

Attack of the Zuzax

By Robert Culkin



An Imprint of
Open Door Publications

Attack of the Zuzax
By Robert Culkin

Copyright © 2016 by Robert Culkin

The following is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

All rights reserved.

Cover Design by Genevieve LaVo Cosdon, Lavodesign.com

Published by
Can't Put it Down Books
An Imprint of
Open Door Publications
2113 Stackhouse Dr.
Yardley, PA 19067
www.OpenDoorPublications.com

Chapter 1

THE OLD GREEK WAS beside himself. On his chalkboard he had calculated three different equations and each had the same result. Eschewing computers, the astronomer, Costas N. Magakis, trusted only his immense mathematical logic when it came to calculating asteroid trajectories and paths. He feared a machine might miss something only a human, or more specifically he, might catch. However, he was caught between this awesome discovery with all its implications, and the damp fear crawling over his 83-year-old bones like winter fog.

The professor had built a small but state of the art observatory on his home island of Skyros. It was the fourth and biggest island in the Northern Sporades chain, lying far out in the Aegean Sea off the coast of Greece. The professor's observatory and his house were high in the hills on the southeastern part of the island near his birthplace, Loutro. The project had been funded through grants. Participants included the European Space Agency, NASA, the NEODYS Group (Near Earth Object Dynamic Site), the United States Air Force, and Dynamic Propulsions Laboratory's PHAU (Potentially Hazardous Asteroid Unit).

The world's attention had become more focused on possible asteroid strikes after 1997's XF-11, 1999's AN-10 and 2001's PM-9 brushed past planet Earth with little or no warning. But it was Professor Magakis's colleague, Eugene Shoemaker, who started the ball rolling when he discovered 1994's asteroid comet, Shoemaker Levy-9. This colossus was a 21-fragment asteroid that had been captured by planet Jupiter's immense gravitational pull. SL-9 continued to accelerate in Jupiter's orbit, culminating in the 135,000 mile-per-hour strike of all 21 fragments, some over a mile wide, during the period 9 July through 14 July, 1994. It was

the most violent celestial event in Earth's recorded history.

The past week, Professor Magakis had tracked a recently discovered asteroid which he temporarily designated JR-5. It was one of many asteroids he would track as part of his ongoing project. Within the month, he was preparing to publish his tenth paper on Near Earth asteroids and short-term comets. The professor had labored for fifty years in this rather obscure field of astronomy, and was recognized as its greatest living authority.

Now asleep across his desk, as morning sunlight pierced the room, the wall clock gently chimed. He awoke with the adrenaline rush of someone who was late for work and had overslept. He twirled in his chair, stopping as quickly as he started. Several inches from the leg of the chair was the only living creature Magakis would yield to, Naxos his best friend. The portly 40-pound mutt was lying flat on his back, paws straight up, snoring peacefully. He shakily hoisted himself up and over the sleeping animal and stared at the blackboard.

The fourth and final equation was chalked on the board and was now complete. Costas stared blankly. He was, at the present time, the only man on the planet aware its end was at hand. He called for his assistant, Professor Wenta.

Thomas Wenta had met Magakis at a symposium three years earlier. Tom had graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology as a full-fledged astronomer. Upon meeting the famous Professor Magakis, they conversed for seven hours straight. The old man had never met anyone with the same fire and passion for the somewhat obscure field of comet chasers and asteroid trackers.

Tom had returned with him to his island laboratory to continue their research together.

Tom would joke that the two of them were like Maytag repairmen. Costas had a vague idea of what he meant and laughed at the notion they were akin to lonely washing machine trouble shooters.

That day, when Tom entered the room, he was taken aback by Costas's facial expression. Only once in their three-year association, had he seen his mentor look so devastated; that was the day Costas's only brother had died.

Glancing quickly at the chalkboard across the room and realizing there were asteroid trajectory path and impact predictors displayed, Tom began to feel uneasy. Costas's mind, sharp as an old shark in bloody waters, caught it. They locked eyes.

“Tom, I believe this asteroid I’ve been tracking the past week will hit the earth.” Pausing slightly in response to Tom’s stunned look he added, “In one week.” The Greek had never been one to mince words.

Tom knew Costas to be an absolute perfectionist in his work. He was fanatical in his quest to prove to anyone that his final pronouncements on asteroid and comet trajectories were totally accurate, and dared anyone to disprove his findings once he made them public. Tom would never respond to the professor’s discovery with incredulity or doubt. Tom knew if Costas said we are going to have a collision, the next question was, “How big on the Torino scale?” The scale similar to numbers or categories for other acts of nature was devised as a method for measuring the impact hazard associated with asteroid or comet strikes on Earth. The Torino scale was created by an MIT professor from the Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences, and formally adopted at the 1999 International Conference on Near Earth Objects (NEOS) in Turin (Torino), Italy.

The old man continued to keep his gaze on Tom, waiting for the question. Tom didn’t like the look on his face, but summoned up a “How big?” with more a gesture than spoken word.

The old man’s lips curled back when he said, “On the Torino scale, my boy, a number 10.”

Tom looked for a sign this was a practical joke—or something.

Costas pointed towards the chalkboard and said in a low voice, “Our end is right here, Tom.” He rattled off calculations and findings gleaned from more than 100 hours of intense investigation performed in the past week. Briefly, he summed it up.

“I have given this asteroid the alpha-numeric designation JR-5. It gets worse. I confirmed it last night. It is a binary type. A smaller asteroid is orbiting its mass. We will designate it, JR-5a. The large mass is close to 12 miles wide and over 200 billion tons. The smaller JR-5a is approximately one mile in width and 500 million tons.”

Like most who love life and hear a death sentence declared against them, Tom sat down and realized he couldn’t move. Upon regaining his composure, and at Costas’s request, the rest of the day was spent probing the equations.

Double and triple-checking the math, Tom gently prodded the octogenarian, hoping there was a miscalculation, that somehow it wasn’t true. Tom did not consider himself the intellectual equal of the professor, but perhaps this one time Costas’s advanced age dimmed his mathematical

perfection. In recent months Tom had noticed he tired easily, could be forgetful at times, or repeated the same story he had told several hours before. Tom thought this JR-5 might be a false alarm.

After a working lunch, they found a mathematical error in the second equation. Tearing into it, they found a correction in the third equation. Twelve hours after starting, Tom was convinced—Costas was right. It really was the end of the world.

At 6 p.m., a weary Costas asked Tom to bring him the telephone and make another pot of coffee. As Tom prepared the coffee, his hand began to shake. “Nerves,” he thought. He steeled himself with a prayer beseeching God to help him and the planet, then remembered an old Mark Twain quotation, “Nothing focuses the mind so wonderfully well as a death sentence.”

When he returned to the living room with the phone and two cups of coffee, he saw Naxos resting his head on the professor’s knee. Late at night, reading, Tom would hear Naxos patrolling the hallway, nails clicking on the stone tile floor. Naxos would peer into his bedroom, walk over to Tom, rest his head on the mattress, and sigh softly. He thought Naxos was one of those old souls, a very kind dog with golden eyes that seemed to read a man’s mind.

Costas didn’t acknowledge Tom for a minute. He was whispering something Greek into Naxos’s left ear. The dog’s tail wagged gently. When Costas reached for the telephone, Tom thought he detected a tear in the old man’s eye. The first phone call went to Costas’s most trusted colleague, Professor Helmut Zerbys at MIT. Zerbys was in charge of the university’s Minor Planet Center, which assigned designations to newly discovered comets, unusual objects, and main belt asteroids. The Lincoln Near Earth Asteroid Research project or LINEAR was an MIT Lincoln Laboratory Program funded by the United States Air Force and NASA. LINEAR was originally developed for the surveillance of man-made satellites, but was now adapted to the problem of detecting and cataloging NEOS (Near Earth Objects), or, in layman’s terms, potential killer asteroids.

The program used a pair of GEODSS telescopes at Lincoln Labs Experimental Test Site in Socorro, New Mexico. All heavenly observations were sent on a daily basis to the main Lincoln Laboratory site at Hanscomb Air Force base in Lexington, Massachusetts, where they were linked from night to night, double-checked, and forwarded to the Minor Planet Center.

Professor Zerbys had just finished breakfast when the telephone rang. He was happy to hear his old friend's voice. It had been months. They spoke for several minutes before Costas broke the bad news, requesting Zerbys handle the information as highly classified.

Costas told him of his evidence and conclusions. At Tom's urging, Costas asked Zerbys to check all the calculations via MIT's Cray supercomputer. He gave the coordinates to find JR-5 in space and where to focus the New Mexico telescopes. Unknown to Tom, Magakis had booked a flight for two on Olympic Airways Flight 411 to New York the next morning. Magakis asked Zerbys to meet him there. Helmut agreed to ride the Amtrak Acela down from Boston. Finally, Costas told him of his earth-related weather problems. He would be unable to track JR-5 tonight due to a low-pressure generated cloud cover over the Aegean Sea and most of Southern Europe.

The next call went to Steve Stern, the recently appointed Director of Dynamic Propulsion Laboratory's Solar System Group. Just an acquaintance, Costas spoke briefly on his research work, and then broke the shocking news. Where Professor Zerbys had received the news stoically, like a soldier receiving orders in the field, Stern was skeptical.

"What the hell you mean you skeptical?" Magakis unleashed his formidable Greek temper on the Doubting Thomas administrator. The previous week's tension had finally caught up with him.

Working alongside the old man going on three years now, Tom knew his depth of knowledge was breathtaking, and could tell this conversation was headed downhill fast. When Stern repeatedly asked Magakis what systems of verifications were used in his discovery, Magakis ordered Stern to get on the phone with NASA, the U.S. Air Force and Professor Zerbys at MPC.

"And do it now!" he ordered, slamming the phone slammed into its cradle.

Tom noted the professor's hand trembling as he reached for the coffee cup. He was a serious astronomer interested in results and discoveries, not vanities. Tom rarely glimpsed his temper on display. It came only under pressure from colleagues he felt were inferior, or from laymen, like Stern, who dared question his scientific findings.

Tom had been exposed to brilliant men and women at MIT, but Magakis was undeniably the greatest living astronomer. The comet/asteroid Shoemaker Levy-9 was a watershed event in scientific circles. After its discovery, Costas Magakis had helped his colleague,

Gene Shoemaker, create an excellent model of rapid and accurate orbit determination once SL-9 zeroed in on planet Jupiter.

Tom met Magakis shortly after writing a 1994 paper on the SL-9 event titled: "Interpretation of Observed Data and the Jovian Decametric Events during the Period of Impacts of Fragments A through L." A few months later, he and Magakis were both attending an international workshop of a hundred fellow astronomers assembled to discuss various aspects of the violent collision. During the conference, Magakis stepped out of a stuffy meeting room and came across a table packed with numerous photocopied reports. He was idly shuffling through them when he discovered Tom's masterpiece.

When Tom saw this old man with fire in his eyes rapidly approaching, he thought he was about to get knocked over. "You!" he shouted, "You are the one who wrote this fine paper? You are the one called Wenta? I am Professor Costas Magakis."

Tom was stunned. He had only seen one photograph of his idol from a 1959 MIT faculty photo book. Now 47 years later the reclusive genius astronomer was here in the flesh and talking to him.

Having no sons or any family member remotely interested in his profession, he latched tightly on to Tom as the proper conduit for the knowledge he felt must be given to someone younger. Magakis, in his later years began to fear he might die before he could disseminate all the work he had gathered over his lifetime. Whether Tom Wenta liked it or not, he was chosen.

Tom liked it. He couldn't believe his luck! Now, three years later they sat in a small room, in a small house, on a tiny Greek Island lost in the Aegean Sea, having coffee and preparing for their impending demise. All of their shared knowledge going for naught, along with an entire planet, in approximately one week's time. After informing Tom of the details of their flight to New York in the morning, the old man let it all hang out.

Well, not everything. There were two things he didn't reveal, two of Costas's highly guarded, and deepest secrets. Those two secrets would be revealed, unbeknownst to him, in the next 72 hours.

Over coffee and pastries, late into the evening, Costas and Tom spoke their minds and laughed with gallows humor. Finally, tears welled up in Costas's eyes. "Tom, you are son I never had. God sent you to me." His voice faded, the fire going out. He patted Tom's hand, then shook it firmly, "Good night my boy, good night and may God bless us all. I see you in morning." He shuffled out of the room and down the hall, pausing

to look in on Lexine, his sleeping daughter, with Naxos trailing slowly behind.

Chapter 2

GONE FOR YEARS, LEXINE, the professor's 31-year-old daughter had finally returned home three weeks earlier. It would have been better to welcome a typhoon into the house. Her main purpose seemed to be to disturb and torment anybody and anything in her immediate vicinity, including her father, Tom, and Naxos. Until her arrival, all three bachelors were quite content to discover, analyze, and rest. With Lexine in the house, that was no longer possible.

In the three years Tom had lived with Costas he had only heard Lexine's name mentioned once. In fact, he had lived with Costas for over a year before he learned the old professor was married and widowed. There were no pictures of his wife or daughter anywhere in the house.

Lexine was a real sore spot with Costas, so Tom never asked about her. He pitied the unknown wife and daughter who had attempted a relationship with this genius. Costas's entire waking life was devoted to the observatory and analysis of comets and asteroids.

Tom never thought about Lexine again until that lazy afternoon three weeks earlier. Returning home from a walk with Naxos, he saw a stunningly beautiful woman sitting on the back porch. As Tom strode closer, Naxos took off like a rocket, the dog's tail whipping wildly about. For a moment he thought Naxos was attacking the stranger on the porch, but when he reached her, the dog was wild with joy, yipping, twisting, and barking.

Before he could introduce himself she called out enchantingly, "Tom? Are you Tom Wenta, my father's assistant?" He was face to face with Costas's daughter, Lexine.

Oh Lexine, the olive-skinned goddess with a jet black pageboy and amber eyes, fire lit! How many men, uncounted, had wrecked upon her shores? What number wreck would Tom Wenta be?

Poor Tom was quite handsome: six-foot-one, a modern day Clark Kent, square of jaw and horn rim glasses, but minus the fedora. He fell for her like a ton of bricks.

If only he had some experience with Greek women.

Lexine sized him up and within fifteen minutes marked him as her new play toy. This is not to say she didn't also find him attractive. He knocked her for a loop, but only for 24 hours or so. Trouble was, Lexine's game was keep away. She traveled through fields of men like a summer butterfly alighting here for a few seconds, then over there for a minute or two.

There was the ubiquitous wealthy Greek shipping magnate who tried to commit suicide twice. There were the brothers she romanced who attempted to murder each other, now serving ten-year sentences in a Greek prison. Her latest conquest was a discotheque owner in Pireaus who went broke and was caught robbing a bank in an attempt to fulfill her many wants. With the police eyeballing her as a possible accomplice, she thought it prudent to get the hell out of there, hence her sudden appearance on Skyros.

Into this European tragi-comedy stepped MIT astronomer, Dr. Thomas Wenta. He was entranced. She was very intelligent and quite versed in the astronomical, having helped her father since she was six-years-old. Upon arrival on the island she made her first stop at old Aunt Thekla's house, deftly pumping her for information about her father's present situation. She learned Tom had been working as his assistant and heir apparent for the past three years.

The next evening, she dressed to the nines. Short white miniskirt, peasant blouse, no bra holding those buoyant size C's, and her highest white high heels. She wore huge hoop earrings and shiny gold bracelets that softly clinked on her oh-so-slim, olive-skinned wrists. She was a vision equal to any syren of the old order.

That was Lexine on the outside. On the inside lay a polished, solid granite heart and the devious mind of Machiavelli. Was it Herodotus who asked, "Why do the Gods play such tricks on us?"

That night, she took Tom all over the island, introducing him to relatives and friends. The next two days she was completely at his beck and call. On the third night, she jumped his bones, the two making love for hours. Finally, on the fourth day, she implemented one of her old favorites: the cold shoulder, quick destruction process. Tom called her cell phone six times that day; she was nowhere to be found. Finally showing

up at the house around 9 p.m., he found her with an old boyfriend in tow. She was as cold as ice to Tom as she was warm and loving to her old boyfriend. Lexine hung all over him, whispering sweet, soft, wet secrets in his ear. She made a big show of seeing him off, kissing and nuzzling his neck, pleading with him to stay a bit longer.

Tom was thunderstruck, then angry, and finally hurt, but said not one word about it. He was her match, and then some. Tom Wenta had one thing playgirl Lexine Magakis did not: determination—iron-rodged, nickel-plated determination. This was War! The following weeks he gave her the automaton treatment; one word answers to any and all questions, hard looks or blank stares when eye contact was required, and tactical response to all provocations.

If she bent over in front of him he would avert his eyes and pick up a book. If a high heeled shoe dangled while she sat on the couch, Tom would leave the room. When she escalated the conflict by bringing a man home and making noisy love two doors down from his room, it was no bother to Tom. Huge beeswax earplugs, purloined from a local beekeeper, wedged into each ear blotted out all noise while reading and sleeping.

Lexine became frantic. Tom should be killing her lovers, or beating her senseless and ravishing her. He should be down on his knees, a broken man, confessing tearfully his total devotion so she could coldly smash his heart to bits. What was this American? What was he made from? She was Lexine, the untamable goddess. Tom was crushing her inexorably, like a constrictor; every time she exhaled, he tightened her ribs another inch.

She thought about him constantly now, looking for some opening—anything to begin to repair the damage. When he would drop downstairs in the morning, lightly bearded, tousled hair, wearing a white t-shirt she would feel a surge of electricity through her body. He had been wonderful in bed during their one-night stand.

She gamely tried to make small talk, but Tom would have none of it. Lastly, one scorching hot afternoon while her father was out visiting Aunt Thekla, she blocked Tom's retreat from the living room. She stood directly in front of him, forcing eye contact and pleading,

“Tom, won't you forgive me? I was a fool; an impetuous school girl, an idiot, please listen.” She began to unbutton her blouse. “I am so sorry, please make love to me. No one is home, yes? We can forgive, can't we?”

For a second or two lust overcame Tom's pain, and those seconds seemed like an eternity. But no, Tom folded his chart, took a last sip of cold coffee, and walked out.

Lexine cried for two days straight. Tom was horribly confused and torn, but what Lexine never bargained for was that you only got one chance at Tom Wenta's heart. It was a heart of gold bigger than the island of Skyros, but a sad and troubled heart, and one fools never prevailed upon.