he said after a few moments of intense scissor work under Robert's watchful eye.

"Oh yeah, I got you." Robert drew a horizontal line on the blackboard spanning its width, marked their original detection as time zero, and divided the line into twenty-four equal parts.

"Would this do? Each mark is a four-hour span. That's four days' worth of detections."

"*Muy perfecto.*" Max got up and began taping slivers of paper onto the blackboard from the left, each placed according to its detection time. When he finished, he took a step back and stared at the newly constructed timeline.

"See anything?" Robert asked.

"*Nada.*" Max shook his head.

A WEEK HAD passed since the original detection. A steady stream of new reports from around the globe had kept them busy, yet no one anywhere had found any order in the chaos. Max and Robert still worked only at night, so they could be present when Big Ear pointed toward the signal's origin.

Max sat at a cafeteria table among several dozen students in the two-story modern university café. He was physically there but not yet in attendance, having just been so rudely awakened by his alarm clock at the crack of afternoon. He poured sugar into his coffee mug and added another spoonful, staring out the windows that made up the entire north-facing wall.

"That can't be good for you." Robert sat on the other side of the table, rifling through papers.

"Mbrueah, need... more..." Max added another spoonful and stirred his coffee flavored sugar absentmindedly. He went for a third, but spilled much of it onto the table.

"Have you seen these?" Robert laid several papers on the table. "All the latest detections from Australia and Japan."

"Whuh...? I..." Max stared at the table, unmoving.

"Wake up, man. People are watching!"

Max slowly reached into his jacket pocket, took out his wallet, and pulled out his student card. He dropped the wallet on the table and began pushing and pulling the spilled sugar into piles.

"Dude!" Robert hissed. "Get it together."

Max continued with his methodical work. He took more sugar from the jar and spilled it onto the table. After a few moments, he had shaped the white powder into several rows of longer and shorter lines, resembling Morse code.

"What's all this, boys?" The thick-mustached manager of the cafeteria appeared at their table. "Do I need to call campus security?"

Max ignored him and kept working.

"It's just sugar, sir," Robert said. "My friend... he's been under quite a bit of stress lately. He's not himself, I'm afraid."

"Stress," Max said. "Stress. Yes. That's it. Stress!" He got up from his seat and ran for the exit, leaving his jacket and wallet behind.

"It is a message!" The cafeteria doors slammed open as Max barged through.

Max ran the full half mile to the observatory bunker. Robert followed, urging him several times to slow down or stop. He hadn't, and he didn't. He flew down the stairs and went straight to the blackboard.

Their timeline had long outgrown it. The chalk line had become a thick black Sharpie line running across the unpainted concrete wall, already encroaching on the second wall to the right of their underground room. Dozens of paper slivers covered the surface.

"Stress," Max said. "Think about it! Stress!"

"What the hell are you on about?"

"It's right there." Max pointed at an empty space between two slivers of paper.

"There's nothing there. You've gone crazy."

"We're missing it. Look! Did you throw away the papers?"

"No. They're still right there, next to the printer," Robert said.

Max hurried to pick up the papers, rushed to the central table, and began rifling through them at a frantic pace.

"Look," Max said. "I cut out only the strongest signals. But there are also these weaker signals that only reached strength A or so. The ones we wrote off as noise."

"And?"

"What if they're part of the signal?"

"I..."

"There's stress in our speech, right? We whisper, and we yell!"

"Oh, yeah... Oh, right!" Robert picked up the scissors.

The two men sprang into action, rifling through printouts from their own printer and faxes from other observatories, cutting out all the weaker signals. After culling the data they deemed unreliable, they had taped dozens of paper slivers onto the wall.

"Does it look like anything to you?" Max took a step back from the blackboard.

"Kinda. No. Maybe?"

"Dashes and dots. Like Morse code."

"Kidding me? Morse code from outer space?" Robert said incredulously.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?"

"Bwuah." Robert threw his arms up toward Max.

They stood in silence for a moment, contemplating. The speakers buzzed at low volume every once in a while, the dot-matrix printer droned numbers onto the continuous paper, and the IBM 1130 beeped at random intervals.

"Tell me," Max said eventually. "What is the simplest form of numbers?"

"Um, base two, I guess. Binary code. Ones and zeroes — what the computers use, right?" Robert said.

"What if the stronger signals are ones and the weaker signals are zeroes?"

"Wouldn't the empty spaces between the signals be zeroes?"

"I don't think so. No signal, a 'null', is different from a weak or low signal," Max said.

"So, um... we'd be looking at binary numbers from outer space?"

"What else could it be?" Max said. "Natural phenomena would either be broadband or clearly repetitive with an obvious pattern. Like the night and day cycle, or the orbits of planets and stars. It takes effort to send an alternating signal with data embedded in it."

"You're jumping to conclusions!"

They stared at their timeline in silence for a long moment.

"It's gotta be," Max said. "Look, this pattern repeats several times: two ones and two zeroes, followed by a set of twelve signals."

"Looks like it," Robert said. "There's one set, then another, and... how many is that? Four different sets."

"S/. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Well, 1100 would be twelve in decimal. Or twelve counts in any base. Could it be telling us how many digits follow?" Robert asked.

"Maybe," Max said. "But I think there's more to this."

Max took a piece of paper and wrote the numbers down.

```
1100 000010100111
1100 001011101110
1100 001011101110
1100 000011101111
```

"Does this mean anything to you?" Max asked.

Robert crunched the numbers. "In decimal, that would be 12-167, 12-750, 12-750, and 12-239."

"No. I don't think that's it," Max said. "That would be an Earth-centric interpretation. We use the decimal system because we have ten fingers. If an extraterrestrial intelligence is really sending this, they most likely use a different base."

"Hexadecimal wouldn't really make sense either, nor would octal, or base six," Robert said after a moment of thought.

"Could the ones and zeros mean something else entirely? That they're not numbers at all," Max said.

"Sure, I guess. Like power on, power off, the way computers use them. Or yes and no, light and dark, good and evil, man and woman. Anything with a dualistic nature."

"*Si. No*," Max muttered. "Do you know how electronic computers actually work?"

"Duh, I just said it. With ones and zeros. Binary code."

"Yes, yes, but the computing happens in simple logic circuits."

"Logic?"

"You know, Vulcans and pointy ears." Max held out his hand, index and middle fingers together, ring and little fingers together. "Live long and prosper."

"You're kidding me, right?" Robert rolled his eyes.

"Well, logic in its most basic form. Boolean logic. Look." Max rearranged the numbers into a column.

11
00
000
010
100
111

"One is one, true is true. Zero is zero, false is false. False plus false is false. False plus true is false, and so on. This is the truth table for a simple AND gate; only if both inputs are on does the output turn on," Max said.

"And the other ones?"

"Just a moment," Max said, rearranging the remaining numbers.

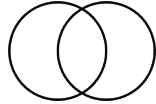
1 - 1	1 - 1	1 - 1	1 - 1
0 - 0	0 - 0	0 - 0	0 - 0
00 - 0	00 - 1	00 - 0	00 - 1
01 - 0	01 - 1	01 - 1	01 - 0
10 - 0	10 - 1	10 - 1	10 - 0
11 - 1	11 - 0	11 - 1	11 - 0

"So, if the first 1100 is always just the header," Max said as he wrote the numbers down, "it establishes the basics of Boolean logic. Each header is then followed by a truth table for a different logic gate. The first is an AND gate, the second is an inverted AND gate, and the third and fourth are the OR gate and its inverted counterpart." Max set the pencil down by the cup of cold coffee.

"So, what you're saying is..."

The pencil rolled off the table. Neither went to pick it up.

"It's an instruction to build an electronic computer," Max said. "From outer space."



CHAPTER 01

Middle of Nowhere

--| | | | | - | - | | ----- | | | | - | --- | --- | --- | | | | | --- | ----- | | | | - | - | | | --- |

PRESENT DAY, AUTUMN 1997
TWENTY YEARS AFTER THE 'WOW!' SIGNAL

THE HURLING OF a Japanese-made four-by-four on the rough, pot-holed gravel road in Turkey jerked Maxwell French in every direction like a diabolical carnival machine. The car was filthy and battered, inside and out — it looked like it had survived several world wars.

He sat in the back seat, wishing he had dressed more lightly for the hot Mediterranean climate. Even the pair of jeans and the black Pearl Jam t-shirt with the ubiquitous stick-figure print had proved to be a mistake for the ten-hour ride from Istanbul under the blaring midday sun. His long, black ponytail stuck to his neck, and his patience was wearing thin.

"Remind me again," Max said, "how on Earth did you convince me to come here to the middle of nowhere?"

"Trust me. You need to see this," Nadjeschda Novikova said in her thick Russian accent from the front passenger seat. A tiny hand in a tweed blazer jacket sleeve appeared from behind the seat, offering an open box of dusted, pinkish candy. "Turkish delight?"

"No thank you. See what?" Max had asked her several times already in the past few days since her invitation. "We're only a few miles from Go Speckle Tiipii. Can't you tell me already?"

"Is Göbekli Tepe. Better I show you. Not far," Nadjeschda said.

She had seemed young to Max at first sight, but not exceedingly so; maybe in her early thirties, still an appropriate age for an assistant director at an archaeological dig site.

"Fine. Have your secrets, Nadch... Nadjias..."

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

"Nadja. I'll get it right one day," Max said.

As the car 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. The sun was already low in the afternoon as the car trundled to a halt at a chain-link fence gate down the next hill.

"Wait here." Nadja jumped out of the high-floored cross-country car and hurried to the gate. She had to use all of her diminutive frame to pull open the heavy chain-link gate and close it back again after the four-by-four had gone through.

She blew a few strands of sun-bleached tan hair from her eyes as she hopped back onto the front seat and said something to the chauffeur in a language Max guessed was Turkish. The car took off towards the top of a low hill where a gravel patch doubled as a parking lot and a stockpile for various construction goods.

"Is Göbekli Tepe." Nadja pointed at a massive white tarpaulin canopy on top of another hill about a hundred yards away. A series of small dirt paths crisscrossed the area between the main dig site, other hilltops, the parking lot, and a series of shipping container-style barracks buildings to their left. She exchanged a few words with the coveralls-wearing chauffeur, who began working on repairs on the car.

"Come! What we find here change history." She hurried towards the dig site.

"How so?" Dust quickly covered Max's shoes on the arid dirt path.

"Many think civilisation started six thousand years ago. Sumer. Only hunter-gatherers before this. No city. No town. No complex society. Göbekli Tepe, eleven thousand years ago."

"Twice as old as the oldest known civilization?"

"*Da*. Sumer people live closer to us. Göbekli Tepe begin after Ice Age." She ducked under the tarpaulin and gestured for Max to do the same. "Sorry. No door."

He had to fold nearly double to duck beneath the canopy, silently regretting a few recent steak dinners. Inside, he straightened onto a wooden walkway circling a dig site roughly the size of an Olympic swimming pool. The canopy cut the Mediterranean sun while venting the heat, though the air beneath it remained humid.

Nadja pulled a lever on a metal enclosure. Overhead, on the metal truss that held the canopy taut, high-intensity halogen work-lights cracked to life, illuminating the dig site now that the sun was already setting.

Several wooden ladders rested against the edge of the walkway, and Nadja led the way down onto the ongoing excavation level. Rubble still covered most of it, while a meandering dirt path between broken-down stone walls and large stone pillars created a labyrinthine impression. Loose rocks gritted under Max's feet as he walked, and the smell of freshly dug earth reminded him of the times he had been digging for worms with his father as a child before going fishing at the nearby pond.

"Megalith, ten thousand years old!" Nadja slapped a particularly tall pillar, as if she was trying to sell it to Max.

"Megalith... That's 'large stone', right?" Max browsed aimlessly about the ruins, peeking behind corners, and inspecting the carvings on the beige limestone pillars. Most depicted simple engravings of animal figures: ducks, boars, foxes, and vultures; some had more geometric designs on them. At the largest pillar, his steps slowed. His hand rose toward one of the high-relief figures, then stopped short of the stone as he followed its outline with his eyes.

"*Da*. Is Greek word."

"Got it." Max pointed at a particular pillar. "What's with the handbags?"

"*Shtob?*"

"These here." Max pointed at the largest pillar, shaped into a stubby T-shape. "Three handbags carved next to each other. Were they idolizing Prada?"

"Ha! Prada! We not know. No analyse yet." Nadja laughed, and then pointed at another megalith. "Look. High-relief. Take effort to do. Carve stone around animal." She gestured towards a feline-looking figure whose head pointed downwards to its prey. The animals stood several inches proud of the pillar's face. "No seam between stone and animal. Carve from one stone."

"That's very impressive for cavemen." Max nodded with appreciation.

"No caveman make this!" Nadja crossed her arms, with a one-sided smile remaining on her face.

"Absolutely correct!" The booming voice from above startled Max.

He turned toward the voice: a burly man in khaki shorts and a white full-sleeved shirt leaned against the walkway railing, tips of his work boots peeking over the edge.

"It most certainly was *not* made by a crude, barbaric hunter-gatherer group." The man ducked under the railing and jumped down onto the ground floor. "But by members of a well-organised and complex society with specialised professions and trades, and most importantly: with a surplus of food." He extended his arm to Max. "Mehmet Öztürk, the director of this archaeological dig at Göbekli Tepe and the representative of the Turkish National Museum. Pleased to meet you, Mr. French."

"Likewise." Max shook hands with a man with a farmer's body and arms, dark olive skin, a clean-shaven bald head, and a grip so firm it was like shaking hands with a bench vise. "This is an impressive site. I've never seen anything like it. Though I haven't seen many archaeological digs."

"Neither have we." Mehmet eyed up the pillar Max stood by. A carving of a vulture stood on it, just below the 'handbags' Max had just pointed out. "Well, anything like this, for sure."

"Surely, you didn't bring an astrophysicist over the Atlantic just to see some rock carvings?"

“No,” Mehmet said. “The pillars are not the reason we brought you here, no matter how spectacular they are. We, um, found something here, something rather unexpected.”

He paused for a moment. “Well, something even more unexpected than proof of a civilisation dating back several thousand years earlier than considered possible, that is.” He gestured up the nearest ladder. “Shall we?”

“What exactly did you find here?” Max asked, as Mehmet led the trio up to the boardwalk and back outside into the cooling evening air.

“Better you see the artefact first. We’re keeping it safe there, in the barracks.” Mehmet pointed at the gray, container-style barracks buildings at the foot of the hill.

“Tell history, how it start!” Nadja hurried behind the two men as they started their walk down the path.

“We have been excavating here for half a dozen years now.” Mehmet pointed at another hilltop as he walked. “About a decade ago, a farmer hit a 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. The National Museum of Turkey took over the excavations, and I have been running the site ever since.

“Every hilltop has something buried beneath; that is just the first and largest we’ve concentrated on.” They walked down the dusty path as the sun barely kept above the hills. Further away, the chauffeur closed the hood of the four-by-four with a clunk, wiped his hands on his coveralls, picked up a tool bag, threw it in as he jumped into the driver’s seat, and reversed the car out of the parking lot.

Why would you need an astrophysicist to examine an ancient artifact? Max thought.

Max’s recent appearances on the “Archaic Aliens” TV-show had garnered him some fame — and infamy — in unexpected circles; the show was notorious 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. But why would a serious archaeological investigation ask for his expertise?

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

“I’ve heard of it, but never paid much attention. It’s the study of the history of astronomy?”

“Not quite. It is a sub-discipline of archaeology that focuses on how ancient cultures incorporated astronomy and astrology into their buildings, city planning, and burial sites,” Mehmet said. “The most famous site is Stonehenge; you have heard of it, at least?”

“Of course,” Max said. “Aren’t hippies dancing around it every summer?”

“*Da.*” Nadja gave an awkward laugh as she tried to keep up with the long-legged men. “But no hippie. Druids gather Summer Solstice day. Sun rise behind Heel Stone. Is solar calendar.”

“Precisely! Every year, more and more archaeological sites from around the world are discovered to have astronomical alignments built into them. We have found several such alignments here, most of which are pointing towards the constellation of Orion.”

Max paused in his step. The Signal he had discovered almost two decades ago was coming from near the central star of Orion’s Belt, the three-star asterism that makes up the waist of the hunter Orion.

Sometime after its discovery, the International Astronomical Union determined the signal to be of natural origin: a spinning neutron star with a highly eccentric wobble emitting radio waves from its poles, creating the illusion of a message when pointing towards the Earth at intermittent intervals.

“Please, come in.” Mehmet opened the door and let Max in first.

Inside was a workshop, or a rudimentary laboratory, and a massive square wooden table stood in the middle of the main room, on which a sizable pile of tools, papers, and artifacts had accumulated. Numerous drooping shelves covered the walls with endless stones, pottery fragments, and other objects Max couldn’t identify in several states of disrepair.

Several simple, wooden tables ran along the walls with computers, fax machines, and landline phones on the right side of the room; microscopes, test tubes, and other chemical apparatus on the left; everything seemed old and second-hand. Worn maps of the local area and the dig site covered the walls. Several doors hung half-open at the back, labeled for each member of the archaeological team or for bathrooms and showers. Max paused just

inside the doorway, his gaze moving from the drooping shelves to the mismatched equipment before he stepped toward the nearest table.

“Quite the... setup you have here.” Max sauntered over to a desk and investigated the pile of archaeological rubble on it.

“Bwuahah!” Mehmet took off his coat and hung it on a nail on the wall. “When it comes to archaeological dig sites, we’re the least important of them all. We’re the last in the pecking order for any good equipment. Or modern. Or useful.”

“*Da*. Everything else here is—”

“Nadja.” Mehmet clapped his hands. “Would you go get the artefact?”

“Ah. Sorry.” She disappeared into one of the back rooms.

“It’s just me, Nadja, two students from Istanbul University, and Sebastian — the jack-of-all-trades — working here.” Mehmet bulldozed the office rubble on the central table towards one side, clearing enough room for the white-cloth-shrouded object Nadja came back with. She carried it with both hands, the tendons and muscles in her arms straining. It was approximately the size of a dinner plate. She placed it on the table with a heavy *thunk*.

The entrance door opened, and the chauffeur walked in, leaving the four-by-four idling just outside. “Sorry, sir. I need to use the restroom.”

“Use the one at the garage, Sebastian,” Mehmet said. “We have important work here.

“Sorry. No water. It will only be a moment.” Sebastian walked past them, carrying the tool bag, through the rightmost door at the back.

“Again? That’s the first thing you’ll sort out tomorrow morning!”

“Yes, sir. Sorry, sir.”

“Lord, give me strength with that man...” Mehmet said under his breath, too loudly after Sebastian had vanished from sight. He shook his head and turned back towards the cloth bundle on the workbench. “This is what we found buried in a ground layer dated to ten millennia ago. We unearthed it within a small stone box large enough to hold it, on a pedestal in one of the burial chambers.”

Nadja carefully unwrapped the artifact. “We... Not know. Never see before. Nothing like this. Anywhere.”

Max stood at the other end of the table as she methodically unwrapped the last piece of cloth, slowly revealing what was inside. As she did, the last light of the evening sun hit the object. The reflection blinded Max for an instant.

“Jesus Christ! Is it gold?” Max dodged away from the light and took a step closer, leaning over the table.

“Yes.” Mehmet caressed the flawless surface of the disc. “Very pure and finely polished. Near perfectly flat, with no visible tool marks other than the engravings, of course.”

“That is... I mean... For thousands of years old, it’s... Wow...” Max stumbled.

“It truly is.” Mehmet grinned. “There’s no record of any similar artefact from around the world. I mean, there are golden discs, but others have tool marks and other imperfections on them. And they are much, much thinner.”

“There is... a jumble of geometric symbols, minuscule figures like writing or numbers, several grids of squares, some engraved fully... What is it?” Max was reduced to a schoolboy.

“Show the other side, Nadja.”

She turned the disc over. She handled it like it was her baby. Both sides were carved in a similar fashion, but with different motifs. The same horizontal and vertical dash pattern encircled the disc; dot-and-line markings that resembled constellations; lines, triangles, and squares within intersecting circles; and several other geometric designs that seemed familiar to Max, but still foreign.

“Have you made any sense of this?” Max leaned closer, his fingertip hovering above the markings. “Does this mean anything to you?”

“No, and not really,” Mehmet said. “It looks like a geometry textbook. But one after another, we haven’t found any perfectly matching counterpart in the historic record, not even in Euclid’s *Elements* book.”

“*Njet*. We have. Look, circle.” Nadja pointed at the edge of the disc. A full circle of horizontal and vertical lines ran around the edge of the disc, like dashes and I’s. “It look... *Privichny*... Familiar to you?”

“No, I don’t think so... It’s just a line of, well, lines. But there’s no order to—” Max’s eyes widened. He was instantly transported to the

observatory bunker twenty years ago when he had just laid the extraterrestrial signal intervals across the wall in paper clippings. “Wait. It can’t be what I’m thinking.”

“Is Wow! signal, is not?” Nadja tapped at the disc with her finger.

“Signal? Not this again...” Mehmet grumbled. “Nadja, you said he was an expert in planetary and stellar alignments! That he would identify the constellations on the disc!”

“He is.”

“I am. Well, kinda. I’m a radio astronomer. And—” Max stepped next to the disc, and Nadja made way.

“And...?” Mehmet asked.

“The dash-pattern on the disc seems to match a radio signal I discovered as a grad student from outside our solar system. We thought it was a message from an intelligent source at first, but it was nothing but a weird natural phenomenon.”

“Is no natural. Same on disc!” Nadja squeezed in so she could point at a certain spot. She tapped her finger on it. “Look! Start here.”

“... Enough of this. He’s here to give his expert opinion of the stellar alignments, not to entertain your crazy ideas!”

“... Wait.” Nadja ran to her desk. She opened a drawer and pulled out a pile of papers. “Wait... Ha!” She took out one sheet, dropped the rest on her desk, and skidded back to the central table.

“Here. This is Signal. Same on disc. Start here.” She pointed at the paper with a line of ones and zeros, then at the disc.

“You cannot be serious. Nadja, we need to have a discussion.” Mehmet crossed his arms, but she didn’t seem to pay attention to him.

Max went around the disc with his finger, mouthing the ones and zeroes of the Wow! Signal, which he knew by heart. They matched perfectly, and it was easy to recognize after Nadja had pointed out the start. “It is the same pattern of symbols. It... looks like — *it is* — my Signal.”

“*Da!*” Nadja exclaimed, then turned to Mehmet. “Sorry I do this. If I tell he find same message on disc, you not allow him here. Disc is from space.”

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

Mehmet crossed his arms. “Yes. Of course! The ground layers had been untouched for thousands of years. There’s no doubt it predates any known written record.”

“It’s been only twenty years since the signal’s discovery. The disc must’ve been made after that. Maybe someone planted it there as a joke? How else could it have the same pattern?”

“It has to be a coincidence!” Mehmet said.

“The chance of that would be one in two to the power of sixty-four, that’s...” Max tried to do arithmetic in his head. “One in several trillion, at least. Maybe quadrillion! Random chance is way beyond possibility; it’s gotta be modern work.”

“It’s not. All evidence points to it being thousands of years old.”

“How is it so clean and shiny, then?” Max asked.

“Gold never tarnishes or rusts. It shines forever,” Mehmet said.

Max took a step back from the disc. Something jogged his memory. “It... is... a message,” he muttered under his breath.

“*Da!*” Nadja exclaimed.

“What? From who? And to whom?” Mehmet’s arms tightened across his chest.

“I don’t know. And I don’t know. But I... think I’ve seen such an... artifact before. Not with my own eyes, but a photo of one. I can show it to you. Do you have access to the Internet?” Max asked.

“*Da.* Here.” Nadja gestured toward the desk where she had rummaged for the papers.

No one talked as the computer booted up. After the jingle of the operating system and the cacophonous buzz of the dial-up modem, Max launched Netscape Navigator and typed in the address for the Ask Jeeves search engine, excruciatingly slow with his foolproof two-finger technique.

“Why not use Google? Is better.” Nadja joined Max at the computer.

“Nah, it’s a fad. It’ll die off soon.” Max typed in the search term. After a few moments, he found what he was looking for in the NASA archives, clicked the link, browsed to a specific folder, and clicked an image link.

An image of two golden plates appeared on the screen. One was rectangular, the other circular. The rectangular plaque depicted a line drawing of a man and a woman; something akin to an explosion of several converging streaks of tiny horizontal and vertical dashes; and a cross-section of the Solar System. Many of the same patterns were also on the circular disc, along with many seemingly disassociated and abstract geometric depictions.

“These are the Voyager 1 and Pioneer 10 discs.” Max pointed at the screen. “Designed by Carl Sagan for NASA as messages to other intelligent civilizations out there. They are attached to a pair of space probes that are now traveling in the far reaches of the solar system. Both are made of pure gold so they won’t rust or dull, and should be legible even long after we’ve gone extinct as a species.”

The resemblance to the disc that lay on the workbench behind them was striking.

Max continued, “These discs are, quite literally, called ‘Message in a Bottle’, dubbed by Sagan himself.” He turned in his chair and pointed towards the workbench. “And you have found a similar one buried in the ground.”

For a moment, silence filled the room. Max gawked back and forth from the NASA image to the disc on the central workbench. Nadja had advanced there already and rested both hands on the workbench, leaning upon the disc. Mehmet’s arms loosened at his sides. He joined Nadja at the workbench, and picked up the disc, while side-eyeing the computer screen.

The bathroom door opened. The chauffeur, Sebastian, stepped in, wielding a pistol. He shut the bathroom door with his heel and kept the pistol pointed at Mehmet. “Now, give me the disc.”

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preview for The Maxwell
Signal.

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