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The Saga of
the
Phoenix

INTRODUCTION.

The radio operator aboard the merchant navy ships was an officer who had the task of connecting the ship to the rest of the world by radio. On the cruise ships there was a radio operator chief assisted by other radio operators in more or less large numbers depending on the importance of the ship and the number of passengers on board. In practice, the radio station acted as a post office for passengers who could send and receive telegrams and, with a simple telegram, send flowers or gifts of various kinds to relatives and friends all over the world. In addition to this function available to passengers, the radio station on board ensured the connection of the ship with the terrestrial radio stations from which it could receive orders and information from the shipping company, service communications and above all had the task of monitoring the meteorological conditions by reporting to the deck officers radio bulletins with weather forecasts relating to the sea area where the ship was, issued by coastal weather stations.

PART ONE. On the sea.

Giorgio Relli was born in Trieste towards the end of the war, in 1944. As soon as he was born, his mother with him in her arms together with the midwife and other staff of the clinic, they had to flee to the air"raid shelter below. These escapes to shelters often occurred due to frequent bombing. His father was in the Civic Guard and often it was he who carried him to the shelter with the full cradle, together with his mother and maternal grandmother. The maternal grandfather, on the other hand, never wanted to enter the shelters and disappeared who knows where until the sirens ceased.

His father disappeared in the first months of 1945, when Giorgio was four months old, slaughtered by the Tito partisans during a patrolling. He was not a fascist but, a member of the Civic Guard which was a corp depending on the fascist Mayor of Trieste, could not fail to be, for the ferocious Tito partisans. Giorgio grew up with his mother and grandmother and the only male figure in the family was his maternal grandfather. Trieste of that time, after the war, became the Free Territory of Trieste, a small semi-independent state controlled by the Allied Anglo-American military authorities. After elementary school, Giorgio moved to Udine with his mother who had remarried and after attending high school he did not have clear ideas about his future but had an innate passion for electronics. He thus enrolled in a technical institute in Udine which had just started an experimental course in electronics with the study program that also extended to the humanities and scientific disciplines. He attended three

of the five planned years and then dropped out of school.

The stubborn and proud character of him did not allow humiliation on the part of some teacher who dominated the chair, especially if without merit. Giorgio was basically polite and respectful of everyone, but he could turn into a real monster of vulgarity if he was teased with malice and stung in his perhaps too exaggerated pride. He was very tolerant in nature and always ready to excuse any wrongdoing but only if he did not see intentional malice. In this case he definitively deleted the guilty person from his world and broke off any kind of relationship by completely ignoring him. Physically he was not a colossus however thanks to the sports he practiced, especially swimming and mountaineering, he had developed a musculature, even if not very evident, rather robust. He had a peculiarity, which belonged to the family, a deadly handshake that surprised his companions and friends, even much bigger than him. He didn't come to blows that easily because he knew that if he was forced to do it he would hardly stop.

Abandoning the school he wondered what he wanted to do and considered, among other things, the idea of enlisting in any military corps that included service on the sea, to which he was particularly attracted. By chance, one day, while reading the newspaper, he saw an advertisement from a private school in Trieste that was preparing for the state exam to obtain the radio officer license with which he could embark on merchant ships. He was attracted to the idea of returning to study in Trieste to which, at the time, he was particularly attached and moreover, thanks to this

type of work, he could explore the world. He also had an insatiable curiosity that led him to deepen, as a self-taught, some subjects that particularly interested him, physics and mathematics. In Rome he obtained the radio operator's license in 1962 by taking the state exam at the Ministry of Telecommunications. After obtaining the patent, he was waiting for a boarding for a few years.

After turning to various shipping agencies, he had almost lost hope and was considering the idea of working with some firm on shore. He had never obtained, for reasons that are not clear even to himself, the famous "matricola" that is the navigation book that allowed boarding on ships flying the Italian flag, essential in addition to the patent already in his possession. He had already found a not particularly interesting position in a local industry when, a couple of days before starting his new job, he received an unexpected phone call. " Mr. Relli? This is the Calvetti shipping agency in Trieste, are you available? ". " Yes, of course, is it a boarding as a radio operator? " The voice at the other end of the phone was from a young secretary with a cordial and hasty tone that showed efficiency: " You should show up the day after tomorrow at 10 here at the agency if that's okay with you. That "if that's okay" had a tone that did not admit any reply so Giorgio, amazed, intrigued but happy, replied in the affirmative.

For the whole day before the meeting, he concentrated on gathering in his mind all the notions necessary to face the new assignment. He knew the subject well in theory but in practice he lacked a lot as he had never actually boarded a merchant ship for such an

important assignment. At the time, no ship could set sail without a radio operator on board and he thought that those of the agency had to be in a tight spot to call someone like him without any experience.

On the fateful day he went to the agency and was immediately received by the director. He later discovered that he was also the owner of the ship. Immediately after the pleasantries and the director's welcome, Giorgio immediately announced: " Sir, I've never been on board, I have a scholastic knowledge of this job but also good will and willingness to learn. " The director was expecting it and with a good natured smile replied: " Do not worry in case of difficulty in receiving, we will send you the most important messages via radiotelephone, you know how to use that right? And he smiled more openly. "Of course," Giorgio replied back, timidly returning the smile. " Well " said the director " you have just enough time to prepare your luggage, the ship is at anchor in the roadstead and leaves tomorrow morning at 0600. A few hours before, you will have to get the mooring of the motorboats, near the Bersaglieri pier, where you will find a motor boat that will take you on board. The radio operator who disembarks will hand over your duty."

Giorgio thought that at 0600 it was not the right time to familiarize himself with instruments he had never seen before but greeted the director thanking him, went out and headed home absorbed in his thoughts. He had longed for that job but the unexpected arrival upset him not a little. However, he decided to go on and concentrated on preparing the luggage and on what could be useful on board.

Knowing nothing about the destination of the ship, he decided to pack summer and winter clothing, there was no need for uniforms but he also added khaki shirts and trousers as he had heard that they were used on board. He also thought of buying the epaulets with the navy rank, as the radio operator has the rank of second mate but would have only the captain as his superior. When in doubt, he discarded the idea so as not to look like a "fanatic". He would eventually get them later if necessary.

At 0400 in the morning, after having badly slept a few hours, he showed up at the appointed dock with a large suitcase and a leather bag where he had put a couple of elegant clothes in the hope of being able to show them off in some exotic port like a true adventurer like in the movies. It was a cold January morning and a persistent *bora ciara*¹ crept in everywhere, spreading a strong salty smell. This helped to wake him up completely and he felt ready for any challenge. The man from the motor boat, who was waiting for him on the dock, saw and addressed him with the typical Trieste dialect: " You have to get on the Old Warrior right?" " Yes, I'm the new radio operator " he replied" Ah, you are the new *Marco* ... mount on board, please. "

He later discovered that on board, the radio operator, regardless of his first name or surname, was called Marco or Marconi and that it was neither a mocking nor disrespectful term, on the contrary he was respectfully affectionate. The same happened for the captain who in the Venetian-Dalmatian navy was

1 Bora ciara: typical bora wind of the gulf of Trieste

called Barba² with the same intentions. All other officers were usually called with the surname only, but preceded by *Mr.*

In the darkness of the night, the lights of the city could be seen reflected on the sea that was not too rough and the persistent *bora ciara*, together with the even more intense salty smell, gave it a pleasant feeling of adventure. After a short distance the motorboat approached the side of the ship along which a rather large rigid wooden ladder with a rope handrail had been lowered, illuminated by a large lamp similar to those used for night fishing.

Giorgio went aboard and was received by an elderly man, robust, with a stocky physique, with the appearance of an old fisherman, wrapped in a blue cloth jacket and a wool cap of the same color pulled down to his eyebrows who, with his hands in his pockets greeted him with a " Good morning Mr. Relli, please follow me, the radio operator who has to disembark is waiting for you at the radio station ". The phrase was formulated in a mixture of Trieste and Grado dialects mixed together. Later, Giorgio discovered that this was the chief mate and thought he had done well not to have brought the epaulets with the navy rank.

In the radio station, the radio operator waiting for him was a young man in his middle thirties but had spent several years at sea and was an "expert", one of those who really know everything and make do in any eventuality. It was evident that he was in a great hurry to leave but seeing the "rookie" who was in front of him he took a few more minutes to explain. The

2 Barba means bear in Italian.

equipment was all pre-war of German manufacture and only the radiotelephone was new and of Italian construction.

The farsighted radio operator had accumulated a considerable stock of spare parts so that one could hope to cope with any troubles even in navigation. He had the courtesy to provide Giorgio, whom he conspicuously appalled, with valuable advice. " It is good that you know that in the main receiver there are wire impedances that when the ship rolls a lot they touch their aluminum casing. I put some cork disk of beer caps, to avoid the problem but, sometimes, they fall down in case of very strong rolls. In that drawer I put a supply of them if someone goes missing. " He greeted with a handshake and a " Have a nice trip and good luck " and, running down the ladder, got on the motor boat that was waiting for him, disappearing into the darkness.

Giorgio was left alone to familiarize himself with the equipment by exploring the entire radio station and, while he was examining the Nautilus, an emergency transceiver in the shape of an ogive, operating with a crank, he heard a knock on the door. A tall, elderly man with white hair, elegant and martial-looking but with a nice and friendly smile, entered directly without waiting for an answer. "Hello, I'm Captain Riccardi, welcome on board. Have you already sailed?" He inquired. In response Giorgio threw him a "Thank you Captain, it's my first embarkation", "Let's hope well then," he replied, walking away with a smile.

After half an hour, while he was trying the telegraph key, he heard the sound of the anchor chain be-

ing hoisted by the winch. They were sailing, and he wondered where to. Shortly after, he heard the sound of the engine, a slow succession of thuds that made the whole hull vibrate. The ship began to slide in the dark, on the smooth sea of the gulf. A slight roll began offshore and Giorgio doubted whether he could get seasick but, at the moment, he did not feel any nausea, on the contrary, the slight roll seemed to lull the hull pleasantly. It was still dark when he decided to go up and browse the bridge to see what was going on. He left the radio station that was adjacent to his cabin on the life boats deck and climbed the ladder that led to the bridge wing which led to the bridge. The sliding door had a glass window and beyond it he could see a darkness interrupted only by a weak light coming from the large magnetic compass that illuminated the helm wheel and the helmsman's face. Amazed, he opened the door and entered, glimpsing some standing figures in the darkness, among which he recognized that of the Captain and stupidly asked: " Don't you have any light here? " The answer came disconsolately in the Trieste dialect from Captain Riccardi, who was from Zara: " Doesn't you know that on the bridge one must stay in dark? Oh my God ... Oh my God ... ". It was obvious that the bridge had to remain in the dark to allow viewing from the outside. Giorgio stammered something and returned to the radio station with the certainty that he had made a figure that is normally identified with a very vulgar term.³

He was not discouraged and turned on the equipment of the radio station that is turned off near the ports. The ship had gone out offshore by heading

3 In Italian, a bad figure is vulgarly said a figure of shit.

south at full speed, at 55 propeller revolutions per minute. That "full speed" today would make one smile because it was equivalent to a speed of about ten miles per hour.

The Old Warrior was a steamship built in Germany in the 1930s, but flying the Panamanian flag. It was about seventy meters long and a little less than fifteen wide, it had an empty displacement of five thousand tons and a capacity of as many. Her propulsion was ensured by a particular steam engine that was the pride of the engineer officers on board. Instead of the traditional three-cylinder steam engine of decreasing diameter, the Old Warrior was equipped with a four-cylinder engine similar to a diesel engine with overhead valves but in the cylinders, instead of oil, was injected steam at high pressure. The steam was generated by two heavy oil fired boilers. When this strange steam engine was conceived, it must have been considered as something innovative but, after seen the performance achieved at sea, the designers of that time must have changed their minds and that engine was perhaps the only one running in navigation in the 1960s.

The engineers officers of other ships who visited the engine room were amazed by this type of engine and on the occasion of the visit of the Chief Engineer of a Lloyd Triestino ship, he asked: " How much are you doing on sea with this engine?" The Chief Engineer of the Old Warrior replied proudly: " With smooth sea and without splitting the propeller shaft even 11 miles" exaggerating a little. The Lloyd's Engineer shook his head, giggling: " I see... Germans not always hit the targets... look, my ship has an Ansaldo

Diesel engine, that looks like this, but we inject light oil and does 19 miles without straining". Despite her detractors, the Old Warrior's engine was a rarity and remained the pride of its Engineers.

It was dawn when Giorgio decided to send his first message from the ship to the Trieste radio station IQX and with some emotion he manipulated the message on the key: *IQX de HOPF QRU?* which meant according to the Q code used in the navy: "Trieste from Old Warrior (whose call sign was HOPF) do you have any messages for us?" They had just sailed and it was extremely unlikely that there were any messages. After a second a loud and ringing signal in the headphones answered: *HOPF de IQX nil* (no message). The radio operator from Trieste radio said aloud amid the good-natured hilarity of his colleagues in the radio room: " They sailed right now, what messages are they looking for? Surely, the radio operator is at his first boarding ". But Giorgio to finish everything completely replied: *IQX de HOPF tu* (thanks).

Proud of having successfully performed his first task, he wandered around the ship and entered the officers' lounge where the steward waited to serve breakfast to the first shift officers from 08:00 to 12:00 who, on that ship, were the Captain on the bridge and the Chief Engineer in the engine room. The officers' lounge was a rather large room for that type of ship, located at deck level. The bulkhead towards the bow was occupied by a bench for its entire length, in front of which three tables were fixed to the floor, each of which had two armchairs aft. The seats were assigned according to a precise hierarchical order.

The Captain sat at the starboard table on the bench and in front of him was the Chief Engineer. On the central table sat the Chief Mate on the bench facing starboard, with the First Assistant Engineer on his right. In front of them sat the Second Mate with the Second Assistant Engineer at his side. The third table was reserved for the radio operator sitting on the bench who should have faced the Third Mate and the Third Assistant Engineer but they had not been embarked on that ship to save money. The hierarchical order was respected in both directions. The service chiefs, arranged lengthwise from starboard to port according to rank, sat with their backs towards the bow and faced their subordinates. Giorgio had no subordinates.

He was considering this hierarchical order of which he had been informed by the steward, when the Captain entered and sat in his place, addressing him a " Good morning, Mr. Relli " and received in return from Giorgio: " Good morning Captain, can I ask you our destination? "The answer was: "For now, to the south but we are waiting for instructions by radio, I recommend you" and smiled.

After breakfast, Giorgio ran to the radio station and turned on all the receivers he had, activating the listening on the loudspeaker and turning up the volume. He was quite excited waiting to receive such an important message as the ship's destination. His shift involved eight hours of listening per day from 0800 to 2200 with breaks of two hours each. These times were in practice purely indicative as in case of need the radio operator could spend many more hours in his place or, during the mandatory hours, turn up the volume

and remain in his cabin next to the radio station. In theory he had no other duties aboard. But only in theory as we will see later.

In the two following days Giorgio spent almost all his time on the radio station with very few breaks, asking Ancona radio, which was the most important radio station in the middle Adriatic, several times a day waiting for the telegram announced by the Captain. On the third day a croaking voice from the radiotelephone pronounced his call sign followed by the name of the ship. Ancona radio had a phonogram for them. He answered immediately and they sent him the phonogram, short and without particular details: *To: Commander Old Warrior from: Agenzia Calvetti stop Directing Salonicco stop Support Schembri Agency. End.*

Giorgio ran to the bridge where the Captain was on duty and handed him the phonogram copied in block letters. After reading it, the Captain recommended "Bring me the weather reports every twelve hours with the forecasts on our route, please", he promptly answered "Of course, Captain" and returned to the radio station.

The next day he received the Malta weather forecasts announcing a force 6/8 storm in the south Aegean. He immediately reported to the Captain who asked him to constantly monitor the evolution of bad weather. On arriving at the Otranto channel, the report announced a slight lower bad weather which dropped to 4/6, so the Captain decided to continue on the established route by rounding the southern tip of Greece, Cape Matapan. The monks of the monastery on the top of the promontory greeted by ringing the bells the

passing ships that answered with a long whistle of the onboard siren. A few hours after rounding Cape Matapan the sea strengthened again to a force 6/8 storm with rain and thunderstorms.

The old ship began to roll violently and in the old hull there were squeaks that were not very reassuring at least for him who had never been in a similar situation. The Old Warrior had empty holds, which helped make the rolls even wider. He thought he was lucky not to be seasick even if that rhythmic and continuous rocking caused some annoyance. He often went up to the deck when he had no commitments, a bit out of curiosity but also to fraternize with other officers on duty. The Chief Mate, the one looking like an old fisherman, who always wore the blue cloth jacket and the woolen cap, remained calm and looked at the stormy sea, swinging on his legs to support the roll and occasionally giving some order to the helmsman to correct course. Looking at him, Giorgio reassured himself thinking that he must have seen much worse at sea. The Second Mate, on the other hand, was a thin little man in his sixties with a thin mustache and a nervous air, who continually walked on the deck, longitudinally from starboard to port and vice versa, up or down depending on the roll. He too did not show any particular concern which reassured Giorgio even more about the hold of the ship which was proceeding at half speed to limit the impact of the waves on the old hull. The Captain then did not really consider the conditions of that sea and joked with the Dalmatian helmsman talking to him in Croatian.

After two days of storm, the ship reached the north of the Aegean where waters were calmer and

headed full force for the port of Thessaloniki. In Thessaloniki 5,000 tons of sunflower seeds were to be loaded in bulk for Porto Corsini in Ravenna. This is where the raw material for making sunflower oil came from, thought Giorgio.

The Old Warrior docked at the pier in the port of Thessaloniki at 18:00 so the port authorities and the support agent immediately boarded. Once the formalities were completed, the Chief Mate organized the duty shifts in port, leaving all the others in shore. The radio operator, when the ship was moored, not only had no commitments but was forbidden to turn on the radio transmitting equipment and Giorgio was thinking about how to spend his evening.

It was his first outing as a ship officer and even though he had already been abroad in the past, getting there by sea was new and exciting. He began to think with whom to go ashore to share the exploration of the city with someone and perhaps with someone already experienced in the place. From a quick evaluation he immediately discarded the Captain and the deck officers, too old and not very confident with them for the moment. The closest to him in age were the cook, a Triestine in his late thirties and the Second Assistant Engineer, a tall, thin type with large sideburns that framed his thin, almost haggard face. There wasn't much choice so he decided to first ask the cook, the more cheerful and likable of the two, if he had plans for the evening. "Obviously hunting for girls right?" the cook replied, laughing, "we organize a *mopping up patrol* but, wait until I hear the Second Assistant Engineer that will surely not stay on board tonight, all the old ones will" and laughed louder.

The *patrol* was ready to leave around 8 pm and got off the ship and walked all the way down the pier to the exit gate. The cook immediately took matters into his own hands, hailed a taxi and all three got into it. None of them spoke Greek but luckily the taxi driver spoke a little German and a little English so the cook was able to make him understood that they wanted to have dinner in a good restaurant. They arrived at a typical restaurant where they gorged themselves on local specialties with incomprehensible names accompanied by an excellent red wine to which everyone paid special attention. Around midnight they took another taxi and the cook, who had become the expedition commander, asked the driver to take them to some place where there were girls and music. The driver nodded knowing well that sailors could not ask for other at that time. He headed out of town to a mountainous area he called Monastir. Giorgio, sitting in the back seat of the old black Fiat 1100E, saw patches of snow on the side of the road, from the window, and asked the cook if they were headed for some ski resort. The question sparked a hilarity not justified except by the red wine from before.

They arrived at an isolated cottage that stood on a small plateau in the side of the hill and, getting out of the car without worrying about how to get back on board, the cook paid the driver who left. They entered a kind of very spacious and crowded tavern, where there was inside all men of all ages. In one corner there was music, a trio of elderly people strumming on strange stringed instruments that resembled guitars but resting horizontally on their knees and the music was traditional Greek. The counter next to the orchestra

was crowded with patrons served by a man in his forties with mustache and sideburns and a girl who looked like his daughter.

They sat at the only table left free and shortly after the girl approached, a very pretty and very curvy brunette. Six eyes magnetized on the brunette's huge breast and, when she asked in English what they wanted to drink, they answered in chorus "Red wine" without looking away. Once the hypnotic effect of the brunette's breasts ceased, the cook said perplexed: "The taxi driver screwed us, the music is there but girls, apart from the busty woman, nothing at all" The other two nodded disconsolately and got busy with the wine which was even better than the restaurant.

At one point the music changed and increased in volume. A dozen men rose from the tables with handkerchiefs in their hands and, in the center of the room, stood in a circle holding on to the handkerchiefs. The dance started slowly and then as it increased it gained strength until it reached a very involving rhythm. The highly concentrated dancers moved with incredible synchronism for non-professionals and even a little tipsy. It was evident that they had in their blood what was more than music to them. From their absolutely virile movements one could guess the meaning of tradition, history, pride of their ancient civilization, of life itself.

In the middle of the dance, whose music had involved everyone in the room, the bartender hastened to bring another bottle and said something, approaching the cook's ear to be heard in the din of the room. The cook gasped for a moment and when the bartender walked away "Where are the women?" the

other two asked in unison, sensing the content of the bartender's message. "You mean the WOMAN, the only one is the brunette and upstairs her room. Now, either we take turns or nothing". Nothing was a sad word so they decided to take turns. The highest in rank was Giorgio and he had to climb first. The brunette led him to the upper floor where in a huge space a room had been created with plywood walls painted in canary yellow and grass green. Surely no designer had ever interfered in the choice of that furniture. The bed rested on bricks, with no headboard, and the lopsided chest for a leg had a vocabulary. Without paying too much attention to the thin, Giorgio enjoyed himself with the brunette but he could not kiss her because she told him that for her it was a job and she would kiss only for love. He descended to join the others who immediately asked him: "How did she go?". "Uh ... great, never been with a woman like that" and it was true.

The second session player went up to brunette's room and then the third while Giorgio enjoyed the music and the dances that continued incessantly. When the third got off they asked the man at the counter if there was a way to return to the harbour. They were very organized, one of the patrons at the counter had a taxi that brought them back to the port without problems.

The trip back to Ravenna for unloading began two days later and one morning Giorgio and the Second Assistant Engineer met in the kitchen while the cook was preparing coffee. They began to comment on the evening they had spent together in Thessaloniki. The cook maliciously began to say that one had to be careful of illnesses with those women and asked

Giorgio if he had used a condom. Having received an affirmative answer, he said that he too had used it offered by the brunette. They saw the other, who had been the third to have the girl's favor, turn pale: "She didn't give me anything!" He replied getting nervous. "Either she had finished them or you inspired her confidence" grinned the cook adding: "A big risk though". The two sipped their coffee, sneering behind the poor man who went away worried and irritated.

Once in Porto Corsini, the ship was unloaded in a very short time with suction pipes which stored the seeds directly in the storage tanks and then set sail for Monfalcone. The Old Warrior had been moored for a few days in Porto Rosega of Monfalcone for supplies and some minor repairs when the news arrived that the ship had been chartered for a number of fixed trips. It would have had to sail empty for Durres, Albania, to load iron ore to take it to Galati, Romania, about twenty miles up the Danube from there it would have had to continue to the port of Braila, a little further on the river, to loading wooden logs to be unloaded in Monfalcone for the local Paper Mill. The prospect seemed pleasant, fixed ports and not too long trips, in total about a month for each trip considering also loading and unloading time. Giorgio had made friends with the Chief Engineer, a short, sturdy thirty year old with very short blonde hair cut in the military style. He was a friendly and nice guy who had been sailing since he was twenty and obviously was very proud of his special engine.

In view of these fixed trips, first joking but then seriously considering the thing, they both began to think that it would be nice to have a car on board to be

able to run around on shore while staying on shore. A few days before departure, Giorgio showed up alongside the ship driving an Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint 1.6, a red coupe that looked like a fire. He had bought it for little money, in partnership with the Chief Engineer, in a car recovery in the area, but it was functional and with the body in good condition at least in appearance, despite its 15 years of service. The loading on board had been agreed by the Chief Engineer with the boatswain, who could not refuse him a favor, in exchange for a fee to be paid which consisted of a case of beer for each loading and unloading of the car. Not for him but for the sailors, boatswain specified.

A few hours before departure, the car was harnessed with nets and hoisted onto the hatch of hold number two at the bow of the quarterdeck, with a ship's loading crane. Tied up properly and covered with a tarp, it was waiting to take to the sea. Promptly paid the fee to the boatswain, the ship soon set sail. While navigating with a treacherous swell, Giorgio and the Chief Engineer often went to check the tension of the ropes that blocked the car and with relief they found that the boatswain had done a good job. On the other hand, if it ended up in the sea, it would no longer be able to collect his fee.

The ship entered the port of Durres at dawn and the pilot got on board. The captain, as usual, had given orders to hoist the courtesy flag of the host country on the starboard flagpole of the mainmast and a young man on deck had taken charge of the operation. The Albanian pilot, as soon as he got on the bridge, in perfect Italian and in a friendly tone, said to the Captain: "Barba I suggest you to lower that Albanian flag be-

fore we enter the port" and smiling added: "if you do not want us to be shot at from harbor artillery!" The Captain looked at him surprised but, observing the flag better, he noticed that it had a red background with the black eagle in the center but next to the eagle two fasces stood out. It was the Albanian flag at the time of the Italian occupation. Apologizing to the pilot he immediately had the flag lowered and replaced with the right one without the fasces.

At the time, Albania was a closed on in itself country and, despite the population being Muslim, it had a communist, marxist, leninist regime and was the only European ally of Mao's China. It had fewer than two million inhabitants but proudly Albanians claimed that they and the Chinese together were a billion and a half.

As soon as the docking maneuvers were completed, Giorgio and the director, who were free from on board duty, went immediately to the port exit to go to the support agency, to ask for authorization for landing the car. At the gate, a uniformed guard stopped them suddenly. They tried to explain the reasons for their exit but the guard replied that an authorization was required to go out by walking and another to go out by car. The guard explained very kindly, that for the first authorization it tooks about a month and for the second one at least six. While they were talking, a large woman walked nearby dressed in a Muslim dress with a kind of scarf that covered most of her face. The two turned to look at her not for physical attraction but out of pure curiosity as she looked like a moving haystack. The guard noticed them and added another piece of advice: "I also suggest you do not turn around

to look at women, it is not used here". After thanking the guard for the valuable advice they returned on board rather disappointed. The car had been unloaded and put in a corner waiting to get back on board without even a *skid*.

Loading operations began the next day. The ship was moored to a quay where a huge hill of a reddish ore, probably high in iron, had been deposited, although the Albanians proudly claimed that it also contained gold. Several teams of shippers worked hard day and night. Each team consisted of a man and a woman with her head wrapped in the usual scarf. The man walked first with a pickax on his shoulder and a pipe in his mouth followed by the woman pushing a wheelbarrow with a shovel inside. Arriving at the ore hill, the man gave exactly five blows with his pickax and sat down to smoke his pipe. The woman loaded the wheelbarrow with the shovel, carried it to the ship's hold and unloaded it inside. On her return, the man gave another five blows of the pickax so fast that the woman did not have time to sit down and he sat down again to smoke, and so on. In the evening, other similar teams arrived to work the night shift and, incredibly, in a few days the loading was finished. The holds were half empty but, because of the high specific weight of the ore, the maximum capacity of the ship had been reached.

The Old Warrior set sail very early in the morning, carefully avoiding the half-sunken wreck of a ship broken in two that watched at the entrance of the harbour and headed off to the south. It doubled the Matapan cape receiving the usual greeting of the monks of the monastery and George thought that they must not

be very busy because they greeted all the passing ships. At that point there was a lot of traffic so the bell was practically continuous. The sea was calm and the old hull glided at full speed towards the Dardanelles Strait which reached it a few days later.

Past the Sea of Marmara, the Old Warrior came in sight of Istanbul showing in the distance the splendor of the dome of the Hagia Sophia Cathedral flanked by the Blue Mosque which had been given the task of beating the Christian cathedral in beauty to demonstrate to the world the excellence of Islam and to comply with the will of the child sultan Ahmet I, who had built it in the early 1600s.

To cross the Bosphorus it was necessary to slow down and let a harbor police boat alongside. An officer had to get off the boat to have the ship's documents checked, and then the ship could continue the navigation. This operation was normally the task of the Second Mate who was a thin nervous man with a sickly look. The Captain took Giorgio aside and made him sit in his cabin. "Look, Mr. Relli, I need your help. Since the Second Mate is essential to me otherwise the guard shifts would become unsustainable and are yet heavy, I wouldn't want to lose it at sea" he said smiling "You should be kind enough to deal with the Turkish police", "Certainly Captain" Giorgio promptly replied. It was his first task not as a radio operator and it was not the only one.

Arriving at the predetermined point the ship put the engine at slow speed and was flanked by the police boat. Two sailors lowered the rope ladder with the wooden steps and Giorgio got down on the boat, had the documents checked and went up without problems

even if it made a certain impression along those five or six yards on the side with the ship in motion and with a slight roll. From that day on, at each passage through the Bosphorus, police control was the responsibility of Giorgio. At that time, there were no bridges over the Bosphorus and numerous water buses crossed it to connect the two parts of the city. Navigation was thus quite complex because of the high traffic and especially at night when countless small boats of all kinds, many of which did not have lights, crossed the canal.

Leaving the Bosphorus, the ship headed north along the Bulgarian coast towards the Danube delta. Beyond Bulgaria, almost across the delta, they veered starboard towards the open sea and, after several miles, turned their bow again towards the delta with the engine stationary.

Another task that the Captain had assigned to Giorgio was to stay at the engine telegraph during maneuvers or in delicate situations. The engine telegraph was a short brass cylinder, placed horizontally on a metal column, equipped with a handle that made an index move on the two lateral scales that indicated from "full astern" to "full ahead" with "engine stop" in the middle scale. When it was activated, another equal in the engine room marked what was set from the bridge and the watch officer adjusted the speed of the ship according to the order received.

Giorgio on the deck next to the telegraph observed this unusual maneuver and asked the Captain, who replied: "The entry channel has a submerged bump on the seabed and we risk to touch it, so we need to take a run to pass." In practice, the river de-

posited earth and various debris with the current and a kind of submerged bump was formed on the seabed. Motor ships with powerful engines did not have the problems that the Old Warrior had despite its special German engine. Furthermore, the fully loaded ship was at the limit of the permitted draft and the submerged part was very deep. The Captain called the Chief Engineer with the mouthpiece for the engine room: "We are at the delta, Chief, how long it takes to give me maximum power ? ". " Give me a quarter of an hour Captain. " replied the director, aware of the problem.

The mouthpiece was a brass tube a few centimeters in diameter that reached the engine room from the bridge. A whistle was inserted at both ends so that by blowing on one side one warned on the other that someone was calling and removing the whistle you could talk. It was said that an elderly Captain of the Old Warrior, who did not have the sympathies of his Chief Engineer at all, happened that the Chief Engineer replaced the whistle with a cork, forcing the poor man to puff himself in vain trying to operate the whistle in the engine room and cursing with the little breath he had left.

The Captain ordered Giorgio "full ahead". The boilers were at maximum pressure and perhaps beyond, when the propeller began to spin with all possible speed, the hull gave a start like a runaway horse. The masts began to sway, breaking the radio antenna that was stretched between them. Giorgio looked with disappointment at the braided copper cable about thirty meters long on the deck and thought that every

month he would have to repair the antenna and send sailors to the masts to put it back in place.

With several miles of run up, the ship reached the entry at a speed well beyond maximum cruising speed that it could not sustain for long. The impact with the submerged bump made jolts and creaks in an impressive way but the old hull resisted well and began to rise up the river at a normal speed.

The Danube delta was not very attractive. Millions of flying insects of all kinds captained by ravenous mosquitoes forced the crew to close portholes and doors throughout the ship. There was not a lot of traffic on the river, only a few barges carrying various materials or loaded with fuel. Arriving in Galati after about ten miles from the delta, the ship anchored fairly close to the shore where there was a quay equipped for unloading the ore. In little more than a day, during which no one went ashore, the ship was completely unloaded and resumed navigation along the river.

After Galati the river turned south and, about twenty miles away, there was the port of Braila. It was a much larger port with an inlet protected from the current and docks equipped for loading poplar wood in one meter logs. As soon as they were moored, a port police patrol boarded for the usual paperwork and cargo contract checks but, unexpectedly, it was led by the harbor Commander personally. He was a Captain in his fifties, tall, martial, with a uniform whose sleeves bore his golden rank signs: *a round of bollard, two wide lasagna and a very wide lasagna*. In the Italian navy slang, the rank signs of a navy Captain were so called. Once the paperwork was done, he dismissed the team, sending it back to shore and asked the Old

Warrior Captain to visit the ship. He instructed Giorgio to accompany him, giving a plausible but false excuse, and retired to his cabin. During the visit Giorgio immediately noticed that the senior officer had a great desire to talk and make friends more than to see the ship, which was not really a marvel worthy of a visit. After taking a quick ride on deck and an even quicker ride in the engine room he asked to visit the radio station. And it was there that, sheltering from prying ears, he began to ask Giorgio if he had brought souvenirs from Italy as it was known that seamen brought with them nylon stockings, in Romania almost impossible to find at that time, to barter them for favors. of the local ladies. Giorgio immediately understood where he wanted to arrive and told him: "Sir, I didn't know anything about Romania, among other things this is my first trip, but I have some things with me and if you allow me I would like to give you them as a souvenir of your visit to our ship". While the very interested Captain remained in silent assent, Giorgio went to his cabin and returned shortly after with three packs of Gillette double blade razors, a can of Gillette shaving foam and a bottle of Arden sandal wood eau de toilette, all inserted in a nice cardboard handbag with the brand of a famous perfumery of Trieste. All things that could not be found and highly coveted in Romania at the time.

The Captain widened his eyes for a moment but immediately gave himself a demeanor thanking Giorgio for his kindness. Leaving the radio station, from the life boat deck, they saw the sailors under the orders of the boatswain who were discovering the Alfa Romeo to unload it on the dock. The vision of the car

enchanted the Captain, struck by such great Italian car and asked who was the owner. Giorgio replied that it belonged to him in partnership with the Chief Engineer and that if they managed to obtain permission they would have the intention of visiting the city and perhaps the surroundings.

Meanwhile, the Alfa Romeo had been unloaded on the dock and was surrounded by several onlookers who had come running to look at it closely, having noticed it hanging from the harness while the ship's crane lowered it to the dock. They went together and approached the car. Those curious at the sight of the Captain's golden signs on his sleeves withdrew in good order but reluctantly. Giorgio opened the doors to let him admire the black leather interior and his guest, after having carefully observed it from all sides, including the double custom made tail pipe, asked Giorgio if they could take a ride together. Giorgio agreed but specified that he still did not have permission from the authorities to leave the harbor. The Captain smiled: "Don't worry about anything if I'm with you."

While Giorgio started the engine, the captain rolled down the window and leaned his arm out of him exposing the half kilo of gold he had on his sleeve. He headed towards the exit of the harbor and just before the gate slowed down at a walking pace. A guard came out of the guard hut amazed and jumped to attention, saluting militarily. The Captain exchanged a few sentences in Romanian that sounded more like orders than conversations and they left the harbor. They rode around downtown to the amazement of passers by both for the car and for the half kilo of gold that pro-

truded from the window. They stopped in front of a police station and the Captain got out apologizing for a short stop. He returned after about ten minutes announcing to Giorgio: " Everything is OK, you can go wherever you want in Romania and if someone should stop you for any reason, tell him to call the harbor command. But you will see that no one will stop you." he smiled and added "I would ask you now to take me home". Giorgio thanked him heartily and told him that since they would return next month if he wanted something from Italy he could have provided him. The Captain thanked him and announced a list, which he would be given on board, of things to bring from Italy on the following trip.

When he reached his home, he pompously got out and, walking very slowly with a martial way, headed to the entrance of his home to the amazement and wonder of the passers by who had seen him get out of an "alien" vehicle. Every evening the red Alfa ran around downtown to the amazement of passers by. Parking the car had become really awkward. Onlookers gathered around the car with veneration, someone more informed whispered to the others "Alfa Romeo, Milano" and the voice also reached those behind who craned their necks to see it. Landing aliens with a flying saucer couldn't have attracted more attention.

Giorgio and the Chief Engineer went out for the most part together and frequented the Dunarea restaurant almost every evening, often with other ship officers who didn't mind a ride in the car. The restaurant must have been a very luxurious place in the past and this could be deduced from the red velvet curtains even if they were worn and torn in several places. The

gilded stuccoes on the coffered ceiling were partly crumbled like those on the walls. The tables with the white tablecloths showing some holes had padded chairs with armrests around them that had also seen better times. Despite the obvious air of decline, the waiters were adamant they were serving at the Hilton New York hotel. Thoughtful and dignified, they abounded in decorations and accessories for the table. Ice bucket, finely chiseled salt shakers, full set of glasses, silver looking cutlery and immaculate napkins with a few hidden holes in the folds.

On the first evening, after hearing the menu proudly enunciated by the waiter, not too extensive to tell the truth, they ordered baked sturgeon with various side dishes and red carp caviar as an appetizer. The waiter triumphantly suggested some Russian champagne which was accepted by all with curiosity. It was the first time that Giorgio had tasted red caviar and he ate an exaggerated quantity. The sturgeon was great and the Russian champagne went down with pleasure. The ice bucket was continually replenished by the waiters and in the end seven bottles were gone. Leaving the restaurant, they asked passers by if there was any place to end the evening. There were no night clubs in the city but there was a kind of pub not far away where night owls gathered. They finished the evening there in front of glasses of vodka. The least drunk of all was Giorgio and it was his job to bring the company on board not before having whistled a bit of tires around a fountain in the center of a square. Two policemen noticed his skill in controlled skidding around the fountain but turned their heads and walked

away. Giorgio thought that the golden sleeves of the harbor Captain had a good power on them.

The following evening, the same company decided to repeat the experience at the Dunarea as they had a good time overall. However, they arrived later around 10 pm. The menu of the day before had shrunk considerably. There was only fried rabbit brain, fried potatoes and cheese. Having no choice, they had everything brought and ordered the Russian champagne which would at least brighten the meal. No, it was finished they had drunk it all the night before. There was only beer bottles that the waiter carefully introduced into the ice bucket. The beer was tasteless and Giorgio noticed that at the other tables people put salt in to try to flavor it. So they did too but with poor results. They ran out of beer bottles and ordered more but the waiter advised that there were only four more left. Amazed, they asked for explanations and they were told that the management assigned a certain amount of alcohol and after that they could not ask for more.

They continued to frequent the restaurant every evening, but with a variant: upon arrival at around 7 pm, they ordered all the bottles of champagne and beer that they had supplied for the evening. A considerable number of overflowing ice buckets surrounded their table under the malevolent gaze of the few other patrons who had to sip mineral water while dining.

One evening Giorgio and the Chief Engineer were having dinner at the Dunarea, occupying the usual table surrounded by overflowing ice buckets, when two rather handsome women entered and sat down at a table not far from them. When the waiter approached the girls' table, it began a friendly conver-

sation that soon turned into a lively discussion. The girls seemed irritated and complained to the waiter about something. When the waiter left their table to go to the kitchen the Chief Engineer motioned him to come over and asked him what the discussion argument was. He replied that they had run out of Russian champagne and the young ladies were very upset. Giorgio took the ball and instructed the waiter to bring one of the spare bottles placed in the buckets to their table. The waiter did the order and poured the champagne not before having whispered something to one of the two, pointing to their table. The one who looked like a blonde doll, cute but exaggeratedly made up said in Italian: "Thank you gentlemen" To which the Chief Engineer went off in the air: "If you are alone you could sit here with us and help us to destroy our supply of champagne, for us would be a valuable help". The two looked at each other for a moment and decided that the only way for drinking champagne was that. The doll was called Luminiza and was a post office clerk while the brunette was called Mioara, she was an interpreter and spoke almost perfect Italian. During the dinner the conversation was pleasantly animated, ranging from Italian football teams to the natural beauties of Romania. The doll devoured the Chief Engineer with her eyes, attracted by his making energetic while the brunette was very composed and addressed Giorgio in an almost whispered voice. Around midnight, not before having investigated whether they were married or engaged, the Chief Engineer asked the doll: "Do you know a place to finish the evening, perhaps listening to music or dancing?" Unexpectedly answered the brunette: "I know a place just outside

town, in an old country house where some friends of mines have set up a kind of club. There is music and you can also dance but we will need a taxi" The Chief Engineer said with disdain: "Don't worry, we are equipped".

They paid the bill and despite the protests of the girls they also paid theirs, remaining amazed, as always, by the derisory bill. They left the venue and headed for the Alfa Romeo which was waiting for them slyly in the dark and, given the late hour, without the usual crowd of admirers. The girls did not show great surprise at the sight of the car. Either they were good actresses or they were used to dating sports car owners. Only a: "What a beautiful car" said more out of courtesy than anything else. Giorgio drove following the directions of the brunette and they came to a remote farmhouse in the country. It must have been a state farm in the past, then abandoned for some obscure reasons. The main body consisted of a two storey building with a sharp roof and was surrounded by other wooden buildings of evident farm use. He parked in the open space in front of the house next to several other cars.

The fleet of cars available in Romania at that time did not allow for great choices. The Dacia, an economy version of the Renault 14 was the most popular. The Trabant with the fiberboard body had a 500cc two stroke engine. A witty joke that circulated in all eastern countries said that the Trabant was the longest car in the world, if you also counted the trail of smoke it left behind. The two stroke engine should have been powered by a 2% oil mixture but some pranksters had spread the rumor that putting the mix-

ture at 5% the engine would have a much longer life even if it made a stinking smoke from the exhaust pipe. Thus was born the longest car in the world. Some eccentrics owned a Skoda that did not excel in anything, only the coupe version that managed to slightly exceed 65 mp/h was the dream of motorists.

Giorgio parked right next to a red Skoda coupe that timidly faded immediately next to the fire red of the Alfa. At the invitation of the brunette they headed for the building that looked like a barn. Loud rock music could be heard from outside and when they entered they were pleasantly surprised. The large room had been completely restored with polished wooden walls and a marble floor. Tables and chairs were arranged all around the walls and here and there a few sofas completed the furniture. At the back of the room there was a kind of stage where live bands probably also performed. That evening there was a console with two turntables and two huge loudspeakers that at that moment were shooting full force Lucille, shouted by Little Richard.

The owner was at the console and the brunette introduced them. He was a smart looking guy in his thirties who by profession was an entrepreneur and importer but probably without any respect for the property of others and for the tax law. Proudly he showed his new sound system. Giorgio immediately recognized a 500 watt McIntosh tube amplifier, which was, at those times, the best on the international market and alone, it must have been worth much more than the whole farm. "Had it from a friend of mines." he said, smiling in broken Italian. Giorgio thought that perhaps the unsuspecting friend was still looking for his ampli-

fier. The four of them sat down on a large sofa and a sort of waiter in blue jeans and a jacket with fringes on the sleeves, sporting Elvis style sideburns, brought a bottle of vodka and four glasses. After a couple of glasses the Chief Engineer and the doll threw themselves into the dances while Giorgio and the brunette remained on the sofa talking, both discovering that they were not too fond of wild dancing. At one point the disc jockey decided to give breath to the dancers and spread the first notes of Procol Harum's *a whiter shade of pale*. Giorgio stood up politely and holding out his hand to the brunette asked, with a discreet French pronunciation, smiling: "*Voulez-vous danser avec moi mademoiselle?*". "*Mais bien sûr monsieur,*" she replied cheerfully. She was also a French interpreter.

The vodka and the particularly sensual music convinced Giorgio to hug his lady a little more than normal and he felt that the brunette was resting her head on his shoulder with abandon. They danced a few more slow songs and the urge for sex took both. Back on the sofa they noticed that the doll and the director have disappeared, either exhausted by rock 'n roll or perhaps taken by a similar desire. Giorgio took courage and asked the brunette: "What do you think if we find a place to spend the night together?" He was surprised to hear: "The owner will definitely lend me a room if I ask him, he is my friend and he has many rooms..." with a half smile between shy and excited.

The brunette did not look like a prostitute at all and Giorgio later discovered that she had paid for the room to the smuggler-disc-jockey. During the night, she had let out all the fire that she had inside her and Gior-

gio, who on his part had been fasting for sex for a long time, behaved with enthusiasm as a passionate and expert lover despite his young age, to the great satisfaction of the brunette.

Only in the morning did he think of the Chief Engineer and the car. He hadn't warned him that he would stop for the night and maybe he had looked for him. His fears vanished immediately when he saw him, from the window, leaning against the car hugging the doll. They took the girls home and went back on board to sleep until the evening.

They met again in the evening at the Dunarea and the after dinner was the same. The girls were of pleasant conversation and delightful in bed. Almost every night everything happened the same way, sometimes with some variation. Between one embrace and the next, the director and the doll went to knock on Giorgio's door to be together all four to joke and to comment on the performances made. So they spent all the time the ship loaded the timber, as both were free during their stay in port.

After loading, the Old Warrior, heeled ten degrees on the starboard side due to the timber loaded also on the deck that raised the center of gravity of the ship, went down the river again without any problem at the river mouth as the current favored the exit in the open sea and did the same route headed to Monfalcone.

Giorgio had made friends with Captain Riccardi and a mutual sympathy and respect had arisen between the two. In the free hours they often met in the officers' lounge chatting while Barba did puzzles or played cards together. The Captain was a rather witty

person and prone to jokes. He told Giorgio that many years earlier, when he commanded a luxury cruise ship, he was asked by a passionate philatelic friend to bring him rare stamps from the countries he visited. At each port he bought the strangest stamps he could find and sent them by post to his friend, accompanying each shipment with a short and jolly poem he composed.

The postage stamps from Latvia and Lithuania were accompanied by the following:

*Here stamps from new countries, then
fuck me in the ass
if you already have them.*

While those of Andorra and San Marino:

*Have them from Andorra and San Marin,
the two republics of my big pin.
(intending his dick)*

Those from Japan were accompanied by:

*Rare stamps from China and Japon,
where geishas in great kimon
suck dicks in yellow lemon*

Going up the Adriatic sea, all ships follow a route close to the Yugoslav coast since the favorable current is directed northwards as opposed to the route along the Italian coast which uses the southward current. When the Old Warrior came across Zara, the Captain stood motionless on the starboard bridge wing with binoculars aimed at the city. Giorgio noticed that tears were streaming down the Captain's face as he silently stared at his beloved city he had had to leave immedi-

ately after the war. This sadness did not last long because the witty gentleman returned again. He told an anecdote about Zara. When he was young, there were only two cars in Zara. That number one license plate was from the mayor and that number two was from the pharmacist. "Maybe you can't believe but, one day, those two old fools collided with their cars." he said, giggling.

So they spent several months always making the same route Monfalcone, Durazzo, Galati, Braila and back to Monfalcone. One day while the ship was in port in Monfalcone, Mr. Calvetti, owner of the homonymous agency and owner of the ship, unexpectedly boarded. From the pompous and malevolent air with he got on board, Giorgio foresaw unpleasant problems coming. As soon as he was aboard he asked to gather the Captain and all officers in the officer's lounge. He placed himself in the center and began by publicly announcing that some of them had committed serious shortcomings during navigation.

Any officer if lacking in something should have been rebuked and, if necessary, also punished but exclusively in private, without undermining the officer's authority for the future. But in this case the future would not have been compromised in any way as the disembarkation of the guilty officers had already been decided.

The first to be accused was the Captain himself, with a sentence in the gall: "I had given orders to inform you, Mr. Captain, that the officers' meals were to be served in the room next door and not in here. Have you been informed? " The Captain, holding back his anger for that unpleasant scene replied calmly: "Yes,

Mr. Calvetti, I have been informed by the Chief Mate" There was a rumor that the Chief Mate was the owner's spy and that he would report to him every event that occurred on board during the navigation. "How come, Mr. Captain, you have allowed yourself to transgress my order?" He replied, raising his voice as if he were scolding a child. The Captain stood in front of him with his legs apart, his hands on his hips, overhanging him by at least one foot and looking him in the eyes from above, said in a calm but authoritative voice: "Mr. Calvetti, I inform you that I am not willing to consume meals in that little hole room nor do I allow my officers to do so. I assure you that meals will be served on my order, always here in the officers' lounge". Calvetti turned pale and almost trembling with rage replied in an even louder voice that had become almost shrill: "Captain, I make you disembark from my ship for having disobeyed my orders". The Captain always in the same position with a thunderous voice that was heard by all the crew who was eavesdropping from the deck: "Mr. Calvetti you can make all decisions you want but now get off MY ship immediately". He was forced to go down because on board the highest authority was the Captain and above him only God. Nobody could oppose this order not even the owner.

The second accused should have been Giorgio who was spared public punishment thanks to the forced exit of the owner. He too received, the next day, the disembarkation letter motivated by a failure made during the first trip. Giorgio had received the phonogram from Ancona radio and had followed the evolution of the bad weather. When the weather had slightly

improved, the Captain decided to continue on the established route. In the meantime, the agency was aware of the bad weather but not of the improvement and had sent a second phonogram via Crotone radio, which Giorgio did not receive as he was concentrated on the messages in Morse, in which they ordered to pass through the Corinth channel to avoid the bad weather. The mistake of Giorgio had not produced any damage but rather had saved the fee for passing the channel which was quite high. In reality, the shipowner no longer needed the radio operator as he had obtained a long-term chartering contract for coastal trips in the Adriatic for which, by law, the radiotelephone could be used by the Captain himself with a considerable saving of an officer's salary.

The Captain disembarked with dignity two days later, greeting all the crew and thanking them for their cooperation. He shook Giorgio's hand with sympathy: "It was nice to work with you, Mr. Relli". "Thank you Captain, for me too" replied Giorgio with a little sadness. They both knew they would never see each other again. Giorgio left the ship the following day. Most sorry of all was the Chief Engineer who lost a friend and companion on car and sexual raids. The Alfa remained on board even though the humidity and the brackish air after a long time at sea had seriously damaged the body. Perhaps the Chief Engineer could have used it again but not for long, but in Italy it could not collect the admiration received in Romania.

Giorgio returned to Trieste and after a couple of days of vacation spent with old friends in the cafes of

the Acquedotto⁴ telling them his sea adventures, he set out in search of another embarkation. He felt himself much secure now and was no longer afraid of not being up to the task. A couple of weeks passed during which he made numerous phone calls to the Trieste shipping agencies without obtaining any positive feedbacks. He then decided to go to Genoa to continue the search in person. He thought that in the busiest Italian port he would have a better chance.

He packed his bags and one morning boarded the Trieste-Genoa express train. In Genoa he took up residence in a hotel, near the Principe railway station, which was decent, clean and cheap enough to allow a long stay. During the day he visited the many shipping agencies that recruited personnel for foreign-flagged ships. In the evening, on the other hand, he wandered around the old port, not far from the hotel, in front of which there were numerous clubs frequented mainly by seafarers.

He chose a small bar and after a few days he made friends with the regulars who were parked every evening on the tables of the narrow and long room with a counter that took its entire length and overlooked by numerous American-style stools. Some were seafarers waiting for boarding like him but most were Genoese who spent their evenings discussing mainly politics. In the group they were all politically oriented to the right with some Nazis among them as well. This surprised Giorgio that he did not expect to find a den of fascists in the "red" Genoa of those

4 Acquedotto: it is so called the 20th September Boulevard, in Trieste downtown, plenty of traditional mittel-european styled cafes and very popular with Trieste inhabitants.

years. Not many years earlier, in the port, riots had broken out due to the birth of Tambroni⁵ government which had the external support of the MSI⁶. The communist dockers in revolt tried to slaughter the policemen, sent to quell the riots, with their hooks used to load the sacks and someone even succeeded.

Despite the length of the counter, the service was ensured by a caring and friendly girl who was sometimes flanked at rush hour by her mother, a happily overweighted woman in her fifties. The regulars had almost adopted the two women and in case of fights between drunken sailors, not uncommon after a certain hour, they protected them and in practice ensured public order in the place. Very late one evening, Giorgio was amused at one of their public order interventions. Two uniformed American Navy sailors stood at the counter and, clearly drunk, began to quarrel violently. When one of the two broke a bottle and, holding it by the neck, approached the other in a threatening manner, one of the group who was monitoring the scene stood up. He was a Genoese giant of nearly two meters with a swastika tattooed on his powerful bicep held uncovered by the rolled up sleeve of his military-colored T-shirt. He squeezed from behind, in his huge hand, the neck of the one with the bottle and as he passed he also took the neck of the other, heading towards the exit with the two almost raised off the ground. He left them pushing them to the ground a few meters from the entrance of the bar, barking in English: "You don't dare to get back inside" and went

5 Tambroni was an Italian politician.

6 MSI: Movimento Sociale Italiano, extreme right Italian party from 1948 to 1988 afterward turned to National Alliance.

back into the bar singing *Die Fahne hoch*, the Nazi anthem par excellence. A few minutes later two gigantic MPs armed with truncheons, got out of a jeep with a flashing light and siren and loaded the two sailors, as if they were parcels, into the back of the jeep and set off at full speed. The lady at the bar felt safe with that patrons so protective and she often offered drinks to the whole company who often stayed to chat and drink even after closing time.

After about a week of this nightlife, Giorgio found a message at the hotel reception. The Bertuzzi agency wanted to be called back for urgent boarding. Giorgio immediately called back and they made an appointment for the next day. The following day he reached the office by cab without the excitement of the previous time, but still excited by the speed with which he had found a new boarding and thus finally leaving Genoa and the nightlife of the port that he had begun to get tired of. Also in this case, the agent was in partnership with the shipping company, the Monrovia Shipping Company, which was based in Bern, Switzerland and owned three ships: the Bayhorse, the Sorrelhorse and the Whitehorse, all flying the Panamanian flag. They were three sister ships of Liberty class powered by a traditional triple expansion steam engine powered by four heavy oil boilers.

US built Liberty class cargo ships were the most widely used naval cargo units during World War II. They represented a standard cargo ship model, which thanks to the ease and speed of construction could be built in thousands of units and used in the convoys that supplied US troops and allied countries in Europe. They were destined to make only one voyage, foresee-

ing the merciless hunt that the German submarines that patrolled the Atlantic gave them. They were armed merchant ships 140 yards long and 18 wide, with a 4.9" artillery position in the stern, another installed in the bow and eight anti aircraft machine guns distributed on both sides. Many of them survived the war and were bought by several shipping companies who modified and reinforced them appropriately.

The weak point of the hull was given by the welded sheets since the rapidity of construction was privileged over solidity. In 49 days one was built ready to take to the sea and had 46 kilometers of welds on the hull. With extreme sea conditions, however, there was a risk that the hull would break in two. The three Liberty of the Monrovia had been purchased not many years earlier, from an English owner, already reinforced with nailed sheet belts along the entire length of the hull. After these modifications they had become decidedly safer and had an empty displacement of about 7,000 tons and a maximum capacity of 10,000.

Giorgio was assigned to the Bayhorse which was to arrive at the port of Augusta⁷ the following week so he would have to reach Sicily by train and wait for the ship to arrive. At the agency he was introduced to two other Italian seafarers who had to embark on the same ship. A Second Assistant Engineer and a sailor. They then organized among themselves to leave together as the agency had already prepared train tickets and booked the hotel in Augusta for all three. The journey was interminable for the many kilometers to cover and, in addition, for the waiting time for the ferry boat

7 Augusta: Port of the eastern Sicily

to cross Messina's strait. They arrived in the late afternoon at the hotel which fortunately was a few steps from the railway station. It was not a proper hotel but rather a modest family-run guesthouse that seemed clean and often welcomed seafarers waiting for their ships. They dined at a nearby pizza house and took a stroll around town. Giorgio had never been to Sicily and was looking around rather amazed in the narrow and semi-dark streets of the center, with the ropes of clothes hanging between house and house like a large bunting of underwear and shirts left to dry in the hot night.

They saw the sign of a bar in the distance and headed for it. The sailor proposed a snifter and they entered. They ordered three Vecchia Romagna brandy and the attentive bartender with a "Immediately gentlemen" placed three saucers with three coffee cups on the counter. Giorgio dared to repeat: "Excuse me but we would like three Vecchia Romagna brandy, not coffee". "Sure sir" answered the bartender and took a bottle from under the counter and poured three generous doses of brandy into the cups. Seeing the amazed gaze of the three he specified with a smile of complicity: "You know, we don't have a license for spirits".

The next morning Giorgio got up quite late, so he had nothing to do, and entered the bathroom of his room that the owner had boasted upon their arrival as one of the beautiful rooms with private bathroom. He immediately noticed the squat toilet in front of a shower with a floor drain that aimed at the toilet. Crouching on the squat, he noticed that next to him there was an elegant office basket for waste paper. After using the toilet paper, as usual, he took a shower

and went down to have breakfast. He found the other two at the table who were gorging themselves on typical Sicilian sweets and joined them. The owner joined them at the table with three coffees and turned to everyone almost whispering: "Gentlemen, sorry but you have to know that in this area the toilet drains are faulty and easily obstructed, so please use the basket and do not throw the paper toilet in the toilet". Giorgio ardently hoped that the ship would arrive before the attack of the *Klebsiella Pneumoniae*⁸. Fortunately the Bayhorse arrived two days later, but before the dangerous pathogenic bacterium and remained at anchor in the harbor. It was immediately joined by some barges that supplied oil and fresh water. Giorgio noticed that it was much larger than the Old Warrior with its red and black chimney that stood about fifty feet from the water and, seen from a distance, made a good impression. It must have been recently repainted and there were no traces of rust on the emerged part. Later he discovered that during the long ocean crossings the crew was ordered to continuously paint the ship even overboard. By the time they got to the stern, the bow was already semi-rusted so they started over. The work was so mechanical and repetitive that sailors did it automatically without thinking too much about it. It was said that if one had remained standing leaning against a bulkhead before or after the painter sailor would have covered him with paint without noticing.

A motor boat brought them on board and when they reached the deck the sailor was entrusted to the boatswain, the Second Assistant Engineer introduced

⁸ *Klebsiella Pneumoniae*: very dangerous pathogenic bacterium sometimes present in human feces

himself to the Chief Engineer and Giorgio to the Captain. The Bayhorse crew consisted of 28 men. The Captain and officers were all Italians and almost all Ligurians. The non commissioned officers, the steward and the cook were also Italian. The sailors, on the other hand, were of different nationalities: Yugoslavs, Moroccans, South Americans and a couple of Italians.

The Captain, a Genoese who had commanded cruise ships for most of his career, had embarked, almost seventy, to supplement his pension money. Of short stature, stocky and massive, he sported a thick white curly hair and was the only one on board to wear the jacket of the uniform with the rank signs of Captain while all the other officers wore only the white cap and a khaki uniform without signs. He was an avid hunter and had brought on board two 12-gauge long-barreled duck shotguns, a side-by-side and an over-and-under, with a substantial supply of ammunition. When asked why he had his rifles on board, the sneering answer was always the same: "I like tender game" Alluding to both game and young maidens. Not even to do so on purpose, Brazil was the destination of the Bayhorse, and as if that were not enough, to load logs in the heart of the Amazon going up the Amazon River. Perfect for the Captain. Giorgio, hearing the news, smiled to himself and thought he would see some funnies ones.

The captain summoned Giorgio to his cabin which was starboard immediately behind the bridge while the radio station was on the same level to the left and the radio operator's cabin adjacent to the radio station. "Mr. Relli" he began with a cordial but decisive tone that denoted his habit of giving orders to his

officers, without weighing his rank, in order to obtain the maximum collaboration. "The shipowner has asked us to report our position by radio at 1200 every day possibly via Bern radio, fuck he is a Genoese⁹ that tries to save even the crumbs. Do you think you could?"

It must be said that sending a telegram by means of a support station other than the destination one has a slightly higher cost. "Captain, Bern radio is a weak station that emits very weak signals and it will be very difficult to communicate directly with them. Even in the Mediterranean I can only do it at certain hours in the evening, in the ocean it will be almost impossible. The telegrams of the position I can only send them via Roma radio and I'm sure I can do it every day on 19 Mhz". "Even if you spend some more money ... don't worry about. Another thing, they will let us have the chartering contract when refueling in Dakar. However, they also warned me that there are riots and shooting in town, so it is not sure if they will be able to get us the contract. In that case they will send it on by radio, and you will have a hard work" he said smiling. "There will be no problems Captain" he replied and took his leave, shaking the hand that the Captain, satisfied with the answer, held out.

On the second day of navigation, Giorgio tried to communicate with Bern radio and in the afternoon he managed to send the telegram with the position of the ship. The signal was very weak and certainly it was even weaker for the operator from Bern, so much so that he asked Giorgio to repeat one word every two.

9 People from Genoa are supposed to be very stingy like Scotsmen.

He thought, chuckling to himself, that he could hardly repeat that cleverness.

Beyond the Strait of Gibraltar, the Bayhorse veered sharply left to south, skirting the African coast about thirty miles away. The sun made the sheets of the deck hot and the cabins were ovens even with all the portholes wide open. A few seagulls rested on the masts and the hull pitched gently across the light swell sea. Giorgio and the Second Mate were on the bearing compass bridge, the highest on the ship, just below the chimney, playing chess shirtless in swim shorts and the uniform cap on their heads. Without that, their heads would have become pressure cookers that might have improved their way of playing chess but with unpleasant side effects. Neither was much of a fan of that game but it was a great pastime during the long hours off duty. On the bearing compass bridge, the sun beat down with hammer blows but the sea breeze mitigated the unpleasant effects, a little.

A mutual sympathy was established despite the age difference. The second was well over in his sixties but was a dynamic guy with a medium height build, slender and snappy. He was retired and was sailing to round his pension money. He originally was from La Spezia, and spoke mainly in Ligurian dialect with its funny typical chanting. In a short time Giorgio became familiar with that dialect which he found amusing for the chanting it had and that he later discovered to be the same as that of the Portuguese spoken in Brazil.

About fifty miles before Dakar he sent the position via Rome radio and immediately afterwards received a telegram from the shipowner who ordered to fund in the harbor in Dakar for problems of public or-

der in the city. Refueling would take place as soon as possible and the contract would be sent by radio. He immediately informed the Captain who, shaking his head, muttered: "These people have never peace."

The Bayhorse anchored in the harbor and remained waiting. It was reached after a few hours by a harbor police boat for the usual checks. The non-commissioned officer in charge of the patrol informed the Captain that they could not dock but that they could refuel in the harbor. Not even the support agent could get on board and also warned that there was an absolute ban on communicating by radio. The radio station had to remain off and in fact they had to seal it for safety reasons. This last obligation was overlooked thanks to a generous series of ten-dollar bills, but the big problem of the chartering contract that was to arrive by radio remained. In the evening, shots and the noise of riots going on in the city, were heard. After consulting the Captain, around two a.m., when he hoped that the police and the rioters tired of the skirmishes had stopped the quarrels and the police had loosened the controls also for radio listening, Giorgio turned on the shortwave transmitter by adjusting it to the frequency where he heard the weak signal from Bern radio and briefly flipped their call-sign HEB, once on the key, hoping for luck which usually helps the bold, but not always. Absolute silence. He repeated the call at five minute intervals, hoping for the deep sleep of the police radio operators assigned to listen. After about twenty attempts there was a very weak signal of response. He answered with his HOGH call-sign and, using the Q code that shortened the transmission, asked if there were any telegrams for them. To

the affirmative answer, the operator told him that he had a long text for him and Giorgio dared, with as short a communication as possible, to warn him of the situation and asked that, during the transmission, at his signal of only two points as an interruption, it be repeated the last word transmitted. The Morse signal of a ship at anchor, due to the power of the short wave transmitter, created interference in all radio receivers for a wide range but, evidently, no one listened to the radio at that time. The text consisted of eleven pages transcribed by hand by Giorgio in capital letters with very small characters. After a few hundred interruptions and consequent repetitions, the contract was received together with the final good luck of the operator from Bern, very kind and patient. It was six in the morning when Giorgio, exhausted, handed the document to the captain and went to his cabin to sleep.

He woke up around two p.m. as the ship was being refueled by a small tanker. All sleepy he went out onto the awning next to his cabin with his eyes half closed from the beating sun that advised him to return to the cabin. Instead, he went up to the bridge and the Captain, as he saw him, addressed him with a smile: "Good morning, Mr. Relli, good job tonight. You arrived just in time, we are about to set sail as soon as we have finished refueling".

One day the captain gave him his third assignment by handing him the keys of the First Aid room. To the Giorgio's " Why? " he replied amazed : "Listen, you don't have a lot to do all day apart from some particular situation as happened in Dakar. Not having a doctor on board, we need someone to take care of the First Aid room. You know that is only used for plas-

ters, purges and, sometimes, talcum powder for public louses. For the rest, God has to take care of us. You will surely be able to do a great job " he said with a chuckle and Giorgio nodded resignedly. Thus it was that, in spite of him, he was forcibly "graduated" as a ship's doctor.

The ocean crossing was peaceful, calm sea, barely an occasional breeze, the sun was beating down hard and the endless chess matches continued. One day, just before noon, when they had left Cabo Verde for several hundred miles, and they were right in the middle of the ocean, a small flock of about twenty turtledoves stopped to rest scattered a little everywhere on the highest bridges and on the masts. They were exhausted from the long crossing from who knows where and perhaps they had lost orientation. To get away from something that frightened them they did not fly away but just scurried away. When the Captain saw one, he ran into the cabin to load a rifle and ran out as if he were facing a fierce enemy. Most of the turtledoves had landed on the bearing compass bridge, out of sight of the hunter. He aimed at the one he saw perched on the foremast and fired, missing it. Despite it fatigue, the dove managed to fly away and landed next to her companions on the bearing compass bridge. While the Captain with still one shot in the barrel and the cartridge belt over his shoulder was wandering around the deck looking upwards, Giorgio and the Second Mate were climbing up to play chess and when they reached the top they saw the frightened turtledoves that scampered but that did not have the force to fly away. The idea came to both of them at the same time. At the bow of the chimney there was a per-

forated wooden platform, about thirty centimeters high, on which the bearing compass was placed. The platform was closed laterally by removable wooden grates. It looked like a coop and was the perfect hiding place for the turtledoves. While the second mate, emitting sounds that are usually good for hens, after removing one of the side grates, tried to persuade the turtledoves to take refuge inside, even if they did not seem very convinced that it was a good idea, Giorgio ran down to his cabin and returned with a packet of biscuits. Crumbling them, he made a kind of eating trail up to the side opening and threw the rest of the crumbled biscuits into it. Hunger took over fear and in a few minutes all turtledoves entered. Giorgio closed the grate and they began to play chess. They heard still a couple of shots but no casualties. Evidently, with age, the old sea dog's aim had deteriorated. Convinced that they had all flown away, the Captain laid down his weapons and with disappointment retired to his cabin. In the following days Giorgio and the second took care to supply the unfortunate birds with food and water until, one day, one of the turtledoves found the courage to go out and after a few strolls it took off. A few seconds later all the others followed her, moving away behind stern towards Africa.

After a quiet crossing with calm sea and sun at peak, when arrived about 100 miles from the Brazilian coast Giorgio called Macapà Radio to inform them that they were arriving with ETA¹⁰ scheduled for the following day at 1000 at the entrance channel of the river and that they were headed to Manaus. The station replied almost immediately by communicating the

10 ETA: Estimated Time of Arrival

obligation to bottom the anchors in the expected waiting area and warning that there may be delays for the pilot's boarding. Giorgio immediately informed the Captain that he nodded with a " Oh fuck! ".

The next day, around the scheduled time, the Bayhorse stopped the engine and turned to put the bow to the wind. While the captain with the mouth-piece warned the Engineer on guard that they were about to drop the anchor, Giorgio from the bridge gave the order "slow astern" and at the bow the boatswain gave the order to release the chain attached to the starboard anchor which ended at sea with a thud and an impressive rattle. Backing up for a hundred meters the ship stopped after having spun four lengths of chain in order to ensure a safe anchorage.

Two days passed of waiting during which Giorgio, every day, communicated their position of anchorage by means of Rome radio. On the third day, perhaps thanks to some animated conversation that took place between the shipowner, who was angry about the ship-stop-which-costs-so-many-dollars and the local port authorities, a boat came up with the pilot who immediately boarded with the agility of a monkey. He was clearly a Brazilian native with typical features, dark skin and rather long, smooth and black hair. He spoke English with the Brazilian chant that made Giorgio smile a little.

The Bayhorse entered the Amazon inlet channel with no problems as the seabed was regularly dredged. The navigation along the river was smooth even if against the current. The half speed machine moved the ship safely along the practically deserted river. Occasionally some fishing boats passed in the distance but

because of the width, it seemed to sail in a huge lake rather than on a river. At certain points near the delta, the channel could measure nearly 200 miles between the riversides. During the trip the pilot informed the Captain that he would descend at Belem, which was about 270 miles from the mouth and the ship would have to continue along the river to Manaus, for about 800 miles after Belem. There, another pilot would get on and take them to the loading point.

They arrived in Belem two days later and the pilot waved goodbye and jumped onto the boat that had flanked the Bayhorse without slowing it down. The navigation continued for almost a week during which Giorgio did not know how to communicate with Manaus to warn the pilot but he realized that no notice was necessary. Across Manaus, they were flanked by another boat that started at the same speed as the Bayhorse to allow the new pilot to climb up the rope ladder, which he did as a boarding buccaneer. He too was a native who looked like the twin of the other pilot and spoke English with the same chant. He immediately informed the Captain that the loading point was about 50 miles away in a tributary of the Amazon where the current was stronger than in the main branch of the river. He also suggested that, due to the muddy riverbed with poor grip, it would be better to bottom both anchors and spin a lot of chain. Towards sunset they arrived at the expected point where an old wooden pier, protected by half-destroyed truck tires that, hung with ropes, served as fenders, stretched along the river bank for a hundred meters. The Bayhorse, following the pilot's instructions, overtook the pier and bottomed first the starboard anchor and then

the port one, letting the chains spin until it positioned itself on the side of the pier at a distance of about twenty meters from it, where the water was still deep. An anchorage so close to the ground would have been unthinkable in other conditions but the absence of wind due to the dense and high vegetation that looked like a green wall and the sustained current of the river made it possible and safe. At the end of the maneuver the pilot said goodbye and went ashore with a kind of canoe that had come to take him. A few minutes later, the loading agent came out of the only wooden shack on the pier who, with another canoe, boarded the ship and after a brief conversation with the captain, was invited to dinner on board. He was a middle-aged Portuguese who wore a crumpled white linen suit with a light, wide-brimmed hat on his head. Of less than average height, he had a belly so prominent that the buttons of his shirt cursed in an effort to contain it. He ate greedily next to the Chief Engineer, in front of the Captain and explained the local situation in a shrill voice in English with the usual chant. That was the most upstream point where logs were loaded that came floating on the river. He had taken steps to hire teams of natives who would load the logs, but someone from the crew was needed to maneuver the cranes from board to lift the logs and load them. Other teams of natives would have provided for the stowage. At the end of dinner, the conversation continued, the agent pulled his pipe from one of the deformed pockets of his jacket and almost everyone else lit cigarettes. The steward dispensed some old Captain's-reserve Scotch whiskey, to which George preferred bourbon. Towards the end of the evening, all the topics of conversation

exhausted, the agent asked the Captain if he had a cabin available to avoid sleeping in the hut waiting for the boat that would take him back to Manaus the following day. In fact, there was an unused cabin on the life boat bridge and the captain told the steward to prepare it for the guest. Shortly after, the agent withdrew and Giorgio began walking on deck looking towards the shore.

In the moonlight, a thick vegetation could be distinguished that reached the river and at moments one could hear the cry of some nocturnal bird in full activity, probably hunting for food. In the darkness among the dense vegetation life throbbed and Giorgio did not dare to imagine what kind of animals roamed among the thick foliage. The extremely humid heat of the day was very annoying but was dropping slightly with the night. The ship's lights attracted millions of insects of all kinds, flying and not, and Giorgio noticed a huge spider on the main mast that was climbing in pursuit of some prey. Back in his cabin, he took care to close the two portholes before going to bed in his bunk. Better the heat than hosts of that type. He thought that the next day he would try to protect the portholes with sturdy mosquito nets to be able to leave them open day and night.

The following morning, while having breakfast in the officers lounge, he heard the voice of the agent giving orders in Portuguese to a group of about twenty natives lined up on deck, wearing only a sash of white cotton passed around the waist and between the legs that barely covered their private parts. They were of all ages, some with geometric symbols painted on their faces and bodies while others wore ornamental

scars that must have taken a lot of pain in their execution. They listened very carefully like diligent school-children on the first day of school.

In practice the loading was organized in a rather ingenious way and also fairly effective, considering the lack of adequate equipment. A hundred meters to the bow of the ship and, at a similar distance, to the stern, two live goats were tied, blocked with ropes, in the shallow water of the river near the bank. At a pre-determined time, a log was left to the current every 10 minutes from a lateral tributary a few miles upstream, astride two natives armed with paddles.

They were huge trunks coming from trees up to 150 feet high, about 30 feet long and with a diameter ranging between 3 and 5 feet. Downstream of the first goat tied into the water, several yards away, the gathering teams were positioned, each consisting of two men armed with hooks. Upon arrival of the trunk, the two natives who rode it would direct it towards the teams who would push it between the pier and the ship where other natives immersed in the water would hook it to a kind of pincer fork which was then hoisted to board from the ship's crane. Once on board the log was lowered into the hold.

When the first log arrived, other natives also arrived both to hook the logs and prevent them from being lost along the river, and to help with the stowage given the considerable weight of each log. In the end, about a hundred men worked on it. Giorgio from the life boat bridge, watched the loading operations with curiosity and amazement since the purpose of the goats half immersed in the river was not clear to him. Another fact caught his attention. Very frequently,

men took turns out of the water and arranged the single cloth that wrapped them, squeezing it as much as possible between their legs. The two facts intrigued him and convinced him, the next day, when the agent returned, to ask for the purpose.

The agent, smiling, explained to him that the goats were used to signal the presence of piranhas. On the riverside in front of each goat was sitting a little boy who, as soon as he saw the water foaming red with the goat's blood, would have given the alarm screaming, thus giving the men in the water time to get out. The fact of the arrangement of the costume, made him smile even more clearly before replying: "You should know that in the river there is, fortunately rarely, a microscopic fish that is even more dangerous than piranhas, here they call it *maricon fish*¹¹. It swims in almost invisible shoals and penetrates any orifice of the human body. In the case of a man in the water, it inserts himself into the anal orifice and goes up it by eating the tissues he encounters along the way. It causes almost always fatal bleeding, also due to the absence of medical assistance in these areas." Giorgio amazed thanked the agent for the exhaustive explanations and decided within himself, shivering, that he would never bathe in that river. He also thought of those poor natives who risked their lives for a reward that was certainly less than modest.

The indigenous teams worked incessantly from dawn to dusk with only a short break of half an hour at noon. They sat on the shore outside the water to eat some fruits they had brought with baskets.

11 Maricon: in Brazilian and in Spanish means homosexual.

On the second day the Captain, seeing them eat, ordered to cook a big pot of rice with fish and had it distributed to everyone. They were primitive but good-natured people, extremely polite and respectful. Receiving the unexpected food, they thanked an infinite number of times in a way that even created embarrassment in those who offered it. One of them always went to feed the two boys guarding the goats. The crew who at first, when they saw them get on board, were a bit frightened, had to change their minds for the mild and cordial character of this people and many sailors during the breaks tried to make friends and exchanged gifts to the great satisfaction of both sides. The sailors' razor blades were a resounding success among the natives while the sailors greatly appreciated the bracelets and necklaces made by the natives with stones and pieces of bone. A sailor, once, borrowed from an elder indigenous, who seemed the boss and did not work but only watched (and ate most of all), a feather headdress with which he improvised a tribal dance among the laughter of all and especially of the natives.

The Bayhorse remained anchored on the river for two weeks. When the holds were completely filled with logs and the whole deck to a height of over ten feet, it sailed the anchors, without the pilot who had never been seen, and turned all starboard to go back down the tributary and resume the Rio of Amazons. All the natives who had worked together with all the inhabitants of their village lined up on the shore attended the departure, greeting with songs and dances. Before leaving, the cook secretly from the Captain, who even knowing it would certainly not have ob-

jected, had unloaded two 100 lbs bags of rice. Much later it was discovered that this generosity was due to the fact that one night, without anyone noticing it, the cook had managed to obtain the favors of a kind and hospitable damsel from the village.

The Bayhorse slowly descended the river with the favor of the current and a great saving of oil that would have delighted the Genoese shipowner. Reaching the mouth he veered north-east to cross the Atlantic Ocean and reach Dakar to refuel. The crossing was quiet, as often happens in the South Atlantic, with little rough sea and the usual sun that accentuated Giorgio's tan and that of his opponent at checkered.

As soon as the ship was moored at the supply dock in Dakar, they were warned by the support agency that they had to wait a couple of days for refueling. The riots had ceased but other problems had arisen which were not explained. The unexpected led Giorgio to get off the ship and take a look around the city. In the evening, he, together with the Second Mate and the cook went to dinner in a restaurant in the center of Dakar. The sea food was obviously very fresh accompanied by a pleasant French white wine cooled to the right point. After dinner they asked a cab driver to take them some where nice to finish the evening. The cab driver assured them that the Playboy club was the best place in town. Luxurious, trendy and full of gorgeous girls. Evidently he was paid by the club to drive foreigners there. The rather large venue was located on the first floor of a tall modern building in the heart of the city. In fact it was a peculiar place. Walls and floor were covered with stainless steel sheets with no visible joints and the ceiling was low, black and shiny. On

the low tables placed in front of the sofas and arm-chairs there were psychedelic lamps, fashionable in those years, formed by an illuminated ampule in which, with the warmth of the lamp, a colored substance that constantly changed shape was circling.

There was a faint sweet smell in the air, probably due to some client's marijuana smokes. There were very few customers and a group of black girls in miniskirts, were unemployed and perched on the sofas. When a waiter approached and suggested a bottle of champagne, claiming it as a French original, the three asked for two Scotch whiskeys and a bourbon for Giorgio. Background music was trying to create a voluptuous atmosphere but was unable to. In the center of the club there was a small steel floor for dancing, with the famous Playboy bunny painted in pink on the floor. Shortly thereafter, three of the unemployed girls arrived and sat silently beside each of the three. Giorgio examined the one close to him, it wasn't bad but in that context he didn't really like her. "Do you want to sleep with me? " He said to her ear. The girl amazed by the direct approach replied: "I can't now, but if you offer me a glass of champagne maybe later..." Giorgio, smiling very politely, replied: "Oh I'm sorry but I only drink bourbon, if you want I can order one for you also" and called the waiter, who had witnessed the whole scene, and ordered two bourbon. On his return the waiter took care to put a glass in front of the girl containing a liquid that was slightly lighter than Giorgio's one. Before the girl had time to pick up her glass, Giorgio took it and tasted the contents. It was light and sweet tea. He called the waiter back and rudely told him to take away the rubbish and

bring some real bourbon while the poor girl was shocked. The bartender saw the scene and foreseeing troubles, motioned to a huge black man in a tuxedo who went to ask Giorgio, defiantly, if there was any problem. The cook, who was groping heavily the girl beside him with her breasts half out, stopped for a moment and took a short barreled Smith & Wesson 38 special, out of his jacket pocket and, looking the black man in the face, placed it on the table. Not happy yet, from the other pocket he took out a handful of bullets and placed them next to the gun. The girls disappeared immediately and so did the black man after questioning the bartender who nodded. They were left alone in the room and after draining a couple more glasses they got up to leave. The cook turned to the bartender for the check. He fumbled with a calculator and fired a disproportionate amount. The cook, still determined to cause troubles, rattled the bullets he had in his pocket and asked: " Êtes-vous vraiment sûr?¹² ", " Excusez-moi monsieur, j'avais tort ¹³" the bartender apologized and asked for a much more reasonable amount which was paid instantly. They left the club laughing and returned aboard by a cab. Giorgio did not know that the cook was armed but he thought it was a good idea and promised himself to buy a similar weapon to keep in his pocket.

The next day, the second day of waiting, Giorgio and the second decided to fish just to do something different from chess. They found on board an instrument that in Trieste is called *togna*, a simple block of cork wrapped in nylon line with a pair of hooks at the

12 "Are you really sure?"

13 "So sorry Sir, I was wrong."

end. They chose a breakwater pier and sat on the rocks after throwing the hook into the sea as far as possible. While they were chatting, the Second Mate holding the line in his hand felt a jerk and stood up. The continuous tugs indicated that a prey was hooked. He retrieved all the line and a large fish appeared that could weigh over 5 lbs, with extraordinary colors. The back was a beautiful metallic brown sprinkled with dots of deep blue. Neither had ever seen such a fish. When it was on the dock with the hook still in its mouth and struggling, Giorgio started to grab him to detach the hook but suddenly its dorsal fin opened. It was a huge fan as sharp as a razor that opened the palm of his hand to its full width making it bleed profusely. Giorgio cursed and compressed the wound with a handkerchief while the Second Mate hit the fish in the head and placed it in a plastic bag. Back on board the Second Mate went to the kitchen to deliver the fish to the cook while Giorgio got the First Aid room to medicate his wound.

Those who had supplied the First Aid room had foreseen any operation, with the exception perhaps of heart transplants. There were medicines of all kinds including various antibiotics, anesthetics, antipyretics and an impressive array of surgical instruments, many of which had never been seen before and were of unknown use to him. There were also a series of popular and practical medicine books that would surely be useful in case of need. Looking closely at the wound, he saw that it was quite deep and would need a suture. Without practice and with only one hand, he considered the operation to be of dubious success and on the other hand he did not consider it as a good idea to ask

someone else for help. He opted for a home solution. After applying an antibiotic powder and covering the wound with a large gauze, he applied wooden splints to keep his hand straight and wrapped everything with a tight band-aid in order to stop the bleeding and immobilize everything. Fortunately, it was his left hand and it wouldn't compromise his work.

They left Dakar the next day after refueling with fuel oil and fresh water and headed for Gibraltar. After crossing the strait they skirted the south coast of Spain and headed north-east along the French coast. Further on was the terrible Gulf of Lion which was the most dangerous point in the Mediterranean. No ship, even if large, dared to cross it but sailed along the coast line. Sudden storms erupted offshore, so violent they were worthy of the most treacherous of oceans. After passing the gulf and beyond the Blue Coast they arrived in Genoa.

The day after arrival, the unloading operations began on very big trucks because of the length of the logs. Some trucks were able to carry only one log and others never more than four, due to weight and size. The cargo had arrived in perfect condition and the Chief Mate who was in charge of the loading had managed to stow more logs than expected, earning a reward from the company that had purchased the logs. They gave him a log free, which he sold almost immediately for one million and two hundred thousand lire. Comparing it to the Captain's salary, which was about five hundred thousand lire, and to that of Giorgio that was three hundred and fifty thousand, the real value of one of those logs was very high, considering that it had been sold quickly and under-priced. After unload-

ing, the ship remained in port for a few days for minor repairs and then had to enter the shipyard in La Spezia for more important repairs and maintenance of the hull.

Giorgio and the Second Mate were watching a sailor replacing a lamp on the main mast when the Second said: "Do you know that I have decided to disembark when we arrive in La Spezia? " continuing to stare straight ahead. " What? Are you kidding, right? " Giorgio burst out " No I'm serious. Yesterday I phoned home and announced my arrival. My wife is not well and it seems serious. I've been a gypsy at sea for too many years and it's time for me to moor in the family"." I am really sorry Mr. Giannelli for leaving you in the dangers of the shore. What will you do without my protection? ". " Oh my God, I don't know! " he answered smiling. They didn't talk about it again until the moment of saying goodbye.

Human relationships on the sea evolve differently than on shore. The fact of having to share a hull with other people, that is at the same time a work tool but also a common mean of survival, creates different bonds that rarely form on shore. Everyone on board has his own task which is useful to himself and to others. The ship is like a mechanism formed by a set of gears and even the smallest and most insignificant one, if it does not work properly, creates anomalies that affect all others. The on-board hierarchy, that cannot be discussed and never it is questioned, is fundamental for the good of the ship and the human lives. Those who have to take decisions must do it quickly as well as those who have to execute must have the same promptness without judging what has been de-

cided. This way everything works as it should. Officers have the heavy responsibility of guiding the crew in their assigned duties, but also of their lives when they are on sea. Most of the crew is unaware of many of the problems and dangers that arise during navigation. In particular on the Bayhorse, with a crew made up of brave and skilled sailors, but rough and uneducated, once on sea, they had officers as their only reference. Seeing the Radio Officer sulky or worried meant, for them, bad weather on the way. Watching an engine assistant argue animatedly with a deck officer meant impending engine breakdown. And so on. It was therefore essential that officers maintained an impassive attitude in all circumstances. Even in situations of serious danger, the fear, of which not even the officers were immune, had to be completely disguised and never had to turn into panic, because fear stimulates the ability to react while panic paralyzes it.

The Bayhorse entered the dry dock of La Spezia and once the buoyancy water had flowed out, the hull showed a thick crust formed by millions of barnacles¹⁴ deposited during navigation. The hull needed to be completely cleaned as those encrustations hinder the flow in the water and also increase the consumption of oil. The work lasted two weeks during which almost all the crew were free. The Second Mate left on the first day. "Just so as not to drag it out" he said excitedly before going down, greeting everyone, Giorgio joined him on the ladder and they shook hands without adding anything.

Two new officers boarded in La Spezia, a new Second Mate and strangely, to the great delight of the

14 Barnacles are marine organisms with calcareous shells.

Chief Engineer, a Third Assistant Engineer. The owner had decided to do great things. The Second Mate was a Serbian of the same age as Giorgio, very tall and slender, he spoke Italian, as the Yugoslavs usually did, omitting the articles since they do not exist in their language. He had boarded to avoid military service in his country and having been declared a deserter, he would never be able to return to Serbia because he would have been in prison for several years. He was sailing from the age of eighteen and had a good experience on sea. Giorgio and he immediately fraternized.

The Third Assistant Engineer was a tall, fat Genoese young guy, nineteen, on his first boarding. He was the son of an old Captain who had first pushed him to the nautical school and then catapulted him onto the Bayhorse to make his bones stronger. In all probability his father, thanks to his acquaintances, had managed to convince the shipowner that a Third Assistant was absolutely indispensable on board. The young officer was not very enthusiastic about that profession but evidently he had no choice and had to submit to the orders of his Captain-father.

A few days before the end of the works, the destination of the next trip was known. Set sail empty for Varna in Bulgaria to load sunflower seeds again for Ravenna, with a technical stop in Palermo for refueling and to embark an inspector of the company. A rather short and not very adventurous trip in the sense that the loading and unloading times would have been very short, so little time to go around on shore.

Leaving the shipyard, the Bayhorse crossed the splendid gulf of La Spezia and, passing in front of the marvel of Porto Venere and the island of Palmaria,

headed off to the south. The almost flat sea and the clear sky instilled joy and optimism and despite the fact that it was the beginning of January, the air temperature was strangely mild. Giorgio often spent his free time on the deck or on the bridge wing enjoying the breeze and the scent of the sea. One day, from the bridge wing, he overheard a strange conversation between the Chief Mate and the Captain. The Captain commented: "Wow we're already at Stromboli!" "No Captain, we are not even on the side of Strombolicchio" he replied "How not? Look right there, see how Stromboli smokes?" retorted the Captain. The Chief Mate with no comment entered the chart room and checked the course again. He had recently taken the position of the ship and was sure that it was a few miles north of Strombolicchio. Returning to the bridge he said to the Captain: "Look Captain, what smokes is not Stromboli but must necessarily be Strombolicchio. I checked again our position"." Incredible " said the Captain " Strombolicchio is an ancient volcano that has not erupted for a few hundred thousand years... and now it smokes... well... " The conversation ended thus leaving both amazed by the unusual phenomenon they faced. Giorgio did not give any importance to those speeches thinking that one of the two was wrong. They passed crosswise the Strombolicchio island from which a thin wisp of black smoke rose and as they went on, Stromboli also appeared, calm and inactive. Nobody thought about it anymore.

They docked in Palermo in a secondary dock and, since they had to wait two days both for the arrival of the inspector who was to disembark from another ship of the company, the Whitehorse which was late, and to

load some spare parts for the engine, the steward, with the permission of the Captain, sent ashore to the laundry, all the officers bed linen and all that for the kitchen and lounge.

The following day, in the engine room, occurred an accident. A young hub was tightening a valve that shut off steam in a pipeline when the valve broke and was hit by a jet of very hot steam. He was rescued by the other assistants but at the sight of the burns on most of his body they did not know what to do. They called Giorgio who after seeing the conditions of the victim, immediately called an ambulance from the nearest hospital and told everyone not to touch him. The poor boy had skin that lifted and peeled off like tissue paper, leaving the living flesh uncovered with the risk of very serious infections. Fortunately, the ambulance arrived shortly after and the nurses under the direction of a doctor managed to compose him as best as possible and load him onto the rescue vehicle, which drove away with blaring sirens. If it had happened in navigation the boy would have had no escape.

The aftermath of the accident, the spare parts and the inspector arrived but the linen was not yet on board. The Captain had begun to worry that they would all be left without sheets, pillows, tablecloths, towels, etc. He was discussing it on deck with Giorgio and the Chief Mate. There was no time to go ashore to buy the missing things and they could not even hold the ship that was supposed to sail that same evening. While they were discussing, a deckhand approached, a Sicilian boy of less than twenty years, with the air of an urchin and timidly said to the captain: " Mr. Cap-

tain, excuse me, I heard the problem but maybe I can help, if here is a phone I can try to ask my uncle if he can do anything... " In the ports, a wire telephone connected to the national telephone network was always installed for the duration of the stay in the port. The Captain, surprised but without much hope, told Giorgio to take the boy to the cabin where the telephone was installed.

The boy made only two phone calls within five minutes of each other. He dialed the first number he knew by heart and spoke in a very narrow Sicilian dialect for a few minutes. Giorgio did not understand a word but saw him write a number in pencil on a piece of paper that was on the desk. The second conversation took place in Italian and left Giorgio speechless: "Hello, I'm Peppino, Don Salvatore Maranzano's nephew" he paused briefly, perhaps to give his interlocutor time to impress his uncle's name well in his mind and then resumed "My uncle told me to tell you that if the Bayhorse stuff isn't on board within a hour, he'll cut everyone's balls off and put them in your mouth." He hung up the receiver with a shy smile while Giorgio was still with his mouth open. Three quarters of an hour later, a white van, with LAUNDRY written on the sides, arrived alongside the ship and two willing young men competed as to who would get on board first with the baskets containing all the laundry. It was evident that they really cared about their testicles.

The Bayhorse set sail at sunset and the next day Giorgio, after hearing it on the radio, informed everyone that a terrible earthquake had occurred with enormous victims and damages in the Belice valley and

had also been warned throughout Sicily. It was January 15th, 1968. Only much later, speaking with the Captain, Giorgio did reconnect the episode of Strombolicchio with the earthquake in Palermo.

From Palermo to the Dardanelli Strait they found extensive and uninterrupted bad weather. On certain days wind and sea reached storm 7/8 and for a short time also gale 9. When the sea reaches 9 the violent pitching makes the propeller come out of the water and this causes a violent vibration that affects everything the hull. The Engineers swear because they must immediately reduce the steam, when the propeller comes out, in order not to stress the propeller shaft too much with a number of revolutions beyond the safety limit, immediately afterwards, however, they must re-open it to allow the ship's bow facing the sea. A hard job for all the engine crew.

The bad weather lasted almost a week and some suffered seasickness. Giorgio was quite insensitive to such ailments and often, around ten a.m., met in the kitchen with the inspector to have breakfast together standing up, with a sandwich just made by the cook, hot and crunchy, filled with raw ham. Obviously, to properly accompany it, one needed a glass of fresh white wine. The two were looked at the young kitchen assistant who served them and who had stomach problems because of the sea. Once, looking at the grimace he saw printed on his face, the inspector suggested with a chuckle: "Don't forget, for the kittens go downwind in the stern."¹⁵ The young man looked at him in pain and remained in a disconsolate silence. He was often made fun of for his sensitivity to the sea. "Fresh-

15 In Italian slang "to make kittens" means to vomit.

water sailor" was the most benevolent term he received.

They crossed the Dardanelles with the calm and peaceful Sea of Marmara and passed the Bosphorus. The Second Mate, with whom Giorgio had made friends immediately, took care of the practice with the Turkish police, without problems as he was an athletic and robust young man and so Giorgio gladly gave up on that task. On the other hand, the task of ship's *doctor* remained untouchable. Past the Bosphorus, the Bayhorse headed north along the Bulgarian coast towards Varna, Bulgaria's main port.

The sea was calm even though the sharp January breeze made them shiver. He was on deck taking a walk all wrapped up in a heavy blue jacket and the woolen cap pulled up to his eyebrows, when he noticed a Croatian sailor who had rolled up the sleeves of his sweater to work better. It caught his attention that he had bare forearms despite the cold. Looking closer, he noticed that in the area of the bare forearm between the work glove and the sleeve of the rolled-up sweater, there was a red stripe that looked a lot like an infection in progress. He called the sailor and asked him how that strip was made. " Ah no, no, Marconi, I pulled up spring and stung even though I had glove, but it doesn't hurt so much" he said casually, smiling and eliminating all the articles from his speech. Giorgio made him take off his glove and raise his sleeve more. From the tip of the middle finger of his left hand, an infection started up the arm that passed the elbow. Giorgio, despite being a doctor only as an assignment and not as medical knowledge, was immediately alarmed thinking of a tetanic infection. He was

followed to the First Aid room where, after having washed the wound with hydrogen peroxide, he banded his finger and told him not to work until the arrival in Varna and to remain in his bunk. The surprised sailor obeyed since *doc* had told him it. Immediately afterwards Giorgio informed the boatswain not to let him work and recommended to the Chief Mate to prepare the sailor's disembarkement. With the captain's authorization, he sent a telegram to the port of Varna to arrange an ambulance for the urgent hospitalization of a crew member.

They were mooring with the springs already on the bollards, the Captain on the starboard bridge wing, Giorgio at the engine telegraph, the Chief Mate at the bow maneuver, the Second Mate at the stern. Giorgio was looking towards the bow with his ear turned to the Captain waiting for orders for the engine, when he heard a patter of footsteps that echoed on the metal staircase that led to the bridge wing. He turned his head and saw the Captain slumped to the floor and the Second Mate on his way, having seen him fall while he was maneuvering astern. They assisted him together. The Second removed his dentures that risked suffocating him while Giorgio held his head to make him breathe. A heart attack, probably. Luck would have it that the ambulance was already on the dock for the sailor and, in order not to waste time, the Second Mate, while the ship was a few meters from the dock, gave the order to two sailors to hook up a kind of platform sufficient to carry two people to a crane and immediately lower it ashore near the ambulance to avoid waiting for the time to complete the mooring maneuver. Giorgio had also brought in the sailor who was to

disembark and who assisted the unconscious Captain during the transfer. They were both loaded on the vehicle which immediately set off with sirens blaring. To complete the mooring that had been interrupted in a delicate phase, the Chief Mate went up to the bridge, the Second to the bow maneuver and Giorgio was entrusted with the stern maneuver. It was a matter of synchronizing the winches that wrapped the spring so that the ship approached the pier while remaining parallel to it, avoiding collisions. Giorgio, to operate the stern winch, had at his commands two Bosnian sailors who did not understand Italian and were on their first boarding on a ship sized as the Bayhorse. He received orders from the deck from which the Chief Mate yelled them in a very low-tech way, namely in a large metal funnel with a handle. Giorgio repeated the order to the sailors who hesitated before executing it. Eventually, along with Giorgio's cold sweats, the aft maneuver was completed with only a very small draft on the side plates.

The next day Giorgio went to the hospital to ascertain the situation. The Captain was in a medically induced coma after the heart attack but the doctor said it was just a precaution and that he would get away with it. The sailor, on the other hand, had a rather important infection for which hospitalization was essential for him too. When the real situation and the risk taken was explained to the sailor, he frowned but immediately smiled at Giorgio with a "Thanks Marconi".

The loading of sunflower seeds was done in a rather rudimentary way. They arrived with the trucks loaded under board and loaded the seeds with the shovel into rectangular pots hooked with chains to the

ship's cranes. Once full, they were hoisted aboard and overturned in the hold where other loaders distributed to level them. During the trip, the Chief Mate had given orders to the boatswain to prepare wooden bulkheads, from bow to stern, in all five holds. Since the cargo was in bulk, it was essential to prevent the seeds from moving sideways with the roll, with serious risk to the stability of the ship.

At the exit of the port some girls were stationed waiting for sailors eager to be distracted after a long navigation. They made love for a fee but they weren't really prostitutes. They were looking for money but also for both sexual and worldly fun. Being able to go to restaurants in which they would never have been able to set foot gave them the impression of elevating themselves socially and perhaps making their friends envious. The standard of living in Bulgaria at that time was terribly low. Salaries in general allowed nothing but to feed and lead a less than modest life. A simple sailor could play the nabob when he went ashore and could afford whatever was for sale. Many of them married sailors who were initially known as "clients".

The first evening Giorgio and the Second Mate went out together to explore the city. At the exit of the port they were immediately stopped by two girls. One, in her thirties, with a very black lion's mane, curvy, dressed in a very tight black dress that tried to compress and mask her excess of shapes. The other one, younger, was a slender blonde with a cheerful air. They asked the two if they wanted company for the evening without entering into any preliminary negotiations about the price. Probably they just needed to go out to dinner as the first goal and then they would see

how to continue. They started chatting and joking there, standing just outside the harbor. The Second was fascinated by the forms of the brunette who had huge breasts and there were no discussions about coupling. They proposed to go to dinner in a typical restaurant outside the city about ten kilometers away, on the beach. The place was called “Zlatni Pieski” (Golden Sand) which reminded Giorgio of Lignano Sabbiadoro¹⁶, a well known resort in the northern Adriatic sea, the name of which has the same meaning.

The place was huge and crowded, circular in shape, with a kind of amphitheater-like depression in the center, where tables were placed on the very wide steps. On what could have been the stage of the amphitheater, there was an enormous fireplace, open on all sides, with burning coals under the grates, on which mutton hearts cut in half and stuffed with herbs were being browned. The scent was very intense and appetizing. They sat down at a table not far from the grills and the waiter immediately brought two twin bottles of a local red wine which turned out to be really good and suitable for that food. They obviously ordered mutton heart which was the cook’s specialty. The evening was spent in joy, the girls were cheerful and witty and also spoke a little Italian. The Second never diverted, if not for more important things, few for him in truth, his gaze from the neckline of the brunette who was laughing happy with the success of her breast. The blonde talked continuously with Giorgio and told him about the life in Varna, but in a whisper, since criticism of the communist regime was

16 Sabbiadoro in Italian means golden sand.

strictly forbidden and it was better not to be overheard. People lived in generalized misery. A qualified engineer employed by the state (it could not be otherwise as the state was the only entrepreneur in the country), in order to change his coat had to plan the purchase long before and save as much as possible on the meager pay he received. The blonde told it not to pity but she did it with an almost combative tone of rebellion and Giorgio liked it very much.

The dinner continued with an abundant use of local wine and, at the end, after a good Turkish coffee, the waiter brought some rakija at 65 °.¹⁷ The atmosphere was overheating and the Second was arguing animatedly with the brunette about where it was best to spend the night all together. Giorgio and the blonde followed the discussion with interest, smiling.

In those years, the regime prohibited prostitution and even the simple accompaniment of a Bulgarian woman with a foreigner to a hotel was considered a crime. To remedy the problem, there were private apartments, in large public buildings, which were rented out by the residents who were happy to supplement the meager wages they received. They went to sleep with a friend or relative and gladly left their home free. These high-rise buildings were the normal housing solution for the entire population. They were called "panel houses" because they were built, on Chinese patent, with prefabricated concrete elements, which allowed the construction of these buildings in a very short time. The very small rooms could contain a bed and a small wardrobe. Larger families equipped

17 Rakija is a very strong distillate made from plums. It is very popular in the whole Balkan area.

the living room to transform it into a bedroom for the night. Housing uniformity together with wage uniformity contributed to the equality of citizens and thus the mission of the regime led by Zhivkov was fulfilled: all equal for the happy socialism.

A black Volga car, unexpectedly came out of the dark and brought them back to town. The brunette gave instructions to the driver who stopped the Volga in front of an anonymous seven-storey building that stood in the dark among many others similar. They walked up the stairs to the seventh floor, as the elevator, not being a socialist device, was not present. At the top they went out onto a large terrace and entered the apartment through a low window that overlooked it. The brunette explained that it was for the safety of the assignee of the apartment. If the police had caught him renting the house to girls with foreigners, they would have evicted him instantly.

The two identical rooms were divided, each of which could contain a single bed and a shelf that served as a wardrobe. Giorgio was experiencing a period during which his main sexual interest was focused on perfecting cunnilingus. On board, during the long trips, the subject was often discussed among officers. A middle-aged but particularly sexually active First Assistant Engineer had offered everyone a workout that would make a good impression once on shore. Basically it consisted of filling a glass with water and floating a cork inside it. The training consisted of holding the cork underwater with the tongue. It was not easy but Giorgio immediately proved to be particularly good, gaining the admiration of his colleagues. The blonde greatly appreciated what Giorgio had

learned during training and she reciprocated with enthusiasm in all ways. Much later, the second and the brunette appeared on the bedroom door while Giorgio was still very busy with his favorite technique and became aware of their presence only for the voice of the brunette who, seeing the scene, let out a resounding “Ohhhhh my God!”.

A cab, which was another black Volga, brought them back on board around five a.m.. Giorgio thought that perhaps the Volga was not a luxury sedan but the only model available for use as a cab.

Two days after arriving in Varna, the replacements arrived. The Captain was a tanned Croatian from Fiume, in his forties, who had commanded a torpedo boat during the war. He spoke Italian almost always omitting the articles, but in a fluent and very understandable way. He often used terms familiar to Giorgio because they were similar to the Trieste dialect. The Yugoslav sailors were happy as they no longer had communication problems and could use their language.

The replacement sailor was also Croatian, very young and rather naive and in a short time he became the victim of the Captain who enjoyed making fun of any person suitable for the purpose. The first time he got on the bridge at the helm, the captain did not miss the opportunity to play his usual joke that he repeated with all the new helmsmen who had just boarded. The ship's course was zero degrees north and a dialogue similar to this occurred:

- Captain: *desno po malo* (veer a little to starboard)
 Helmsman: *da, Barba* (yes Captain)
 C: *kolko je sada?* (how much is it now?)
 H: *dva, Barba* (two degrees)
 C: *desno po malo* (a little more to starboard)
 C: *kolko je sada?* (how much is it now?)
 H: *pet, Barba* (five)
 C: *desno po malo* (a little more to starboard)
 C: *kolko je sada?* (how much is it now?)
 H: *sedam* (*sedam* means seven but the pronunciation is almost the same as *sedim* which means: I sit)
 C: *da, na kurac!* (yes, on a dick!).

The Captain completed the sentence laughing out loud while the stunned helmsman gasped.

The shippers had filled the holds and the Bay-horse set sail for Ravenna the next morning. The crossing was smooth with a rough sea that never exceeded force five. The continuous rolling was not particularly annoying even if it was prolonged for most of the trip. Only the young kitchen assistant made the kit-tens downwind at stern several times, according to the inspector's recommendations.

In Ravenna the ship was unloaded with suction pipes which took less than twenty four hours to suck up the ten thousands tons of sunflower seeds and deposit them in the silos. Shortly before the end of the unloading, came the news that the next destination would be Brazil, but not the Amazon River as the previous trip, but Rio de Janeiro, after loading chemicals in Gela, Sicily. The whole crew received the news with enthusiasm and many anecdotes began to circulate about Brazilian girls, who, according to many ex-

perts, had the most beautiful butts in the world. For Giorgio it would have been the first time in Rio and, to be on the safe side, he began a strict training program with the floating cork.

The Bayhorse left the port of Ravenna and headed south, staying along the Italian coast to take advantage of the favorable current that flowed down the Adriatic. They docked at a pier in Gela, Sicily where they loaded 10,000 tons of solvents into 52 gallons drums. The cargo, which was particularly dangerous, was carefully stowed by securing it to the bulkheads of the holds and stowing took longer than loading. Leaving Gela, the Bayhorse headed west to reach the Strait of Gibraltar and the Atlantic Ocean. Giorgio continued to send telegrams with the position of the ship every day via Rome radio, from which he rarely received any. There were no particular instructions for the ship as everything had been prepared before departure. He also had a lot of free time from his duty on the distress frequency therefore he turned up the loudspeaker volume so he could go around the ship safely. His trained ear would have been able to hear a Morse signal from anywhere on the hull. He often met with the inspector who had even fewer commitments on board than him and often they played cards together in the officers lounge.

After crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, the Bayhorse headed southwest along the coast of Africa to reach Dakar for refueling. Once in the harbor, it anchored and was immediately joined by the small supply tanks. This time the city was calm, the riots had been quelled or died out on their own and everything worked smoothly. Dakar was a well equipped port and

very popular for supplies both for its geographical position and for the low cost of fuel and general services to ships. The ship left after a few hours and continued southwest to cross the ocean.

As almost always in the South Atlantic, contrary to what happens further north, the sea was gentle and the sun beat down as usual in the austral summer. Giorgio no longer had a chess partner but still went up on the bearing compass bridge to sunbathe often in the company of the Second Mate and the inspector. The latter was an old Captain of the Monrovia who for special merits, which he had never revealed, traveled on the company's ships, salaried more than a Captain, with the charge of inspector but practically he did not inspect anything. He was a tolerant and cheerful type with a brisk manner. In his sixties, Genoese by origin, he said that, since he had spent most of his life on the sea, he no longer felt tied to any place. He had no family and thus spent the last years of his career, having fun practically without any particular commitments. He knew everything about Brazil and instructed Giorgio and the Second Mate, whom he considered his best "students", dispensing detailed lessons on behavior to be held once ashore in Rio.

Of course, the lessons were mainly about behavior with Brazilians women. " First of all " he said " you have to make sure, when you approach a woman in Brazil, that she is really a female. Since there is full of *viados*¹⁸ that have dicks to frighten, therefore it is better to avoid nasty surprises and carefully check everything first". After such an introduction, the lesson continued: " Another fundamental thing, remember it

18 Viado means transsexual person.

well, is that you should never, under any circumstances and for any reason, refuse the side B, which is often offered first. Such a refusal would be an unforgivable rudeness." The students laughingly assured him that they would never be rude. Giorgio also asked if his training with the cork could have had positive results in Rio. " Yes, but it is a more secondary, the most important thing is side B " reiterated the inspector. Nevertheless Giorgio still decided to continue his training program to further refine his linguistic techniques. "Finally," he continued "another fundamental operation, slightly less important than side B but still appreciated, even if not explicitly requested, is the introduction of the whole hand up to the wrist into the cavity of the side A and I recommend you that hand must be introduced up to the wrist, otherwise is considered incomplete and could infuriate the gentle girl". After the very detailed bon ton class in Brazil, he ended with a " Now you are ready guys, go and do your best! " and laughed heartily. It sounded like an "*Ite missa est*" at the end of a Catholic mass.

After about ten days of navigation, the Bayhorse came in sight of the splendid bay of Rio de Janeiro. It was truly a delight. The intense green of the lush vegetation on the heights contrasted with the purplish red of the soil creating a jaw dropping color combination. The huge statue of Christ, which overlooked the bay from the heights to the left of the entrance, also overlooked the Pão de Açúcar¹⁹, further down and, passing through the myriad of islets scattered in the splendid inlet, it seemed to enter an enchanted place. Even

19 The most worldwide famous hill in the bay of Rio de Janeiro. Its name in Portuguese means: Sugar Cake.

those who had already been there before suffered the same charm as it was the first time.

The Bayhorse anchored on the left side of the large bay, overlooking the commercial port. Shortly afterwards the harbor police came on board for the usual checks and at the end announced that all the piers were occupied and it was necessary to wait a few days for a mooring to become free. While the police boat was moving towards shore, the inspector approached Giorgio, who was admiring the bay, and said with an air of complicity worthy of a conspirator: "You will see tonight what will happen here on board..." and, to the astonished face of Giorgio who was trying to understand, he smiled and went to his cabin.

The evening on board passed normally and after dinner Giorgio and the Second Mate started chatting on the life boat bridge until late. Giorgio had decided to buy a weapon thinking about the episode at the Playboy in Dakar and was discussing with his friend which weapon was the most suitable to keep on board. They immediately excluded the rifles, bulky and impossible to bring to shore, so they turned to short guns. The Second was enticed by the Walther PPK, having read many novels by Jan Fleming, while Giorgio favored revolvers that never jam. Around midnight, after long and detailed considerations on short guns and their practical use, they reached an agreement: they would both buy a short-barreled Smith & Wesson .38 special. A handy weapon, powerful and easy to carry in a pocket, inaccurate over long distances, it could have been used only for personal defense and was

deadly at a short distance. Once the agreement was reached, they went to sleep.

In the middle of the night Giorgio was awakened with a start by a din from the door of his cabin slammed violently when opening it, by a sailor, a nice and loafer Peruvian, who shouted: " Marconi this is for you! " he suddenly pushed into the cabin a girl who lost her balance due to the push and landed in Giorgio's bunk, who, half sleepy, found nothing better than to ask her: " Who are you?". "I'm Ana Maria De Oliveira Carvalho" answered the white-skinned brunette with huge breasts. She undressed in the blink of an eye and slipped into the bunk, covering herself modestly with the sheet up to her neck, looking at Giorgio with a defiant half smile. Giorgio jumped down from the bunk in his underwear and said: "Wait for me here, I'll be right back." The girl nodded and disappeared all under the sheet giggling. He left the cabin while in the corridor there were several half-naked girls together with the Peruvian sailor in charge of distribution. The captain appeared at the door of his cabin, half sleepy, exclaiming: " What a fuck happens? Are you all crazy? ". The Peruvian pushed two girls into his cabin, the door closed and never opened again. Giorgio went down the internal staircase that led to the life boat bridge where the other officers' cabins were located and there too, girls were being sorted. The inspector, at the door of his cabin, had a busty black girl by the hand and waved goodbye to Giorgio, which meant "I told you, didn't I ?".

During the night five, rowing boats loaded with girls had approached the ship and, arriving alongside, asking the sailor on watch to be allowed to board. The

latter, without thinking in the slightest of asking the authorization of any officer, did not wait to be repeated the question twice and immediately lowered the ladder. The girls, whose ages ranged from sixteen to twentythree, climbed like apes up the ladder and spread out across the deck. The Peruvian who was waiting for them gathered them and arranged for distribution. It remained a mystery how he could have agreed with someone for the arrival of the girls on the ship.

They were girls from the poor neighborhoods of Rio and they were very particular prostitutes, if you really wanted to define them as prostitutes. They did not ask for money but expected little gifts in the form of dinners at a restaurant, a dress or similar things that cost nothing in Brazil at the time. They also chose a partner and, if they could, remained loyal to him until the ship left.

Giorgio went back into his cabin, now wide awake, and slipped under the sheet held up by Ana Maria de Oliveira Carvalho. The girls stayed on board for a week then took their boats back and returned to shore just before the ship weighed anchor and entered the harbor for mooring. On shore, they waited for their partners at the exit of the port as they were forbidden to enter the free zone. Only a few were disappointed not to see their friends again but most of them re coupled with the partner they had on board for the whole time the Bayhorse was in Rio.

During the week she was on board, Ana Maria De Oliveira Carvalho was not bored at all. Giorgio put into practice all the teachings that the inspector had given him but he did not fail to add the fruit of his in-

tense training. They spent the nights in bed together but also most of the days eating in the cabin, joking and playing. Between them a kind of mainly physical bond was established but which also had implications on the affective level. Giorgio liked that note of wild spontaneity and the total lack of taboo that the girl had, while she appreciated in him the determined calm and his imagination that made her feel new sensations for her who was only 19 years old. After arriving in port they met again every day. Giorgio went ashore and took a room in a luxury hotel in the center of Rio, which made the girl widen her eyes with happiness. After two days locked in the room they decided it was time to visit the town. So Ana took the lead and led Giorgio around Rio. Giorgio wanted to climb the famous *Pão de Açúcar* but, when he learned that the only way to reach the top was a creaking and rusty cable way, he opted for a visit to Christ the Redeemer, on Corcovado hill. There, too, there was a cable way but also a long winding road that led to the top. They went there with a cab that waited for them as they walked around holding hands like two sweethearts. Seen from the base, raising the head and endangering the first vertebra, the statue made a huge impression. It was about forty meters high and looking at it from below with the clouds moving in the sky, it gave the impression of collapsing on the observer.

After a few days Giorgio and the Second Mate went out together to buy weapons. They got a cab that carried them to a famous armory which, according to the cab driver, served all the high-ranked Brazilian officers. In fact, the armory was very well stocked with both hunting and military weapons. As they had

agreed, they chose two short barreled Smith & Wesson .38 specials and a large number of bullets. The clerk informed them that in order to collect the weapons they first had to obtain a clearance from the Ministry of Defense which was not far away. They reached there by walking and asked the attendant for the office where they issued permits for the purchase of a weapon. They went up to the first floor of the huge Portuguese colonial style building and entered a spacious office where, behind a pompous desk, sat an army colonel with a jacket full of decorations. He was a tall and burly man, imposing, with his mustache which gave him an adequate military air. Giorgio explained the purpose of their visit, in approximate Portuguese mixed with some Italian words. He cited, as the reason for the purchase, the fact that another trip up to the Amazon River was planned and the weapons would be used exclusively as personal defense. The colonel in a gruff voice explained that it was not a valid reason to issue such a permit, also because revolvers were not hunting weapons. At one point, unexpectedly, he asked Giorgio: "You are Italian right? " And to his affirmative answer he continued: "How are Juventus²⁰ doing this year?" pronouncing "sgiuventus" in the Brazilian style. Giorgio was not a football fan and he only knew what he heard in the bar and by chance on the radio. He quickly glimpsed all the little information he possessed in his mind, filling it with some abundant additions of fantasy that could not have been verified by the colonel. The latter listened attentively, smiling satisfied and at the end said, getting up: "Well gentlemen, I thank you for your visit"

20 Famous Italian soccer team.

and handing two sheets full of stamps to Giorgio, he added: "You have to fill them in with your personal details and deliver them to the armory. Have a nice day".

They stayed for a month in Rio and when the ship set sail, Giorgio took a last look at the beautiful bay, with a hint of regret.

PART TWO. The Enigma.

They were en route to Rio Grand do Sul and Giorgio was waiting to receive orders from the company. He had just tuned his medium wave receiver for his usual duty on the distress frequency when, to his surprise, he heard his call sign being transmitted at breakneck speed. The intensity of the signal was quite low which meant that it was transmitted from a considerable distance or from a very weak transmitter and did not seem to come from a ship.

After waiting for a dozen repeated calls, he answered with a question *de* which meant *who is calling?* Half a second later it began a transmission at a very high speed, over two hundred characters per minute, surely emitted with an automatic key. Although he was very well trained in reception, at that speed he understood only a few words and the call of the operator who was transmitting from a Yugoslav ship. He answered at a normal rate of 100 characters per minute, asking to re transmit more slowly. After a few minutes of pause someone replied with an even weaker signal but at an acceptable speed, giving the ship's name and asking if the Bayhorse was en route to Rio Grande do Sul. When Giorgio answered in the affirmative, the operator, a Russian, said that his ship was already moored there and for that very reason it was transmitting at reduced power. He wanted an in-person meeting with Giorgio.

Russian radio operators used to transmit at impossible speeds and Giorgio had always thought that they were trained at those speeds to hinder the listening of other non-Russian radio operators and that they

were probably equipped with automatic reception equipment. Giorgio was not surprised that he was Russian but was surprised at the request for a meeting. In any case, he replied in the affirmative, promising that, as soon as he arrived in port, he would visit him on board, on the Partisanska Slava, a motor-ship flying the Yugoslav flag.

Rio Grande do Sul is located at the only southern mouth of a huge salt lagoon, over 120 miles long and about 30 miles wide, called Lagoa dos Patos²¹, which extends parallel to the coast and is accessible through the narrow navigable channel that connects it to the Ocean.

The Bayhorse traveled the channel following the directions of the local pilot who asked the captain for an experienced helmsman and, with rather delicate and demanding maneuvers due to the narrowness of the channel, reached the mooring pier. After mooring and having completed the usual port formalities, which were very short as the ship came from another Brazilian port, Giorgio, driven by his innate curiosity, went ashore and began looking for the Russian's ship.

The port was not very large, but going randomly would have been a useless waste of time. In reality it was not an urgent question but he was curious to understand the reasons for such an unusual request. He immediately went to the office at the entrance to the port and was told where to find the ship. Partizanska Slava was a modern motor ship of recent construction with a very sharp bow that suggested a speed at sea unthinkable for the Bayhorse. Some of the plates on the bow were slightly concave, which meant that the

21 Lagoa dos patos in Portuguese means duck lagoon.

Captain had forced the hull at too high a speed for the sea conditions he was in. It was quite incomprehensible why they had damaged such a beautiful motor ship were it not for an extreme emergency. On the contrary, in case of very bad sea, the speed is lowered to reduce the impact of the waves on the hull.

He got on board and asked the sailor on watch to speak to the radio operator. The latter looked at him with a rather hostile air and told him to wait. He shouted a few words in Serb-Croatian, which Giorgio only partially understood, to another sailor who was walking around on deck and after a few minutes the radio operator appeared. He was a typical Russian perhaps of Siberian origin, blond with military-style hair, small eyes close to the nose, very tall and robust. He wore camouflage pants full of pockets and a blue and white horizontal striped shirt typical of the Russian navy. He looked more like a mercenary than a radio operator. Giorgio looking at him thought that he surely had a Kalashnikov machine gun in his cabin. They introduced themselves and the Russian politely asked him to follow him into his cabin.

It was a very spacious room, unthinkable on the Bayhorse, and next to the desk there was also a chair for guests. On the desk there was a bottle of vodka with which the Russian filled two glasses in silence. Giorgio tried to refuse but could not. Grigori Vasilievich Bogdanov, this was the name of the Russian, emptied his glass in one go and began to speak: "First of all, thank you for accepting my invitation" He spoke perfect English with a slight American accent, probably learned in some prestigious college in the US, which was quite out of place with his appearance

and the clothes he wore." You see Mr. Relli we know everything about the Bayhorse and its crew and we would like you to do something for us." Giorgio, very surprised, interrupted him: "Excuse me, *we* who? And what interest these *us* would have to know everything about the Bayhorse" Giorgio asked amazed and piqued together and Grigori Vassilievich replied without going into too many details: "Let's say that the people I represent are very interested in the Bayhorse and in particular in something that is on board. They would like to be able to dispose of that something, which is their property, and they would be interested, for a while, in a collaboration with you that would be well rewarded" then unexpectedly added: "You know what your ship's destination will be after Rio Grande do Sul? You surely cannot know as your Captain does not know it yet. I can tell you now: Jacksonville, Florida, USA. As soon as you will have confirmation you will be convinced that I am speaking very seriously". He stopped and waited for Giorgio's reaction who, more and more amazed, remained silent for a few minutes and then with an annoyed voice replied: "OK, you don't want to tell me who they are, you don't want to tell me what interests they have in me and my ship. You don't want to tell me what this collaboration consists of and do you expect me to agree? It seems excessive to me. Thank you for the vodka." He got up to leave but before reaching the door the Russian added in a calm voice: "Mr. Relli I would like to meet you again as soon as you will have confirmation of the ship's destination. Ask your Captain about it today and if he still doesn't know how to answer, wait until

you'll have it. Then we'll meet again and then you'll believe me."

Giorgio went out without turning and returned to board thoughtfully. The cold calm and confidence of the Russian bothered him, but he did not seem like a joker or one who enjoyed wasting his and others' time. Then? How did he and his phantom partners know the Bayhorse so well that they wanted something hidden on board? Why did they need his cooperation? How did they know the ship's destination if perhaps even the shipowner did not know yet? These were questions that ran through his head but with no possible answers.

Two days later the Captain informed Giorgio about the next trip, announcing: " Mr Relli we had to load here several spare parts for the engine but due to a mistake we don't know why, they are no longer available so we have to go and load them in Santos" For Giorgio hearing the word Santos was a relief that made all those questions he had asked himself disappear. So that Russian clown had made fun of him, but for what purpose? He asked to himself. Then the Captain added: " Yes, but only to load them. We stop in the harbor without dropping the anchors, load the crates and leave immediately for Jacksonville, USA " Giorgio, almost stammering, asked: " When did you hear about that Captain? ". "A few hours ago, the shipowner who had just concluded the charter contract informed me." The Captain answered and left Giorgio absorbed in his thoughts. He thought that the Russian was not joking so it was necessary to meet him again to understand more.

It was evening when he boarded the beautiful motor ship that seemed deserted. The deck was illuminated by the lights of the masts but, strangely, there was not even a sailor on guard. Giorgio, at the bulwark, looked around and saw the Russian coming out of the shadows who signaled to follow him. On the desk of the cabin there was the usual bottle of vodka with which Grigori Vassilievich filled the two glasses. Giorgio took a sip and put the glass back. " *Ty tozhe*²²" the Russian exclaimed smiling and downed the glass in one gulp.

Giorgio sat next to the desk reluctantly admitted: " OK you were right about our destination. Now tell me everything if you want my cooperation." The Russian poured for himself another glass and sat down, speaking in a calm and confident voice: "I can tell you what you need to know right now. Once you have agreed to work with us, you will be presented with a person who can explain more to you, I'm not authorized to do so. During the trip, you will find an object in your First Aid room that you will immediately recognize as not belonging to the ship. You will need to deliver it to a person who will board in Jacksonville and give you further instructions. Before looking for the object you must send me a telegram to the following address: Grigori Vassilievich Bogdanov c/o UBS Bahnhofstrasse, 45 Zurich, Switzerland. The text in English must be: "beautiful Florida", without signature. This will be confirmation that you are willing to cooperate with us. It is also essential that the telegram is sent to Bern radio without intermediary stations. Did you understand everything?" Giorgio had the im-

22 So do you!

pression of being on the verge of enlisting as a secret agent and would have had a million questions to ask him but he nodded and only asked: "What happens if I refuse the collaboration and I find the object?". "I do not recommend it and if you refuse it is much better not to look for it and leave it where it is" he replied, smiling in a way that seemed to Giorgio a very veiled threat.

He returned aboard with his mind full of questions and undecided on what to do. He was not particularly attracted by the promised of a not even quantified compensation, but his curiosity would not allow him to refuse such an out of the ordinary offer. Certainly there must have been something unclear and perhaps illegal underneath, yet his curiosity prevailed over his scruples. He decided to send the telegram facing the technical difficulties that would have required direct dispatch to Bern but he decided to find the mysterious object first.

After the ship left, when they were in the ocean en route to the north, he began the search. The First Aid room was of 3 yards by 3 yards and had walls covered with cabinets with frosted glass doors. At the center of each glass was drawn the silhouette of the caduceus in transparency, surmounted by the inscription: "First Aid". Giorgio looked around in that environment that was familiar to him wondering where it could be and what the mysterious object was. He wondered if any of the crew had favored the arrival of the object. The images of the other officers came into his mind, no one in particular made him suspicious but each could potentially have been an accomplice. He then decided not to tell anyone about it and set out to

search. He quickly scanned the cabinets from which he had already taken things and began to carefully inspect those still unknown. Late at night, after inspecting all the cabinets, emptying them and putting the contents back into place, finding nothing suspicious, he thought again that he had been made fun of by the Russian. But the fact that he knew the ship's destination in advance convinced him to continue the search. He checked the ceiling and the walls of the room but there was no opening in the metal of the bulkheads. Behind the cabinets was impossible as they were locked without even a free slot. The wastepaper basket was empty and so was the small desk drawer. While he was puzzling about where the object could be, he began to observe the medical books he had left on the floor after having removed them from the lowest shelf of a cabinet and had not yet put them back. He remembered that the books crammed inside came flush with the door but, looking closer at the depth of the books and that of the cabinet, the latter was greater by at least ten inches. A sudden flash crossed his mind, there must be a double bottom. He lay down on the floor and inspected that niche. Tapping the back wall it *sounded hollow* and the metal paint was slightly peeling on the top edge. "Bingo!" he thought and with a knife he tried to remove it without success but, sinking the knife deeper into the slot, he heard a slight metallic click and the sheet hit the bottom. It was there.

He didn't dare open it for the moment and almost running went to the radio station to try to call Bern. Fortunately it was the right time for the optimal ion-

ization²³ of 6Mhz. Bern radio answered almost immediately with such a strong signal that it left Giorgio astonished. He sent the agreed telegram and went to his cabin where he immediately fell asleep.

The next morning he took the object wrapped in a cloth to the radio station and locked himself in the emergency battery room. Topping up the battery acid was an operation that he did periodically and that had to be done in the special ventilated room. He felt himself a very much secret agent and was devoured by curiosity. He unwrapped the cloth and placed on the workbench a black cube of about ten inches on each side that looked like it was covered with leather but instead had a metal surface with pores that at first sight made it look like leather. The edges and the vertices of the cube were slightly rounded and on the faces there was no visible joint that could suggest an opening. Handling it, he sensed that it was not empty and that it must contain something heavy. There was no sound when shaking it. Giorgio began to examine it more carefully wondering what that strange box might contain, if it was a box. Passing his fingers over the smooth and hard surfaces he tried to notice some cracks that had escaped the eye. It occurred to him that there was a large magnifying glass in the First Aid room. He went to get it and began to carefully inspect the surface but found no trace of cracks. He thought

23 When operating in short wave, the range depends from the ionization of the higher layers of the atmosphere that reflect the waves up and down and allow them to go far. For each altitude of ionization, which varies during the day, correspond the ideal wave length to get the maximum range of the signal. The most common frequencies used by radio operators was 4MHz, 6MHz, 12MHz, 19MHz

that if that cube was that important it must surely contain something, so there must be some way to open it. Violent and invasive means went through his mind such as circular saw, drill, hammer but he immediately discarded them because the cube had to be delivered and the Russian surely meant intact.

It was almost time to send the telegram with the position of the ship for which he went up on the bridge and the Second Mate who was on guard gave him a sheet with the ship position. He went back into the radio station and turned on the 1000 watt short-wave transmitter built by the Canadian Marconi Corporation. Bern radio was unreachable at that time, so he started calling Rome radio to pass the telegram. Each time he pressed the key there was a faint hum from the battery room. When the broadcast was over, a test occurred to him that, absurd as it was, was worth doing. He took the cube and placed it on the top of the transmitter near the porcelain insulator from which the copper cable that fed the external antenna came out. Breath in his throat he pressed the key for some seconds. With metallic clicks, eight cylindrical pins came out of the cube's vertices and pushed the eight caps to a distance of a couple of inches from the main body. The cube rose on the lower four pins as if they were paws. Giorgio thought that it seemed to have come to life with a threatening air on those kind of paws. The mechanism must have been activated by the strong electromagnetic field, emitted by the transmitter, present in the vicinity of the antenna output. Unusual and very ingenious as opening system. He walked over to the cube and started trying to rotate a cap but nothing happened. Yet they had to do something. He

began to rotate them in pairs in all possible combinations. When he rotated two caps of two opposite upper vertices on the diagonal, to his great surprise he saw that two side faces of the cube opened and positioned themselves horizontally, revealing a metal sphere inscribed inside the cube. He rotated the other two caps on their pins and the other two faces opened. The sphere was firmly anchored to the base of the cube and to the upper panel. The golden surface was smooth, uniform and shiny like a mirror. It occurred to him to calculate the hypothetical weight of the sphere if it were full and compare it to the real weight. He put the object on the scale that he had in the battery room and found 14,3 lbs. and he estimated the weight of the sphere alone to be 13,2 lbs by subtracting the estimated weight of walls and pins. The radius of the sphere was 3,9 in which, inserted in the formula for the volume of the sphere, $\frac{4}{3} * \text{Pi} * r^3$, gave a total of about 256.3 in³. He made an effort to remember the specific weights of some metals and drew up an approximate table:

Iron about 0.28 lbs/in³ weight of an equivalent sphere: about 7 lbs

Aluminum about 0.098/in³ weight of a sphere: about 2.8 lbs

Gold about 0.7 lbs/in³ weight of a sphere: about 18 lbs

From the table, even if with approximate values, he deduced that the sphere was hollow because if it had been made of solid gold, it should have weighed more. If had it been made of iron or aluminum to other metals or alloys with similar specific weights it would have had to weigh much less. Only if it were hollow

with something inside it could have weighed 6kg. It could also have been full only if it were made of an alloy composed of a heavy metal such as gold and a lighter one that brought the total weight to 13 lbs. At this point, to investigate further, the indispensable parameters were many and impossible to obtain, so he stopped at the idea that the sphere was hollow. If he was right then there had to be some way to open it. It occurred to him that he had to deliver it and obviously not opened so before conducting further investigations he tried to close the cube. It was easier than expected, she lifted the four side faces, pushed in the pins with the domes and it all closed with a metallic click. The surfaces returned to being compact with no signs of joints.

Life on board always continued with the same rhythms, hours of rest alternating with shifts and an almost flat sea, with no wind. The only difference was that Giorgio was now observing all the other officers with different eyes and trying to figure out who was the Russian's accomplice on board.

The Bayhorse reached Santos in the harbor and stopped the engine, remaining motionless without dropping the anchors. Giorgio called the harbor office on the radiotelephone and after half an hour a motor boat came alongside with the spare parts that were immediately hoisted on board. As the boat moved away, Giorgio gave the order *slow ahead* and the officer on duty ordered the helmsman all to starboard. The Bayhorse put the bow northwards following the Brazilian coast at full speed to go up the Atlantic towards the United States.

About 200 miles off the US coast, a Coast Guard seaplane flew over them and made several passes at very low altitude almost touching the tops of the ship's masts. Several hours later, about half a mile away, a large Coast Guard patrol boat flanked the Bayhorse and began to flash with the Aldis²⁴. Giorgio answered from the bridge with his Aldis and provided the requested data: ship name, flag and call sign. Shortly after, the patrol boat, which must have had very powerful engines, left the ship and soon dwindled on the horizon.

As soon as they moored at the bulk loading dock in the port of Jacksonville, a Military Police patrol boarded the ship under the orders of an immigration officer. He was seated in the officers lounge while three gigantic MP's remained at the door. The officer, as a demonstration of the severity and precision of their checks, gave the Captain a very precise list of the Bayhorse crew members complete with names, dates of birth and nationality and next to the names of four of the sailors there was the note: unwelcome person. Without providing further details and with a broad smile, he told the Captain that these sailors could not get off the ship, all the other crew members were free to move throughout the entire United States territory until the ship's departure. After the interview with a welcome to the USA, the officer left, leaving one of the three giants on guard near the stairway on the quay. In those years the Vietnam War, which saw the American troops directly involved, was in full swing,

24 It is a flashing light device that allow to send messages in Morse code.

so those precautions did not surprise anyone on board. The United States was a country at war.

Two hours later the holds were ready to load 10,000 tons of fertilizer phosphates. It was a gift from the US government to India as part of an international aid campaign to counter the famine that had hit that country. The expected time for full load was 36 hours. On each of the five holds a loading pipe was placed, connected to a huge silo that contained the fertilizer and a few minutes later they started pumping a thin light gray powder into the holds.

Giorgio was on the starboard bridge wing and watched the quay waiting for a technician to repair the shortwave transmitter which had an unsolvable trouble in navigation, for which he had asked for assistance via radio before docking. After several hours and several cigarettes, he saw a woman with short blonde hair and a young black man carrying a metal suitcase, approaching the stairway. "Technical assistance has arrived" thought Giorgio. Once on deck, the sailor on guard accompanied them to the radio station. Giorgio explained the problem he had and the technician, a huge black man who looked like an American football player, immediately got to work. The woman stood on the sidelines at the door of the radio station and Giorgio assessed her with a quick glance. She was quite attractive, a short-haired blonde in her thirties, very elegantly dressed, giving the impression of a classy woman. Looking at her with a questioning look, he wondered why a woman like her accompanied a technician aboard a ship. The blonde caught his gaze and, in a voice that seemed warm and sensual to Giorgio, said looking at him with an intense look straight in his

eyes: "Have you ready what I have to collect?" She spoke in English with an inflection that reminded Giorgio of the Russian in Rio Grande do Sul. Giorgio winced not only for the surprise of having the person in charge of the withdrawal of the mysterious object in front of him but above all for the intense gaze of the blonde's green eyes that had given him a tingle in the back of his neck. He immediately composed himself and replied: "Of course, please follow me."

Entering the cabin adjacent to the radio station, he extracted the object, covered with a cloth, from a drawer under the bunk and handed it to the blonde who took it without any effort putting it under her arm. As she turned to go out, Giorgio stopped her by gently taking her arm and saying: " They told me that you would give me more information on all this... " She did not escape Giorgio's grip, even if delicate, she turned and answered looking intently into his eyes: "Yes, you are right but unfortunately we do not have the time, there was an unforeseen event... You must be patient and everything will be explained to you in Bombay. It is our interest that you be informed of everything to ensure your full cooperation, which we care very much about... "

That *very much* was said with a particular emphasis that intensified the tingling in the back of Giorgio's neck. They reached the technician at the door of the radio station who reported that he had fixed the transmitter for which they formally greeted each other and Giorgio remained in the radio station thoughtfully. A few seconds later the blonde reappeared at the door and said: " When you are on sea, take a look at the First Aid room again because you will find something

to deliver in Bombay" and started running towards the staircase that led to the deck and to the stairway. He watched her go with the technician along the quay until she disappeared among the harbor cranes.

After 38 hours of the mooring, as expected, the ship had been fully loaded. The powerful pumps had filled the five holds bringing the waterline of the ship to the highest permissible level and nearly the mark²⁵. After all the operations, the Bayhorse took off its moorings and headed offshore putting the bow east south east towards Dakar to refuel before heading towards the southern tip of Africa and rounding the Cape of Good Hope going up north-east towards India. There was no other alternative since the Suez Channel, in those years, was permanently closed due to the perennial conflict between Israel and the neighboring countries that had plagued that region since 1948.

Shortly after leaving Jacksonville, Giorgio entered the First Aid room and removing the double bottom of the cabinet, he found an object similar to the previous one. He looked at it and evaluated its weight then put it back in his place. He would have plenty of time to take it back and deliver it. He thought for a moment about who might be on board who was using, perhaps unwittingly, that hiding place. Someone who must have had a duplicate key. He promised himself to investigate in this sense.

25 The mark is an indelible engraving on the hull which must remain out of the water and which indicates the maximum load the ship can safely handle.

The navigation had been going on quietly for some days when, one morning, the Chief Engineer informed the Captain that one of the huge bushings, where the propeller shaft was housed, was dangerously overheating and asked to requisition all the fresh water available on board to cool it continuously. He also announced that the maximum cruising speed possible in those conditions could not have been more than 3 or 4 miles per hour. The prospect was not rosy, without fresh water and at that speed, the ocean crossing would not have been very pleasant.

The Captain gave the order to set aside a reserve of fresh water to drink and made the tanks with the remaining fresh water available to the Chief Engineer. There was also a supply of bottled mineral water on board which was normally intended for officers but which was set aside for the entire crew in case of emergency. Showers were not even talked about and washing with sea water was impossible, since in a short time they would all be transformed into statues of salt. Fortunately the weather was fine, the sea calm but boredom prevailing. The boatswain, to keep sailors busy, devised some unusual tasks. Apart from the usual painting of the hull, he put some sailors at the disposal of the chief engineer to assist with the shifts in cooling the failing propeller shaft. He also organized fishing shifts that were possible at that speed. The cook provided butcher's hooks and an old expert sailor joined them together by tying them to an old steel cable that was spun into the sea. A sailor always stood guard on the gigantic hook that had an empty wooden barrel as a float. Other impatient onlookers also often paused to take a look at the float in the sea.

The Captain, who was among the curious, grinned at the sailor on guard and said: "Bravo bravo... do you want to fish Moby Dick with that big hook? " In fact, that gigantic hook could only attract some very large animals, covered as it was with kitchen scraps and bones held together by a dense net.

The boatswain was hoping for some large grouper or some swordfish. Giorgio hoped instead that the hook would not attract dolphins, for which he had a particular affection. He often stopped at the stern to watch them play with the propeller, chasing the ship and jumping out of the water. Once a dolphin jumped very close to the rail where he had been observing them and saw the dolphin's eye in mid-air that stared at him for a brief moment before diving back. It seemed that it was smiling at him.

One morning around seven Giorgio was awakened by the cries of the sailor guarding the hook. He got out and headed aft from where the cable had been dropped. At the side there were already several sailors, the boatswain and the Captain. A huge five or six yards white shark had bitten and was struggling harpooned by the big hook it had swallowed. The animal must have had monstrous strength because the steel cable that was in tension rubbing on the bulwark, raised some sparks and with each tug of the animal a dull blow was heard that made the bulwark vibrate. There was immediately a kind of war council between the Captain, Giorgio and the boatswain, on what to do with that monster. It was definitely not edible. The Chinese ate only the lips and used the dried fin as an aphrodisiac. Nobody was interested in tasting its lips and there was no need for aphrodisiacs. Lifting him

aboard would therefore have been useless as well as dangerous.

An animal of that size could have survived for hours out of the water unless you shot it in the head immediately and no one was tempted to see it squirming on deck and maybe biting someone. As a trophy it would have been a clutter on board and would have required time and taxidermist expertise. The war council unanimously decided to free the prisoner.

The boatswain asked everyone to move away at a safe distance and released the steel cable which, hissing and snaking dangerously through the air, disappeared into the sea together with the shark. The barrel that served as a float was seen quickly moving away from the ship and then disappearing into the depths of the ocean.

All officers, at the table, avoided drinking mineral water to store it in case of emergency and many of them did not complain at all about the situation. The stock of wine ran out in ten days while that of beer was rationed and lasted twenty. They were about to affect the whiskey reserve when, to everyone's relief, the African coast loomed on the horizon. Dakar finally meant shower and fresh water at will, after a month of sailing in those conditions.

The repairs to the propeller shaft lasted two days and the Bayhorse resumed the sea in a southerly direction, skirting the African coast, cutting the Gulf of Guinea and resuming the coast of Africa, keeping further out along the dangerous Skeleton Coast of the Namibia. The First Assistant Engineer who had sailed in those waters during the war told that along that coast there was a secret base of German Uboats well

protected from the continuous change of the seabed, so no submarine hunter ship dared to approach because of the dangers of the submerged dunes that changed shape quickly and that no nautical chart could report. Being stranded it meant losing the ship and the crew. In that area the impetuous winds push the enormous sand dunes of the coast into the sea and then the current makes them fall, creating changing and insidious seabeds. In fact, the name of Skeleton Coast derives from the presence of thousands of shipwrecks that have been stranded over the centuries in those dangerous waters. The Bushmen who live there say their land was created by God when he was angry.

Beyond the Tropic of Capricorn the sea began to swell and after 30 degrees latitude south it unexpectedly reached gale 10/11 even though the weather reports had reported storm 7/8. Evidently the local weather reports was either not using the Beaufort scale or was not as accurate as those of Malta radio, thought Giorgio.

Fortunately, the sea came from the south, almost of bow and the Bayhorse plunged into the gigantic waves almost halfway up the hull. A similar sea taken from the side would have caused the ship to overturn. The crests of the waves that passed along the ship edge reached almost the bearing compass bridge, the highest one of the ship. Giorgio estimated that they should be over 10 meters high and thought it was fortunate that the ship was loaded because if empty it would really be at the mercy of the waves. The old hull vibrated and emitted sinister squeaks which were echoed by the rumble of water falling on the sheets of the deck. All the watertight doors were barred and

only through the portholes one could witness the unfolding hell of water. The Captain and all deck officers were on bridge watching that wild sea. While the engine crew was all in the engine room ready to cope with any emergency.

When nature is unleashed in that way, it frightens but above all it fascinates and the amazement and wonder at seeing such a powerful spectacle prevails over the fear. Giorgio was reminded of the paralyzed mouse in front of the snake that is about to grab him. The wind whistling madly made the crests of the huge waves foaming, causing the hull to pitch with dangerous inclinations. When the bow plunged into the wave, the stern came completely out of the water. Engineers went crazy closing the steam when the free propeller threatened to reach an unsustainable number of revolutions, to reopen it immediately afterwards, when the propeller returned underwater. The Captain, impassive, but pale in the face like everyone else, commented that in the Pacific ocean, over 40 south latitude, he had seen waves more than 20 meters high. All the other officers, also pale in the face, commented something by return, remaining impassive. The helmsman and the two sailors on the lookout threw furtive glances from time to time to see some signs of concern on the faces of the officers but could only notice calm and firmness that ensured them.

The helmsman, chosen from among the most experienced sailors, had a delicate task at that juncture. He had to keep the bow at sea and continually correct without worrying too much about going off course. When he deviated by 5 degrees from the intended course he alerted the Captain who gave him further in-

structions. An anomalous wave, stronger than the others, hit the forward hold and caused the hatch covered by the waterproof to collapse. There was a depression in the center which indicated that some of the heavy wooden planks had given way and most likely the hold was flooded. It was not possible to go and control the situation because the sea would have swept away any daredevils who dared to venture on deck. Hold number one was the smallest of the five and the hull could have floated even if completely flooded but, by leaning forward, the hull would have taken on even more water.

The storm lasted about 12 hours with the only damage to the bow hold, then the sea calmed down, albeit relatively and dropped to storm 8, nothing compared to the previous power. The Bayhorse returned to course and navigation resumed regular. The boatswain sent sailors to the bow hold who confirmed a partial flooding whereby the water had mixed with the fertilizer creating a gray slime that would have made it unusable. The hatch boards and the damaged tarpaulin were replaced.

Rounding the Cape of Good Hope, the ship veered north-east to pass east of Madagascar and avoid the counter current of the Mozambique channel which flows southwards. After passing Madagascar, it turned her bow towards the Horn of Africa and the island of Socotra. The island, semi-deserted in those years, was a well-known refuge for Somali pirates who tried to board passing ships, get on board and steal everything they found usable or resalable. At night they often turned off the coastal lighthouse, in the hope that some ship ran aground on the coasts in

order to plunder it. They weren't very dangerous as they weren't well armed and mostly with machetes and some old guns, but some caution was still necessary because if they were able to get on board they could create serious problems.

As they approached Socotra, which they would have left to the west, the Captain had all the sailors come on deck and placed them along both sides of the ship and two for each bridge wing on lookout with binoculars. The sea was calm and flat and one could have noticed a boat, even a small one, at a considerable distance.

A sailor on guard on the left wing signaled the presence of a small sailing boat that looked like a fishing boat and was following a course parallel to the Bayhorse a couple of miles away. Giorgio pointed his binoculars from the bridge and saw that, having lowered the sail and forcing the engine, it had set off on an interception course with the Bayhorse that was already sailing with the engine at full speed. The Captain knew about it and after telling the officers, that he knew they were armed, not to fire without his specific order, he ordered the boatswain to have six fire hoses connected to the port side of the ship. He called the engine room and ordered them to steam the deck hoses. Giorgio at that time did not understand the intentions of the Captain, who asked the First and Second Mates to join the sailors at the hoses. The Second Mate, taken from his warlike nature deriving from his Serbian ancestors who had gutted the invading Turkish Muslims for centuries, before going down from the bridge he approached Giorgio and whispered: "Come down as soon as you can, we let them hook the stairs

and while they go up we shoot them in their mouths". But the Captain was right, his strategy was to not let them get on board and avoid a shooting that would surely have caused many victims. The six hoses could launch steam of over 200 degrees at a distance of 20 or 30 yards and, whoever was in the jet, would be left without skin. The boat of false fishermen was fast approaching followed by another one that appeared out of nowhere at a distance of half a mile.

Arriving a hundred yards from the ship, the Captain gave orders to the officers on deck to open the hoses by pointing them upwards as a demonstration. Giorgio took a look at his S&W 38 special that he wore in the holster under his armpit, checked if the drum was fully loaded and mixed with his hand the thirty bullets he had in his pocket. He was a bit tense but the contact of the weapon under the armpit reassured him.

The boat seemed to slow down its run but not having given back with the engine it arrived at about thirty yards from the Bayhorse. The Captain then gave orders to point all six hoses on their bow. The jets of steam were unable to fully take the boat due to the distance at the limit of range, but the pirate who was standing on the bow let out a horrifying scream and fell backwards. Their engine was heard roaring to give it all astern and they veered hard left to get away, but they could not avoid a second jet of steam on the stern which caused another equally gruesome scream. They quickly moved away preceded by the second boat which, having seen the scene, had veered even before. The Captain approached the mouthpiece for the engine

room and after a laconic "You can turn off steam" he went back to his cabin.

Beyond Socotra the Bayhorse turned its bow to the east, skirting the Arabian peninsula several tens of miles away and then veering south towards Bombay. They were about 100 miles from Bombay when Giorgio, from the bridge wing, noticed a strange smell in the air. In the open sea, the air normally smells of brackish, but that smell was indefinable and very unpleasant. He asked the Captain who was on guard on the bridge: "Captain, do you feel this stench too?", "It stinks of Bombay, Mr. Relli, you will see, it will be even worse in the city. But don't worry because after a couple of days you get used to it and doesn't feel it anymore" he answered smiling. Giorgio frowned and hoped fervently that the Captain was right about the couple of days.

The Bayhorse docked at a peripheral pier far from the commercial port and, from the mooring point, one could see in the distance some very high warehouses with corrugated metal roofs. There were no other ships nearby and no suction equipment for unloading or silos for storage. Giorgio thought that certainly the unloading operations would take a long time and immediately packed a suitcase to settle in a hotel with air conditioning, as the ship was heating up in the sun and he had nothing to do on board. He greeted the Captain who, with a nod in response, added: "When in town, pay attention to M-F-S: Misery, Flies and Shit and let me know where you are staying that I will come to see you tonight."

Giorgio got into the cab he had called, a black right-hand drive Fiat 1100 E with a yellow roof and

and also quite dented. Later he discovered that all Bombay cabs were of the same model and color and almost all in the same condition but with very clean interiors full of various junk hung everywhere according to the driver's tastes.

He was taken to the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel which was a huge 5-storey building by the sea, surmounted by a dome that looked like St. Peter's in Rome. In evident Old English style, it was very luxurious and sumptuously furnished. He was given a huge room larger than the Bayhorse bridge, the Captain's cabin, his cabin and the radio station all put together and with delightful air conditioning. Giorgio phoned on board and informed the Captain of where he was, then he emptied his suitcase and lay down on the bed to enjoy the air conditioner. He woke up around 7 pm, took a shower and went down to the hotel bar.

In the Indian state of Maharashtra of which Bombay was the capital, prohibition was in force for alcohol, but in practice it was only valid for Indians. Foreigners in luxury hotels were controlled by the police and could drink moderately while Indians were forbidden. The result was that there were thousands of clandestine bars in the city, mostly frequented by Indians. In hotel bars where a policeman sat at a desk stationed at the entrance, an Indian ordered a whiskey for the policeman and then could drink without limits. The foreigners did the same. Obviously, no policeman was able to drink the hundreds of whiskeys that were offered every evening so, once he drank his dose, he was reimbursed in rupees by the bartender for the amount of glasses offered and not drunk. Obviously the bar-

tender reserved a percentage with the consent of the policeman and everything worked perfectly.

When Giorgio sat at the bar counter and ordered a Vodka Martini, the barman took care to inform him of the custom, for which he paid for a whiskey and glanced at the seated policeman he had not noticed upon entering and received a broad smile in return. He was about to decide to go to the restaurant when the Captain emerged at the entrance who, upon entering, turned a look of disgust at the policeman and reached Giorgio with: " What the fuck is he doing here? " Giorgio explained the Indian custom to him and they went to the restaurant together.

After dinner the Captain had desire to have fun and proposed to George to try some Indian girls. They got into a cab, that was a black Fiat 1100E with a yellow roof and the Captain muttered something in the driver's ear who, with a skillful slalom to avoid the bodies of those who were already sleeping on the street, took them to the Paradise Hotel. The tempting name didn't exactly match the reality of the place. It wasn't a hotel but a fairly decently maintained brothel.

The two new customers were greeted in the lobby by an individual dressed in luxurious Indian clothes and seated, obviously in the Indian style, on a kind of cylindrical platform one yard above the floor, smoking a long homemade cigarette made with who knows what crap, kept between ring finger and little finger, sucking it from the closed fist. At the sight of the two foreigners, he promptly gave the order to an attendant, with the shrill voice of a eunuch, to have them sit in the private sitting room. They sat down on a long sofa and a few minutes later the parade of girls began.

Giorgio was not particularly horny like the Captain but he told himself that it was time to relax with an Indian girl. While waiting, the Captain told him: "Mr. Relli, let me advise you, choose one of those who suffer a lot of tickling because they are better in bed." And when the girls arrived he got up and tickled everyone. He chose for him a curvy woman, in her early twenties, who could not stand still under her manual works. He continued the search undeterred since Giorgio, feeling himself a bit ridiculous to tickle whores in a brothel, had not got up from the sofa. The search ended to the great satisfaction of the Captain who pushed on the sofa a very young girl with her black eyes wide open in amazement and a bit of fear, saying to Giorgio: "This is even better than mine, have fun!" So he disappeared into a room with her girlfriend in tow.

Giorgio spent most of the night with the girl chosen by the Captain and found her delicious and very sweet. She had to be a beginner as a prostitute because she looked like a girl who wanted to make love rather than work. She was very shy and let him do everything he wanted with her but she prevented him, with an unexpected modesty, from looking at her naked out of bed. That made Giorgio smile but he respected, even if reluctantly, that unusual modesty.

He returned to the Taj Mahal around five in the morning and immediately fell asleep. Around eleven he went down to the bar and sat down at a table in the inner garden, ordering some Italian-style coffee. The waiter, very attentive, nodded and returned with a bowl full of coffee which was not bad after all. He was sipping his XXL coffee when he caught a glimpse

of a silhouette dressed in white who said to him: "Good morning Mr. Relli, well up, did you sleep well after the hard work at the Paradise Hotel?" Giorgio looked up and gasped, risking spilling coffee on his white linen suit and stammered: "Very well, thank you!" And he added, composing himself. "Isn't you following me by chance? ". "Let's say we care a lot about our collaborators and always check their safety, Bombay can be dangerous at night" replied the green-eyed blonde with a smile. Giorgio thought of his S&W gun that he had left in his room after taking it off with the holster on his return to the hotel and that he would do well to keep it always with him or put it in the safe. "Don't worry, I know how to take care of myself and sometimes of others as well" he answered smiling.

The blonde kindly asked permission to sit at his table and before getting it she sat down nicely saying: "It is time for me to answer some of the questions you have been asking for months" and lowering her voice even though the garden was completely deserted, she continued: "You see, I represent an organization, a kind of supranational club, that have interests all over the world with practically unlimited resources. All members united together can influence any event on the planet, from politics to the stock market and can even influence currencies around the world as they please." She stopped waiting for Giorgio's reaction, who impassively asked: "OK, understood, the club of the very rich people is not a novelty. What I did not understand is why they seek my collaboration and it will certainly not be to save money" he finished with a smirk. "Not for sure, but you see you are the ideal collaborator for us. They examined everything about you,

character, reliability, political ideas, ability to react, coldness when needed, so they can predict any behavior of you in any eventuality. Furthermore, you are easily controllable both on board and on shore. Our control and communication systems are much more advanced than your shortwave transmitters. Finally, you have the ability to transfer confidential items from one part of the world to another with absolute discretion and security“.

Giorgio nodded and added: "Please tell me about the item I gave you in Miami". "We know you opened it and examined it. We also have video recordings of you looking for it in the First Aid room and what you did in the storage room. You were supposed to open it even though you stopped at the sphere and that was appreciated. The sphere can self-destruct if clumsily forced. I am authorized to assure you that the object is not intended to harm anyone but is only a container of information. I am not authorized to give you further details for now." Giorgio replied with an ironic smile: "Well miss mystery, I wanted to know above all about the harmlessness of the object. Welcome me aboard the club and tell me what will happen after Bombay“.”For the moment I have no other information to give you" she answered and added smiling and opening those green eyes in which Giorgio feared to sink: "Tomorrow an Indian police officer will come aboard to collect the object that you did not open this time... you good boy." Giorgio nodded his head and threw her a: "Why don't you stop here for lunch with me?". " I would do it very willingly.“ She said in a tone that seemed sincere "But unfortunately I have a binding commitment with very important people and

it is not the case that I postpone the appointment.“ She greeted Giorgio with a gracious smile and left.

The day passed between boredom and relaxation until dinner when the Captain reappeared and they sat down at the usual restaurant table. Arriving at the after meal coffee, the Captain proposed: "What about the Paradise Hotel?" Giorgio agreed, thinking that he would gladly see the girl with the shy black eyes again. When they entered, the eunuch removed the closed fist from which he was sucking the cigarette and gave them a dazzling smile. He shouted some orders in Hindi and after a while he asked Giorgio to take the room 5 and the Captain the 7. The girl wore for him a delightful sari interwoven with gold threads and stood beside her bed. As she saw him coming in, she stared her eyes wide from her joy and threw her arms around his neck holding him and hiding her face against his shoulder. She was even sweeter and more shy than the previous time and she gave herself to him with an even more intense passion.

The next day around noon, he was chatting with the Captain on the bridge wing and commenting with disapproval on the rudimentary way of unloading the holds. A truck was positioned under alongside while the loaders in the hold filled rectangular pots, a couple of yards long and one wide, with shovels. Once filled, they were hooked to the ship's crane and lifted spreading a cloud of fine dust and then tipped into the truck body which had sides no higher than one yard, spreading clouds of dust all around again. The truck then went away wobbling and losing dust from the unsteady banks and creating more clouds along the way.

After a few days the dock had risen by about four inches due to the layer of fertilizer spread.

An officer of the Indian police went on board, greeted Giorgio and in perfect English similar to what Giorgio now knew, said to him: "Mr. Relli? I'm here for the withdrawal". Giorgio returned the greeting and asked him to wait for a moment. He went up to the First Aid room and took the object and after putting it in a canvas bag, he went back down and handed it to the officer who greeted him with a nod of his head, turned his heels and left at a slow and martial pace without uttering a word. Giorgio told himself that it was necessary to see the blonde again and get more information. Apart from the mysterious object, there were other things that left him perplexed. Even assuming they had unlimited resources, how did they manage to control him on board in real time as she claimed? How could they send information and even videos if it took him hours from the Indian Ocean to send a simple telegram to Rome Radio? Not to mention all the other extraordinary control abilities scattered around the world. They had to have a powerful organization but also a technology still unknown. He remembered the perfect construction of the object he had opened. The mechanics and the materials that made it up were simply amazing. Could they be aliens? Giorgio wondered for a moment, but he smiled to himself and rejected the hypothesis. Another thing that was not at all clear to him was the intentions of this organization, only commercial or even political? Did they have the goal of controlling the world? Or maybe they were already doing it... Having no answers at the moment he promised himself to look for

the blonde even if he didn't know how. Until now she had always found him.

The problem solved itself. A sailor joined him in the cabin where he was looking for clothes to take to the hotel and told him that someone were looking for him on the landline phone. The blonde's voice again caused the usual tingling. "Good morning Mr. Relli, if you still have that idea, I would gladly have dinner with you at the Taj Mahal tonight at 8 pm" Giorgio under the effect of the tingling in the back of his neck and looking for a demeanor so as not to let the emotion show, answered: "But certainly, very willingly". "Well, see you tonight then " she said in his usual sensual voice and hung up. He returned to the hotel and spent all the time listing the questions he would have liked to ask her. He repeated the list many times until he knew it perfectly by heart, even in reverse order.

He was at the hotel bar at 7:45 p.m. with a Vodka Martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other when she came in, casually looking around. She was gorgeous, she wore a delightful pearl gray evening dress that left her shoulders bare highlighting her swollen breasts and accentuating her short, cheeky blonde hair. She looked like a brat, but classy. When she saw him she approached him smiling and said: "Good evening, I don't have time for aperitifs I'm very hungry!" Giorgio smiled back. He finished his Vodka Martini with a sip, stubbed out his cigarette and, taking her gently under her arm, piloted her to the restaurant. As they passed between the tables, almost all the males turned to admire her and to look at him with undisguised envy. Those who did not it faced with a wife who stared at them with menacing eyes.

After ordering dinner from a waiter who seemed to be moving on roller skates, Giorgio turned to her with a smile: "Do you want us to talk after dinner or don't you mind starting right away? I have a lot of questions to ask you". "I don't mind eating and talking, so we can start right away" she said, smiling back. Giorgio had millions of questions but he forced himself to be rational and to start with the most important ones. "First I would like to know the aims and intentions of this organization. I do not hide the fact that I would not be willing to pretend for my personal economic advantages and if I were not in line with their intentions I would immediately stop the collaboration. Then I'd be curious to get my nose into your technology. From what I imagine you should have a private place where it was developed and where you made those marvels of objects that I have examined. This aspect, even if secondary to the first one I told you, interests me a lot." He spoke in one breath and waited for the answer with some apprehension. He would have been sorry not to see her again. She replied immediately, lowering her voice just a little: "You see, Mr. Relli, you were chosen after a careful analysis made by experts, so I have no doubt that you agree with what I am about to tell you. The organization which has been given a very fascinating name, The Phoenix, has mainly economic purposes as it aims to achieve the well-being of all the inhabitants of the planet, but by checking that development is balanced and gradual. In this sense, The Phoenix must necessarily deal with politics as well. We are convinced that the best way, for an optimal coexistence between human beings, is not capitalism or liberalism and not

even the communist ideas of Marx that irrationally put classes in conflict with each other. A supranational leadership is needed that deals with the interests of all social classes and harmonizes their mutual collaboration. In other words, the entrepreneur must pay the right salary to the worker who in return must offer him his work with an adequate collaborative commitment. Rights and duties must be well defined and harmonized. The freedom of an individual cannot be unlimited because this would mean prevarication for others. It must end where the freedom of the other begins. All this must take place without partisan or ideological conflicts and under the control of an impartial organization that aims at the global collective good. It will take several generations before reaching the final goal, after having overcome all partisan interests and the various political factions in conflict, but we are working leisurely with very clear ideas. Maybe neither you nor I will see the final result but it will surely be there. Our scientists, who work on predictions based on precise estimates and analyzes, predict that the new global system will begin to bear fruit after 2060, in almost 100 years." She paused as the waiter served dinner and looked him in the eye with a look that showed her total belief in what she had just told him. When the waiter had gone away, Giorgio replied: "It is certainly a tempting goal and, as your experts had predicted, I agree perfectly. Tell me about your technology that intrigues me very much". She smiled at him and continued: "This curiosity of yours was also expected, given the calculations you made to understand if the sphere was full or empty" and continued serious: "Have you ever heard about Area 51? ". Of course "

answered Giorgio with a frown "from what I know it is a secret military base in Nevada where people say they are also studying aliens. But what does it have to do with The Phoenix?" The blonde lowered her voice even more and stopping in midair her fork, where a bite of curry chicken was skewered, bending slightly forward towards him, she said: "We do not depend on any government even if some collaborate with us without knowing it. We have nothing to do with the Area 51 military base, but thanks to our highly placed and very discreet friends, several years ago we established our base 40 meters below the military base and remained completely independent and self-sufficient. Basically we are a top secret below a top secret and we are a top secret even for our neighbors upstairs. Nobody knows of our existence under Area 51 so the confidentiality is almost total. If someone would decide to make our presence public there, it would only feed another unproven and unverifiable legend such as that of the aliens and other mysteries linked to Area 51 that the public is greedy of, without causing us any damage." Giorgio nodded. waiting for more interesting revelations and she went on: "I am not able to give you technical details about our technology but I assure you it is science fiction turned to reality. Many scientists, who have inexplicably disappeared over the years, work for us and many others collaborate in secret. They do it willingly not only for the economic advantages that derive from it but also because they have enormous resources and equipment at their disposal, unthinkable in other research laboratories, even the most advanced. The laboratories in area 51 are playgrounds compared to ours" and she continued

smiling "In area 51 they are developing spy planes while our scientists are working on an engine for interstellar spaceships. We are a few hundred years ahead of them. Finally I must tell you that our safety and also that of external collaborators is guaranteed by super-trained personnel equipped with weapons that are unimaginable for you. Your S&W 38 is a toy by comparison. They are not killers, even if they would not hesitate to kill a human being if ordered to them, but they operate strictly following the orders received without moral or sentimental conditioning. They are something like very efficient and well-programmed robots."

He stopped and Giorgio was silent for a few minutes to process all that information, while she silently watched him. They finished dinner and Giorgio asked her: "Why did you choose this restaurant?". "It's simple..." she answered with a smile "It's more comfortable for you and for me also since I am staying here too, so you don't have to worry about deciding whether to ask me to accompany me or not, as you were already thinking" and emphasized the smile maliciously. Giorgio returned the smile but remained imperturbable. He liked the blonde very much but he didn't want to force events with inappropriate phrases. He wanted her to make the first move in that direction so he went back to the previous topic. "You already know the destination of the Bayhorse right?" "No, now you are wrong, but I will certainly know before departure and after they have processed the information contained in the object you brought. The Bayhorse, in practice, sails for us without the knowledge of the owner and crew, apart from you. We organize

trips by arranging chartering contracts to places where the presence of the object is useful. The owner, unaware, is happy to enter into profitable contracts with companies that are always different even if they are always controlled by us and from which it is impossible to trace The Phoenix. By the way, the object has a name, we call it Flier ". "Flier?... A flier... that carries news around... interesting" Giorgio replied. "Yes, exactly but I am not yet authorized to tell you anything else about its functioning and its content, also because I know very little about it" she said, getting up from the table and added "You have to excuse me but I have to retire, I need to sleep a lot because awaits an important mission. You stay here, please, and don't worry about the bill that had already been paid even before my arrival" Giorgio stood up and stay at the table as she walked away waving her hand without turning. He followed her with his eyes and with a: "See you tomorrow... " She stopped for a moment, turned her head and smiled at him over her shoulder, then went straight on and left the restaurant among the admiring glances of the few males left unattended.

Giorgio had no desire to go up to his sumptuous room, He called a cab and was taken to the Paradise hotel. The girl with the big eyes was waiting for him near the bed in a refined sari, this time quilted in silver. As she saw him at the door she took off the top of her sari and with a very quick movement she dropped everything to the ground remaining completely naked, standing in front of him.

One morning, passing through the hall and on his way to the dining room for breakfast, a concierge stopped him haughtily and handed him an envelope

addressed to him. Giorgio, a little surprised, put it in his jacket pocket and went to his table. After ordering a hearty breakfast, he took the envelope out of his pocket. It bore the heading of the Bombay Presidency Golf Club and contained an invitation to the party that will to be held three days later, at 6pm. It recommended the evening dress and the presentation at the entrance of the invitation that was personally made out to him. Giorgio, about golf, only knew that it was played with clubs and that a ball had to be hit and he imagined that such an invitation had to do with the blonde and The Phoenix. He did not have a suitable evening suit so he tracked down the concierge and asked him where he could get a tuxedo, quickly. The very helpful concierge and up to his mission, proposed two solutions. The first was to rent one and Giorgio was not very keen on wearing a used suit in India. The second was the tailor Gigi.

After half an hour, while he was sitting in the garden, the tailor Gigi arrived. He was a short, stout little man, with a parting in the middle of his straight black hair and, to Giorgio's surprise, he spoke Italian fairly correctly. The efficiency of the concierge was immediately revealed when the tailor Gigi took some fabric samples from the bag he had with him. Giorgio chose a light, iron gray silk fabric and black satin for the lapels. "I know that you are in a certain hurry" said tailor Gigi and continued "If we take the measurements immediately, tomorrow I will be back for the first test and the day after tomorrow it will be ready" Giorgio agreed and, unsolicited, handed him a \$ 20 bill, telling him with a smile "It will definitely be

ready for the day after tomorrow, right?". " Certainly sir " assured the tailor Gigi.

On the evening of the party Giorgio, in his elegant tuxedo, reached the Presidency Golf Club by cab, having the driver calculate that he would be at his destination at exactly 6 pm and not earlier. On the way they passed a sign with the inscription Tailoring and outside the door under the sign several half-naked individuals sat on the sidewalk, with turbans on their heads, sewing clothes and keeping the fabric taut with their bare toes. Giorgio hoped that they weren't those employed by the tailor Gigi.

The Presidency Golf Club was the most prestigious in Bombay and was founded by the British during the occupation. Finding an 18-hole club inside a city was a rare thing, thought Giorgio. At the entrance he showed the invitation and the man in charge of the control with extreme deference addressed him in a low voice: "Welcome Mr. Relli, I will immediately accompany you to the reserved area". He was accompanied, by a young trotting waiter, to an area of the playing field, at hole 4, which had been specially fenced and where a huge gazebo with sofas, chairs and tables had been set up. In the center of the gazebo stood a superb buffet that could have fed all the Bayhorse crew for a month. The place was splendid, surrounded by greenery and secluded. Ideal for confidential interviews as Giorgio expected. Evidently it was too early for the reserved area to come alive so he got a Vodka Martini from the well-stocked bar set up next to the buffet, he chose a corner table and waited.

It was almost 7pm and he was sipping his second Vodka Martini when he heard a noise from the sky

that made him think of a helicopter. After a few minutes, a few hundred meters from the gazebo, a big helicopter appeared from the treetops and landed gently on the grass. When the huge propeller stopped, two small vehicles appeared from the thicket of the trees surrounding the clearing, traveling close to the lawn without touching it. Giorgio had already seen the hovercrafts that crossed in the English Channel between France and England but he was amazed to find them there and, above all, so silent. Five men and a woman got off the helicopter ladder and took their places on the hovercrafts. While he was watching the approaching vehicles, he noticed that other guests were coming from the club and took their places at the tables so the gazebo began to come alive. The vehicles stopped about ten meters from the gazebo and the passengers, except for the blonde who walked towards him, took their places at the large low rectangular table placed in front of the buffet, surrounded by elegant white Chesterfield armchairs.

Giorgio was not at all surprised to find her there and he greeted her politely as if he were seeing her for the first time. He had decided to keep a detached demeanor. She approached him saying: "Welcome Mr. Relli, soon I will introduce you to a very important person who wants to meet you" and with a smile she walked away towards the other tables that were filling up. Giorgio looked at the people who were talking sitting on the armchairs around the table. One in particular struck him. He had a very tall slender figure that was noticeable even when seated, with Caucasian features, he wore very white, wavy, rather long hair and was apparently the oldest and perhaps the most impor-

tant since all the others turned to him when they spoke and one could see him nod or answer briefly. Giorgio decided he was the boss. But what amazed him most was the fact that he could hear nothing of their conversation, not even an incomprehensible buzz as he managed, with his trained hearing, to pick up conversations from much more distant tables. He was pondering this when the blonde approached him again and sat down at the table. “In a short time I will accompany you to that table that you have certainly noticed but, before, I must warn you not to be surprised when you enter the acoustic dome” . “Acoustic dome?” Giorgio repeated “Yes, you see that table is located under a special dome thanks to which all the sounds produced inside cannot go beyond the invisible walls of the dome. When you’ll enter you’ll hear only a very brief buzz and then nothing more from the outside” she looked at him to make sure he understood. “This is the explanation for the strangeness that I had noticed earlier and that amazed me. Who is that old man with white hair?” He asked “He is the person who wants to meet you. He will tell you himself” she replied smiling.

The tables under the gazebo were all occupied and many had dishes from the buffet that looked delicious. The blonde accompanied him near the special table and passing Giorgio heard the loud voices coming from the numerous tables around him. She stopped and motioned him to continue. Giorgio felt for half a second the buzz she had announced to him and then nothing more. He entered a hushed atmosphere where no noise was heard. The other participants had left and the white-haired gentleman was sitting alone in his

armchair on the short side of the table. He stared at him with disconcerting eyes, which Giorgio had never seen before, of a very light gray color, almost white, and pointed with his hand to the armchair next to him, telling Giorgio in a tone of voice that seemed authoritarian and cordial in the same time: "Please take a seat, Mr. Relli. You will have been amazed by several things I imagine, starting with our acoustic dome that allows us to converse with confidence even in a crowd. Do you know we also have an individual portable version?" "Sir, I am no longer surprised at anything" he said with a smile "since the young lady mentioned the technologies used by The Phoenix". "Ah, the young lady you mean is the Duchess Alexandra von Hohenstaufen, descended from an officially extinct dynasty but which actually still exists and has been part of The Phoenix for many years. She is one of our most precious collaborators" and after a short pause he continued in a friendly but firm tone that sounded like an order disguised as advice: "I would propose to avoid the terms Mr. or Sir in our conversations. It will be easier. I will call you Giorgio and you will call me Morgan and we will continue this way as all the other members do." Giorgio agreed as he was not very interested in the definition of the formalities in use and asked: "Listen Morgan, can I ask you some questions?" And at his nod he went on "On the acoustic dome I have nothing to ask you because it is simply amazing and the technical details would be beyond my understanding but I would like to ask you about the hovercrafts I noticed upon your arrival. They have an electric motor right?" Morgan just smiled and replied nonchalantly "Oh those... are electric toys that we

need to test a new type of batteries that we are developing. You think that one of those vehicles can definitely run for a year with the newly developed batteries it has on board. We discreetly place them in suitable places just to test battery life. Some of our designers say the lifespan could be up to two years and we are checking it out. But I must tell you that you have deceived yourself by calling them hovercraft. They actually have a propeller on the bottom but it only serves to make it pass for a hovercraft and avoid indiscreet questions. In reality those vehicles travel on a magnetic cushion that keeps them off the ground”.

For Giorgio such batteries were unimaginable and amazed him much more than the acoustic dome, while for Morgan they were both curious toys. He didn't ask for more about the magnetic propulsion system to avoid migraines. It was already too much for him to imagine those fantastic batteries. “Well...” Morgan said with a smile “Now it's my turn to ask questions” and becoming serious he began: “You have shown Alexandra your identity of views with the final objective that The Phoenix intends to pursue. But you did not do it regarding the means by which we intend to reach it” he paused and staring at him with his light gray eyes continued: “Our experts who have carefully examined your behavior have already given me an answer but I would like to hear from your voice how far you are willing to go to collaborate with us” Giorgio stared into his eyes and replied: “Before I answer you, let me ask you if your interest in me is a prelude to a closer collaboration with The Phoenix and some assignment you has in mind to assign me.” Morgan, impassive, assented with a nod of the head and Giorgio

continued “I want to be honest with you as is my habit especially when it comes to important topics. I fully agree with the objective of the Phoenix and I consider it the only possible solution to create a balanced civilization that spreads well-being among all the inhabitants of the planet. I am also sure that the path will be very difficult because we will be in conflict with mainly economic interests but also with political and power interests that will oppose by any means. Precisely for this reason I would have no scruples in acting with such determination. Sacrificing a few to save many can be considered ruthless on a moral level but it is the most logical and pragmatic solution that can be adopted to achieve the intended purpose”. He stopped and waited for his interlocutor to speak who was staring at an indefinite point beyond the gazebo. After a couple of minutes, Morgan spoke again: “Well, Giorgio, that was what I wanted to hear from you to confirm the information already in my possession. We will meet again in a few months when you will visit our base in the USA”. He slowly got up from his chair as if absorbed in who knows what thoughts, greeted absently with a short wave of his hand and headed out of the gazebo towards one of those vehicles that looked like a hovercraft.

Giorgio returned to his table and shortly after he heard the sound of the helicopter taking off. He stayed at the table for almost an hour, delighting himself with the buffet dishes and reflecting on the interview, while the other tables were slowly emptying. He looked around for Alexandra but didn't see her, so he went back into the club building and asked to call a cab.

That evening he didn't go to the Paradise hotel but stayed in the hotel bar until late, rearranging his thoughts over a couple of Old Fitzgerald glasses. After about a week, while he was on board to check the radio station, he received a call on the land line and the blonde's voice rang: "Good morning Giorgio". "Good morning Alexandra". Calling him by first name meant that he was now part of The Phoenix. "The Bayhorse will sail for Mombasa next week. The Flier will be withdrawn shortly after your arrival". Giorgio now not surprised at all replied: "Okay Alexandra, will you be in Mombasa too?", "Of course, I'm still your guardian angel" and he hung up.

A few days later Giorgio left the hotel and went back on board. As he climbed into his cabin still with the suitcase in his hand, he passed the Captain who informed him of the ship's destination: Mombasa, Kenya.

When the Bayhorse left its moorings, the quay was two feet higher due to fertilizer lost during unloading. Leaving the port he turned the bow to the southwest to cross the Indian ocean. After a week of smooth sailing the sea began to swell. The sky was partly cloudy but the strong northeasterly wind caused powerful waves to rise and increased to gale 10. The stern sea pushed the hull making it pitch violently and interfered with the action of the rudder so the Captain made the two more experienced helmsmen.

The situation was delicate, all the deck officers were on bridge and the Engineers in their posts. After a few hours of navigation in critical conditions, one of the sailors on the starboard bridge wing saw a large oil tanker arriving from starboard on an interception course with the Bayhorse. The tanker flew the Norwe-

gian flag and was so loaded it almost looked like a submarine. It had the sea almost sideways but was little affected by it, even if it rolled, it spun at high speed with the deck half-submerged by the waves. It must have had at least 150,000 tons of cargo on board. According to the rules of navigation, the Bayhorse would have had to veer to let it pass but if this had done so it would have had the sea sideways with the risk of capsizing.

Giorgio tried to call the ship by radio to warn them that they were unable to maneuver but with no response. After trying to call them with the Aldis, the Captain had conventional balloons hoisted on the foremast to signal the impossibility of changing course but there was no sign of a response. The Captain commented worried: "They must have engaged the autopilot and they will all be drunk in their cabins. Typical of those ships..."

When they were at a dangerous distance, the Captain gave the order to veer to starboard and, putting the engine at half speed, trusting in the sustained speed of the tanker and perhaps the Bayhorse could have passed after their stern. The wave that hit the hull from the side caused a fearful skid almost on the verge of overturning and tons of water entered even the chimney, flooding the engine room. All the engine personnel were convinced that it was the end and that they were sinking. Someone prayed, others swore but all at their posts. Then everything happened in a moment, the Captain ordered the helmsman to put the stern back to the sea avoiding a second roll that would not have left them any way out and at the same time, inexplicably, the tanker veered decidedly to star-

board, widening from the collision course to let the Bayhorse to pass after their stern. They then saw the tanker resume her usual course a couple of miles later. Resuming navigation en route, even if critical, the Captain, impassive but pale in the face like everyone else, called the engine room to warn them of the past danger and ask for a report on the situation. The Chief Engineer replied in a breathless voice: "Well... thanks Captain. We are pumping out the water and soon we will be dry. However the engine works regularly and has not been affected by the wave". The Captain put the whistle back in the mouthpiece and addressed the officers on the bridge: "Gentlemen please, everyone in my cabin". He pulled a bottle of his special reserve of whiskey out of a locker and filled glasses for everyone. Giorgio who preferred bourbon didn't complain. Having emptied their glasses in silence, each of them returned to his place of service or rest. Only Giorgio remained on the bridge at the engine telegraph together with the Captain.

No one ever knew that from an anonymous satellite in a geostationary orbit on the Indian ocean, command pulses were emitted directed to the tanker's autopilot.

Near the tropic the sea calmed down and the navigation resumed calmly at full speed towards Mombasa. Giorgio checked the Flier in the First Aid room and left it hidden in the usual double bottom. The Bayhorse docked at the timber pier where the huge logs of precious woods destined for Hamburg were waiting. A long trip to circumnavigate Africa and go up the Atlantic Ocean to the North Sea. During the crossing Giorgio had encountered problems with the main re-

ceiver so, once moored, he asked the support agent to send a technician for repair. He had not even tried to repair it himself, also because the failure did not make it completely useless and he had been able to carry on up to Mombasa. However, it was preferable to have it examined by an expert technician. A couple of days after his arrival, while he was on deck watching the logs being hauled aboard, he saw Alexandra on the quay heading towards him followed by a very tall and robust man with very short blond hair, who was pulling a two-wheeled cart with a wooden crate on top. They went up the staircase which was quite steep and the man dragged the cart up to the deck without any apparent effort. Giorgio went to meet them at the bulwark and greeting both of them, he said to Alexandra, with a smile: "Good morning, I see that you are in charge of technical assistance to the radio stations" She returned the greeting and replied, returning the smile: "We brought a replacement receiver as we don't have time to repair yours".

The man took the box in his arms and went up to the radio station. He didn't really have the air of a technician, his sturdy build and the icy gaze of his light blue eyes made him look more to a soldier than to a technician. While he replaced the faulty receiver, Giorgio and Alexandra remained outside the radio station, talking on the life boat bridge. Alexandra whispered to him: "Look, apparently it looks like a wide range receiver of military type, from the Canadian Marconi, like there are many on ships. But in reality, even though he will perform the receiver functions as well as it does, he can do many other things. It is a new type of Flier, disguised as a receiver and will

have to remain on board even after your disembarkation. It will never fail, so it will not need extraneous technical assistance. It cannot be dismantled in the traditional way and, if forced, its interior would destroy itself, becoming an unusable metal pulp” Giorgio stared at her thoughtfully and replied: “I have two questions: the first is why are you putting him on board? And the second is whether I am already scheduled to disembark from the Bayhorse and if so, where to?” She replied seriously: “I answer you starting from the second one, Morgan wants you at the base for an important assignment that he intends to entrust to you” and she continued “After you are gone we need to have total control over everything that happens on board, including about the radio operator who will take your place. The Flier you know does not communicate perfectly with our satellites and this is a risk we cannot take when it comes to important data. This new type, on the other hand, assures us total and safe control”. Giorgio, who was no longer surprised by anything, asked again: “When will my disembarkation take place?” She replied with a sincere expression: “I don't know exactly, Giorgio, but I think within a couple of months and no more. It will be imminent when the ship will have as its destination a port of Canada and during the trip you will receive a telegram directed to you, with the instructions to prepare your disembarkation in a discreet and unsuspected way” and she continued with a smile that made her look even more like a brat “Do not be surprised if you discover that the telegram will have your own receiver as sender: Flier 2.0”. Giorgio had dozens of other questions to ask but did not consider it's the right moment.

The technician had finished and was waiting for them at the door of the radio station, looking around casually. Giorgio could not resist the temptation and lowering his voice asked her: "Who is that?", "He is one of the security guards I told you about. Didn't you understand it?" He nodded silently and they said goodbye. The man lifted the crate with the old receiver as if it were full of feathers, went down the ladder and walked away on the quay. It occurred to Giorgio that they had not collected the Pharmacy Flier and he was about to call them back, then he thought better of it, went to the pharmacy to check, but the Flier was gone.

After a week, the ship was loaded, the holds full and the deck was three yards higher of logs covering it from bow to stern. They set sail at sunset for the Mozambique channel, between Madagascar and the African coast, where the southward current facilitated navigation. The sea was calm and, having rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the Bayhorse turned its bow north to go up the Atlantic, cutting the Gulf of Guinea and approaching Africa again heading Dakar for the usual refueling. Leaving Dakar, it continued northwards, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar and skirting Portugal on to the English Channel.

The weather changed and the sky was covered with a thick layer of low-lying, dense, white clouds. The fog began to fall and when they reached the channel entrance it was so thick that it was difficult to see the bow from the bridge. Crossing the channel in those conditions was not easy. The ferry-boats traffic between France and England was sustained. In addition, the large passenger hovercrafts crossing the channel

further complicated the situation. The Bayhorse on-board radar was an old Danish-made device, complete with a Danish-language manual, which Giorgio had repaired as he could. It worked but it wasn't reliable. At times it signaled non-existent echoes and often did not *see* small boats, not even at short distances. The only way to signal the presence of the ship was the siren. At intervals of a couple of minutes, the watch deck officer sent out a long whistle to signal the presence of the ship, while on the bridge and bow there were sailors on guard, equipped with binoculars with their eyes wide open.

The Bayhorse proceeded without incident, at half speed, the entire length of the channel and exited into the North Sea. The fog cleared slightly but the overcast and milky sky prevented the detection of latitude as the sun was almost invisible behind the thick clouds. The longitude could not be calculated in the absence of the detection of the highest point of the sun at noon so it was impossible to make the ship point. Estimating the position on the basis of the miles traveled relative to the speed of the ship was equally impossible due to the drift of the hull due to wind and wave motion. After three days in those conditions the Captain asked Giorgio to try the on-board radio direction finder. It was an old device Marconi fixed antenna type, installed on board in wartime and remained unused for decades. In theory it could have detected the direction from which a radio signal emitted from a beacon on shore was coming. By taking multiple detection and reporting them on the nautical chart, the ship should have been found at the intersection of the detection lines. Giorgio made several attempts for a

whole day but the best result he managed to get was a polygon on the map at least 50 miles wide, instead of a crossing of the detection on a single point. Knowing that the ship was anywhere within an area of 50 miles on each side was of little use, so the Captain, in the need to have the ship point, resigned himself and asked Giorgio to get their location from coastal stations. It was a paid service that cost several gold francs, which was the international currency used for ship services. The Genoese shipowner's wrists would have trembled upon seeing the ship's expense report. Giorgio locked himself in the radio station and began to consult the lists of coastal stations that offered that type of service, also comparing the relative costs, pitying the idea of the Genoese shipowner's trembling wrists. He was noting down all the data to request the service when from the receiver tuned in medium wave to the guard frequency of 500 kHz, he heard, with a ringing sound, his call sign HOGH, in Morse code. Amazed, he answered with the question *de* and the answer, with a perfectly regular cadence as if it had been transmitted by a machine, was:

HOGH de FLYER2.0

QTH at 1200z

lat 53° 15' 25" N long 3° 10' 12" E

and then silence. The message reported the position of the ship at 1200 with an impressive accuracy of a few tens of meters. Giorgio remained speechless for several minutes staring at the receiver installed by the technician who arrived with Alexandra. While he stared at him, he had the impression that there was a thinking entity inside and that the scale of the frequency indicator was smiling at him. The accuracy of

the position surprised him even more. One degree of latitude corresponds to 60 nautical miles, a minute to a mile and a second to 16 thousandths of a mile, namely about 30 meters.

He recovered from his astonishment and came up with an excuse to justify how he had obtained the ship's position. He told the Captain that he had managed to get the direction finder to work while saving the gold francs from the cost of shore service and handed him the position sheet. The Captain glanced at the sheet and said to him: "Could you tell me, please, how you estimated degrees, minutes and also seconds?" omitting the articles as usual. "But no... Captain, I put the seconds on my imagination to make a good impression" he answered jokingly, smiling.

Without taking into account the seconds the accuracy went up to a mile and was more than acceptable. The Captain took the answer as good, as if it was really a witty joke and complimented him. The Chief Mate mocked him as the *great savior* of the Bayhorse while the second looked at him with admiration, proud to be his friend.

A few days later the Bayhorse entered the channel that led to the port of Hamburg going up the estuary of the Elbe River. They docked at a pier equipped for the unloading of logs and operations began a few hours after mooring.

The unloading operations were almost finished and Giorgio was in the radio station staring at the new receiver and trying to resist the temptation to take it apart to see how it was done inside, but the thought that it was equipped with a self-destruct system made him give up. The Captain went to the door and in-

formed him of the ship's next destination. From Hamburg they were supposed to set sail for Rotterdam, Holland, about a day and a half away, where they would load 10,000 tons of railway rails for Halifax, Canada. Giorgio thanked him for the news and remained unperturbed but inside himself he started. It was the time, he thought.

The Bayhorse left Hamburg down the Elbe estuary and veered left towards Holland. It entered the complicated port of Rotterdam the next day, docking at a dock equipped with huge rail-mounted self-propelled cranes. The rails were stacked next to the cranes, already harnessed in groups of 10. Two gigantic cranes, which were much taller than the masts of the ship, positioned one in the bow of the quarterdeck for the three bow holds and one in the stern for the others. two holds, and began loading. Thanks to the cranes and numerous crews of stevedores, working non-stop, the Bayhorse reached full load in two days. Such a load greatly lowered the ship's center of gravity and ensured stability. In the event of very swell seas, however, it would have caused a very abrupt and annoying roll of the hull, especially if accompanied by a strong pitch. This thought reminded Giorgio of the puppet running on the wire with a weight underneath and he tried to imagine, smiling inwardly, how many times the kitchen assistant would have gone downwind aft to make kittens.

They left Rotterdam and turned left towards the English Channel. The sea was calm and the fog had disappeared, so they passed the entire canal without any problems. despite the heavy traffic. Leaving the

channel, the Bayhorse veered west into the North Atlantic towards Canada.

The next day the sea began to swell. The weather reports predicted a storm from northwest 6/8. In fact, in the following days the sea also reached gale 9. The roll together with the pitch began to annoy and for a long time, everyone, even the most insensitive like Giorgio, began to feel stunned by the sudden movements of the hull. The kitchen assistant made regular trips aft, but no one laughed at him anymore. The bad weather lasted a week with a continuous roll so deep that sometimes walking in the corridors one was forced to put his feet almost in the corner between the floor and the bulkhead, holding on to the handrails present everywhere on board. When the sea calmed down it was a huge relief for everyone. The ship resumed its usual cruising speed, sliding on a slightly rough sea that caused an almost imperceptible roll.

They were sailing a hundred miles from Halifax when George received the following Morse message on medium waves:

HOGH de FLYER2.0 RT officer feels himself sick probably due to the long timed rolling ship. Medical advice will be required in Halifax urgently. If necessary he will be immediately disembarked.

and then the silence. Giorgio was even more convinced that inside the receiver there was a thinking entity that suggested that excuse to disembark. The next day he improvised the scene “Captain, I don't feel well, I would like your authorization to ask for a medical examination on board”, “If you are not well, Mr. Relli, maybe it is better that you go to the doctor as soon as we moor” proposed the worried Captain, un-

wittingly favoring Giorgio's plan, who agreed: "You are right, Captain, in Canada they have respectable health facilities that will refurbish me quickly" he replied with a pained smile.

PART THREE. The Phoenix.

Shortly after mooring Giorgio warned the Captain that he would go to the doctor, and left the ship. At the exit of the port he looked around for a cab and noticed one that was waiting not far from the gate. As the driver saw it, approached him and, without getting out of the car, lowered the passenger side window he said to him in a deferential tone: "Good evening Mr. Relli, I was instructed to take you to the airport, please get in. Excuse me but we don't have much time". Giorgio got into the back seat and the car started off at high speed. They took the highway 102 and, without traffic, reached Stansted airport in a quarter of an hour. The driver took a service entrance and, after showing a badge to the guard, continued to a hangar in front of which a small private twin-jet was parked. On the staircase, the uniformed pilot was waiting for him and seated him in one of the ten empty seats behind the cockpit. The second pilot was already in his place and in a few minutes they took off. Giorgio did not think it appropriate to ask for explanations also because the only two on board, besides him, were only in charge of the flight. He didn't even ask the destination because he imagined it: Nevada, USA.

After several hours of flight during which Giorgio dozed on the comfortable seat, the plane lowered in altitude and prepared for landing. From the window one could see only a desert expanse with a ghostly air in the soft light of dawn. They landed on a beaten track of sand raising a huge cloud of dust. When the plane stopped and the pilot opened the hatch to lower the ladder, Giorgio from the door saw in the distance a

vehicle that was approaching the plane. It was similar to those seen at the golf club in India, but larger and with a camouflage paint job. From above it would have been almost impossible to notice it on the surface of the desert. The appearance was out of the ordinary because the bodywork had no curvature but was completely formed by flat surfaces with different angles, as if it were faceted. The engine noise was a slight hiss as Giorgio expected and it stopped about ten meters from the ladder, automatically opening a sliding side door. When he got on board he found himself in a rather military-like environment with about twenty empty seats. In front of the seats there was a metal bulkhead with a closed door. He sat down on one of the first seats while a metallic and impersonal voice greeted him saying: " Good morning Mr. Relli, take a seat and please remain seated until you arrive at your destination, which will take place in 13 minutes". Giorgio didn't even think about answering the greeting because most likely that was an automatic vehicle with no humans on board, apart from him. The vehicle moved smoothly, sliding on the magnetic cushion with a slight hiss and accelerated until it reached a high speed that Giorgio imagined around 150 miles per hour from how the panorama flowed from the window. The desert stretched out flat as far as the eye could see, only in the distance could one see some low rounded hills spotted with bushes.

Exactly as announced by the voice, the vehicle stopped after 13 minutes in a sort of almost circular hollow with a diameter of about a hundred yards and a depth of ten, with the walls slightly sloping towards the center. The door of the vehicle opened automati-

cally and Giorgio got out looking around perplexed in the still dim light of the sun that was just emerging on the horizon and which created long shadows behind the low bushes scattered on that strange clearing that looked like a huge sandy basin.

A part of the sloping wall moved and sliding silently upwards it discovered the entrance to a tunnel about ten meters wide and just as high. Out of the darkness came a vehicle similar to the one that had brought him there but much smaller and silver in color. Stopping a few meters from him, a tall man got out wearing a sort of high-necked uniform of silver gray. He looked like the twin of the technician who had replaced his receiver. "Welcome Mr. Relli, please get in" he said with extreme courtesy, pointing to the open sliding door of the vehicle. Giorgio thanked him with a nod of his head and went aboard. The vehicle, which, unlike the others, made no noise, slipped silently inside the completely dark tunnel. Giorgio, looking over his shoulder, saw the sliding wall closing slowly.

The tunnel descended rapidly illuminated by the vehicle's headlights and they traveled it for several miles until they reached a very large and brightly lit underground chamber, with concrete walls and ceiling. They left the vehicle in the middle of the large room and took one of the many elevators that overlooked a steel-covered wall. The elevator button panel was very simple, only two buttons, one with an arrow pointing up and the other pointing down. The descent lasted several minutes after a gentle start, which caused a feeling of emptiness in his stomach and made him think of a very high elevator speed. It stopped just as

softly without jolts and they went out into a very long room completely covered with semi-polished steel which faced countless metal doors. The ceiling was translucent white and gave off a uniform light that cast no shadows. The atmosphere was fresh and fragrant like a field in spring. They took the first lift on the right wall, whose button panel was much more complex than the previous one. The man pressed button number 12 and they started to go down again. The door opened onto a long corridor with a series of doors on either side. Sliding door number 5 opened automatically upon their arrival and the man moved aside to let Giorgio enter first, saying: "This is his your accommodation Mr. Relli, it has been stocked with everything you may need but for any need you just call with it" he pointed to a red sphere about ten inches in diameter resting on a piece of furniture near the entrance which, having no connection cables, could be moved everywhere. The man also added: "Just lift it to get it working and you can talk to the housing assistant for whatever you want". The door closed behind him after greeting Giorgio with a slight bow and wishing him a good stay.

Giorgio, left alone, began to explore the rather large accommodation, with a corner that had a kind of kitchen and a door that opened onto a large bathroom. He found a plastic table with printed all the instructions, in English, for the operation of the appliances in the accommodation, including the toilet bowl whose operation left him rather perplexed also by the absence of toilet paper. A futuristic keyboard protruding from the side of the toilet bowl with plastic keys on which some symbols were printed. When he decided to use

it, smiling inside himself, he used it holding the table with the instructions in his hand. Once the procedure was started with the appropriate button, the futuristic toilet did everything by itself, washed and dried the affected parts, making the use of toilet paper useless and reassuring Giorgio who sat there with a little apprehension. He took a shower and lay down on the big soft bed falling into a deep sleep most of the day.

He was awakened in the evening by the sphere which was making a sweet but piercing sound. He lifted it up and heard Alexandra's voice: "If you are available for an interview I'll join you in your quarters". "Give me 10 minutes and I'll be waiting for you," he said sleepily. After a quarter of an hour he heard a buzz on the door that opened as he approached. Alexandra wore a uniform similar to that of the man who had waited for him on arrival but in white, while Giorgio still wore his blue jeans and a blue shirt. "I'll take you first to get some clothes then we have to meet a person," she said cheerfully. "Morgan?" Giorgio asked, still half sleepy. "No" she replied "Morgan is not here, he will arrive in a few days" and she didn't add anything else.

They went out and, with an elevator, went down five floors below the level of Giorgio's accommodation. They entered a room furnished with armchairs and a large table in the center without chairs. An elderly man came out of a door wearing a green uniform. Alexandra went to meet him and the two whispered softly. Then, as the man disappeared into the door he had left through, she turned and said to him: "Let's wait here for a few minutes, come, let's sit in those armchairs". Giorgio nodded and they sat down

in silence. Ten minutes passed and the man reappeared with different clothes and placed them on the table. They were all uniform the same as the others but black in color. The man stared at him with a deference that amazed him and asked him to try on the uniforms, pointing to a door behind him. Giorgio went into the fitting room and chose one that suited him perfectly as if it had been tailor made. He went out wearing it and put the others back on the table.

They went back to the elevators and went down to level 35. They arrived into a large room that looked like a square and was full of people walking in all directions looking busy. Giorgio noticed that everyone was looking at him with an air of deference and many lowered their gaze when they met him. He also noticed that he was the only one wearing the black uniform. There were uniforms of different colors, some white like Alexandra's, some silver gray, many blue, green, brown, yellow but none black. He asked Alexandra the reason, who replied with a smirk: "The person we will meet shortly will explain it to you, but don't worry it's not a bad thing to wear the black uniform... rather it's a privilege" Giorgio replied: "Does it mean that at every color match a rank or an assignment or something?" Alexandra agreed with her head: "Something like that" she said smiling and went on "We have arrived."

They stopped in front of a closed door which had a small flat luminous screen on which words and images appeared. Giorgio had never seen such a thing and looked at it with interest. She lowered her head to the height of the screen that illuminated her face and after a couple of seconds the door opened sliding into

the thickness of the wall. They entered a kind of office that had a desk a few meters from the door. The man who was sitting there wore a dark gray uniform and as he saw them he stood up saying: "Please this way, he's waiting for you" pointing to the door next to the desk that had just opened.

They found themselves in a large office at the back of which, in front of the door, there was a huge desk with several flat screens larger than the one at the entrance that had intrigued Giorgio. Behind the desk sat an elderly man with white hair cut short in the military way. When he got up to receive them, Giorgio noticed that he was very tall, just under two meters and, despite the age that from his face seemed close to seventy, he still seemed to have an athletic physique. He wore a black uniform like Giorgio's and the only difference was three golden bars pinned to the left chest, just below the shoulder. But the detail that struck him most were the man's eyes: they were very light gray but slightly darker than Morgan's, which were almost white. Pointing to the chair in front of the desk, he said in a baritone voice: "Please sit down, Giorgio, I was anxious to meet you. My name is Chad and I am the Security and Intelligence Manager of The Phoenix" and while Giorgio returned the greeting, Alexandra turned to him with a smile of circumstance "Giorgio my driving task ends here, I leave you with Chad who has several things to say to you and to whom you can ask for all the information you want" and she headed for the exit.

Chad began to speak: "You have been chosen after passing numerous tests to which, even if without your knowledge, you have been subjected. I myself

was amazed at the results when our analysts brought me the report about you. Your job here will be to replace me.” He paused while Giorgio listened to him incredulous but imperturbable. “This will take place gradually and after an adequate notional treatment that will be applied before the complete handover of the duties. To begin with, you will support me in my work and even if at first you will not understand many things, it will still serve as a training platform”. He stared at him with his gray eyes that Giorgio now found less and less disconcerting and continued. “I guess you will have countless questions to ask but I think it is better that you satisfy all your curiosities about The Phoenix by means of our information room where the first session of the treatment will take place and then you can pin this on your uniform” he pulled out from the desk a golden bar identical to the ones he had on his chest and handed it to him. “This will give you access to all the level one information that will be enough for you for now. At the end of your training you will have access up to level three who will complete it. Only Morgan has access to level four.” He paused waiting for any comments but Giorgio remained mute and he went on “I have to inform you that all information will be provided with a method that will amaze you and that could upset you also. You will have to endure those harmless hassles that the notional treatment will give you.”

Giorgio was not afraid of the physical pain he endured up to high levels, causing him above all anger and he remained silent in listening. Chad went on further “You will have to resign yourself to changing your eye color, in case you care about your natural

color, since at the end of the treatments you will have them the same as mine. The color change is due to a change in the pigmentation of the iris caused by the flow of information that through the optic nerve will reach the memory areas of your brain. The more information will be transferred, the less pigmentation will be present. This in no case will compromise your visual faculties, on the contrary, in many subjects they have been sharpened.” and concluded: “You can start when you feel yourself ready, even immediately if you want. Arrange with my assistant who will lead you into the information room.” He stood up and held out his hand that Giorgio shook, but feeling Chad's energetic squeeze, he squeezed, without thinking, even more. Chad was surprised by the unexpected squeeze but released his hand and Giorgio went out greeting him with a nod of the head. On leaving he memorized the way and returned to his accommodation, counting to start the next day. He needed to reflect on all those new and extraordinary events.

The next day he decided to start the treatment and went to Chad's office assistant who welcomed him with a respectful smile: “Good morning Giorgio, are you here to start the notional treatment?” He asked and with Giorgio's assent he went on “Please follow me”. He accompanied him down the corridor to a door that opened automatically as soon as they were in front. “Get in” said the assistant, stepping aside “William knows of your arrival and will take care of you” he greeted with a nod and returned to his office.

He entered a kind of laboratory with the walls almost completely covered with equipment unknown to him, in the center there was an armchair that to Gior-

gio seemed similar to those of dentists with two trolleys alongside where some appliances were arranged and one of which had, mounted on a swivel arm, a flat screen of those already seen previously and that intrigued him so much.

He could not imagine how it could reproduce images and symbols without having a cathode ray tube like in the television sets of those times, which would have increased its depth by at least ten times. Beyond the armchair, on the back wall there was a desk on which other flat screens and keyboards could be seen. The man, in a dark gray uniform on which three silver bars stood out, was sitting at the desk and as he saw him enter he stood up and went to meet him: "Good morning and welcome Giorgio, I'm William, the information room manager, take a seat please" he said pointing to an armchair in front of the desk and looking at him with his light gray eyes. Giorgio returned the greeting and sat down in wait. William began to speak in a calm and reassuring voice "This first notional treatment will give you access to all level one information, as indicated by the rank you will have on the uniform. The session will last one hour during which information will be transferred, through your optic nerves, directly to the areas of the brain responsible for memory. After the treatment this baggage of information will be part of you as if they were memories that you have acquired in the past and which you can access whenever you need it. They will remain indelibly impressed and it will be impossible to forget them." Giorgio listened attentively and he continued: "They will have already told you that your eye color will change and I hope it will not be a problem for

you” Giorgio slowly shook his head in denial “Absolutely not” he replied and William continued “The brown color of your irises will fade with this first treatment and then become light gray at the end of the third treatment. These changes in the pigmentation of the iris will not cause any inconvenience for you, on the contrary you may even notice a sharpening of your visual faculties, as has already happened in several subjects.” He paused to allow George to process all the information that he was providing him. “During and after the treatment, you may experience a mild headache and a harmless and temporary light headedness, for which you will be accompanied to your accommodation by an assistant. That's all and we can start”. He looked at Giorgio who nodded and got up from his chair inviting him to sit on the armchair in the center of the laboratory. After applying several sensors to his face and neck, he held the swiveling flat screen close to his face. He asked him to rest his head on the chair's headrest and relax himself. When the screen turned on Giorgio immediately noticed that it was impossible for him to lower his eyelids and move his head but he tried to relax as William had suggested. The machine began the transfer and Giorgio saw on the screen a whirling succession of indefinite images that changed color and shape very quickly. A special device provided to lubricate the eyeballs by periodically injecting a transparent gel on his cornea. After an hour the screen went out and Giorgio realized that he could lower his eyelids. He closed his eyes and felt a slight nausea accompanied by a slight headache. He noticed that an assistant had entered and made him sit on a kind of armchair with the back very inclined

but he did not notice that it was suspended on a magnetic cushion. The assistant guided him to the door of an elevator that was in the laboratory and which took him directly to the corridor level of his accommodation. He helped him recline on his bed, suggesting him to sleep as much as possible, and left. Giorgio did not need the hint because he immediately fell into a deep sleep.

He woke up the next day without any disturbance. Nausea and migraines were gone. He remembered the interview with William and went to the bathroom in front of the mirror. He immediately saw that his brown eyes had cleared to an amber hue. He sat down on the chair of the desk and looked around. He did not feel any differences compared to before the treatment but looking at the appliances supplied to his accommodation he no longer found them mysterious and their functioning was familiar to him. He looked at the flat screen and knew that there was not a cathode ray tube that reproduced the images but a panel formed by groups of LED's of the three basic colors that could compose any image of any color. He was also amazed to know what a LED was and how it emitted light. He understood and knew the functioning of all the objects that surrounded him in a natural way as if he had always known them and the wonder for certain devices that he had considered science fiction was gone because he understood them perfectly. He also had the impression that his vision had sharpened and in particular when the lighting was more subdued. "I'm becoming a cat," he said to himself, smiling as he distinctly saw dim details in the room. He decided to

go out and wander a bit through the corridors to see other devices that were no longer mysterious to him.

He let the lift take him to the large room that he had seen crowded and looked around without being surprised. The uniform illumination coming from the ceiling was produced by millions of white LED's inserted in a translucent plastic material that uniformly diffused the light. The people he passed while walking gave him a brief glance at the black uniform with the golden bar on the chest, greeting respectfully with their heads and went on but no one stopped to talk to him. At one point he noticed an automatic bar and at the push of a button he was served a steaming coffee. He sat down at a table drinking coffee and looking around. He saw William arrive in his dark gray uniform who approached him with a coffee in his hand and a smile "How's Giorgio, all right?" "Yes, thanks it's all right, I have no trouble and I begin to understand everything around me and above all I am no longer surprised at anything as it happened to me as soon as I arrived" William sipped his coffee and said seriously "Come tomorrow morning for the second treatment. Chad gave me your second golden bar for you to pin after the treatment." Giorgio nodded and William, after greeting him, got up and disappeared among the people who in the meantime had become more numerous.

He sat there drinking a second coffee and watching the folk go by. They were all busy and headed for somewhere to carry out their duties. For the most part they were people between 30 and 40 years old but there were also some much older and some younger people in their 20s. In general, young people wore yel-

low uniforms. Giorgio by now knew the meaning of the colors of the uniforms: the color indicated the level of knowledge and thus also explained the respect that was given to the black uniforms. But what stimulated his mind the most was the fact that he understood, even if not yet completely, the functioning and scientific basis on which the countless devices and equipment used by The Phoenix were based. At his current level of knowledge it already seemed to him that he was a century ahead of what he knew before the treatment and his innate curiosity was waiting to be satisfied with other notions.

It occurred to him, smiling to himself, that day when on the Bayhorse they could not make the ship point due to the fog, while it would have been enough to interrogate the satellite to have it with an accuracy of a few meters. Such a task the Flier 2.0 disguised as receiver did easily. He also realized that, thanks to the Flier that was on board, the satellite, acting on automatic pilot, had diverted that tanker into the Indian Ocean that was about to ram them.

Thinking about it, he considered himself lucky to have the opportunity to approach such a knowledge so advanced that he could never have imagined before. The method of transferring information was also extraordinary because in an hour it was possible to absorb so many knowledge that could not have been obtained even in 30 years of study with traditional systems. Another fact occurred to him. That system of education was independent of the will of the subject so that any person could be educated without effort and without the need of a particular motivation to study. He thought of the ease of education for young people

and, on a large scale, the possibility of educating the whole of humanity. Anyone who could not have been educated as a young man could have been at any age with little effort and quickly. Even if he had not yet fully absorbed the notions related to restorative brain treatments, he sensed that with the same system it was possible to remedy brain injuries or malformations by restoring correct functioning.

He imagined for a moment the whole planet inhabited by humans with very light gray eyes. It would truly be the end of every conflict, every famine, every oppression, every injustice. The earth would become an Eden for the whole of humanity. Perhaps this is why scientists are studying an engine for an interstellar spaceship: a future colonization of the universe. He thought he was truly living in the future despite being in the late 60's.

William made him sit in the chair for the second treatment and informed him "This treatment will take place in two parts of 45 minutes each with a 15-minute break between one and the other, during which you will have to remain in the chair." Giorgio nodded in silence and William placed the screen in front of his face. As before, he found that he could not move his head or close his eyes. Images began to appear on the screen, alternating swirling with ever changing shapes and colors, but this time they seemed more intense and luminous to the point of causing a slight but annoying pain spread throughout his head, not unbearable but irritating. During the break, William put a kind of snap syringe on his neck and injected him with a liquid, explaining "It's an anesthetic, the second part will be slightly more annoying". He replaced the screen and

the treatment continued for another 45 minutes. Eventually Giorgio felt very dizzy even though the anesthetic had eliminated the pain. He was taken back to his accommodation by the assistant and as soon as he lay down on the bed, he fell sound asleep within a few seconds.

He woke up the next day very hungry and from the automatic kitchen he had in the apartment, he chose a hearty breakfast that was served to him from a counter which, opening up, presented him with a laden tray. While eating he began to think about what he had learned the previous day. All the information about the technology and the physical and chemical principles on which they was based on was ninety percent clear to him and was sufficient to understand practically everything. His task would not have been to design or develop new technologies but only to use and control the existing ones. During the second part of the treatment, however, he had learned an infinite number of notions regarding the social, political and economic events that occurred in the last 50 years. It was like reading documents, even the most top secret, that explained the facts and behaviors of characters who had influenced or provoked the major events in the world. He knew why President Kennedy was killed. Who really decided and why the launch of the first atomic bomb on Japan. Who really caused the economic crisis of 29. How Mussolini's killing really happened and why. Why the foundations had been laid for the creation of a European community. All the facts, more or less mysterious or inexplicable or simply sensational, of which he had read in the newspapers and in the history books now had a detailed explanation in his mind.

He realized that he had a totally different worldview than he had before and he also realized the enormous intelligence resources of The Phoenix.

He was back in the armchair when William smiled at him saying “You are about to earn your third golden bar, you know?” Giorgio smiled back at him and he continued “This session will give you new mental abilities that will allow you to replace Chad worthily.” The session, with the usual modalities of the previous ones, lasted two hours at the end of which Giorgio felt physically exhausted and even more mentally. The usual assistant accompanied him to his quarters where he fell into a deep sleep.

Upon awakening the next day, his mind felt clear, calm and rational as he had never felt before. He looked at himself in the mirror and unsurprisingly saw that his eyes had turned a light gray like Chad's. He had stayed in his quarters meditating until late afternoon when he heard a call on the red sphere. Alexandra's voice announced: “There will be a meeting at 6 pm at which you are expected. I will come to pick you up from your apartment at 5.30 pm.” Giorgio, happy to hear her, replied cheerfully: “I'm ready yet right now” he heard a sonorous chuckle and she cut the communication.

They took a special elevator at the end of the large, always crowded atrium. It was not usable by everyone and the door only opened when Giorgio brought his three golden bars close to the control screen. He was not surprised to find only two buttons: an arrow up and one down. There were no other choices because whoever took it only went to one place. They entered a large office with a table in the

center surrounded by armchairs. Morgan sat at the head of the table and to the left of him Chad with William beside him. Giorgio sat down to Morgan's right with Alexandra next to him. He immediately noticed without any surprise that Chad had almost white eyes like Morgan and had four golden bars on his black uniform. Morgan also wore the uniform with four bars and immediately began to speak: "Giorgio's preparation has been completed thanks to the excellent work of William who has just handed me his report and his thoughts. If you have anything else to add I would ask you to do so now William." He said turning to him who replied in a professional voice: "As I pointed out in the report, everything was done in the best way. Giorgio was a very receptive subject and the results exceeded expectations. I also noticed a noticeable sharpening of vision like never seen in previous subjects. Based on my experience, I think he is ready." Morgan nodded his head and replied: "William thank you for your work, excellent as always." It was a sign of farewell and William greeted in silence, lowering his head imperceptibly and left the room while Morgan continued: "Alexandra, you have been invaluable in this operation and as usual you have done your job in an excellent way. I would just like to mention that you saved Giorgio's life when he was on sea. My personal thanks and from the Phoenix to you" This was also a sign of farewell for which Alexandra thanked him with a nod and a smile and walked out.

Morgan went on to Giorgio: "Initially a period of coaching in the direction of the Intelligence had been envisaged and that you should have worked together with Chad. From the results of the treatments and the

accurate analyzes to which you were subjected during sleep, it appeared that you can act in full autonomy in carrying out your duties. This saves us time.” He fixed Giorgio's gray eyes with his almost white ones and went on: “We are making radical changes in the management of the Phoenix. A single man in charge exposes to risks so we decided to form a management team. All members will have equal importance and dignity and all decisions will be taken unanimously. There will be no votes in order not to create opposition or conflicts, but only a detailed exposition of opinions up to the unanimous conviction of all.” He paused briefly and continued: “The mental faculties we have, including you, allow us to function of a management group so characterized.” He stopped and turned his gaze towards Chad who continued the subject: “You see, Giorgio, currently the management group is only a duumvirate which, as you will have noticed from my uniform, is made up of Morgan and me , but we plan to add new members as soon as the suitable subjects have been identified. We believe that the optimal number is ten members who will be chosen over the next few years.” He looked at Giorgio in the eyes and went on: “From tomorrow morning you will take my place and you will receive instructions from us and you will send your reports exclusively to us. Know that you will be the only member of The Phoenix to wear the black uniform with three golden bars. Good work.” This too was a sign of farewell and Giorgio got up and greeted them both with a nod before leaving the room.

PART FOUR. The Intelligence.

It was 1969 and the Western world was shaken by an unstoppable desire for change. The old rules were no longer tolerated and freedom was invoked with the aim of breaking down existing rules rather than wanting to achieve new ones. Even if the risk was of falling into total anarchy, no one cared. For intellectuals, the priority was to break down old values without proposing new and constructive ideas that would replace those considered obsolete.

The Left parties from all over the world took the front row in this revolution by managing it and appending their political ideas praising freedom and rights, obscuring duties. In the name of equal rights, equal duties were totally neglected. The result was a permanent conflict on the ideological level between the revolutionaries and the few advocates of a gradual and rational change who were considered reactionaries and conservatives in the most derogatory sense of the term. Young people from all over the world gathered in crowded concerts where music sang their freedom of sex and drugs. Pacifism was a must in the name of an allegedly impossible universal peace. The Vietnam War was in full swing and was the main accusation against the United States considered invaders and warmongers to fuel the profits of its war industry. All the crimes committed in Communist states were carefully ignored because they inspired the Left parties scattered around the world who believed they had the monopoly of justice and peace. The Soviet Union and China had no internal problems because they were severely repressed in the bud, in the name of the people.

In reality, popular consensus was due to the terror established by regimes of that type which did not admit political opposition. Only in the Western world the protest against the old rules grew, which fell without being replaced by new and more valid ones.

The communist and socialist parties of the western world, and especially in Europe, became the champions of freedom and equality among humans, carefully ignoring the contradiction of the class struggle to the bitter end they advocated. The credit for all this must be ascribed to the efficiency of the KGB which managed to instill a pseudo-thought of peace, equality and the rule of *politically correct* during the years of the Cold War throughout Europe and to a small extent in the USA. Thus a generation grew up inspired by those false values of freedom, equality and pacifism at all costs that often produced abuse and prevarication.

Giorgio had settled in the office that had belonged to Chad and had at his disposal six assistants in dark gray uniforms each of whom dealt with a specific geographical area: North America, South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and the Far East. In addition, a seventh assistant, the eldest, took care of the internal and external security of The Phoenix and its collaborators. They worked in a large room not far from his office where all the command, listening and control equipment were installed and where the satellites of The Phoenix were controlled. The existence of many of these satellites was in the public domain and were used for telecommunications but no one knew that a private part of each was under the exclusive

control of the Phoenix which, through officially recognized companies present on the international market, had contributed to put them into orbit. A small part of the huge resources of the Phoenix came precisely from the profits of these public services. With the same system they had also managed to control American and Russian military spy satellites which in times of the Cold War proved to be very useful.

Once a month, barring emergencies, Giorgio gathered all his assistants to report to make the picture of the various critical issues around the world. The first who asked to speak was the security manager and after Giorgio's consent he told him: "I have taken steps to normalize all aspects of your sudden disembarkation from the Bayhorse. We have sent a message to the shipping company and to the Captain from a Toronto clinic informing them that the radio operator has a cerebral vascular disease that prevents him from returning on board and is undergoing therapies that will require much time. In addition, in your name we have sent to your family a reassuring message, coming from the m/s Tahitiene, in which you inform them that you are fine and are embarked on a ship traveling in the Pacific. Then you will proceed to contact them further, as you believe." Giorgio nodded and turned to the head of North America: "Please !" he invited him. He was a man of about fifty, tall and slender with graying hair cut very short. "I have entered all the detailed reports in your confidential database but, summarizing: CIA and FBI have received vague information regarding the existence of a secret organization operating on a global level" he smiled for a moment and went on "They are investigating in the USA and

abroad but listlessly because they consider it a little reliable voice. NASA has launched two probes to Mars and one to Venus in which we have micro Fliers that send information directly to us. All data received is entered in our scientific archives. We are following with discretion the developments of the situation in the USA after the death of Martin Luther King. Apollo 11, after the landing of men on the moon, released a discreet Flier 3.0 of ours on the lunar soil that is sending us information. We have fostered the birth of a global communications network, currently in embryo, by secretly supporting the Arpanet project. Professor Kleinrock of the University of California made the first connection between two computers 300 miles apart, unaware of our support. Our policy of fostering the creation of a global computer network is paying off. That's all." Giorgio replied: "Thank you, I will deepen the various situations by reading his reports." and he turned to the Middle East manager: "What news in Palestine?". "Arafat was elected head of the PLO and it seems that more attacks are being prepared. The Israeli Mossad is on red alert and we keep them informed in complete secrecy. Officially they do everything by themselves as they are considered the best intelligence service in the world but one of its senior officials has been our trusted collaborator for years." he paused briefly and went on "At the moment there is no other relevant information." Giorgio agreed and turned to the responsible for Africa who reported: "Barre took power in Somalia. The country is in a state of extreme turbulence. We continue to monitor the situation with some difficulty." The head of the Far East department informed Giorgio of the secret meet-

ing between Kissinger and a French intermediary to start negotiations with North Vietnam. "It is the result of our undeclared work that we hope will bear fruit soon." He concluded.

There were no other important events to be examined, so Giorgio dismissed his collaborators thanking them and remained alone in his office to consult the detailed reports in his database which only he could access. Each assistant had his own personal database and sent a copy to Giorgio's but could compare with the reports of the other assistants only with Giorgio's consent when it was deemed necessary and useful for the performance of the assignment received.

The treatments that Giorgio had received had also given him a particular faculty which was that of intuiting the emotions and intentions of the person in front of him with almost total certainty. It was practically impossible to lie to him. It was not telepathy but a refined ability to read the language of the body, the inflections of the voice, the gaze and all the automatic manifestations that an individual expresses in spite of his will and without realizing it. This ability was very useful to him in carrying out his work, but because it was so deeply rooted in him, he used it even without realizing it, on any occasion.

He was in his office and was reading some particularly boring reports when he turned his attention away and decided to call Alexandra. "Good morning Giorgio" she immediately replied. "Alexandra I would like to explore that traditional restaurant at level 10 with you." She paused for a long time "Tomorrow night at 9 pm I'll be there" she simply replied.

In the base, everyone had an automatic kitchen, simple but very efficient, in his quarters. There were also many automatic kitchens available to everyone in the various public areas. All meals were served for free except those served in level 10 which featured a top-of-the-range restaurant with real chefs and waiters serving at the tables. It was frequented mostly by high-ranking officials who had a longing for the outside world. They paid the bills but not with money. The account was sent to the administration which compiled an expense report which was subsequently deducted from the official's fees.

It was 20.45 when a waiter noticed Giorgio's uniform with golden bars at the entrance and deferentially guided him to a table at the back of the huge room, luxuriously furnished in old English style. The walls were covered in dark wood and from the high ceiling, instead of the usual diffused light, hanging crystal chandeliers probably coming from Italy. Giorgio sat down and the waiter asked if he liked the acoustic dome. Giorgio looked at the empty room and replied that he did not need it.

She came in at exactly 9 pm and as she saw him she headed straight for him. Despite the white uniform, she always had her brat air that Giorgio liked so much. She sat down and they stared into each other's eyes for a long time, in silence. When the waiter discreetly approached asking what they wanted, they both hastily ordered something just to get him away. Giorgio watching her carefully realized the attraction she felt for him was the same as his for her. He then decided that the time had come for both of them to stop pretending and looking into her eyes he said, low-

ering his voice: "I want to join carnally with you" She continued to stare into his eyes for about ten seconds and replied: "I want it too". They remained silent while the waiter served them and also throughout the meal. When they went out in silence Giorgio said only "My apartment?" and she nodded with her head. They reached Giorgio's quarters and as soon as the door was closed they both melted in a long kiss, standing in the entrance. After several minutes she broke free from the embrace and ran to the bed undressing. She lay naked as he looked at her for a long time and then walked over to her. They loved each other all night, at first with extreme sweetness but then the sweetness gave way to unbridled and shameless sex as they had both dreamed.

The next day, towards evening he called her: "I had never made love with a duchess" and she returned "Neither did I with a radio operator".

A month later, a magnetic cushion vehicle took them to the desert airstrip where a small private twin-jet was waiting for them. In Las Vegas they joined in marriage and after a few days spent happily among the various attractions of the city they returned to the base. They separated for a few months as she had to follow the recruitment of a new member in Hong Kong and he remained engaged at the base submerged by increasingly alarming reports regarding the demonstrations in the US against the war in Vietnam and in Europe with the birth of terrorist cells in different countries.

It was 1970 and The Phoenix could not and did not intend to intervene directly in the internal affairs

of any country but they limited to supporting the actions of legitimate governments that they believed were oriented or at least close to their own philosophy. They had contacts with some senior intelligence officials in some countries including Italy and some of them were members of The Phoenix while others collaborated secretly without knowing the organization in detail. They always did so willingly because they received valuable information for their work in return.

Giorgio chose a period in which he could take a vacation leaving as his deputy the head of internal security who was constantly in contact with him with the personal communicator he wore on his wrist and could call him from anywhere in the world. He had a desire to return to Trieste for a few days, especially for his mother, whom he had not seen for long time, but he would not have minded finding some old friends as well.

The private twin-jet took him to Toronto airport from where he took a direct flight to Trieste. He lodged at the Vanoli hotel, in the beautiful Piazza dell'Unità d'Italia and making a few phone calls he learned that his mother had settled in the countryside. She had been widowed by her second husband and she lived with her two daughters married to two farmers living in an isolated farmhouse not far from Udine. He rented a car and went to see her. As he got out of the car in front of the house, she recognized him and ran to hug him saying: "You are finally back home, I was just making the plum dumplings that you like so much." After the long hug Giorgio greeted the sisters and their husbands whom he did not know. At the ta-

ble his mother told all the exploits of her son, exaggerating not a little. He stayed for two days and when the moment of departure came his mother said to him: "I knew you would have to go away, now I have a reason that your life is around the world. Come back as soon as you can." She kissed him on the forehead holding him tightly. He realized that she was happy there and the farewell was less sad.

Giorgio returned to Trieste with a bit of melancholy in his heart and when he arrived at the hotel he went in search of old friends. He managed to get little news. One had died in a car accident, two had emigrated, one to Australia and the other to the USA, in Oregon and he had no news of the others. He vowed to look for that in Oregon upon his return. It wouldn't have been difficult with the means at his disposal. Trieste by now made him sad, it was no longer his city where he always gladly returned. It seemed changed, more somber, sad. He took the flight from Trieste to Toronto from where the private jet brought him "home". He suddenly realized that The Phoenix had now become his home and automatically thought of Alexandra.

The following year, Alexandra announced that she was expecting a baby, adding: "I would like him to also carry my surname after yours. It could be useful to him in the future. Indeed, if you want, you could also bring it." Giorgio thought about it for a moment and replied smiling: "Let's make a deal, you choose the surname and I choose the name. As for me, I have no interest in bringing your surname as well, it would only force me to spend more time signing the docu-

ments. He will continue the lineage since he is a male.” He smiled more openly while she was amazed and said to him:“How do you know it?” .“Honey” he replied “You forget what work I do. All your vital signs are constantly monitored and even the slightest variation in your body is detected. The technicians under my command are very efficient and are always ready to satisfy my every curiosity”. “Then you already knew all.” Giorgio did not answer and hugged her holding her tightly to him.

Lupo Relli von Hohenstaufen was born in 1971. As usual for all children born on the base, Lupo, at the age of five, underwent a notional treatment for basic elementary learning. At the age of 15, he received a notional treatment in general culture and foreign languages that would allow him to enter any college outside the base. Normally at the age of 18 young men enrolled in a college to allow them to familiarize with the outside world and socialize with companions other than the inhabitants of the base and also to practice sports.

They enrolled Lupo at Henderson's DeVry Institute of Technology, about 15 miles from Las Vegas. Its founder, Dr. Herman DeVry, was the inventor of the first portable film machine in the 1920s and gave an advanced technological direction to the University he founded. The choice was dictated solely by logistical issues, as he would not have had the need to acquire technical knowledge outside the base, but only to socialize in the outside world.

Lupo was a tall, stout young man with dark blond hair he had taken from his mother and light brown

eyes from the light notional treatments he had been submitted to. He had taken from his father the stubbornness and innate pride, but he was inclined to tolerate some slight wrong. He did not, however, admit intentional deceptions and malice towards him. His classmates in college learned to appreciate him for his sincerity and for his comradely cheerfulness but they all avoided teasing him beyond a certain limit because they knew how he reacted when he was forced to defend himself. He was passionate about martial arts and had learned several basic disciplines. In college he attended the judo classes that he particularly liked. Thanks to the physical prowess and the techniques he learned, he was able to defend himself from any aggression.

He had just entered the college when *old* students took aim at him and started teasing him continuously as a *freshman*. It was a very common custom in college. Lupo did not react and ignored them without responding in the slightest to the verbal provocations he received. One day they decided he deserved physical punishment, angered by his failure to react. Three of them followed him into a college bathroom and approached him threateningly to give him a just punishment. Lupo decided that he had to act rapidly and aimed a powerful sweeping kick on the ankle of the support foot of the first who was approaching him, causing him to roll to the floor in pain. The second surprised but determined to punish him took a blow to the throat and stopped breathless, holding his neck with his hands. He approached the third who had turned to escape and aimed a side kick in the leg causing him to fall tumbling. He stepped over the two on

the floor and, passing in front of the one who still had his hands at his throat, smiled mockingly. He was never bothered by anyone again.

After successfully completing his college studies and obtaining his diploma, even if it was useless for him, Lupo returned to the base. He asked his father if he could be assigned to external security as an agent, but the experts, who had analyzed him during all phases of his physical and mental development, were of different opinion. They sent a report to Giorgio in which Lupo was considered a precious element for the Intelligence. directed by his father. So it was that, with some pride, he wore the black uniform with a golden bar. In the following years he proved to be a precious help for Giorgio and above all in the management of human resources. He had an engaging charisma that led his collaborators to give their best in any situation.

Giorgio was in his office concentrating on examining newly arrived reports on the developments of terrorism in Italy, which also contained highly confidential information regarding the links between terrorists and organized crime. The body of Aldo Moro killed by the Red Brigades had recently been found and an extensive investigative activity was underway to identify those responsible. The confidential information provided to him by The Phoenix Intelligence indicated that the perpetrators of the gesture were only members of a criminal labor force that raved about communism but, few or perhaps none of them knew who was the real director of those ferocious subversive acts.

The agents of The Phoenix formulated very probable hypotheses about who the real perpetrators of the terrorist activity were but even having the evidence, they could not have made the names known without revealing the existence of The Phoenix. Attempts were made by discreetly suggesting information about it to some senior Italian officials but without success, as the information was too far from the official assumptions made at the political level. Those hypotheses then should have necessarily become truths precisely because they come from government politicians.

He was pondering the situation in Italy when he received a call on his personal communicator. He immediately recognized Morgan's voice: "Giorgio, please, in half an hour in my office" Despite the *please*, the tone was peremptory but always pervaded by a certain kindness as it was his habit. When he walked into Morgan's office there was also Chad sitting to his left at the big decisions table. Giorgio sat in front of Chad and Morgan began to speak: "Within three months Lupo will have his third golden bar and you will have your fourth." He had already explained everything, but he went on: "You must have seen our expert reports on Lupo and I have received those on you as well." All the members of the Phoenix were constantly monitored by a group of experts in psychological, behavioral and emotional analyzes even when they were outside, thanks to the Fliers who also had this task. This ensured the efficiency and fairness of behavior, especially that of the senior officials who had to make important decisions. The team of experts was made up of scientists from various disciplines and were coordinated by a super-computer that prepared

reports autonomously once everyone's opinions were received. The team members wore uniforms of different colors, not corresponding to their real activity, just to remain anonymous towards the other members of The Phoenix. None of the team was aware of the contents of the reports that went directly to all those who wore four golden bars on their black uniforms. Morgan concluded by saying, "We need to extend the leadership team and you will be the third member. We also have two other candidates who will join us within six months. Tomorrow William will subject you to the last notional treatment and will deliver the fourth bar. Barring emergencies, we will meet here every week."

There was nothing else to add and Giorgio left the office thoughtfully. Lupo would be fine, he had no doubt. He had seen him at work and thought him perhaps better than himself in certain situations. Instead, he was intrigued by the latest treatment and what notions he could have provided. The next day William welcomed him with a smile: "Welcome Giorgio, I had foreseen that you would receive the fourth treatment so it doesn't surprise me at all to see you here again." The procedure was the same as the others but lasted two hours at the end of which Giorgio fainted.

He woke up the next day in his bed as if he had gone to bed normally the night before. He immediately realized he had something new in his mind but he still didn't understand what it was. He was aware that he had acquired other information about the outside world and what were previously more or less reliable hypotheses were now certainties. The mission of The Phoenix was clearer to him, which was not limited to the well-being of the inhabitants of the Earth

but also prepared the survival of mankind not only on earth but also on other worlds in the event of a possible planetary catastrophe which, according to forecasts, would take place over three or four hundred years.

The astrophysicists of the base had identified an unknown celestial body of enormous size that came from space and was headed towards the solar system. Even if it hadn't hit the Earth directly, a celestial body of that size could have upset the balance of the entire system. He understood the reason for the work of scientists who were developing an engine for interstellar travel by exploiting the curvature of the space. He was now aware that several Earth-like planets had been identified which, although very distant, could have been colonized and served as a refuge for the mankind. Space vehicles had been secretly launched by small-scale prototypes of the interstellar engine precisely to explore these planets, in the hypothesis of eventual colonization. He realized that The Phoenix had a couple of hundred years to fix things on earth, since it was unthinkable to face an exodus or even just an exploration of space in the current political and economic conditions. As with the moon landing, there would be a contest and the winner would try to overpower the loser, who in turn would seek revenge in any other way. The only solution was to transform the mankind into a conscious and harmonious whole even at the cost of using coercive methods. Giorgio was convinced that a supreme end like that would justify any means to achieve it. Surely The Phoenix, in the not too distant future, would have been accused of prevarication and of using dictatorial methods when

the time came to come out and inform the masses. He would certainly not have had that task and perhaps not even Lupo, but his current task was to prepare the conditions for that moment.

Immersed in his thoughts, he left his quarters and went to the large, always crowded atrium where he sat at a table in the automatic bar with a cup of coffee in front of him. While he watched the people walking busy in all directions, he sensed what that something new was that he had felt in his mind when he woke up. Within a certain distance of a person he could distinctly hear what was going on in his mind. It wasn't really telepathy but something very similar. He had confirmation of this when one of his assistants approached him with a coffee in hand. Before he spoke he already knew briefly the content of the speech. He asked for permission to sit down and went on: "I wanted to inform you about the report I sent you on the situation in Italy. Most of the credit goes to an Italian agent named Paolo who was particularly efficient. He demonstrated unexpected skills of analysis and synthesis of the situation. I wanted to tell you in person even though I know very well that he is monitored by our experts." Giorgio thanked him and distinctly felt the admiration that the assistant had for him and the consideration he had of the agent since he did not intend to recommend him to Giorgio but only to point out a very useful person for The Phoenix.

Morgan died in 2019 and Chad followed him in 2020. Lupo at age of 49 wore his fourth golden bar on his uniform and was part of the ten-member leadership team. He was not the oldest, but he was still the first to

join after the disappearance of Morgan and Chad and the resignation of his father and was considered by all to be the most authoritative member.

Giorgio was 70 and Alexandra 73 when they bought an old ranch in Arizona, not far from highway 70, lost in the semi-desert plain spotted by low bushes and tall saguaros. They settled on the old ranch in the company of two dogs: a Doberman and a Bull Terrier. They also had two horses in the stable with which, despite their age, they did long rides together that filled them with happiness and the joy of living. Giorgio often went hunting taking the Bull Terrier with him while the Doberman remained on guard with Alexandra.

He had procured a rifle because, in those parts, everyone had a gun even if they did not go hunting and periodically Giorgio went to stock up on shots in the store in the nearest town, Franklin. However, he had brought with him from the base a weapon supplied to external agents. It was a short weapon that emitted an adjustable beam from paralyzing to deadly and that he kept hidden in the house in case of attack by wild animals or bad guys, because of the isolation in which the ranch was located in, with the Greenlee county sheriff's office in Clifton, 35 miles away.

During one of the first nights at the ranch they were awakened with a start by the barking of the dogs and Giorgio thinking of the intrusion of some wild animal that could have been as dangerous as a puma or a coyote, instead of the rifle, took up the beam weapon and set it as paralyzing to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. As he was walking towards the door, he heard

the intermittent angry growl of the Bull Terrier who was evidently engaged in a fight. From the door he saw the panting dog painfully dragging the bloody body of a lifeless coyote towards him who must have leapt over the low fence perhaps in search of food.

In the evenings they often sat on the patio, Alexandra read a book aloud while Giorgio listened to her sitting on the rocking chair, sipping his old Bourbon with the dogs crouched at his feet and admiring on the horizon the last flames that the sun, setting, spread into the sky.

The only contact with the base remained his personal communicator which looked like a wristwatch and which he always carried with him. He had also brought a magnetic cushion vehicle perfectly disguised as a hovercraft with a useless internal combustion engine that only served to make the useless propeller move on the bottom and to make noise to satisfy the most curious. In Franklin, where he went to buy supplies for the ranch, everyone was used to seeing that lonely guy who, instead of driving a pick-up truck, drove around in that unusual vehicle that they had all heard of. There was also a rumor that the couple were from Florida where hovercraft were commonly used in swamps.

PART FIVE. The Earth unites itself.

The Phoenix Council was finally made up of ten members as Morgan and Chad had planned before their disappearance. Lupo had been the first to join when it was still a provisional triumvirate. All the members had equal dignity and importance, but Lupo was given a particular authority. He was the first of the current members to have four golden bars on the black uniform and, even if he did not have superior knowledge to the others, the fact made him worthy of some consideration. When Lupo's father resigned from the council and retired to his ranch in Arizona, the council consisted of Morgan, Chad and Lupo. In the following months four other members joined and shortly after the death of the first two, the selections were accelerated to reach the number of ten.

All important decisions were taken unanimously. No voting was foreseen and all possible differences of opinion were resolved thanks to the mental faculties of all the members, who were able, by confronting mentally, to identify the most appropriate decision to take. All members who had four gold bars on their uniforms had undergone the fourth notional treatment which, in addition to the more confidential information provided by intelligence and complemented by the supercomputer summary considerations, had endowed them with the ability to sense thoughts and the emotions of close people, almost as if they were endowed with telepathic powers. This contributed enormously to the achievement of collegial decisions and it was as if these decisions were made by only one individual but with the contribution of all. The ten brains, after con-

fronting each other, decided together as a single brain. This ensured The Phoenix optimal guidance.

Lupo met Maria Luisa Altoforte von Hohenstaufen by chance when she was assigned to follow Lupo's parents who had retired to their ranch in Arizona. Like all other members of The Phoenix who were outside the base, they were constantly guarded and protected by the Security. Periodically Maria Luisa went to visit the ranch as if she was a relative, showing up in the village and often chatting with the owner of the store who knew Giorgio well, having seen him arrive to his shop aboard the hovercraft that now no longer made news to Franklin. She drove a big pickup truck like everyone else in those parts and often joked with the owner of the emporium about the eccentric Giorgio who drove that strange vehicle. Lupo knew of the distant common lineage of Maria Luisa with that of his mother and one day he decided to accompany her.

After the pick up stopped in the clearing in front of the ranch, they stayed in the car because the Doberman, named Dax, had approached and sat in front of them, watching them carefully, in silence. Alexandra recognized Maria Luisa's pickup and said something to the dog, gesturing for them to get out. Entering the house, she hugged Lupo, beaming with happiness: "You've finally made up your mind to come and see your elders, it was time" to his attempts to apologize for his commitments, she continued: "I know, I know you are an important character but sit down, Giorgio should be here in a moment he went out with the hovercraft in the desert, together with Gip, our Bull Ter-

rier who is a great hunter of wild rabbits.” Surprised Lupo commented : “Really strange, because Bull Terriers are not hunting dogs” . “In fact, it would prefer to fight with coyotes but in the absence of anything else he is satisfied with rabbits.” She replied smiling. “You know that last month he mauled two young coyotes, poor animals...”.

They were chatting pleasantly when the engine sound of the fake hovercraft was coming. Giorgio entered and after greeting Maria Luisa ran to embrace Lupo. Gip, who entered behind him, sniffed everyone and sat down in a corner waiting for orders. “Any news from the Council?” Giorgio began but then immediately changed the subject because it was not the case to touch on matters of the Council outside of it even if they were in the family. “I have a trouble with the hovercraft” he said, also addressing Maria Luisa “Often the internal combustion engine does not start and when this happens I cannot move on the magnetic cushion without attracting attention. You should send someone to take a look or replace the vehicle”.

They spent the day in joy and Lupo greatly appreciated Maria Luisa's attitude towards his parents. Thanks to his mental faculties, he felt a sincere affection she felt towards them and, to his surprise, a certain attraction towards him which, in his turn, found her delightful as a woman and extremely efficient as his collaborator.

They were greeting each other at the door when a large white Chevrolet SUV with the Greenlee County Sheriff's emblem on the doors pulled up into the lot in front of the house. A big, tall man, in his sixties, with a beige uniform with the star pinned to his chest and the

typical brown western Stetson on his head, got out. With a slow, swaying pace he approached the group, greeting Giorgio: "Good evening Mr. Relli" and then bringing two fingers to his hat and addressing Alexandra with a sketch of a bow: "Mrs. Relli..." "Good evening sheriff" said Giorgio "I would like to introduce you my son and his fiancée who came to visit us" The sheriff sketched another bow with his fingers on his hat towards Lupo and Maria Luisa who looked at each other with a smile thinking that they had been introduced as engaged but they weren't very sorry.

"Mr. Relli" continued the sheriff "we have been informed that a rather dangerous prisoner has escaped during the transfer to the Tucson prison and is thought to be around in these parts, in the counties near the border with New Mexico. This subject is a violent and dangerous Navajo offender who faces a 25-years sentence for murder. I recommend the utmost caution and prudence if you see him around and, if so, please call me immediately". "Giorgio amazed replied "Thank you for the warning sheriff, we'll keep our eyes wide open ". The sheriff greeted everyone again with his sketch of a bow and two fingers on his hat, got back into the SUV and disappeared in the direction of Highway 70, leaving behind a cloud of dust. Lupo and Maria Luisa were worried about having to leave the two elders alone since Giorgio was 71 and Alexandra 74 but Giorgio reassured them with a smile "We have dogs, I have a shotgun and a beam gun, you can rest assured that I'm not just a poor helpless old man".

Three days later, a Methodist pastor arrived at the ranch that no one had ever seen around there before. He was a man in his thirties, very tall with very short

blond hair. He arrived driving a hovercraft identical to Giorgio's and after a few hours he left with the same vehicle. No one noticed that the pastor's hovercraft emitted only a slight hiss when leaving.

After visiting the ranch, Lupo began to look at Maria Luisa with different eyes than before. She periodically sent him her reports on surveillance of Security-controlled outsiders, including Lupo's parents, and the reports were accurate, complete and comprehensive. Sometimes they met by chance in the common areas and both seemed to like and want to prolong the conversation that ensued. Lupo felt more and more the attraction that she felt for him and realized that he reciprocated. One day, he decided to invite her to dinner at the traditional restaurant.

Life on the ranch went on quietly for Giorgio and Alexandra who, in love as they had always been since the first meeting, enjoyed the isolation that made them feel even closer to each other. One night Giorgio, due to age and fatigue after a long excursion in the desert in the company of Gip, was unable to complete the intercourse and they fell asleep embraced without doing anything else. The next day Giorgio went out unexpectedly early and returned after a couple of hours with a huge bouquet of wild flowers that he handed to Alexandra sketching a bow: "Duchess... to make me forgive for what I didn't do tonight" She looked at him with an infinite love in her eyes and hugged him tightly, murmuring: "You are a stupid radio operator".

One night they were awakened by the angry barking of dogs and Giorgio immediately thought of

some poor coyote that he would soon become a victim of Gip but, this time, the barking was different. The dogs, while barking, did not move from the front door and looked in the direction of the fence to the south. Giorgio came out with a powerful LED flashlight in one hand and the beam weapon in the other and took a few steps with Gip beside him. By the light of the torch he saw, along the fence, a poorly dressed man who after a short run fell to the ground in silence and was immediately joined by a tall figure dressed in dark. The efficiency of the external agents was perfect, he thought as he returned to the house and went back to sleep.

The next morning, a tall, robust Methodist pastor dressed in black showed up at the sheriff's office in Clifton, holding by the arm the fugitive Navajo who, dazed and staggering, was stammering nonsense. "This lost sheep" the pastor said to the sheriff, looking at him with his icy eyes "Came to me to seek comfort for his sins that he wants to atone with the just punishment while waiting for the Lord's forgiveness." The sheriff, who had been in Vietnam and had been part of a special unit of the Marines, evaluating with a single glance the pastor, who looked more like a former fellow soldier than a religious, thanked him saying: "Thank you Reverend and also God will reward you for capturing this dangerous thug. Did you know there is a \$ 20,000 bounty on him?" The impassive pastor replied in a detached tone that amazed the sheriff "Sheriff, no capture, only a lost soul that came to me in search of redemption and as regards the money... I only deal with souls." He greeted with a wave of his

hand that looked like a blessing and walked away leaving the sheriff thoughtful.

A few days later, the Navajo was interned in the Tucson prison but he was never able to explain to anyone nor to himself how he had been captured after wandering for many days in the desert.

The Council of The Phoenix met to examine the political situation in Europe where radical changes were being prepared at the political and even economic levels. One of the members, who particularly followed the events in that area, took the floor to comment on the report on the situation that had already been received by all members. "I believe the time has come to act decisively even if the time has not yet come to reveal the existence of The Phoenix. The European Union is falling apart due to the too rigidity of some member states and their total lack of solidarity with the weaker countries. The impoverishment of the middle and lower classes and the massive arrival of desperate immigrants, favored by left-wing parties in the name of exaggerated do-gooders, have generated a reaction that proved to be disruptive in the results of the political elections held in the southern countries, especially in Italy, but also in Spain, Portugal and Greece. The less well-off social classes have realized that they are no longer represented and guaranteed by the left parties that historically had always been their reference." He paused for a long time looking at the others who were following him carefully and went on "The terms right and left they no longer make sense in politics and parties that, in the past, were scornfully accused as populists, as the only ones able to reconcile

the various needs between the different social classes, are emerging. The exit from the euro and from the Union is imminent of several member states that are secretly negotiating the creation of a Union of Southern European States with a common currency other than the euro and with congruent economies.” Another pause and concluded: “We must favor the birth of this new Union by controlling its developments and preventing the mistakes of the past from being committed again that have allowed the real management to remain in the hands of the economic powers, to the detriment of social justice. We have enough strength to prevent it. This Union will have to be the seed for the birth of a new European Union which will attract, in the future, other countries also from outside Europe”.

They began to consider the means and opportunities to be used for this purpose and Lupo proposed that members of The Phoenix should emerge politically in the various countries and secretly support them by favoring their rise to power. He began the discussion on the methods to be adopted to obtain the best results and at the same time the strategies to prevent the reaction of those who still held the power. After several hours of discussions, they closed the Council meeting to resume it the next day.

The base of the Phoenix began 40 meters below the deepest level of Area 51 in Nevada. It consisted of 50 underground floors that descended into the bowels of the earth unbeknownst to everyone, including those in Area 51 which were already protected by the utmost confidentiality by the government. The base was completely autonomous and self-sufficient and could have

remained isolated for hundreds of years. Access to the surface was ensured by a tunnel that emerged into a hollow, an ancient basin-shaped crater with a diameter of one hundred meters, located a few tens of miles from the vertical of the base, in the middle of the desert. All movements outside the base, on the surface, took place with vehicles that traveled on a magnetic cushion, silent and very fast. Some of these vehicles were disguised as hovercraft when it was necessary to approach population centers. Security officers often patrolled the area around the entrance in disguised vehicles and stopped at gas stations to refuel the useless internal combustion engine they had on board. In the remote desert inns they frequented, they pretended to be geologists boasting the performance of their hovercrafts to the locals. By now everyone was used to seeing those vehicles circulating because those rough people, who live in the desert, are not surprised so easily.

When Lupo entered the traditional restaurant with Maria Luisa in a white uniform on his arm, the waiter, noting that Lupo's black uniform had four gold bars, suggested a reserved table in a corner of the large room. There were a few other tables occupied, nevertheless Lupo agreed to the waiter's proposal to activate an acoustic dome on their table even though he did not feel the need.

They took their places at the table and Maria Luisa was amazed by the ten-page menu that the waiter handed her with a slight bow. Looking at Lupo with a smile that showed all her happiness for that invitation, she said: "It will take some time to study this

whole book... I would like to eat Italian". Although she can boast a very remote lineage from Frederick II the famous wise emperor, she came from a minor branch of the famous Swabian family that remained hidden in Sicily after the fall of the Swabians and the persecutions to which they were subjected by their political opponents. At the end of the 13th century they took the name of Altofonte and their descendants emigrated to Pennsylvania towards the end of the 18th century, following the Lutherans. Anyway, she still considered herself to be of ancient Sicilian origin. Lupo, who was the son of a man from Trieste, obviously agreed on her choice and ordered for both. The Italian cook who was in the kitchen, after hearing the waiter's orders and also hearing who they were intended for, performed a culinary repertoire that left the two wonderfully amazed. It wasn't often a member in a black uniform with four golden bars at a traditional restaurant.

While they were delighted with the various courses, Lupo looked at Maria Luisa who often returned her gaze by commenting on the various flavors that she tasted from time to time. She seemed to him almost another person, different from her efficient collaborator who he was used to seeing and noticed in her a spontaneous, almost childish cheerfulness that he liked very much. Towards the end of the dinner the conversation turned to more general topics such as life at the base, social relations between members, plans for the future. He was impressed when she said: "You know, I am happy here at the base, I like my job, I like to go out when my assignment requires it and I always come back willingly..." and continued almost awk-

wardly: “but I feel that I am missing something... and... I envy your parents so much” and she lowered her gaze. Lupo took her hand and said in a low voice, almost whispering: “Yes, I know... I also feel the lack of something and I hope to find it in you.” She looked up at his staring for a moment in those very clear eyes that upset her and she immediately lowered it, lightly squeezing his hand in her hand. Lupo felt that she was in love with him and felt that he reciprocated that feeling.

Most of the satellites that had been put into orbit had a secretly installed device aboard, which communicated directly with the base. Even the International Space Station, without knowing it, cooperated and its crew often performed experiments discreetly suggested by the Phoenix. Almost all the space probes that started from the Earth had micro devices on board that sent data only to the Phoenix. There was an underground launch pad capable of sending out vectors, of a type unknown to mainstream space science, which were invisible to the most advanced radar and detection systems. During the silent launch, the force of earth's gravity was exploited, which instead of attracting them repelled them. In Area 51, only slight earthquakes were felt, considered to be of natural origin. The technicians were working to create a launch device for much larger vehicles which involved, among other things, a problem, not of secondary importance, of camouflaging the opening in the desert environment. They had also managed to put in an elliptical orbit around the Sun a new type of invisible radio telescope capable of detecting an extended range

of radiation at unimaginable distances with which they had identified that unknown celestial body of enormous size that came from the center of the galaxy and was directed towards the solar system.

Lupo and Maria Luisa often met, both eager to discover more and more of each other. They often dined at the traditional restaurant and did not miss the opportunity to leave the base together, when the commitments of both allowed it. One of these occasions was the visit that Maria Luisa had planned to Lupo's parents who immediately freed himself from her commitments to accompany her.

Giorgio was near the fence on the south side of the ranch and was digging a hole to bury a coyote just killed by Gip. The lifeless body of the coyote was lying near the hole and the dog, with imperturbable pride, sat next to the body looking at Giorgio, waiting for orders. Gip was a muscular Bull Terrier with a white coat and a black spot on his right eye that gave him a pirate look. He was a perfect killer with a particular fondness for coyotes that he managed to kill with a single bite of his powerful scissor jaws, aimed lightning fast at the victim's throat. Giorgio was finishing covering the victim's body with earth when he saw the truck arrive. Alexandra and Dax were already at the door and when Lupo and Maria Luisa got out she ran to hug them happily. Giorgio also joined them, happy to see his son again. They all sat on the patio and Giorgio brought some beers for him and Lupo and some lemonade for the women.

Lupo asked smiling "You were busy with the funeral of another victim of Gip, right?" "Yeah!" Gior-

gio replied “that dog is relentless with coyotes”. They chatted pleasantly until Alexandra called them to the dinner table. While they ate, Lupo announced “Maria Luisa and I will go to Las Vegas in a few days”. The smile of Giorgio and Alexandra joined the amazement of Maria Luisa to whom Lupo had not yet told of his decision which, took her by surprise, but made her happy. “Your mother and I did the same thing many years ago” said Giorgio turning to Lupo who nodded, smiling towards Maria Luisa. They married in Las Vegas two weeks later and returned to base after a few days.

The Council followed with extreme attention the events in Europe which once again became the seed from which the new civilization would be born. As had already happened many centuries before, when Rome with its Empire spread civilization among the primitive peoples of that times and, even after its fall, the ideas and bases of a civil coexistence remained, so old Europe once again became the cradle of the new civilization. The fundamental difference with respect to then was the political disappearance of the power of the Church which was relegated to its mission of care of souls and its political power practically disappeared.

The European states became fundamentally secular, leaving the peoples the freedom to profess any religion but without any interfering with the rules of coexistence and social organization. Non-European states, in which the Muslim religion governed society and also the economy, did not look favorably on these transformations but had to accept them above all for

reasons of economic convenience. In one of these, very close to Europe and which had long aspired to be part of it, Turkey, the religiously inspired party that had governed it for so many years, began to lose support until it almost disappeared to leave power to a new nationalist party similar to that of Kemal Atatürk who, at the beginning of the 20th century, transformed Turkey into a secular and modern country after the fall of the Ottoman Empire.

In the states of southern Europe, parties that were neither right nor left, but which had peace and social justice as a basis for a balanced development not dependent on international economic powers, came to power, with the discreet support of The Phoenix. After a long preparation, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Malta and Cyprus, one Saturday night in fact abandoned the Euro and, on the following Monday, adopted the European Lira with a declared value of parity with the Euro. This created an epochal upheaval in all stock exchanges in the world and after a few weeks of financial turmoil the real value of the new currency stabilized at 0.75 euros per 1 Lira E, devaluing by 25% compared to the initially declared value. The European Central Bank, as a punitive response, stopped buying the government bonds of southern countries and put up all those it held for sale. The move had been foreseen and almost all of the securities were purchased by southern investors and, in large quantities, by Russia, thanks to a fair amount of support given by The Phoenix through secret agreements previously reached with high-ranking Russian government officials. In 2030, after long negotiations, the Union of Southern States was founded in the form of a

confederation, made up of Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Malta and Cyprus. After a couple of years, Turkey and Israel also joined, where, having lost support the religiously inspired parties, they had become completely secular states. Russia, which viewed this Union favorably, did not enter it immediately but entered into trade and political agreements that did not differentiate it much from an effective member.

The entry of Turkey and Israel created a major upheaval of the entire continent due to the fact that Turkey had a massive army and Israel was an atomic power. Nobody questioned the NATO membership of the Union, but the military and political balances that were based on the old concepts of defense and protection of the Old Continent from Russian or Chinese threats were substantially upset.

Within a few years, Hungary, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Poland and, after long negotiations, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Albania and Macedonia joined the Union. The UK and Ireland hastened to enter into commercial cooperation and free trade agreements. Germany, which had been the first economy of the old European Union found itself advantageous on the one hand because they could buy semi-finished products and components for their industries from usual suppliers, now in the Union, at prices devalued by 25%. From the other hand Germany had to face a Union that had a federal government, which jointly managed foreign, economic, social, health and defense policies, leaving the various confederate member states to manage the various local peculiarities.

The increase in exports to the other members of the old European Union who still had the euro was a

significant benefit for the new Confederation which largely offset the increases in the cost of oil and other raw materials paid in US dollars, while imports of gases from Russia were paid in Lire following the agreements made.

Southern EU exports began to compete with German exports on Asian and American markets as well. In the car sector, some companies such as FCA Group and Seat increased investments in Portugal and Greece for the production of hybrid or fully electric vehicles to be offered on the international market. The Italian design combined with the new technologies used, was able to collect enormous successes at the expense of the German and Japanese manufacturers who dominated in that sector. The Phoenix played a not secondary role by gradually introducing some new technologies, but in a very discreet way, remaining in the shadows. The fully electric cars produced in the Union conquered the international market thanks to the price, performance and autonomy given by the newly developed batteries placed on the market. Even Tesla, which had been among the leaders in the sector, adopted the new batteries produced in Europe for their super cars.

The Union had monetary sovereignty with its own Central Bank that could print money and set interest rates. The official language of the Union, after long debates, was decided: Italian and English as a second language. After twenty centuries Rome was starting to be *caput mundi* again. The Phoenix Council considered with satisfaction this first step, which took place in Europe, towards the final goal it had set itself.

Phoenix scientists were perfecting the new interstellar engine that could exploit the curvature of space at different levels depending on the distance to travel. The ability to generate powerful artificial magnetic fields had been available to scientists for many years and with the technology based on these discoveries they had created the first magnetic cushion vehicles. The challenge now was to generate enormous magnetic fields from a moving vehicle that would affect the curvature of the spacetime. The first prototypes launched into space gave very encouraging results such as to be convinced to carry out a very ambitious project, a huge spacecraft capable of crossing the Milky Way, our galaxy, to explore the opposite side to that where our solar system is. That part of the galaxy is difficult to observe from Earth, because of the enormous crowding of stars in the central part. The Council was constantly updated on even the slightest progress with reports sent in copy to all members. Giorgio was informed by Lupo of the latest developments and also asked him to participate in a special meeting of the Council convened in order to discuss the latest scientific advances.

Alexandra was sitting on the patio, with Dax at her feet, when she heard the sound of Giorgio's hovercraft. Stopped the vehicle next to the house under the shed, he got off of it and walked towards her together with Gip who, triumphantly, trotted alongside him with the remains of a wild rabbit in his mouth. Giorgio sat down next to Alexandra while Dax, with disdain, listlessly sniffed the remains of Gip's victim who, seen his colleague's lack of interest in his prey, went away

to bury it in some secret place. Giorgio, who had received the news from Lupo on his personal communicator, announced to Alexandra: "I will have to go to the base for a couple of days. Don't you mind staying here alone?" She looked at him slightly worried and replied: "No, go there, I'm safe. Did something serious happen?" Giorgio's answer reassured her: "No, no problem, the Council wants to see me after a long time, Lupo told me." and he added "Basically I am the first to have had the four golden bars among those still alive." They stayed as usual on the patio chatting with sandwiches and beers until late with the two dogs crouched at their feet. Gip obviously at Giorgio's feet because he always felt himself under his orders.

Very early the next morning, a hovercraft identical to Giorgio's arrived and stopped in front of the house. Two men got out, one dressed as a Methodist pastor, wearing a long black jacket and a white religious collar, while the other was in jeans and a plaid shirt with a brown Stetson western on his head. They looked like twins if it weren't for the so different clothing. Both were blond with very short hair, tall and stout. They greeted Giorgio and Alexandra who were at the door and the pastor said to Giorgio: "I'm here to spiritually comfort Alexandra during your absence." And he smiled slightly. Giorgio thought that Security did not leave any space for unexpected events and followed the cowboy on the hovercraft who immediately disappeared into the desert. Reaching a remote area where there were no roads or houses, the cowboy turned off the useless internal combustion engine and pushed the vehicle at maximum speed onto the magnetic cushion.

The full special meeting of the Council was held the next day. Giorgio had worn his black uniform with the four golden bars and all the other members looked at him with respect and deference, having never seen him before but having only heard of him. The purpose of the session was to have an extra mind to evaluate the important steps to be taken both in light of political events in Europe and for the new space activities planned. It was decided to increase political activity in countries not yet joined the Union and to push Russia to join it as well. Giorgio's contribution was decisive for space activities and it was decided to launch the first interstellar spaceship with human crew. Giorgio offered to be part of it, but his offer was rejected by all the other members, including Lupo, convincing him that he would be much more useful to the Phoenix by remaining on Earth.

The cowboy took him back to the ranch and when they arrived, he saw that Alexandra and the pastor were having a conversation sitting on the patio with Gip staring suspiciously at the pastor while Dax didn't pay him a look. When Giorgio got out of the vehicle, Gip ran to meet him and accompanied him to the patio, trotting alongside him. The pastor greeted Giorgio and joined the cowboy on the hovercraft who quickly disappeared into the desert. "Gip has caught another wild rabbit" said Alexandra "Well, no news then." Giorgio answered and both laughed heartily together.

After a few days they received a visit from the sheriff who arrived with his SUV from which he got off with his usual slow, rocking pace. Giorgio was sitting alone on the patio and welcomed him with a:

“Good morning Sheriff, welcome, I hope another Navajo hasn't escaped” he said smiling. “No, no escapes this time” answered the sheriff after having returned the greeting “I would just like to chat with you Mr. Relli if you don't mind.”

“Please sit down,” said Giorgio. He got up to grab something cool in the heat of the day and returned with a pitcher of iced lemonade and two glasses. He filled one for the sheriff and sat down waiting for him to speak. The sheriff began with a very serious tone: “You remember that Navajo fugitive, right? He was delivered to me in a daze by a Methodist pastor who looked rather odd. Despite the habit, he did not really have the air of a religious, on the contrary he rather reminded me of my former comrade from many years ago, in Vietnam, although obviously much younger. Furthermore, he refused the \$ 20,000 bounty for the capture. This fact is very curious.” He paused and Giorgio waited for more, staying alert because he had already felt the sheriff's thoughts. “Have you ever seen him around here by chance?” He improvised an answer knowing that in any case he would have to request the intervention of the Security, because he was sure that the old hound he had in front of him would not be satisfied with a not entirely convincing answer. He had also warned the question that the sheriff had ready if he had answered in the affirmative: the vehicle on which the pastor moved was the same as that of Giorgio, and it was silent, why? With the utmost naturalness, Giorgio replied: “You see Sheriff, Alexandra and I met that pastor in Florida several years ago, when he was at the beginning of his mission. At the time, he was touring the remote vil-

lages in the swamps aboard a hovercraft and it was there that we became interested in that type of vehicle that is also suitable for the desert. Every now and then he visits us saying that he resides on a mission not far from here in New Mexico.” The sheriff nodded pretending to be satisfied with the answer but he considered it vague and not very credible. Why had the shepherd brought a hovercraft similar to Giorgio's with him? One night, while he was standing in the desert with his SUV off, he had recognized him in the moonlight as he passed close enough at full speed and without making any noise. How did he transfer the hovercraft from Florida to Arizona? With those questions in mind, the sheriff simulated a smile and thanked Giorgio who clearly felt all his doubts. They said goodbye and the sheriff got back into his SUV and headed for Highway 70 back to Clifton. As soon as he saw him disappear on the horizon, Giorgio called the Security with his personal communicator.

The next day, the deputy sheriff, who was a big fat young man, nice and friendly, so much so that he became the darling of all the female inhabitants of the county, was in his office when he received a call: “Chuck, I have to go away for a couple of days, you take command of the department” he heard the sheriff's voice in the usual tone of former-Marine command. Chuck, flattered by the assignment he had never received before, promptly replied with the same military tone used by the sheriff “Roger sir, I'll take the command, yes sir.”

The previous night, two dark-clad individuals had sneaked into the sheriff's house while he slept and gently loaded him into a silent hovercraft that had disappeared into the desert. The sheriff was still sleeping soundly on the cot when William applied the electrodes.

Two days later the sheriff woke up early in the morning in his bed, remembering, with satisfaction, the two days he spent in Las Vegas and the 520\$ loot he had won on slot machines. After a refreshing shower he ate breakfast and, after recounting the loot, all in 20\$ bills, he went to the office, satisfied and ready to be again the law enforcement officer in Greenlee County. He had never seen or heard of a Methodist pastor riding a hovercraft.

The Council met urgently following the news of an extraordinary discovery made by a scientist of Russian origin who worked permanently in the laboratories of the Phoenix. One of the uses of the powerful radio telescope that had been put into orbit was the study of magnetars, the particular neutron stars that are generated by a supernova. The scientist and his research team had identified and understood the phenomenon by which a magnetar generated a magnetic field so powerful and far greater than that generated by other stars of similar mass. They claimed to be able to artificially reproduce a similar magnetic field, but to do so they would need to have certain minerals and a list was attached to the report.

The Council considered this project as a priority, which would have anticipated the construction of the

interstellar engine by at least ten years and one of the members was tasked with examining the list of minerals required and planning their acquisition and transport to the base. The list was compiled as follows:

10,000 tons of laterite clay from which Scandium, Yttrium and Promethium will be extracted.

5,000 tons of magnetite from which to extract Iron.

10,000 tons of heterogenite from which to extract Cobalt.

The supply problem was not simple both for the quantities required and for the availability and localization of sources. Laterite clay could easily be found in Mountain Pass, California. Magnetite was available in Norway and heterogenite in Congo. The last two minerals were supposed to arrive by sea, but the problem remained of how to get the 25,000 tons of the necessary ore discreetly to the base by land from California and from the port of arrival.

A large truck could normally carry around 40 tons which meant around 60 trips of 10 trucks. It would have been difficult to get them to go unnoticed on the roads of California and Nevada. Furthermore, the trucks could not enter the base through the tunnel so they would have to unload outside and then transfer the ore inside by other means. The council member charged with solving these problems came up with a complex but workable plan.

During a session called precisely for the solution of these problems, he explained the solution found: "Gentlemen, I believe that the only possible solution is this. We have the minerals loaded from the ships onto the trucks of some well-known company whose pres-

ence does not arouse curiosity on the roads and we identify a suitable location in the desert where to unload the load on the ground, forming mounds of ore. The operation will seem strange to the drivers who will have to unload and leave the mineral unattended. We have two options: either we build sheds and some shacks to simulate a settlement for the treatment of ore, or at the end of the operation we have William treat all the drivers” he paused for a long time looking at the others who were listening with extreme attention and resumed speak: “We have a large experimental hovercraft under construction that has never been built before. With appropriate modifications to the magnetic cushion generator it could carry around 60 tons and we could build ten of them within a few months. We can use the launch pad of the vectors to unload the minerals and get them to the appropriate level simply by modifying the ramp. The ten large magnetic cushion vehicles with stealth camouflage bodywork, invisible to the radar and detection systems of Area 51, will be equipped with suction systems to load the minerals which they will then unload into the launch pad. The distance between the entrance of the ramp and the place of unloading of the trucks must not exceed 100 miles that will be covered by the vehicles in less than an hour. Ten vehicles can carry 600 tons on each trip and, with four trips, 2400 tons can be transported per night. Ten nights for the complete transfer. Security will have to protect the night convoys from any intrusions or sightings which, moreover, would be unlikely in the desert at night. We will choose a moonless period for added security.” He stopped and waited for the comments of the others that

he already mentally sensed. They decided to adopt both options: both the construction of a fake factory and the possible mental conditioning for curious drivers.

The motor ship *Elsa Oldendorff*, flying the flag of Malta, was a small bulk carrier specialized in the transport of ore in bulk with a capacity of 60,000 tons. It was moored in the port of Dubai, in the Persian Gulf, when the Captain received a telegram that amazed him. After a while, a senior official from the shipping company called him on the phone. The Captain, having heard who the interlocutor was, was even more surprised. The voice had an unexpectedly very cordial tone: “Good morning Captain, I’m Ulrich Heinz Neumann“ and, after a short pause to allow the interlocutor time to understand who he was talking to, he continued “I guess you have already read the telegram and you are also amazed at the planned route for your ship. I call you just to confirm this path that was asked of us by one of our important customers who urgently need to receive the load by paying double the freight” a pause followed during which the captain became more curious and the voice resumed with an even more cordial tone “There is a bonus, equal to two months’ salary for you and one month for all the crew members, if ship will minimize both navigation times and operations in all loading and unloading ports.” He concluded almost smiling “Please, don’t damage my ship too much to hurry.”

The trip that had so surprised the Captain was to sail from Dubai to the Cape of Good Hope and then sail north along the coast of Africa to the mouth of the

Congo River and go up it for 70 miles to Matadi to load 10 thousand tons of heterogenite. From Matadi to Oslo to load 5 thousand tons of magnetite, and then head, through the Panama Channel, to Los Angeles where they would unload everything. What made the trip strange was that they would sail with the loaded ship for a quarter of its capacity, which would obviously have quadrupled the transport costs. The urgency of the important customer, announced by the shipowner, together with the expected prizes made it so that the captain did not worry too much about this oddity. Furthermore, the Captain knew that the ore to be loaded in Congo was used for the extraction of the metallic cobalt, which made him think of some US government body that spared no expense and thought no more.

In Las Vegas County, in a remote place but not far from the Crystal gas station on State Road 15, the construction works began for an industrial plant for the storage and processing of ores. The workers who worked there were all strangers who lived in the caravans on the site and often went to Crystal to spend the evening after work. In addition to the gas station there was a bar with a small casino frequented mainly by passing people who stopped there to make a few bets on the slot machines. The workers were all very polite and never got drunk, not even on Friday nights. Sometimes they came along with others who looked like their leaders, all tall and stout with very short haircuts. Once one of these refueled a hovercraft which was a vehicle rarely seen in those parts and which intrigued the owner of the bar. When it was explained to him

that there was a team of geologists at the site and that they were using that vehicle, all curiosity vanished and the hovercraft no longer made news.

Two months after the start of the works, two workers stared at an arrow-shaped sign on the State Road 15, bearing the inscription: "Western Mining Corporation - 2 miles". The sign indicated a side street of freshly leveled, beaten sand, wide enough for a large truck to pass.

USA Truck was a large road haulage company operating in all states. The commercial office received a call from a Western Mining Corporation employee asking him to make an appointment for one of his officers in their Los Angeles office. The official who entered the director's office was a tall, slender middle-aged man with white short hair and strange light eyes. Impeccably dressed, he looked like a hasty executive, used to giving orders. He sat down in the chair in front of the director's desk and said slowly spelling out the words in a calm voice that didn't allow for replies. "We need to urgently transfer 25,000 tons of ore to our Crystal plant in Las Vegas County, Nevada." He paused briefly during which the manager nodded and then resumed: "15,000 tons will have to be loaded from the port of Los Angeles while another 10 thousand from Mountain Pass, California. Both loads will have to be downloaded to Crystal. I leave the organization of the two transports to you, bearing in mind the urgency we have, so it would be preferable to put on the road as many vehicles as you can, to shorten the time. The cost of transportation won't be an issue while time will." The manager, who was used to long

negotiations on transport prices, replied with a broad smile: "Leave me two days to organize everything. I would ask you to repeat by fax what you have told me now along with the details of your company. In two days you will receive our quote with certain and guaranteed dates of delivery to Crystal." The following week, a convoy of 20 60-tons Volvo trucks, bearing the USA Truck emblem, began commuting between Mountain Pass and Crystal. The following month, a convoy of 25 60-tons Volvo trucks began shuttling from the Port of Los Angeles to Crystal.

Giorgio was aware of the mineral transfer plan and when Lupo called him on the personal communicator to offer him to go together to visit the new Western Mining facility, he immediately agreed. Lupo arrived at the ranch aboard a new type of camouflaged hovercraft, larger, with much more comfortable interiors and suitable for long journeys. He smiled when he saw Giorgio get on the vehicle accompanied by Gip. They covered the 500 miles that separated them from Crystal in less than four hours, leaving the sophisticated onboard navigator to drive the vehicle through rocky gorges and stretches of desert, avoiding roads and towns.

They got out of the vehicle with Gip at Giorgio's side and entered the office hut. The security officer, who ran the settlement, recognized Lupo and, after greeting them almost militarily, said: "We can immediately go and check the ore that arrived a few days ago." At their nod, they went out and walked towards the three large sheds not far from the hut, while Gip, always at Giorgio's side, looked around, sniffing the

air. Each shed covered a mound of different ore, and Lupo made sure there was enough space between the columns, that supported the roof, for the large magnetic cushion vehicles that would load the ore. Everything seemed to be in order and they were about to re-enter the hut when Gip suddenly started running at an incredible speed towards a clump of bushes about fifty meters away. The three of them stood watching it disappear into the bush and Giorgio was about to call him back when he reappeared with a wild rabbit in his mouth. Giorgio and Lupo laughed while the other was amazed by the speed with which the dog had warned and captured the prey. Arriving at Giorgio's feet, he placed the victim on the ground looking at him waiting for compliments. Giorgio stroked him on the head and motioned for him to take away the rabbit's body. Given the modest appreciation for his skill, Gip took back his prey and went to bury it at the foot of the heterogenite hill.

Two days later, with the new moon, ten huge magnetic cushion vehicles arrived at the Western Mining Corp. factory in the dark of night. They loaded the ore and when everyone was full they lined up in a close row, heading at full speed towards the mouth of the launch pad which was 90 miles away. They were escorted by four security vehicles, much smaller and faster and they could even go up about ten meters off the ground. The convoy emitted only an almost imperceptible hiss.

The interstellar spaceship was ready for the first voyage. The destination was Proxima Centauri, a red

dwarf smaller than the Sun, around which at least two planets surely orbited and both could have been interesting. In addition to the debris belts in the outermost orbits, from the observations of the orbital radio telescope there were indications of the existence of three other planets orbiting Proxima but very far from the star. From the data in the possession of the astrophysicists of the Phoenix it appeared that the two most promising planets were Proxima B with an orbital period of 11 days and a mass slightly higher than that of the Earth and Proxima C with an orbital period of 5 years and a mass of six times higher than that of the Earth. Proxima Centauri's distance from Earth was just over 4 light years which should have been covered in about a month by activating the engine at medium curvature. The mission would be fundamentally exploratory for which the spaceship was not armed but only equipped with a defensive system that created, around the ship, a magnetic envelope capable of repelling any solid, liquid, gaseous or radiation that directed against it. On board there were also portable ray weapons kept in the armory, which could have been used for defense, in case of need.

Gordon was born in the base of the Phoenix and, at the age of 25, he joined the Security. He had several missions to his credit which he had carried out in an exemplary way. On subsequent mental analysis he was found to be fit for more important tasks and was assigned to the armaments section. With appropriate notional treatments he pinned two silver bars on his silver-colored uniform. The third silver bar was given to him following further treatment to transfer scientific

knowledge regarding the construction techniques and the functioning of the interstellar engine and he was assigned command of the first mission. The rest of the crew consisted of three engineers, one of whom acted as navigator, an astrophysicist, one from Security, communications officer and three engineers assigned to the interstellar engine. In total nine men who would have left the solar system for the first time in the history of the mankind. On the side of the large spaceship, lying in a huge underground hangar, about a hundred meters underground, a name stood out: Phoenix 1.

The works for the construction of the exit ramp of the large spaceship had begun a few months before the spaceship was ready. The Western Mining Corporation was also officially involved in oil exploration and was drilling in a desert area of Nevada about thirty miles from Area 51. The yard occupied an area of one square mile bordered by a high and sturdy wire mesh supported by poles. The two entrances, one to the north and one to the south of the perimeter, were surmounted by a conspicuous sign bearing the name of the company and controlled by guards armed with revolvers and shotguns. In the guard's hut there was always a company official, in civilian clothes, who was apparently unarmed but, in reality, always carried a short beam-weapon with him. Inside the perimeter there was a long building used as staff accommodation, another for the kitchens with the canteen and the third, near the north entrance, used as offices.

In the center of the area some high drilling towers stood out. The plant manager was a tall, stout middle-aged man with very white hair short cut and strange

light eyes. He wore jeans and a plaid shirt and wore a brown Stetson western, a typical character working in the desert.

He was in his office when he was called on the phone by one of the guards of the hut at the north entrance: "Director, there is a jeep with a patrol of the military police of Area 51 asking to enter." "Tell them to park near the entrance and ask for their driver to stay in the jeep, then accompany the others to my office" he replied in a peremptory tone. A guard opened the door after knocking and ushered in a massive military police sergeant accompanied by a plainclothes man who introduced himself as FBI Special Agent McGuire. Not very tall, slender, with carrot-colored hair and full of freckles, he was clearly of Irish origin. "Please, gentlemen, have a seat" said the director pointing to two chairs in front of his desk "What can I help you with?" He added with a broad smile. The sergeant remained silent because his job was only to show his chevrons, while the Irishman replied: "It's a normal control, we check all the settlements within a hundred miles of the Area." "Well" said the manager "We have all the authorizations in order and we bought this land from the state." "This is very strange... I didn't know that a land so close to the Area was for sale" the agent replied. The director looked at him with a smile and, staring at him with his clear eyes that made Special Agent McGuire uncomfortable, to his surprise, replied: "I can get you a copy of all the documents proving the ownership and a copy of the drilling authorizations, if you like." The agent immediately composed himself, regretting the discomfort he felt, stood up and handing him a business card said in

an excessively brusque voice: "Well then, I'll wait for copies of all documents, by fax to this number. Thank you for the moment." They both greeted very formally and returned to the jeep.

The director did not like that *thank you for the moment*, and immediately called the Security with his personal communicator and explained what had happened by also providing the agent's name.

Three days later, Special Agent McGuire's deputy at Area 51, who was an FBI veteran nearing retirement, received copies of the required documents and placed them in a desk drawer. It was no longer his business as the Special Agent McGuire had been promoted and transferred to the Miami narcotics team.

While the drilling works continued normally and had also identified a modest deposit of crude oil and gas, the technicians began to prepare the large sliding closure that would camouflage the exit mouth of the launch tunnel. It consisted of an enormous steel box, 40 by 60 yards large and a couple of yards high which, filled with earth and sand with real bushes transplanted for the purpose, blended perfectly with the surrounding area. It could rise from its seat embedded in the sand and slide to the side, to discover the opening of the tunnel, thanks to a powerful magnetic cushion device, very quiet. The tunnel excavation work began shortly after. A large tank similar to those to contain natural gas had been installed with a long metal chimney beside it. It was actually a shredding system for the disposal of excavated materials. Using beam weapon technology, The Phoenix engineers had built two large excavators that could crush and vacuum the

grainy ground and rocks below. All the debris produced by the excavation was fed into the grinding tank until it became sand and then sprinkled across the desert by a magnetic cushion cargo vehicle during the night. All night operations were monitored by Security agents in small stealth camouflaged magnetic cushion vehicles.

When the depth of the excavation was sufficient, the two excavators entered it sending the debris to the reservoir through a flexible pipe that was stretched in sections as the excavation proceeded. At the other end, four even larger excavators were at work at the base of the Phoenix, which had no problems with camouflage and which proceeded more rapidly towards the exit according to the established route. The meeting between the excavators took place after a month in a point one third of the length of the tunnel from the exit. When the works were finished, the tunnel 40 meters wide and as many high had a length of 40 miles with an inclination of 30° . The Western Mining Corp. kept that settlement in full operation even though the identified deposit was not very interesting from an economic point of view but the purpose was to protect the tunnel exit and keep the curious away.

The spaceship was ready for departure with the bow facing the exit tunnel. Gordon was sitting in his chair on the bridge and around him sat the crews of navigation and communications. In the engine room the technicians were waiting for the starting order. The emotion, which pervaded everyone for being the first human beings to leave the solar system, was intense but thanks to the mental conditioning received, it

could not have compromised the efficiency of the Captain and his crew. The flight room of the base was carrying out the final checks on the ship and monitoring all the vital and mental functions of the crew. When the starting signal arrived, the large ship slowly rose a few meters above the floor, remained motionless for a few seconds and then slowly walked towards the mouth of the tunnel. It was just over thirty meters wide and just as high with a length of almost a hundred meters. She proceeded at an angle of 30° with the gallery walls less than five meters from the hull, guided automatically by the navigator on board. When it was a hundred meters from the exit, the camouflage cover on the surface moved silently, leaving the tunnel exit free. It was a moonless night and only a few Security officers and the Western Mining Corp. settlement manager witnessed the ship's exit. In the dark, the large black hull made a considerable impression, it remained suspended horizontally for several seconds and then tilted upwards by 60° and began to move, accelerating more and more until it disappeared into the darkness of the sky. As the camouflage cover closed, the spectators on the ground returned to their quarters satisfied with having contributed to that epochal undertaking.

The Western Mining Corp. settlement of Crystal had become useless and it was decided to abandon it, leaving the main facility unattended and the signs on State Road 15. The workers who had worked there had a last drink at the gas station. Speaking with the owner, they announced the imminent closure of the settlement and their transfer to another company struc-

ture. The owner understood and was sorry for the loss of those customers who drank regularly without getting drunk and without causing him problems.

Valerio Relli Altofonte von Hohenstaufen was 17 when he was subjected to the second notional treatment, the one that at 18 would have allowed him to enter an external college. His parents, Lupo and Maria Luisa, were very proud of him because the mental investigations, to which all the children at the Phoenix were subjected, had shown that he had extraordinary abilities that would have allowed him to reach important positions. They already imagined him in a black uniform with four golden bars sitting at the Council table. His grandparents had only seen him on a few occasions as a child and decided to introduce him to them as a boy. Instead of Maria Luisa's usual pick-up, all three arrived in a camouflaged hovercraft similar to Giorgio's but very fast and with a much more comfortable interior. They parked under the canopy and walked towards the front door. Giorgio and Alexandra were on the patio waiting impatiently for them. Dax and Gip, sitting next to each other like a honor guard, watched the arrival of the newcomers.

Giorgio held out his hand to Valerio, saying with a smile: "Welcome to the ranch" they looked into each other's eyes for a few seconds and then embraced.

They all settled around the patio table and Alexandra served cake, sandwiches, beer and lemonade for everyone. Gip, after having sniffed Valerio for a long time, sat down next to him and, after receiving a nice and gratifying scratch behind his ears, it decided to be under his orders too. Alexandra, turning to

the guests, said: "Do you want to stay for the night?" So we can all stay a little longer together." Lupo and Maria Luisa looked at each other for a moment and agreed. Lupo called the base with his personal communicator and warned that they would return the next day.

In the afternoon Giorgio and Valerio went out for a ride in the desert escorted by Gip. They got out of the vehicle for a walk in the wilderness among clumps of bushes and giant saguaros. They stopped at the foot of an enormous saguaro from which Giorgio picked some fruits, similar to large red and juicy figs and handed them to Valerio who tasted them delighted by the sweet taste that he did not expect from a cactus. As they returned to the hovercraft, Gip sniffed nervous the air but it was not the usual attitude he had when he heard a coyote or a wild rabbit. Giorgio became suspicious and hastened to get everyone on the hovercraft. Driving home, while the two deepened their friendship with scratches behind Gip's ears and abundant licks on Valerio's hands, he was the only one to notice a large figure moving in a clump of bushes.

They spent the rest of the day happy to be all together and Valerio had kept some saguaro fruit for his parents to taste. When it was bed time, Giorgio left the external lights on and Lupo curiously asked him: "Why? Are you afraid of any intrusion?" "I don't know" replied Giorgio seriously "but returning to the ranch this afternoon I glimpsed a large figure moving in the bushes and could be of some big dangerous feline." Everyone went to bed but the two of them kept the beam weapon at hand.

They were awakened with a start in the night by a noise of struggle, a din of snarls, roars and yelps. Giorgio came out with the beam weapon in one hand and the torch in the other and found himself faced with a gruesome scene. A big cougar was tearing apart poor Dax, who probably had bravely attacked him first, while Gip had one of the puma's hind legs between his powerful jaws and was pulling it off it. Giorgio aimed a deadly ray at the head of the feline which fell forward leaving the paw between Gip's jaws. For Dax, unfortunately, there was nothing more to do, while Gip with a belligerent air and with the paw of the puma in his mouth, approached Giorgio limping like a veteran after the battle, bleeding from a wound on his side which fortunately did not was too deep. Valerio at the sight of Dax was petrified, impassive, but inside he cried desperately, while the two women burst into tears. Alexandra, helped by Maria Luisa, began to dress Gip's wound while Giorgio, Lupo and Valerio dug a burial for Dax in a corner of the ranch. It was necessary to get rid of the puma's body because if he had been found in those conditions, many doubts would have arisen as to how he had been killed. The beam had made a perfectly round hole with a diameter of 2 inches in the animal's skull, making instantly sublimate its brain. They decided to behead him and bury his head while his body could have been abandoned in the desert. They took him a few miles away from the ranch, into the desert and Giorgio fired a couple of shots into the body with the shotgun. No one would have been suspicious if a hunter had shot down a puma to take away its head and a paw as tro-

phies. The paw was buried by Gip a few days later in one of its secret places.

Giorgio and Alexandra decided to replace the poor Dax with another Bull Terrier, a female with a brown and white brindle coat, a lively and playful looking one year old puppy that they called Suzy. Gip, as it saw Suzy, began to sniff it with distrust but finally welcomed its new female partner. It would be its job of teaching Suzy on how to hunt coyotes and wild rabbits.

PART SIX. The Space

The Phoenix 1 had left the solar system and the Captain gave the order to increase the curvature to head towards Proxima. The protective magnetic shield had proved its effectiveness in repelling the small space debris they had encountered while crossing the asteroid belt. They had even intentionally headed for some bigger ones just to test the efficiency of the shield. The ship proved to be very well manageable. Communications with the earth became less and less frequent given the long response time. However, they had a super-computer on board which had all the information they could have received from the base and which would have come to their aid in case of need. The super-computer was built in the Phoenix laboratories using proton current flow technology instead of the common electronic current, combining it with optical chip technology. This allowed for computing speed and memory capacity unthinkable with other technologies and also allowed direct interfacing with the human mind. The crew members authorized to communicate directly with the super-computer could do so verbally but also mentally. On board there were only two people able to mentally communicate with the super-computer, the Captain and the astrophysicist who had received specific notional treatment for this purpose. Everyone else could access it verbally or traditionally through terminals.

The expected duration of the voyage was one month and the crew enjoyed the spectacle of the images sent by the external video cameras, on the high definition on-board screens. Almost half of the hull

was occupied by warp engines while a third was occupied by a hold with magnetic cushion vehicles and reconnaissance aircraft. However, there was still ample space available for the crew. The reconnaissance vehicles were in reverse gravity so they would work even in the absence of an atmosphere, calibrating the engine to the force of gravity of the planet, an operation that was performed automatically by the onboard computer.

Valerio at the age of 18 entered the Nevada University in Las Vegas and chose the astronomy course. He was a tall, stout young man with dark blond hair and amber brown eyes because of the two notional treatments he received. With a cold and thoughtful character, he was ready for joy and a joke but that rarely started with him. His classmates instinctively respected him and he was never the subject of bullying as he inspired a certain awe in his peers, not only for his build but above all for the look of his clear eyes that many found disconcerting. He practiced several of the sports that were available in the campus, but he excelled in martial arts and in particular judo. Like his father and grandfather, he had a deadly handshake that surprised everyone, and in particular in judo, where the grip on the opponent's kimono or limbs was essential, he was able to overwhelm opponents much bigger than him.

After four years he returned to the base and asked to participate in the preparation of the security agents. He was admitted even though the behavioral, emotional and mental investigations of him suggested a different training path. After completing his prepara-

tion as an external agent, he asked and obtained permission to leave the base to visit his grandparents.

Gip had become too old to hunt coyotes and wild rabbits and he was lying in the shade of the patio all the day with Suzy. Their two sons, Mitch, with a white coat and black spot on the eye and the other, Jack, brindle like their mother, took on the role of guardians of the ranch. Giorgio had chosen those names for the two new Bull Terriers in honor of the two bronze statues that beat the hours from the tower of the town hall in Piazza Unità, two Moors called Micheze and Jacheze from Trieste inhabitants. Although he was 95 years old, Giorgio was still venturing into the desert with his hovercraft escorted by Mitch who had the same passion for wild rabbits as his father.

Both dogs also shared a passion for hunting coyotes that attacked in pairs without leaving any escape for the unfortunate who entered the ranch enclosure. Giorgio hoped that the coyotes would move elsewhere because digging holes to bury them had become tiring at his age and he often used the beam weapon to facilitate the excavation.

Valerio arrived at the ranch on a camouflaged hovercraft and Alexandra, when she saw him, hugged him tightly with tears in her eyes from her emotion. She didn't expect such a big young man in jeans and a shirt with a Stetson on his head. Even Gip recognized him and got up from his rest to greet him with Suzy and take the scratch behind his ear. They sat on the patio to chat with two lemonades in front of them. Alexandra wanted to know everything about her nephew and he answered her by looking with affection

at that old woman who was so dear to him. After half an hour Giorgio arrived and got off the hovercraft followed by Mitch and Jack, each of whom had a wild rabbit in his mouth and Gip watched them approach, proud of his offspring. Giorgio and Valerio embraced for a long time and Valerio, looking at the two dogs that had just arrived, said laughing "Same as his father, right?" and Giorgio with a disconsolate air replied: "Perfectly alike, last week I had to bury two coyotes and the undertaker's job is starting to be too hard for me." They all laughed heartily together. Towards evening Valerio hugged his grandparents and left on his hovercraft with a little sadness in his heart. All three knew that this would be the last time together.

When Giorgio felt that the end was near he called the base who sent a Methodist pastor to stand beside the two. The next day Lupo and Maria Luisa arrived. Alexandra died peacefully in Giorgio's arms at 105 and he followed her a month later, at 102. Even Gip, very old, could no longer stand on her paws and he too left a few days later. They were all buried in a corner of the ranch where Dax also lay, so they all gathered for their eternal sleep. Lupo and Maria Luisa kept the ranch. Lupo was 75 and decided to resign from the Council, as his father had done, and retired to the ranch with Maria Luisa, old Suzy and with Mitch and Jack as overseers.

The Phoenix 1 entered the Proxima Centauri system and the super-computer began to analyze all the planets that orbited it. One very small, almost an aster-

oid, was too close to the star to be habitable, the second and third, those already identified by the radio telescope, were the most interesting. The other four were a long way from Proxima and the supercomputer detected extremely low temperatures on their surface covered with solid methane.

Gordon decided that the first to be explored will be Proxima B. The super-computer found that its size and mass were slightly larger than that of the Earth. It completed its cycle of revolution in about 11 days in a synchronous orbit at 0.5 astronomical units, that is half the distance between the Earth and the Sun, and always turned the same face towards its star. Proxima was a red dwarf less luminous than the Sun so it radiated much less light on the planet but many more X-rays. Moreover, Proxima was a flare star, subject to periodic variations of its brightness and consequently of illumination on the planet. Considering that the planet revolved around Proxima at a much shorter distance than that between the Earth and the Sun and that Proxima's irradiation was much lower than that of the Sun, the presence of liquid water was possible. An accurate analysis of the planet's atmosphere was necessary to verify if it was able to sufficiently filter the large quantities of X-rays that Proxima emitted. The super-computer also had the information of a flare of the star occurred in 2016 that had invested the illuminated face with such radiation as to destroy any micro organisms present on the surface. The Phoenix 1 went into orbit around Proxima B and the super-computer carefully analyzed its atmosphere. The analyzes revealed the presence of a dense ionosphere capable of filtering a significant amount of harmful rays under

which there was a protective ozone layer. The troposphere, the one closest to the planet, had a composition not very different from that of the Earth. The level of X-rays was very high on the face exposed to the star, while it was almost non-existent on the opposite face. The overheating of the exposed part of the atmosphere caused significant meteorological turbulence towards the colder hidden part. The super-computer suggested to Gordon to explore the temperate zone between the two faces where the temperature was tolerable. It was conventionally established that the axis of the planet was parallel to the plane of the orbit of revolution arranged along a radius of the orbit, even if there was no rotational motion around the axis. The two hemispheres, the northern one completely submerged with an icy polar cap and the dry and strongly irradiated southern one, were separated by a temperate equatorial belt of land.

Paul, the astrophysicist, engineer Terence and security officer Peter took their places on the, Explorer 1, to descend to the planet in the area suggested by the super-computer. The aircraft exited the spaceship and entered a lower orbit, above the planet's equatorial belt. It descended into the dense atmosphere, sending data to the super-computer which suggested going down to a flat area that it had considered the most appropriate and also communicated that the atmosphere was breathable with caution. The environment certainly allowed life because it was covered with a dark green vegetation in the center and thinned out until it disappeared towards the exposed part while it thickened with shrubs and tall trees similar to conifers towards the dark part.

The three occupants of the aircraft felt a certain emotion, albeit controlled, since for the first time, in the history of the mankind, they would most likely find themselves faced with extraterrestrial life forms. The vehicle settled gently on a clearing covered with a thick blanket of low plants that looked like lichens. Terence remained on board while Peter and Paul, wearing their protective suits, also against X-rays, descended to the ground. They were constantly in contact with the Explorer 1 and also with the spaceship in orbit to which they sent data and images through the sensors they had on the suit. The super-computer reported that the level of X-rays in that place was higher than the normal amount radiated on Earth but that it did not reach dangerous levels. He also confirmed that the atmosphere was breathable. Peter and Paul looked around. The light of the environment where they were located seemed that of a dawn looking towards the illuminated area of the planet and in the middle of the night looking from the other side. They turned on powerful portable LED headlights, and four more powerful lights from the vehicle lit up the clearing for a kilometer. Paul stuck a metal rod into the ground that bore a disk on the top with the inscription: Phoenix 1 and underneath a drawing that schematically reproduced the solar system with an arrow pointing to the Earth. Surely it would not have been of any use but it was a symbolic gesture that no one would have given up. A similar design was painted on the side of the aircraft with the addition: Explorer 1.

They walked for a few tens of meters, while Peter looked around directing the flashlight, Paul collected vegetables of different types as well as soil samples

and put them in sterile containers that he had hung on the suit. They got back on board and turned off all the headlights, preparing to return. The super-computer that continuously monitored the vehicle's sensors warned that it had detected various life forms around them at a distance of 50 meters. Peter asked the Captain for permission to stay to check the presences detected and Gordon replied: "Remain stationary in the position for 15 minutes without getting out of the vehicle with the lights off but ready for immediate take off." Any inhabitant would have been dazzled and perhaps with their eyes damaged by the Explorer's powerful headlights, because of the low ambient light constantly present in that place.

After 15 minutes they took off following a low-flying spiral route, widening from the landing point for a hundred meters, with the lights off. They saw no movement in the vegetation but the super-computer continued to detect presences of life in the same points as before. They returned to the ship and handed the samples to one of the engineers who took them to the on-board laboratory to examine them. Gordon asked the super-computer for additional information about the presences he had detected. It replied that the detected life forms were very complex organisms capable of moving quickly, bipeds most likely the size of a short man. "Monkeys", Gordon thought with some emotion. The analyzes of the plants and the soil did not give particularly interesting results. The vegetables collected were composed of lichens, but particularly rich in proteins, while the soil was clayey rich in potassium and nitrogen. Gordon decided to send Explorer 1 again to further investigate the detected life

forms. His military training had led him to embark, at the last moment, a revolving turret armed with a medium-power beam cannon that could be mounted on the bottom of the Explorer. Driven by the onboard computer, he would be able to hit any target with extreme speed and precision. It was enough to frame the target on the screen and press a button, or provide coordinates and the on-board computer would have done everything automatically.

The old Greenlee County Sheriff finally retired and moved to Las Vegas to enjoy better his pension money. William bitterly regretted having left him, by mistake, the slightest traces of ludopathia during the mental conditioning that he had applied to him and promised to eliminate them if he had the opportunity. Deputy Chuck proudly took over from him as the top law officer at Clifton. He was well-liked before but with the sheriff's star on his chest he wreaked havoc on female hearts across the county. Shortly after his appointment he decided to personally visit all the inhabitants to collect suggestions, complaints and impressions. One day he happened upon the ranch in his SUV with the county sheriff's emblem. Trying to imitate the slow and swinging gait of the old sheriff, who according to him was the most suitable for a law guardian, he approached the patio where Maria Luisa was sitting with old Suzy at her feet. "Good morning Sheriff " she said when he was near her "Take a seat. Are you allowed one beer on duty?", "I'm not on duty" Chuck replied with his famous smile "but only on a courtesy visit", "Perfect!" Maria Luisa said and got up, returning shortly after with a can of ice-cold

beer and a lemonade for herself. They chatted pleasantly about a bit of everything and Chuck asked if she had any problems in his isolated ranch. "I really think not sheriff, we have three dogs, a rifle and a telephone to call you in case of need" she replied smiling and failing to mention the beam gun that Lupo always had at hand and the emergency batteries in the cellar, which would power the ranch for years in the absence of electricity. Chuck satisfied with the last part of the answer was about to get up when he heard the noise of the hovercraft. Lupo got out and walked towards him and, with a cordial air, held out his hand saying: "Good morning sheriff," Chuck was about to answer when he saw Mitch and Jack come galloping from the hovercraft, each with a wild rabbit in their mouth. They deposited them for a moment in front of Suzy, who approved the skill without discomfort, then took them back and disappeared behind the house to bury them in their secret places. Chuck watched the scene amused and said to Lupo "You have some excellent hunting dogs apparently, Mr. Relli" Lupo replied, smiling. "Yes, I really can't complain." They said goodbye and the sheriff resumed the State Road 70, satisfied with the visit, while Lupo was even more satisfied with the fact that the new sheriff was not at all a nosy.

Gordon had the armed turret mounted on Explorer 1 and gave the order to prepare the second descent to the planet. Gregory, another engineer specializing in communications systems, also joined. They left the spaceship along a spiral descent route until they landed at the same point as the previous time.

With the lights off, they stood waiting. All sensors were active and ready to send their readings to the super-computer. The crew members monitored any movement around the vehicle on the screens. After several hours of waiting the super-computer sensed that a group of ten life forms were at a distance of 50 meters from them in the direction of the bow of the Explorer which was oriented along the temperate land with the dark to its left and the twilight to his right. They waited again, and after a few hours, Peter, who was checking the forward camera on the screen, distinctly saw a silhouette on the screen about twenty meters from the hull. He was an erect biped with a humanoid appearance, slender with thin limbs, with light gray skin and appeared to be without clothing. The oblong bald head from which protruded two huge dark eyes without lids. The height detected was about five feet. He cautiously advanced up to 5 meters from the hull and a few minutes later was joined by other beings similar to him who stood behind him. They looked scared but curious. They activated the highly sensitive external microphones and heard sounds coming from those strange beings. They didn't sound like words but sounds of only two or three different frequencies, rhythmically interrupted with pauses of different lengths. The super-computer immediately began analyzing the language by processing all the sounds received. The laconic response was: rudimentary language based on a few different sounds and modulated by pauses to form words, with a vocabulary extremely limited to basic concepts. Some kind of primitive Morse code, Gordon thought. When the bravest approached the forward camera, the super-computer ana-

lyzed his eyes and reported: multiple eyes with several thousands receptors to compose the whole of the received image and with a much larger field of view than the human eye. Being very sensitive to light they could be irreparably damaged by a too intense light source.

The super-computer processed sounds probably understandable by those beings and sent the sequence to the Explorer. Peter decided to make those sounds outside. They were all amazed to see the beings lie down on the ground with their slender arms stretched forward as if they were in the presence of a divinity, emitting similar sounds all together. For the first time in the history of the mankind they had communicated even if in a rudimentary way with an extraterrestrial being.

On board the Phoenix 1 there was a laboratory for mental conditioning, similar to the one William used at the base, which was able to perform basic notional treatments. Gordon felt that it would be very helpful to subject one of those beings to basic treatment of the kind to which the children of the Phoenix were subjected. This would have made it possible to communicate much more easily and obtain more information about the planet. It was about finding a non-violent way to get one on the spaceship. He gave the order to the Explorer to come back to develop a capture plan together. Explorer 1 rose silently on the clearing while the beings were still prostrate on the ground.

They gathered in the control room and Gordon began: "Gentlemen, we must bring one of those beings aboard in order to analyze his mind and establish a

method of communication. This will provide us with information about the planet and its inhabitants much faster and will save us a lot of time." They followed the comparisons of the various opinions and discussed for a long time each bringing their own scientific knowledge. "The first problem to be solved is to isolate an individual so as not to frighten others during the capture." Gordon said "We remain still in the aircraft and the first one that approaches alone we paralyze him and take him on board" and he added "we must also provide a screen to protect his eyes because, with our lighting, they could be damaged."

The Explorer 1 descended to the same point and stood still with the lights off. For several hours nothing happened, then the super-computer detected an approaching life form. It was probably the individual from the last time who had proved to be the most curious. After a few minutes the figure approached the aircraft with his face very close to the external camera which for some reason attracted him. A beam lasting one thousandth of a second came out of a nearby hole that paralyzed the being and made him collapse to the ground unconscious. Two of the crew got off, wrapped him almost completely in a transparent sheet and loaded him on board.

The being was lying on the laboratory cot where the lighting had been turned down and the protection that had been applied to his eyes during the journey to the spaceship had been removed. He was 5.2 feet tall and weighed 90 lbs. He normally breathed the atmosphere of the spaceship, which made everyone breathe a sigh of relief. The head, completely devoid of hair like the rest of the body, was oblong, The two dark,

oval eyes placed vertically, convex, with multiple composition, had to ensure a wide-field vision but probably at the expense of the sharpness of the images. He had two slits that served as nostrils and a lip less mouth below, with a tiny set of teeth that were all the same, which showed that he was probably not carnivorous. Laterally, his ears were two slits without pavilions. His conformation was humanoid and his skin was a very pale gray evidently pigment-free, smooth and thick. Underneath one could guess a musculature surely proportionate to the gravity of the planet. His upper limbs were a yard long, slender, and ended with two four-fingered hands, with one opposable finger. The lower limbs were 3 feet long with joints at hip, knee and ankle. His feet, 1 foot long, had four stubby, barely outlined fingers, as nail less as the hands. It was a male specimen because a thin penis was visible between his legs. He wore no clothing. From the volume and conformation of the skull it was possible to guess that it had a brain mass adequate for an intelligent being.

The treatment engineer began a mental investigation with the being still unconscious and detected a potentially complex brain activity that seemed largely unused. A more in-depth analysis would have required the being to be conscious. He left him immobilized by the equipment without ties to the cot and made him come to consciousness. The Machine sensed from him fear and there were rhythmic stiffening in the limb muscles that he could not move. He stood motionless as the Machine probed his brain and picked up his communication system and his language.

The Machine's data immediately reached the super-computer which began analyzing the language and setting up a translator. After two hours a device was ready which allowed, when speaking, to emit sounds that he could understand and to receive his sounds translated. The language was elementary and could express mostly concrete concepts, but also describe some basic emotions such as fear, anger, happiness, contentment, disappointment.

Gordon wanted to be the first to speak to him and said slowly spelling out the words "We don't want to hurt you, we just want to communicate with you and your fellow men on the planet." The being remained silent but the muscle contractions stopped. Gordon added even though he knew he was not understood "We come from another world" After a few minutes, the being made a series of sounds with a few notes interspersed with pauses of different lengths and the translator said: "I no move hands, feet" Gordon to reassure him replied "Soon you will be able to move your hands and feet and you can sit on the couch to talk to me, tell me if you agree" The translator reported "Yes please". The engineer deactivated the device that kept it locked and everyone did a I step back as Paul put his hand on the beam weapon, keeping it ready and set to the paralyzing. The being moved his hands and curled her legs slowly while the Machine detected happiness. He slowly sat up on the edge of the bed looking around. In the low light of the environment, normal for him, he perfectly saw four unknown figures who had bodies with colors he had never seen before. The Machine detected fear for a moment, which soon turned into curiosity.

Gordon, who was to the side, asked him in a low voice “What’s your name?” The being turned its head in Gordon’s direction and putting a hand on its chest made sounds which the translator interpreted: “me, F r r r r” They decided to call him Fred and set the translator so that the word Fred created the sequence of sounds that the being had just emitted. “How many are like Fred?” Gordon asked and the answer was “Many”. The problem arose of understanding how beings counted and from a specific mental investigation it turned out that their calculation system was not in decimal but in octal that is base 8 instead of 10, probably due to the fact that they had four fingers on each hand. To confirm, Gordon had 10 identical objects placed on a shelf in front of the being and asked “How many are there?” The being stared at the objects, showed the two open hands then closed them and opened two fingers of one hand and replied “One, two”. (12 in octal equals 10 in decimal) Gordon smiled and thought “They don’t have such a different mind from ours, after all” and the Machine detected happiness in Fred. Gordon made another attempt to figure out how many beings like Fred there were and asked again “How many like Fred are here?” Fred stood still for a few seconds and then showed a finger four times and said “One, one, one, one” (1111 in octal equals 585 in decimal) and added “Perhaps” Gordon interpreted about 600 individuals and asked again “Here are others not like Fred?” The Machine revealed that Fred felt fear upon hearing the question and answered “Yes” and after a pause during which the Machine sensed an increase in fear, he continued “Others from water bad and others from light bad”.

Gordon saw Fred's emotion and decided to suspend the interrogation but asked one last question "What does Fred eat? Is Fred hungry now?" and the answer was "I eat weed, no now". Gordon asked the engineer that was nearby to get a vegetable homogenized food from the galley and offer it to him.

When the engineer returned he handed Fred a plastic tub with the lid open. Fred intrigued, took it, dipped a finger in it and brought it to his nostrils, thought about it for a moment and put it in his mouth. The Machine detected pleasure. Gordon thought with relief that he had discovered how to feed Fred. They put another tray of the same food on the table and left it alone in the room, checking it with a video camera from the outside. Fred wasn't hungry but he slowly sucked both pans with his finger and started looking around. The Machine detected curiosity and interest in understanding what all those objects unknown to him were used for. He looked at them closely one by one and smelling them was disappointed that they did not emit any smell. The room had been kept sterile just for him. Gordon thought that the sense of smell played an important role for those beings.

After a couple of hours Gordon returned to the room accompanied by Gregory, the communications engineer. They sat on two armchairs while Fred, as he saw them, sat on the cot watching them in silence. The Machine detected extreme curiosity. Gordon wanted to understand why he had shown fear when he answered about the other species on the planet. He started asking "Why is Fred afraid of bad water beings?" the Machine detected fear again and Fred replied "R rr m m mm rr eats everyone like Fred" Gordon and George

looked at each other and baptized the bad guys with the name of Rhombs and set the translator to do so. Imagining they were voracious fish species Gordon asked again "Do Rhombs come out of the water to eat everyone like Fred?" the fear was accentuated perhaps due to a memory that the Machine was struggling to locate and Fred replied "Yes out of water walks and eats but Fred fast away" Gordon imagined some species similar to carnivorous reptiles and asked again "Fred shows me where are Rhombs?" The fear increased and Gordon added "Don't be afraid we can defend Fred and kill Rhombs" The fear subsided but remained and the answer was "No kill Rhombs, only run away quickly" Then Gordon tried to calm him and convince him "If Fred shows me where Rhombs are he can see how we kill them" Fred was puzzled for a few minutes then his curiosity took over: "Fred show Rhombs but fear".

Gordon prepared Explorer 1 armed with a beam turret and organized the expedition. He took command and Peter, George and Fred got on it. They descended to the planet with the usual procedure and positioned themselves in the same point where they had met Fred at a height of 5 meters. Peter was at the controls while Gordon and George on either side of Fred and asked him "Where are Rhombs?" Fred was silent then they realized that the images on the screens did not give him the perception of where they were so Gordon had the tailgate open while the vehicle lay flat on the ground. They got out and Fred picked up a clump of lichen which he slipped into his mouth, looked around and pointed with his finger in the direction of the darkness. They all climbed aboard and the Explorer 1

headed in the direction indicated by Fred at an altitude of 10 meters above the ground, at high speed. After several kilometers a winding inlet similar to a fjord was seen in the dark that crept into the land that had flat coasts similar to beaches. The Explorer landed on the sand about a hundred meters from the water with a modest rounded hill behind it covered with trees that looked like conifers and from whose branches hung large brown fruits as big as melons.

They went down cautiously looking around with the night vision goggles and Gordon pointed to the fruit to Fred asking "Good to eat for Fred?" he immediately replied as agitated "Yes good good good, Fred eats but Rhombs no want". Peter walked over to a tree and aimed at a large branch that had six large fruits. The beam cut it off cleanly and the branch fell to the ground, rolling the fruits on the sand. Contrary to what it seemed, the fruit had soft skin and also looked edible as Fred grabbed one and began biting it looking at Gordon as if to thank him. The Machine that was in the aircraft detected gratitude. He bit it all around describing a circumference and then he forced the two caps by twisting them and the fruit opened. It looked a lot like a fruit common in Southeast Asia which people call *durian*. The internal pulp contained two soft bodies that resembled two large beans with a pungent and not very pleasant smell. But for Fred it was obviously very pleasant because he devoured it all in seconds.

While they were watching Fred's meal in amusement, Gregory gave the alarm. A large dark shape had risen from the water near the shore. They approached the Explorer, keeping an eye on the new being and

Fred, trembling, was the first to board. Gordon thought it more prudent to fly low to get a better look. They rose about ten meters with the bow towards the sea. From the water, a huge being similar to a gigantic caterpillar sprouted up about ten yards long and a couple wide. It did not crawl but moved on a long series of short and stubby legs and had the ability to contract and lift halfway off the ground of its length and perhaps even to jump. The huge being came completely out of the water, rose and raised its pointed head towards the Explorer, opening, in four sections, a horrible mouth from which predatory tentacles came out, ending with some species of claws. Gordon decided to shoot it down both to prove to Fred that they could kill it thus gain his trust, and to bring samples to the spaceship. The super-computer tracking their every move recommended Gordon to leave his head intact to analyze it.

He framed the center of the huge body and the beam cannon shoot, cutting it in two. A dark liquid came out of the two halves and soaked the sand. The head part was still moving with the mouth wide open so he aimed a second shot that severed the head cleanly from the remaining body. The predatory tentacles kept moving from the mouth. Then Gordon landed the aircraft and, descending with the beam weapon in hand, aimed at the center of the huge mouth and the tentacles immediately fell to the ground. They loaded its head in the hold of the aircraft and returned to the spaceship in orbit.

The analyzes revealed some peculiarities of that gigantic being. It breathed air but could have remained submerged indefinitely as it had both lungs and gills.

All the vital apparatus was concentrated in the head that could survive even without the body that served as an energy reserve and being omnivorous, its diet could be based on any plant or animal. It was equipped with two separate brains, one presiding over the body's automatic vital functions while the other was decision-making. Both damaged by the ray could not be analyzed completely but from the partial analysis of the decision-making unit it turned out that he really liked beings like Fred who wandered around the trees that gave those big fruits. Evidently Fred's companions were so fond of those fruits that they risked their lives to eat them.

Gordon had gained Fred's full trust after showing him that the Rhombs were vulnerable and continued with the questions Fred eagerly answered. Gordon wanted information on the other beings Fred mentioned and asked "Who are the bad guys of light?" The Machine detected fear again and Fred replied "They come from below" and pointed to the floor with his finger. A people who lived underground thought Gordon, was perhaps more evolved and asked again "Does Fred show where they are?" The fear detected earlier intensified and he replied "Yes, I show, but fear." then Gordon continued "Why fear of the evil of light?" "They take like Fred away and never come back" he replied. Gordon became curious and decided to organize an exploration to meet those beings.

Rachel was a young Security agent, charged with overseeing members outside the base. She had met Valerio in the martial arts gym which she too was passionate about. She was particularly fond of military

sanda, a discipline developed by the Chinese army for its elite troops. She had met several times in training with Valerio whom she almost never managed to overwhelm due to the judo throwing techniques he adopted and in which he was an expert. She asked him to teach her those techniques and they met more and more often in the gym. Valerio gladly agreed to be her judo teacher because he saw her passionate about that sport that he too loved. When she was put in charge of the surveillance of Lupo and Maria Luisa at their ranch, she, knowing that they were Valerio's parents, asked him if he wanted to accompany her. He was free from urgent commitments and gladly accepted.

When they got off the hovercraft in front of the house they saw Lupo and Maria Luisa who were arranging plants in the small cemetery of the ranch, in the shade of four tall cypress trees. As they approached Lupo greeted them with his hand and, placing the spade on the ground, signaled him to join them. Maria Luisa was arranging wild flowers under the watchful gaze of Mitch and Jack who seemed very interested in the operation. They all embraced and Lupo showed Valerio the graves of his grandparents which they had just finished arranging with large square stones and heather bushes around them. Giorgio and Alexandra were buried near the entrance to the low fence made with dry stones. A path of white gravel bordered the graves and continued at the end of the small cemetery where Dax, Gip and Suzy were buried. Valerio thought that that place conveyed an infinite peace that was able to relieve the pain of the disappearance of loved ones.

They all sat on the patio to chat and Maria Luisa brought beers, lemonades and sandwiches for everyone. Lupo at one point, smiling at Rachel, asked Valerio "Don't tell me you're about to go to Las Vegas too..." Valerio, amazed, replied "No, why? don't understand, why should I go to Vegas?". "No worries... I was joking..." Lupo said and they changed the subject. Valerio inquired about their life on the ranch, if they had any problems, if they were happy to be so isolated. "We are perfectly fine here" Lupo and Maria Luisa answered almost in chorus "We also have friends who often come to visit us. Indeed, if you want to stop for dinner tonight we have them as guests for a barbecue and it would be fine to have a nice table all together." and continued "They live on a small ranch a few miles from here and should arrive at dinner time."

Towards evening Lupo prepared the barbecue by lighting some small wooden logs under a large grill, while Maria Luisa brought big T-bone steaks onto a tray that she placed nearby. When embers were ready, with perfect timing, a huge red pickup truck, modified as *big foot*, arrived. The huge tires, over a yard high, protruded from the bodywork by at least one foot and in order to get down to the ground one had to use a ladder fixed under the door. About twenty headlights were on display on the huge bumper and on the roll bar, while a flaming writing stood out on the sides: *Red Devil*.

A couple in their sixties got out, in jeans and Stetson westerns on their heads but with some difficulty due to the size of the two. Jeff was a big man of almost 7 feet and weighing over 300 lbs while she, Donna, was a little less tall but had about the same

weight. They approached smiling with two baskets of wild mushrooms in their arms and Jeff said: "Wolf, put the steaks on first and immediately after these delicious mushrooms." He did not like the sound of the name Lupo pronounced by him and preferred the English translation. They all sat on the patio with a large supply of ice-cold beer cans as the steaks sizzled on the grill.

The dinner was extremely fun for Valerio and Rachel who laughed out loud at Jeff's jokes which, even if not very original, when commented by Donna became hilarious. They sat at the table drinking, laughing and joking until late at night when, at a certain point Mitch and Jack, who were gnawing on some steak bones, left them dropped to the ground and both began to growl, aiming in the dark. Lupo foreseeing a danger and not being able to take the beam weapon because of the two guests, entered the house and left holding the shotgun. Jeff was puzzled for a moment, then despite his size, he got on the Red Devil with unexpected agility and turned on all the headlights he had. Valerio and Rachel grabbed the beam weapon and kept it in their pocket ready in case of extreme emergency. The headlights illuminated a big cougar that was slowly approaching attracted by the smell of the barbecue and that stopped dazzled. Lupo aimed the shotgun and fired at the animal's head and at the same time two shots went off in quick succession from the pick-up. The cougar, with its head reduced to a shapeless mass, fell to the ground while Mitch and Jack ran towards the animal with the intention of finishing it but there was nothing else to do. Jeff got out of the truck and they all walked over to the cougar's carcass.

“Too bad for the head so ruined but the 12 gauge single slug can knock down walls too. Do you mind, Wolf, if I make a rug out of leather?” Lupo, laughing, replied “It's all yours Jeff, I have enough carpets in my house.” They loaded the carcass with difficulty on the pick up and shortly afterwards the guests left, happy for dinner and for the new carpet arriving. Valerio and Lupo had the last two beers and after hugging everyone, Valerio and Rachel got on the hovercraft and returned to the base.

In the year 2050 Russia decided to officially join the Union as a full member and Finland followed shortly after. Estonia, which was culturally and economically linked to Finland, also joined, while the other two Baltic countries, Latvia and Lithuania found themselves in an enclave and were also forced to join the Union. Two years later, Sweden, Norway and Denmark followed. Germany and France, albeit reluctant, joined because of the new parties that took power and were in favor of joining the Union. The triggering reason for this decision was economic. The euro was depreciating strongly against the Lira and the components for their industries were starting to have too high costs that were not compensated by the ephemeral increase in their exports. The economic crisis in the two isolated countries devastated their economies and the European Central Bank, which no longer made sense to exist, was dissolved. Belgium, Luxembourg and Holland were also forced to enter last. Thus was born a state of 600 millions inhabitants with the federal capital in Rome, whose metropolitan territory was detached from the Lazio region and became a federal

district on the model of the District of Columbia in the USA. The whole city was organized, structured and dedicated to the federal government of the Union. The original denomination of Union of Southern European States no longer made sense because the state extended from the Atlantic to the Pacific and was simply changed into a Union.

The federal government entered into negotiations with many African states to activate a giant investment plan for Africa. The countries bordering the Mediterranean immediately joined and obtained very advantageous economic agreements. In return, the Union did not pretend to assume leadership positions but asked the governments of the various African states to comply with the general political and social directives in force in the Union. Massive investments in Africa brought prosperity and progress to the entire continent and the popular masses in the various states realized the improvements brought about by collaboration with the Union. The pro-Union parties began to increase support and gradually came to power in all African states. Within ten years, all of Africa joined the Union.

Australia and New Zealand did not join the Union for logistical and administrative reasons given the distance but fully shared its social and economic policies, fully conforming. India and China, even if they were reluctant, decided within ten years to join, mainly for economic reasons. Gradually, all the Asian states followed China with the exception of Singapore which maintained a neutrality on the Swiss model. The United States, which was already a federal state, also conformed to the policies of the Union as Australia had done, while not becoming a member state.

The last continent to conform was South America where political and economic rivalries between the various states hindered entry into the Union for a long time, especially because of the drug cartels which did not like the new world situation very much, seeing undermined their activities with the control of their markets by the new highly efficient anti-drug judicial structures. Laws were enacted in the Union according to which the use of drugs became a crime punished with mandatory detoxification while trading became a crime punished very severely with a long detention. Precisely for the solution of these problems, the Phoenix began to manifest itself publicly by spreading effective techniques for detoxification derived from mental conditioning that had been in use at the base for many years.

The next step was in the field of education. Various types of notional treatments were gradually introduced into the school both to transfer knowledge at various levels and to identify the optimal training to be provided to each young person according to her mental and physical abilities. Finally, the Phoenix scientists took care of the recovery of the prisoners and of all those who had committed crimes. The result was extremely comforting with a success of 97% of the treated subjects. The prisons remained almost empty and the security of the citizens became almost total.

Towards the end of the first century of the third millennium the Earth was practically united and inhabited by economically and socially evolved individuals. Unemployment no longer existed on the planet. Economic and political rivalries no longer made sense because each Confederate or Union-affiliated state

was transferring its excess resources to others and receiving what it needed. The currency was one for all and had no other comparison currencies. However, social differences remained, the richest existed but the poor had disappeared. Everyone was able to meet their basic needs for themselves and their families. The possibilities for economic improvement were based solely on merit and motivation to improve. There was no possibility of exploitation because the various local states monitored any activity suspected of illegal actions. Freedom was properly limited not to override the freedom of others. There were no limitations to enrichment if achieved with personal or group merits without damaging or overriding the interests of others. Competition was free but aimed exclusively at improving products and services. Racism and nationalism disappeared, transforming themselves into harmless parochialism and the members of the different races felt that they were all inhabitants of the Earth. Under these conditions, the Phoenix revealed itself to the masses by disclosing its entire history over a hundred years and its determination to achieve the result finally obtained after more than one hundred and fifty years.

Explorer 1, with Gordon, Paul, Terence and Fred aboard, headed low towards the glow of the hemisphere exposed to Proxima while the super-computer checked the level of X-rays on the planet's surface. When emissions reached the limit of the bearable without danger, the vehicle lowered and lay down in a semi-desert clearing spotted by low round bushes.

Everyone got out except Terence who remained in the pilot's seat. They were all armed with short beam guns and Paul also carried a heavy long gun that had ten times the power of the others. Fred stood next to Gordon looking around in fear but still proceeding. Gordon asked Fred "What name do these beings have" he immediately replied emitting impulses of fear more and more strong "D v vv v l l l , bad, bad take away Fred" Gordon baptized them Devils and set the translator on that sound.

"No fear, Devils does not take Fred away because we are here" The fear impulses seemed to diminish but Fred was looking around very worried. Advancing among the low bushes, they came across a large square stone, resting with the corners on four small stones, also square in shape, which kept it raised from the ground by about four inches. Everything could not have been natural because of the regularity of the shapes and the smoothness of the surfaces. It was about a yard on the side and on its surface, in the center, some incomprehensible signs were engraved. The super-computer analyzed them and replied that there were too few elements to be able to trace the language they expressed.

The stone looked like the cover of some kind of well and Gordon decided to lift it. They inserted under two opposite sides two small magnetic devices that lifted the stone one meter above the ground, uncovering a round vertical well with a diameter of just under one yard. The lifting device indicated that the weight of the stone was 300 lbs. The well was very deep and, due to its narrowness, there was no need to enter it without first having explored it with a probe. Paul

pulled out of his backpack an infrared exploration sphere that could send sounds and images even in the dark and that could be piloted manually or left free and guided by the small computer it had on board. They released it free to descend into the well and waited. Gordon asked Fred "Do Devils speak like Fred?" and he replied "Not same but Fred heard about Devils and understands not everything".

The sphere was sending, with infrared, black and white images and one could see the smooth walls of the well flow when at a certain point it also sent sounds that they seemed to come from afar. The sphere was at a distance of more than a mile from the mouth of the well and was traveling an almost horizontal stretch. After half an hour of recording the images and sounds, Gordon had the sphere recalled hoping to have collected enough material for the super-computer to analyze. They got back on the Explorer and took off to return to the spaceship.

The super-computer analyzed the records collected from the sphere for a whole day and reported that the new language was similar to Fred's but much more evolved and capable of expressing complex abstract concepts. It had arranged a translator which it however defined as incomplete. It also reported that the walls of the well had been covered with a kind of cement similar to the one the ancient Romans used to line water cisterns. It speculated that the purpose of the well was to supply air underground. The sounds received seemed orders given to someone who was doing a job. The super-computer asked to be able to mentally analyze one of those beings to provide more accurate information.

Everyone gathered on the spacecraft's bridge to comment on the results of the analyzes. "If the well is an air vent, most likely it will not be the only one and there should also be an access door to the underground." Gordon said and added "the door should be in an area where the radiation is at a bearable level for a living organism." Everyone agreed and decided to have the super-computer take high-definition enlarged images of the entire equatorial belt bordering the hemisphere exposed to the star, to identify the openings.

After two complete orbits of the spaceship around the planet above its equatorial belt, the super-computer processed a photographic map where ten square stones similar to the one explored by the sphere were noted. They were arranged in a straight line parallel to the equator in two groups of five spaced one mile apart. Between the two groups there was a space of two miles with a square bigger stone four yards on each side, in the center. It was the entrance.

Gordon, Paul and Terence left the ship and headed Explorer 1 towards the point where the super-computer had identified the stone that was probably the entrance to the underground and approached it at a height of ten yards above the ground. The large square stone of four yards on each side was supported by four columns with a square section of half a yard on each side and three yards high. Unlike the stone they had found earlier, this one was similar to marble with polished smooth surfaces. They deduced that the Devils must have had a much more advanced technology than what has been seen so far on the planet.

The Explorer settled on the ground about twenty yards from the strange building and Gordon and Paul approached with long weapons slung over their shoulders. The opening in the ground allowed a glimpse of a smooth stone staircase that was lost in the darkness of the subsoil. Gordon released an exploration sphere and they returned aboard the Explorer, keeping it two yards above the ground. The images sent by the sphere showed the staircase that continued for a hundred meters and with a kind of landing turned left going down steeper for about ten meters and ending in a large underground room carved into the rock. Gordon stopped the sphere and rotated it 360 degrees to get a complete view of the environment. The underground chamber was dark but the infrared images clearly showed the smooth rock walls and the floor formed by square stones similar to those that covered the air intakes on the surface. On the walls there were empty and shallow square niches of one foot on each side. All of this denoted the presence of beings much more evolved than Fred.

Suddenly from the wall in front of the sphere two stone doors opened from which two beings emerged holding something very bright in their hands. They were nearly seven feet tall with the body having human features apart from the head which was a very elongated oval with an almost spherical protuberance in the back and devoid of hair. The eyes weren't like Fred's but looked like slits without lids. They wore only a short thigh-high thong similar to those of the ancient Egyptians, which seemed finely decorated. They advanced slowly and each of them put the light they were holding in one of the many niches in the

wall. The room lit up enough for the sphere to send out color images. One of the two noticed the sphere suspended in the air and both approached to examine it by passing a hand, with four fingers, above and below the sphere, probably looking for something that kept it suspended. They started talking to each other with sounds similar to Fred's but the voice was lower and deeper. The super-computer after ten minutes managed to complete the translator and sent it to Gordon waiting on the Explorer. While the two beings were still observing that sphere suspended in the air without apparent support, they heard a voice in their language: "Follow me, please, do not be afraid, we do not want to harm you." They were amazed but followed at a certain distance the sphere which proceeded slowly towards the exit staircase. Gordon had moved the Explorer to the opposite side of the ladder and when they came out they found only the motionless sphere suspended in midair and focused their attention on it. Two beams struck them instantly and they collapsed unconscious but unharmed.

In the spaceship laboratory they were placed on two beds, blocked by the Machine. They had a very human-like build, with considerable musculature. They looked like twins, seven feet tall and weighing 190 lbs, their skin was brown and shiny like that of the Caribbean Creoles. They wore two identical loincloths made of a fabric that looked like linen and finely embroidered with geometric shapes of quadrilateral. The well-proportioned upper limbs had at the ends two hands with four strong fingers, without nails, one of which opposable. The four feet-long lower limbs also ended in four-toed feet. The head was the part that

most differentiated them from a human. Of a tapered oval shape with a pointed chin, it had a noticeable semi-spherical swelling in the occipital part of the skull. From the two slits on the sides of the nose, almost non-existent with two tiny nostrils, one could see the Asian cut eyes, with the oval pupil placed horizontally. The lip less mouth showing a series of tiny teeth, all of equal size, was located just below the nostrils. Two slits on the sides were devoid of pavilions and served as ears.

The super-computer began a thorough analysis of their minds while they were still unconscious. It reported that they belonged to the Guardian caste and their task was to supervise the access to the underground city and to collaborate with the Hunters to accompany the other beings of the planet inside. It also added that they ate only vegetables grown in the depths of the subsoil thanks to stones that emitted light with which they could also illuminate the whole city. The translator had been sufficiently perfected by the super-computer but asked that they be conscious in order to carry out further mental analysis.

When Gordon gave the order to awaken one of the two, contractions were noted in his muscles but the Machine did not detect fear but only amazement. The images of the sphere that they had followed outside until the moment they fainted flowed through their mind. Gordon said in a calm voice: "We don't want to hurt you, we just want to talk to you. We come from another planet and are here to explore." The being made low and guttural sounds that the translator transformed into "Why can't I move?". "You've been locked out for safety. If you are willing to talk to us

now you can get up and remain seated on the cot.” replied Gordon. They took a few steps away from the couch and Paul took hold of the beam weapon set on the paralyzing. When the Machine released him, the being slowly moved his arms and legs and sat up on the cot looking around. He saw his companion still unconscious on the other bed and asked: “Is he dead?” The Machine registered fear and Gordon replied: “He is not dead but only asleep as you were before.” The feeling of fear vanished and it gave way to curiosity and amazement. He looked around in amazement at the unknown equipment that surrounded him and those strange beings completely covered in colorful clothing. The Machine did not detect any hostility but only a desire to know and understand. Gordon began: “You are a Guardian right? And help the Hunters kidnap the beings that live on the surface and take them to your underground city. What happens to those beings? Do you kill them? I would like you to explain”.

The being was silent for a couple of minutes during which Gordon doubted that he did not understand and was about to repeat the questions in a simpler form when the being answered him in his low throaty voice . “I am a Guardian, but we don't kill the Ghrgr, they become our friends when they come to the city and work with us.” Gordon set the sound, with which he had called beings like Fred, in the translator and baptized them Fredians, at least temporarily and continued with the questions: “What work are you doing in the city?” and the being answered immediately: “New tunnels and new halls for growing food. The Fredians are good at working in the dark and when they find stones of light they cover their eyes with the

glasses made for them by the Priests". Gordon insisted: "Can the Fredians get out of the city if they want?" and the answer was: "Yes but no one goes out because they are happy and safe in the city". "Who's in charge in the city?" He asked again and the answer was immediate: "Great King and two Little Kings." A sort of triumvirate thought Gordon who ended the interrogation by saying: "Now we will wake up your fellow man and you will tell him who we are, that we do not want to harm him and that we wish to visit your city and meet your kings.

On the Earth, the new world order was consolidated. The UN had been transformed into a Parliament where each country had its own representatives and where decisions of general interest were made, while each State dealt with the management of its own internal problems following the guidelines established in the assembly. The Phoenix had revealed itself publicly all over the planet and had spread all its advanced technologies for the benefit of all. The new energy sources were no longer fossil fuels as in the past and even atomic energy had fallen into disuse in both the civil and military fields. Controlled hydrogen was the new substitute for oil and technologies based on reverse gravity, developed by the Phoenix scientists many years earlier, had revolutionized all industrial, civil and military sectors. All surface vehicles traveled on magnetic cushions and were powered by long-lasting batteries that were easily recharged from public and private sources. In the military field, since there were no more defense problems, each State had its own army, equipped and trained like all the others,

which performed locally the functions of police, civil protection, firefighters and public safety in general.

Three other spaceships similar to the Phoenix 1 had been built in the space sector but, pending its return from Proxima Centauri, they had been used for exploration within the solar system. The space operations base was located on the Moon where a huge installation equipped for the traffic of spaceships had been built. Another smaller one, for scientific purposes, was on Mars, where scientists had identified elementary forms of life underground.

The scientists were awaiting the return of the Phoenix 1 with which communications had been interrupted for a year but, due to the gravitational time dilation, whose mechanisms were well known to them, they knew that only three months had passed on board the spaceship. They expected to receive communications from Commander Gordon within a few months.

Gordon, Paul, Terence and Fred, with the two Guardians embarked on Explorer 1 returned to the planet at the point where the underground access was located. The vehicle settled on the ground in front of the marble building with the bow facing the entrance. Gordon told the first Guardian he had questioned on the spaceship and that he had called Devil 1, to send Devil 2, accompanied by the sphere, to the underground city to announce their visit. The two exchanged a few words and Devil 2 walked towards the entrance followed by the sphere. The Machine revealed no particular emotions in either of them. Only Fred was very perplexed but not afraid.

The sphere sent the images of the path along the stairs and arrived at the great underground room, which had the large stone doors open, it was seen that it was crowded with about ten beings. Some had thongs identical to those of Devil 2, others, long up to the knee, were dark in color and the beings who wore them had a kind of lance in their hands. They were talking to each other and at the sight of Devil 2 they approached him. After an excited conversation, during which Devil 2 explained that some strange beings who were not of the planet wanted to talk to the Kings, everyone stood around the sphere, amazed. The sphere rotated to frame everyone closely and send the data to the Explorer. No hostility was detected but only extreme curiosity and amazement.

Terence remained aboard the Explorer while Gordon and Paul, carrying heavy weapons with Fred between them, descended the staircase following Devil 1 who led them. The sphere continued to send images of the underground room where all the beings in the group were facing the point where the ladder descended. As they entered, Fred applied the protective screen to his eyes and they all stood staring at the group of beings in front of them. Devil 1 explained to them: "These beings come from another world, one of those we see shining in the sky. They don't want to hurt us but just get to know us and talk to our kings."

A buzz of wonder ensued and the group opened up to let them through the access tunnel to the city. Gordon told Devil 1 "The whole group will walk in front of us and you will be next to me and behind Fred with my fellow last." Devil 1 repeated the request and everyone walked along the tunnel. Paul, who ad-

vanced last, often consulted on the communicator on his wrist the images behind him transmitted by the sphere above him. They walked almost a mile along the downhill tunnel, well lit by the stones that emit light placed inside niches along the walls. They came to a large, deserted square room, from which several narrower side galleries branched off, and continued along a larger gallery that faced them. After a hundred yards, they found themselves in front of two large stone doors with two Guardians standing on either side.

Devil 1 who was leading the group exchanged a brief conversation with the two and, while all the others stood aside, the two Guardians opened the doors that flowed silently without apparent effort and the small procession entered maintaining the same order, while the sphere rotated slowly on itself, recording everything. The room was very large and illuminated by numerous luminous stones on the walls made of a very shiny marble that reflected the light with a spectacular effect. On the sides of the room there were long empty marble benches, arranged like the pews of a church, with a large corridor in the center. At the back, on a half-yard raised floor that looked like a stage, three thrones were arranged. A larger one in the center occupied by a being completely covered with a large white tunic with geometric designs, all quadrilateral, of different colors.

He had on his lap a luminous object similar to an empty square frame that emitted a faint light. The other two thrones were occupied by two similar beings, with light green tunics and a thin luminous parallelepiped on the knees. At the sides of the thrones

were four Guardians on each side. The group stopped about ten meters from the thrones and the Great King nodded to the Guardians. Four of them pushed with inexplicable ease one of the heavy marble benches in front of the stage, a couple of meters away from the central throne. The Great King waved his hand to the bench and everyone sat down. Paul sitting at the end of the bench observed on the wrist communicator the images that the sphere, facing backwards, sent to him. After a few minutes of silence during which everyone observed each other and Fred constantly emitted signals of concern, the Great King asked Devil 1, in a low voice that seemed to come from a funnel: "Tell me how you found these beings and what happened", Devil 1 told everything in detail and, with particular emphasis, explained that the visitors spoke their language and that even that strange sphere was able to see and understand everything. All three kings with undisguised amazement stared at the sphere that, in the air, above Paul's head, slowly rotated on itself.

The Great King, turning to Gordon who sat in the center of the bench, said slowly, articulating the sounds: "Where do you come from, what are you looking for, why is a Fredian with you?" Gordon began to answer, also pronouncing the words, having serious doubts of being fully understood. "My name is Gordon and I am the Captain of the ship that brought us to this planet. We come from the Earth, a planet orbiting a star similar to yours that is four light years away. Our aim is to explore new worlds and meet other beings to get to know them in friendship and peace. The Fredian who is with us was the first being we met on your planet and we became friends." The

Machine, which followed and analyzed everything from the spaceship in orbit, did not receive any hostile signal but only the extreme curiosity of the three Kings.

The Great King meditated on Gordon's words and after a few minutes replied: "I don't understand some words you said Captain Gordon, Earth, star, light years... you will have to explain to our Priests to make us understand better. If you are here in friendship and peace you are welcome." He made another sign to the Guardians and after a few minutes, ten beings dressed in blue tunics entered the hall carrying thin marble trays laden with food and drinks and placed in front of the three kings and of them as well. The square-shaped plates were of thin marble while the square-shaped glasses were of semi-transparent white glass. The Great King said: "As a sign of friendship, let's eat and drink together".

Foods were all vegetable, some seemed to be made from sweet fruits, others from legumes. The flavor, all in all, was acceptable to Terrestrials. The drink instead surprised them. It was fermented, slightly alcoholic and resembled the Japanese sake. Gordon thought, smiling to himself, that the occasion had arisen for mankind's first extraterrestrial hangover. Fred tasting something alcoholic for the first time thought that Devils were good and that he would gladly stay with them forever and thus it became clear to him the disappearance of the Fredians in the bowels of the planet. While they ate and drank the Great King asked Gordon: "Who is inside the sphere?" Gordon smiled mentally and replied: "Nobody, it is a mechanism capable of moving by itself and looking

around...". He was immediately interrupted by the Great King who said: "Better you explain it to the Priests" and Gordon had the impression that the slit he had in place of the mouth deformed into something like a smile. The Great King made another attempt: "How do you know our language?" and Gordon with no hope of being understood replied: "Our super-computer has recorded your conversations and has developed an instant translator so that each of us can speak in his own language and hear the other's replies translated". The Great King made the face again as before, which surely was a smile and repeated: "This answer is also a thing for the Priests".

After a few hours of curious questions and incomprehensible answers to those who received them, with increasingly evident grimaces of the Great King, the attendants in blue robes took away the trays and the Guardians pushed a smaller two-seater bench in front of them. Two Priests entered wearing two identical yellow robes and sat on the bench facing the visitors, with their backs to the Kings. They had in their hands a bright frame similar to that of the Great King, but smaller. Priest 1 started the questions again by asking: "Where do you come from?" Gordon replied calmly, spelling the words well: "We call Proxima Centauri the star around which your planet orbits. Our star is called Sun and is 4 light years away. Several planets rotate around, one of them is called Earth. We come from there." The Priests looked at each other and Priest 2 asked: "How far away is it 4 light years? We measure distances in lengths. One length is a man" He took out of his tunic a thin tablet of light marble and a thin black cylinder, placed them on the small ta-

ble in front of him and said “This room is 31 lengths long” drawing two symbols which Gordon imagined were a 3 and a 1 which in octal corresponded to 25 in decimal and, considering that one of them was about two meters high, the total gave 50 meters which seemed approximately the length of the hall. To try to give an idea of Proxima's distance from the Sun, Gordon asked Priest 1 to write the numbers from zero to seven on the tablet in order to understand them. He converted with the computer he had on his wrist 20 million billion lengths from decimal to octal and wrote on the tablet the signs corresponding to the numbers which in octal were the following sequence: 1070336233740400000. He turned the tablet towards the Priests saying: “This is the distance in lengths between your star and ours.”

The priests meditated for a few minutes on those numbers and then Priest 1 asked: “How did you get here?” Gordon tried to think of a simple way to explain travel, the spaceship, the curvature of spacetime, the gravitational time dilation, but he decided it was impossible. At a certain point he came up with an idea that could solve the problem and prove useful in future relationships with those beings. Looking Priest 1 in the eyes he said slowly:

“On our spaceship that is in orbit around your planet we have a Machine that can transfer all the information you want into your mind and answer all your questions in a way that is understandable to you.” He paused and, while the two Priests were talking among them in a low voice, he continued “One of you two could come with us and come back here with all

the answers to give to your kings.” They both turned to Gordon and said almost in chorus: “Both of us!”

The two priests were lying on the beds in the spaceship's laboratory, alert and with the electrodes already connected. The Machine sensed a slight fear in both of them and induced a feeling of relaxation in their minds. Gordon consulted with the astrophysicist and the communications expert who operated the equipment and who had been personally trained by William. They decided to apply the first notional treatment, the one given to five-year-olds at the Phoenix base. Then, based on the results, they would decide which additional treatments to apply. The mental faculties of the two Priests, analyzed by the Machine, proved suitable. Gordon addressed them saying: “After the treatment you may feel a slight headache or nausea which will disappear in a short time. Don't be alarmed.” They both tilted their heads left and right several times in affirmative.

At the end of the treatment they remained motionless on the beds for over an hour, immersed in their new thoughts. The Machine had done a good job. It had also taught them how to emit sounds in the terrestrial language that were unusual for them, Priest 1 sat up on the couch and said in an impersonal voice without accents: “We have entered another world... we still don't know anything about your technologies but what we know is already extraordinary.” Priest 2 also sat up and remained silent for a few minutes then asked almost to himself: “In this way could you also teach children?” Gordon replied: “Of course, our children receive this first treatment at the age of five of our years.” They both reclined again on the cot and

fell asleep. The Machine detected only fatigue but no mental or physical damage. Their brains had reacted well to the treatment.

While the two Priests slept, Gordon, thinking back to what they had said before, realized that he did not yet know how those beings measured time. The planet did not have the day-night cycle as it did not rotate on itself and most likely they did not perceive the period of revolution around Proxima. The star's flare states were irregular so they could not be used to measure time. He promised himself to ask but decided to do it after the second notional treatment. On the spaceship, time was marked by the atomic clock on board which, according to Earth standards, also regulated the crew's sleep-wake cycle. In order to describe the measure of time in use in the city and to be able to compare it with that on Earth, the Priests needed more in-depth notions.

After the second notional treatment, Gordon, Paul and the two Priests returned to the city. The Great King received them alone in one of his private rooms and they all sat around a table of polished marble, on chairs covered with white padding decorated with colored quadrilaterals. The Great King was waiting for news and the two Priests described in detail everything that had happened. He listened in silence and after a long pause said: "I too must reach that level of knowledge to govern better". Gordon nodded and suggested that he follows him on the spaceship along with the other two Little Kings to receive the notional treatments. He also felt that the time had come to ask for more information on their scientific knowledge.

Fred had decided to stay in the city where he had found several Fredians who he believed dead. He enthusiastically joined them in excavating the new tunnels and during the rest times they all gathered to chat happily while drinking that kind of sake made from a cereal grown in the underground chambers. To his pleasant surprise, he discovered that there were different types of that drink with different alcoholic grades and that instilled different but always pleasant sensations. If the Machine could analyze him, it would have detected just intense happiness.

On the Earth, the first century of the third millennium was about to end. Valerio was part of the Council which had been extended to twenty members all endowed with the mental faculties consequent to the fourth notional treatment. The secrecy of the Phoenix had no longer any reason to exist so the base extended to the upper floors up to the surface, incorporating Area 51 whose laboratories had now become obsolete. A large underground scientific settlement was thus created while huge hangars were built on the surface for the construction and maintenance of spaceships. Scientific delegations arrived from all the confederate states of the planet for studies and updates and someone contributed with innovative technical solutions.

Valerio, was just over 70 years old when, as his father and grandfather did before him, he resigned from the Council and retired, together with Rachel, to the ranch in Arizona, which had become the family refuge. Mitch and Jack had died of old age after a long career as coyote and wild rabbits hunters but had taken

the time to train pups born to new females brought in by Lupo in previous years. Bullo was Mitch's eldest son and had assumed undisputed command of the pack. It was an above-average-sized Bull Terrier with a completely white coat which, when it stared at an intruder with its small triangular eyes, made his blood run cold.

The ranch had become a Bull Terrier breeding farm and many local residents bought puppies and coyotes had become increasingly rare there. Hovercrafts were no longer disguised and were widespread. Old Chuck also had one with the Greenlee County Sheriff's emblem on the side and preferred it to the old Chevrolet SUV for the much faster speed he could get and the almost unlimited range.

The son of Valerio and Rachel, who had named George in honor of his great-grandfather Giorgio Relli, was drafted into the space fleet, since the mental investigations he had been subjected to indicated him particularly suited to the command of a spaceship. He had been entrusted with the command of the Phoenix 3 with which he had made several exploratory trips to the edge of the solar system. He was in the flight room of the lunar base when a message arrived from Phoenix 1 with Gordon announcing the next reentry into the solar system. The base responded by ordering it to orbit the Moon and await further instructions for the moon landing.

Phoenix 1 was stationary in the large arrival hangar of the lunar base when the ramp opened, Gordon was the first to descend followed by the Great King and behind them all the rest of the crew. All the hangar staff gasped to see the alien, not only because

of his appearance but also because he was conversing with Gordon in English. George, who had seen them from the command tower, joined them and holding out his hand to Gordon, with a broad smile, said to him: "Welcome back Commander, I see you have brought some distinguished guests with you" and addressed the Great King "Welcome to the Moon" The Great King who had learned from the treatments received how to behave in these cases, extended his four-fingered hand to George saying in almost perfect English "Thank you sir, I asked Commander Gordon to be able to follow him to Earth to see with my eyes all the wonders of which so far I have only the images in my mind." George was amazed by the words of the Great King and even more by his hand with four fingers that he squeezed despite the surprise.

They all sat around the table in the large meeting room of the Moon base. The Great King looked around between amazed and amused while George, turning to Gordon, said: "Your spaceship will need maintenance, checks and updating of the super-computer so I suggest you reach Earth with one of the weekly ferries that connect it to the base."

At the base of the Phoenix, on Earth, the Great King was accompanied to his accommodation where he enjoyed exploring all the devices available in the apartment with the help of the instructions in English that he now knew well. The automatic kitchen fascinated him in particular and he gorged himself with an overview of the available foods washed down with a wine that looked so much like the kind of sake he drank in his palace. But this was much more pleasant

and gave more intense sensations. Full and happy, he fell sound asleep.

Gordon was seated at the table of the Council meeting on the occasion of his return to Earth. All the data collected by Phoenix 1 had already been inserted into the super-computer of the base which had also added its suggestions and conclusions, which were then disseminated among all the members of the Council.

The purpose of the meeting was to hear from the Captain's direct voice his personal impressions and considerations about the space trip and the planet with its inhabitants. Marcus, who was the senior member and presiding over the session, began: "Commander Gordon, first, I would like to express my compliments and those of the Council for the success of the mission. Before the interview with the being you have called the Great King, I would like to hear your opinion on that alien civilization and the opportunities for colonization of their planet." Gordon gathered his ideas for a few seconds and replied: "As you have all read in the reports, the livable area of the planet, without particular precautions, is the equatorial belt about 2 thousand miles wide and about 60 thousand long. The southern hemisphere exposed to Proxima is almost completely subjected to intense X radiation that makes it unlivable. The beings we have called the Devils inhabit its underground at a considerable depth. On the surface, in the equatorial area, live other beings that we called Fredians from the name of the first being with whom we came into contact. They are primitive even if the analyzes on their brains indicate considerable potential to evolve. The shadow hemisphere

has not been explored in depth but during the first visit we came into contact with a primitive, gigantic and very aggressive being who eats other beings, all vegetarians, so it seems to be at the top of the planet's food chain, unless proven otherwise. The deep sea, which bathes the equatorial belt, borders on the opposite side with a very extensive and hardly habitable ice cap." He paused for few seconds and continued: "Ultimately I believe that a future colonization of the planet can only concern the equatorial belt and part of the underground area of the Devils. All beings have proved peaceful and willing to collaborate with us, nevertheless I would consider it appropriate to subject them to adequate mental conditioning for the maximum safety of future settlers. This could also be useful to increase the mental faculties of the Fredians who could prove to be excellent collaborators." He paused, looking at the gray, almost white eyes of the members of the Council, which stared at him thoughtfully. Marcus intervened, interpreting the thoughts of the other members: "Commander Gordon, don't you think that subjecting the beings of that planet to mental conditioning is a violence against them and that colonization becomes an invasion, even if it happened without any bloodshed?" After a pause during which he looked into the eyes, one by one, all the members of the Council, Gordon replied: "Sir, I was given the task of identifying a planet that could become a refuge for the mankind in case of planetary catastrophe. Proxima B is not the ideal planet but it can be a possible alternative in the absence of more suitable planets that we do not currently know. If it is chosen as a colony on Earth and, in the absence of alternatives, I consider it appro-

priate to ensure that the planet offers total security for future colonists.” and after another pause he resumed “I would have no scruples in educating, even forcibly, the beings of Proxima B to save humanity from catastrophe, considering, moreover, the fact that our conditioning would make them progress to their advantage. Respect for their primitive conditions would be dictated by a false morality that would conflict with our needs and enormously slow down their evolution.” He stopped and watched everyone awaiting their comments, flaunting a determination that surprised everyone but was much appreciated. The members were in the presence of a Commander who had totally shared the philosophy of the Phoenix. As he dismissed him, Marcus thanked him on behalf of the Council and all its members.

The Council went to work out the details of the next trip to Proxima B. They all agreed on the following points:

a) Proxima B was not the ideal planet for mass colonization but, being the closest, it would have been useful to colonize it while continuing to explore other worlds.

b) With the next voyage of two spaceships, they would begin to lay the foundations of the colony by building permanent settlements in the equatorial belt.

c) Experts would have been embarked on the spaceships to assess the possibility of settlements also in the exposed and submerged areas.

Commander Gordon's suggestion would be fully followed.

The feasibility assessment of each of the three points would have been personally followed by a

member of the Council who would have compiled a complete report at the end of the assignment, before final approval for the departure of the two spaceships.

The Great King entered the council chamber accompanied by Gordon and was formally welcomed as a head of state as in fact he was even if of a much less developed civilization than the terrestrial one. The talks began which consisted more in a personal acquaintance with the alien than in a negotiation between heads of state.

Two ships prepared to leave the lunar base. Phoenix 1, under the command of Gordon, who already knew the planet, and Phoenix 3, under the command of George who was the most experienced Captain among those who had traveled within the solar system. The holds of both ships were modified, reducing the number of exploration vehicles to accommodate the materials and equipment for building the settlements. Together with the crews, construction technicians and others for underwater exploration were embarked. A large laboratory for mental treatments had also been set up on each ship.

When the Council, from Earth, communicated the authorization to depart, the two large ships rose from the lunar ground almost at the same instant and silently disappeared into the depths of space. Both ships were equipped with a protective magnetic shield while only the Phoenix 3 was armed with heavy weapons. The purpose was not so much offensive as for the fact that the large ray cannons could have facilitated the excavation work by being able to instantly sublimate the solid matter.

After a month of medium curvature trip, the two ships reached Proxima Centauri and went into an equatorial orbit around Proxima B. Gordon warned Phoenix 3 that they would drop an Explorer on the planet to locate a suitable point to drop off. the two large ships. Explorer 1, with the armed turret, left Phoenix 1 and descended on the planet at the point where the previous journey had already descended. It was raised from the ground to a height of two yards and began to explore the area in search of living beings by following a spiral route from the point of arrival and widening from it by about a mile. No presence was detected, which made Paul, who commanded the Explorer, decide to clean up an area sufficient to accommodate the two ships from the low vegetation of lichens. The armed turret created a square clearing of three hundred meters on each side, totally devoid of plants, leaving bare a compact reddish ground.

Phoenix 1 went down first and after a couple of hours also Phoenix 3. George got off accompanied by two of Security men and met Gordon near Explorer 1, with the Great King beside him, and said to him "We must bring back the Great King to his people, come with us so you realize the situation for yourself." As the Great King boarded the Explorer, Gordon approached George and added in a low voice "During the trip we applied mental conditioning to him for our safety and now he will have to convince his people to accept the same treatment, which it will not be difficult." George nodded and they both got on the Explorer followed by the two of the Security.

Explorer 1 settled on the ground in front of the entrance to the underground city. One of the Security

released an exploration sphere and followed it down the ladder. Behind him the Great King stood pompously followed by George, Gordon and lastly the other of the security who had released a second sphere turned behind them which sent him the images on his personal communicator. They sent a sphere forward to the great hall and the images showed it almost deserted. Only two guardians stood on either side of the door and stared as the sphere spoke in their language: "The Great King is coming, open the doors." They did not do it immediately because they were too amazed by that announcement in their language and its content. They were slowly opening the heavy portals when the Great King entered the hall surrounded by the Terrestrials. He ordered the Guardians to close the doors behind the little procession and walked royally down the gallery. They arrived in the great hall which was crowded with Devils and also by some Fredians with eye protection. Two wings of beings formed which, intrigued, left space for the Great King so that he could continue beyond the hall and enter the gallery that led to the palace. At the portal the two Guardians recognized him immediately and threw open the doors. In the hall there were only two Guardians and when the Great King sat on his throne he instructed them to call the two Little Kings and the two Priests. He turned to the Terrestrials happy to have resumed his royal role and said pompously: "Please take a seat, I will have food and drink brought to celebrate my return." pointing with his outstretched hand to the marble bench in front of the throne.

The Terrestrials sat with Gordon and George in the center and the two Security guards on either side

with the spheres just above their heads slowly rotating and recording everything that was happening in the room. Shortly after, eight other Guardians arrived and placed themselves, four on each side, next to the throne followed by the two Little Kings who took their places in the two smaller lateral thrones. The two Priests also entered and took their places on the bench in front of the Terrestrials while numerous other dignitaries filled the large benches in the room.

Food and drink arrived for everyone on marble tables, which the attendants silently slipped across the floor. When everyone began to eat accompanying the food with that kind of sake, the Great King stood up and began to speak, addressing the whole room. "I have been to the Earth" and after a pompously regal pause he went on: "the distant world where these friends of ours come from. It is a wonderful world that I never imagined could exist and they are here to help us advance our world to resemble theirs. They are able to teach us their language and to let us know their knowledge simply by placing threads on our heads and I want you all to learn those notions they offer us." Gordon and George looked at each other satisfied as the Great King sat down and drank from his square glass but, as he drank, he remembered the wine he had tasted abundantly in his quarters on the Earth and which had made him sleep so well.

Gordon whispered to George, "We just have to arrange the mental conditioning treatments alongside the notional ones. Have your expert program them for everyone in this room. For the other beings we wait and we will only submit any dissidents who disobey the orders of the Great King." George agreed and

called the Phoenix 3 with his personal communicator to give orders to his expert, in Italian. It was better not to make the content of the conversation heard. In fact, the Great King, who by now knew English and had heard the conversation, became curious and asked George: "It is not your usual language that you spoke now, isn't it?" All the Devils spoke the same language which was similar to that of the Fredians who, less evolved, had a simpler language but understandable for both populations. George noticed that in the question of the Great King there was also a slight distrust, not having understood the content of the conversation and reassured him by saying: "On the Earth there are thousands of different language that are used only locally while everyone normally uses the language we have you taught. Sometimes we use another language when we both know the local one because we come from the same area of the planet." The Great King listened attentively to the answer and replied: "Then I also can learn other languages" It was not a question but almost an order. George accommodatingly replied: "Of course Great King, please choose another of our languages that you want to learn and we will subject you to the appropriate treatment." The Great King seemed satisfied and said: "I want to learn the one you have used now." he nodded, but both he and Gordon felt that a mental conditioning was necessary to eliminate this curiosity.

In the laboratory aboard the Phoenix 3 everything was ready for the treatments, on twenty beds at the same time. The super-computer ran the machines according to George's requests. In the Phoenix 1, on the other hand, only one bed had been prepared for a dif-

ferent treatment reserved for the Great King who, greeted with a slight bow by two operators specialized in mental conditioning, pompously settled there.

The technicians involved in the construction of the settlement of the colony gathered on the Phoenix 3 in the presence of George and Gordon. The choice of the site was the priority in order to start the works. The considerations and proposals of those presents were examined and summarized by the super-computer which at the end proposed as a suitable place a coastal area not far from the sea in the northern hemisphere.

The super-computer had no command functions but elaborated advice and recommendations based on impeccable logical considerations that took into account both the psychological aspects of humans and their physical safety, all related to the efficiency of operations and the best result obtainable. The choice it suggested had only one unfavorable aspect because of the presence of the aggressive beings that Gordon had called the Rhombs. On the other hand, the area offered many advantages, an almost non-existent presence of X-rays, availability of water and presence of a thick vegetation that could have been integrated with terrestrial species. The very low lighting would not have been a problem for humans and would have favored the use of the Fredians as a workforce. All presents agreed to follow the instructions of the super-computer and it was decided to adequately explore both the coastal territory and the depths of the sea to verify the presence of other beings and ascertain other possible dangers.

In the underground city, the Great King, who had no doubt that the Terrestrians spoke a single language he knew well, had a conversation with the two Little Kings and the Priests to examine the new opportunities offered by the new technologies of the Terrestrians. The knowledge inserted into their minds by the notional treatments they had received, would have allowed considerable progress for their populations. An optimization of the cereal cultivation systems that were the basis of their diet. The introduction of new plant species from the Earth would have improved and expanded their food availability. The Terrestrians had also suggested new sources of energy by exploiting the intense radiation of Proxima on the exposed surface and a new and more precise measurement of time with an atomic clock of which they did not fully understand the functioning but realized its precision and its usefulness for life in the underground city.

Three Explorers of the Phoenix 1 were prepared for the exploration of the site chosen for the future colony. Gordon had mounted on all vehicles the armed turret with the medium-powered gun that had proved adequate to neutralize the Rhombs encountered on the previous trip. They made their way to the coast in formation and landed on the ground where Fred had brought them previously.

The water was calm and the beach that surrounded that kind of fjord was completely deserted. The distance between the coast and the first rounded hills covered by that kind of conifer with edible fruit was about five hundred yards. The flat stretch would have allowed the construction of a building of considerable size with at least twenty floors in elevation

from the surface and the same number in the subsoil. The location would have been optimal as it is very close to both the water and the vegetation and other possibly arable areas.

Explorer 3 was given the task of exploring the surface of the entire fjord and going offshore, at low altitudes, to identify any presence of living beings on the surface. It took off about ten yards above the water and began to follow a zigzag route gradually moving away from the coast.

The Explorer 2 slowly plunged into the water of the fjord and moved away from the shore, remaining one meter away from a flat and muddy seabed. Gordon on Explorer 1 waited for the reports of the Explorers and, getting out of the vehicle, observed the surrounding area, deserted and quiet, without any trace of hostile presence. The vehicle's powerful headlights illuminated the entire surrounding area almost in daylight, to a depth of almost a mile. A report came from Explorer 3. They had drifted off the coast for about 100 miles and were scouting the sea whose surface was devoid of any trace of life. An hour later came a report from Explorer 2. They had spotted a huge Rhomb advancing on the seabed heading for the coast. The being had not paid the slightest attention to the vehicle that was following it at a distance because, most likely, it only perceived the heat of the bodies and could not detect the Explorer immersed and close to the seabed. Shortly thereafter another report arrived that two others had joined the being on the move and were all heading for the coast where Explorer 1 was waiting. Gordon thought it more prudent to get back on board and have the vehicle lifted up. twenty yards

while waiting. The Explorer 3 was returning when, a few miles from the fjord, it revealed some presences on the surface of the water and communicated to Gordon that they were two aquatic beings, similar to sharks, of gigantic size, slightly smaller than Rhombs. They seemed to be chasing the Rhombs headed for the coast at great speed. Gordon called both Explorers: "Get up to an altitude of 30 yards and stand still for observation on the vertical of the beings." The first Rhomb arrived on the beach and came out of the water while the Explorer 1 had moved 30 yards above it and controlled its movements. Shortly thereafter, the second Rhomb also came out and remained semi-submerged in the shallow waters of the inlet. The third Rhomb could not make it to the beach because it was attacked by the two giant sharks in waters that still allowed them to swim. Unlike the Rhombs that could move on the ground thanks to their numerous lower limbs that acted as legs, sharks were real fish with only swimming fins. The attacked Rhomb opened its mouth wide and released its predatory tentacles to counter the attackers but the two sharks with their huge mouths bristling with sharp teeth, both bit him just below the head almost detaching it from the body.

The whole scene had been recorded and sent to the Phoenix 1 super-computer for accurate analysis and Gordon ordered the other two Explorers: "Eliminate all beings." Explorer 3 immobilized the two sharks to prevent them from taking off again with two shots that severely wounded them while they were still submerged and ended them with four more aimed shots to the huge heads. Explorer 2 eliminated the two Rhombs that had escaped to safety on the beach with

targeted blows to the heads that exploded and reserved the last blow to the semi detached head of the third Rhomb which was still shaking its tentacles. All three Explorers rose a hundred yards above the ground to survey the area and stood motionless, waiting. After a few minutes, two beings similar to large turtles with an almost circular carapace with a diameter of a couple of meters, came out of the coniferous forest and descended the hill, slowly approaching the remains of the Rhombs on the beach. Gordon lowered his Explorer to closely observe those beings he had never seen before and whose existence he had never imagined. They were really giant tortoises that were feeding on the remains of the Rhombs. When they got close, one of the turtles raised its big head, to look at the Explorer, with some pieces of meat still in its mouth and Gordon thought of a phrase from an ancient text that had been inserted in his mind during one of the notional treatments to which had been subjected:

*His mouth uplifted from his grim repast,
that sinner, wiping it upon the hair of the same
head that he behind had wasted...*

and the indelible information in his memory also added: Dante Alighieri, The Divine Comedy, Inferno, Canto XXXIII. Lunigiana, a.D. 1321.

The super-computer classified the marine environment and the coastal area as extremely dangerous for the colony and suggested appropriate defenses to avoid aggression.

The Phoenix 3 landed on the ground about a hundred yards from the water and the material unloading operations began immediately. From the huge hold of

the ship 4 beam diggers came out and immediately began to delimit a square perimeter of a hundred yards on each side, clearing it of low vegetation and also cutting down some conifers. Some technicians, intrigued, tasted those large fruits, but most of them were nauseated by the strange taste and pungent smell that emanated from the internal pulp. Thanks to the high protein content, however, they could still prove useful in the form of flours or baby food, after an appropriate treatment.

The first phase of the work consisted in securing the area by delimiting it with a protective screen similar to those supplied to the two ships. The screen covered the entire work area and in addition a space large enough to allow both large ships to be placed safely inside. Once it was put into operation, no being could get past it. The four large beam diggers immediately set to work on the construction of the underground part of the colony.

Gordon and George decided that to speed up the work it would be useful to employ the Fredians, many of whom were already employed in the underground city. Gordon estimated, from the information he had gotten from Fred, that there were still about four hundred individuals walking around the bush. With the promise of those big fruits to eat at will, the Fredians would gladly go to any job and therefore it would be useful to talk to Fred for recruiting.

Gordon found him in the underground city, during a pause in the excavation of a new tunnel, chatting merrily with others of his kind, eating and sipping sake. As Fred saw the Terrestrial coming, he recognized him immediately and went to meet him. "I see

that you are happy here” said Gordon “Yes, all good, all good, food, friends, sake” replied Fred waving the glass he was holding and Gordon said, speaking slowly: “Fred, we need your help . We are building a base that will be our home on this planet and we need the Fredians to help us build it. You could look for other Fredians who are not in the underground city, bring them to us and be their leader.” He paused while Fred looked at him in silence, and went on: “Where we are building our house there are no more Rhombs and you can eat at will those fruits that you like so much.” Fred was silent for a couple of minutes staring at Gordon with his big multiple eyes then in a low voice he said: “Rhombs let those like Fred eat good good fruit?” Gordon smiled inwardly and replied: “The Rhombs can't eat the ones like Fred anymore because we kill them.”

In the clearing where the three Explorers had alighted, Fred, coming out of the bushes, arrived at the head of a hundred Fredians. To Gordon who was waiting for him in front of Explorer 1, he said in a voice that seemed excited: “Those like Fred come, work and eat good good fruit, but scared of Rhombs.” Gordon nodded his head and replied: “No fear Fred, tell your friends that we kill the Rhombs as you have already seen.” They brought up about thirty beings for each Explorer and took them all to the construction site.

The engineer in charge of the works had organized large rooms that served as dormitories for the Fredians where he had set up tables with trays full of those large fruits of which they were so fond of. Between one tray and another, there were bottles containing a low alcoholic wine prepared in the ship's auto-

matic kitchen with freeze-dried. The Fredians under Fred's command threw themselves on the tables thus laden and did a feast washed down with that wine which was highly appreciated and, in the end, they all fell asleep.

The next day, Gordon and George decided to subject them all to a first notional treatment to teach them English so as to avoid the use of translators and, at the same time, a mental conditioning to guarantee their fidelity. In groups of twenty at a time, they were put on the Phoenix 3 and taken to the large laboratory. When all were treated, the head of the lab reported to Gordon that their brains had easily acquired all the notions entered and that it had a considerable potential that they did not know how to use. He also stated that, if necessary, he could have made those brains evolve much more. The Fredians were employed as laborers and proved to be very useful. They worked hard and seemed tireless. They gorged themselves with those large fruits and drained bottles of wine in quantities, but this only increased their performance at work and their happiness.

One day, during the works, a Rhomb came out of the sea and slowly approached the construction site. The terrified Fredians ran for safety when an Explorer, that was standing guard outside the dome, took off. A technician shouted to them: "Stop and do not be afraid, the Rhomb cannot enter the dome." They all stopped, doubtful and fearful. The Rhomb reached the protection and opened its mouth wide freeing its predatory tentacles which remain blocked by the barrier to the astonishment of the Fredians. The Explorer approached the monster and fired repeatedly causing

its head to explode. The wonder of the Fredians turned into joy and after some excited conversations between them, they quietly resumed work. A couple of hours later, a large group of giant tortoises appeared and cleaned the ground of the remains of the Rhomb, under the astonished eyes of the Fredians who had never seen those beings. At the end of the meal, the turtles, satisfied, slowly returned to the coniferous forest.

The settlement had been completed in record time and was ready to welcome the land settlers. An area reserved for the Fredians had been set up at ground level. Neither of them had wanted to return to the area where they had usually lived and stayed to carry out various maintenance duties, headed by Fred who had become their boss. The Rhomb were no longer scary and even the giant tortoises that appeared only when the guard Explorer eliminated a Rhomb, even if disturbing it no longer caused too much apprehension. Once Fred, to increase his prestige towards his fellow men, approached the barrier while a wide-mouthed Rhomb tried to pass it. He trembled inside at the sight of the predatory tentacles directed at him, even if they were regularly stopped by the invisible screen, but that stunt earned him enormous prestige and consolidated him as the undisputed leader of the Fredians.

Gordon sent an Explorer on a mission in the depths of the great sea to detect any presence of other beings besides those they already knew and to analyze waters and seabed. It was in constant contact with the Phoenix 1, to whose super-computer the Explorer sent images and data. The ship's control room staff followed in real time what was happening around the Ex-

plorer. They were sailing a few meters from the muddy seabed that was constantly going down. The powerful headlights illuminated a flat seabed with rare presence of algae-like plants. The water was clear and, even if totally dark, the headlights allowed a good vision of over fifty yards. Paul, who commanded the craft, decided to increase the speed and to raise the altitude to avoid any rumble present on the seabed. He had lowered the front bulkhead that closed the cockpit in space navigation mode and the large front window allowed direct viewing. After a few tens of miles he made the vehicle stop to take samples of the seabed.

The Explorer settled on the soft sandy bottom with the lights off and, as the probe penetrated the mud to perform a deep core, Paul noticed, straight ahead, a faint yellowish glow coming from something on the seabed and, at the same time, from the ship's super-computer received information that there was a life form 70 yards from them on the seabed. Paul raised the vehicle 20 meters from the bottom keeping the headlights off to better identify the light source and, moving slowly, approached.

It looked like a huge cephalopod with eight arms wrapped around the huge body and two tentacles about twenty yards long, stretched forward on the seabed. Among its coiled arms, two huge eyes gleamed, emitting a yellowish light. The Explorer remained motionless at a safe distance and sent all the data to the super-computer. After a few minutes it replied that it was an animal similar to a rare type of cephalopod present, also on the Earth, in the Antarctic ocean, which is called *Mesonychoteuthis hamiltoni* or Colossal Squid which also reaches 16 yards in length

and 1500 lbs. in weight. The specimen present there, however, was estimated by surveys to be much larger, perhaps 40 yards with arms and tentacles extended. The report also warned that the two long tentacles had the task of grabbing the prey and carrying it to the arms which, immobilizing it, would allow the animal to chop it up with its powerful beak and ingest it. The super-computer also added that those cephalopods on Earth are not very aggressive as they just wait for the prey to reach the tentacles, but given the size of that specimen, it recommended the utmost caution.

Paul, although safe in the hull of the Explorer, did not want to take unnecessary risks but found it useful to examine the animal closely to provide more data to the supercomputer. He placed the bow of the vehicle in front of the bright eyes and, keeping to a distance of about thirty yards, began a series of biometric and encephalic measurements of the being. Suddenly the eyes increased their brightness and the light turned a dazzling white as the two tentacles unexpectedly lengthened, grabbing and holding the bow of the vehicle which jolted strongly. The turret cannon fired repeatedly until the tentacles collapsed to the bottom and the huge body remained motionless, releasing a dark liquid that formed a floating spot all around. While the Explorer, with the headlights on, was about to continue navigation, a giant shark pounced on the remains of the cephalopod. Paul watched the scene and decided that he would never surf in that sea.

On the Earth, the Phoenix Council had assumed the task of managing space exploration and coordinat-

ing all research and scientific activity from the government of the World Union. The headquarters remained in Area 51 but other new research centers had been set up in various parts of the planet: in Antarctica, in Vanuatu in the Pacific, in Patagonia, in the far north of Canada and in Siberia. In the new centers, sophisticated radio telescopes linked to the one in solar orbit were installed for data comparison.

The VLA (Very Large Array) in the state of New Mexico, in the USA, the complex of 27 large self-propelled satellite dishes on rails, built in 1982, was implemented and enlarged bringing it to 270 antennas of a much more sensitive type, but maintaining the original Y layout. The new VLA, renamed ELA (Extra Large Array) was dedicated almost exclusively to the research and study of black holes. In this way, humanity was preparing to explore the universe.

Gordon with the Phoenix 1 remained on Proxima B, while George in command of the Phoenix 3 returned to Earth with all the technicians and equipment that had been used for the construction of the colony except for the beam excavators which remained on the planet as they could have been still useful. He would return to the planet with the first contingent of settlers. It would take months for the selection of volunteer settlers so George felt he was on vacation and decided to visit his old parents on their ranch in Arizona.

He obviously loved his parents but he also loved that ranch that had seen the story of his family started by his Italian great-grandfather, Giorgio Relli who, having left the Council, had retired, with his great-grandmother Alexandra, in the peace of that wild and

isolated place. Furthermore, that place also had a particular significance for the history of humanity because it was home to one of the first members of the Council awarded with four bars of gold who had made the Phoenix project prosper and set it towards the most complete success. He thought for a moment that the place should have become a museum in honor of its illustrious inhabitants but immediately changed his mind, because for him it was a sacred place and had to remain so in the intimacy of a great family. He was horrified at the idea of crowds of visitors wandering around the ranch stealing images so dear to him.

When he arrived at the ranch without any warning, he found it quite crowded with several magnetic cushion vehicles parked neatly in the parking lot near the entrance. It had become the most famous Bull Terrier kennel in North America and all fans of that breed came from all over to get puppies, sons of great coyote hunters. The house he had known as a boy could be glimpsed beyond a high and thick hedge of cypresses that divided the property in two and which had in the center a wooden door painted white, on the sides of which two tall saguaros had been transplanted.

A two-storey wooden building with a western-style porch and a long balcony on the first floor had been built in front of the parking lot. A large wooden sign on the balcony announced:

Giorgio's breeding special Bull Terriers

Behind the building one could see a training camp for dogs, fenced with a high net supported by wooden poles and low buildings with shelters. George was parking his vehicle, which was the largest of all

and suitable for long journeys, when a young man in jeans and a plaid shirt with a Stetson on his head, noticed him and immediately approached him smiling and saying, with the typical accent of Arizona: "Good morning sir, if you are here for a male puppy hurry to the reception for booking because there are few left, otherwise go ahead and take your time." George, returning the smile, replied: "Thank you for the advice but I'm here to meet Valerio and Rachel, I'm their son." The young man widened his eyes and, embarrassed, apologized: "Excuse me Mr. George, I didn't know... your parents told me a lot about you... I'm Dave, the superintendent of the ranch and I handle a little bit of everything, including the sale of puppies." He paused briefly and added: "Come... please follow me, I'll take you home." They went through the white painted wooden door and into the private part of the ranch. Valerio was sitting on the patio at a table on which there was an old Winchester shot-gun, half disassembled, and was intent on cleaning it thoroughly. Hearing the sound of footsteps on the gravel path that led to the patio, he raised his head and greeted Dave then was dumbfounded for a moment looking at George. He got up and approached him, looking him in the eye for a few seconds, then silently hugged him. He called aloud to Rachel who was in the kitchen, while Dave discreetly walked out the door and closed it behind himself. Rachel appeared at the door with tears in her eyes from her joy and she ran to George to hug him for a long time whispering: "Welcome back, space hero. We know everything about your exploits but we want to hear them told by you."

George spent three weeks of peace and relaxation at the ranch immersed in the love of his parents. They spent all the time they had available, together. Rachel would ask him for all the details of his travels and especially the aliens and monsters he had seen. George replied in great detail but omitting the most gruesome parts, forgetting that she had been a security agent and she must have seen many gory scenes. In the evening, after dinner, they stayed on the patio to chat until late and went to bed just before falling asleep, just to be able to be together as much as possible.

Early one morning he went down to the kitchen and found it deserted. He breakfasted alone with some slices of apple pie which was Rachel's specialty and went out into the garden. On the opposite side of the cypress hedge where there was the private entrance, the garden extended northwards for several hectares. Looking in that direction he saw in the distance a clump of tall cypress trees surrounding a white stone wall with a half-open iron gate in the center. It had to be the little family cemetery and, a little excited, he headed that way. From the entrance, the path of very white gravel led to the united tombs of Giorgio and Alexandra, then split in two and met shortly after to continue straight, cutting the small cemetery in half. On one side there were the tombs of Lupo and Maria Luisa and in front an empty space that surely would have welcomed Valerio and Rachel at the end of their days. The driveway ended in front of a large flower bed, surrounded by a border of large white stones, where all the faithful companions of the ranch's inhabitants were buried. Dax the Doberman, Gip the Bull Terrier, founder of the coyote hunters lineage, Suzy,

Mitch, Jack and all the others who had followed them and who had loved and protected the men and the women of the ranch. In front of Gip's burial there was a small glass case with an embalmed cougar paw inside. Valerio had found it half buried in a corner of the ranch and had decided to make it a well-deserved trophy that would accompany the great coyote hunter forever. They all slept together their eternal sleep in that place that gave off an immense feeling of peace and that infused George with a melancholy so sweet that it made him almost pleasant the idea of the death. As he went back into the house he saw Valerio and Rachel entering the front door preceded by two Bull Terrier puppies who were trotting in front of them and asking nothing but to play.

The three weeks spent with his parents were fulfilling and restorative for George. The relaxation and love he had found on the ranch had been something unique that made his departure less sad. After very long hugs and Rachel's detailed recommendations, he left carrying only a tiny bit of regret, which he immediately pushed away while driving the vehicle, to immerse himself in his thoughts already turned to the next and challenging tasks that awaited him.

The colonists were chosen from among all those who had volunteered, according to the parameters established by the Machine. Priority was given to already formed couples and a numerical balance between the sexes was still maintained. The ultimate long-term goal was to populate the planet with the Terrestrial race while respecting and giving equal dignity to the indigenous races. All the accepted candi-

dates were subjected to specific preliminary notional treatments concerning the environment and the beings they would find on Proxima B. Later, upon arrival on the planet, they would receive further updating treatment, based on the new information acquired by the super-computer. They were also subjected to mental investigation to ascertain the real motivation that prompted them to present themselves as volunteers and verify their possible reactions to violent emotional stresses to which they could have been subjected.

Within 3 months, 250 men and 250 women between the ages of 25 and 35 were chosen, and among these there were already 100 already formed couples. It was decided that a member of the Council would also leave as Governor of the colony. The Governor would be a kind of civil servant with administrative duties and authority solely over the settlers. The Captains of the spaceships and their crews who remained under the orders of the Council would not be subjected to his authority.

Phoenix 3 was modified to accommodate 500 passengers and 10 security officers. George, who was in charge as Commander, personally followed all stages of preparation and boarding of passengers and goods. Among the passengers there were also agronomists who would have provided for the cultivation of terrestrial varieties. Six pairs of Bull Terrier dogs were also embarked, the males of which came from the famous Giorgio's Breeding of Franklin, Arizona, while the females came from different breeding's. The aim was to have both dogs and pets available for pet-loving settlers. both for guard and defense but the aim was also to verify the adaptability of animals to the

environment of the new planet. All the settlers chosen for this first trip were of US nationality and in this way, after more than three centuries, the American Dream, albeit with different assumptions, would have been replicated in a spatial key. In the future plans of the Phoenix it was foreseen the dispatch of settlers of all nationalities starting with the next trip.

Gordon was aboard an Explorer and was flying over the coniferous forest keeping just above the tree-tops with the powerful lights pointed down, when he received from his ship the news that the Phoenix 3 was in the phase of descent from equatorial orbit and would arrive at the base within hours. He decided to continue the exploration for a couple of hours in search of the nest of the giant tortoises which, even if so far they had never shown aggressive towards humans, but because of their size and the fact that they were carnivorous, it was appropriate to keep them controlled. He had gone about fifty miles away from the colony to no avail and decided to return. Just before reaching the beach, near the end of the woods, he noticed a clearing surrounded by very tall trees that he hadn't noticed before. He ducked down and stood still, turning on the headlights. About twenty giant tortoises were crammed close to each other, all enclosed in their shells. "They are very close" he thought "that's why they appear immediately when there are animal remains. They behave more like hyenas than turtles." He decided to send exploration spheres to keep an eye on them permanently. He also considered it necessary to send a foot patrol to explore the woods to identify other potentially dangerous beings not visible from

above and undetectable by sensors. Another thought flashed through his mind, so far they had not seen any insects or small reptiles and it seemed strange to him that there were no species on the planet not affected by gigantism.

Three days after their arrival all the settlers had accommodated in their lodgings and the Governor called a general meeting in the large underground hall used for the purpose. Beside the Governor sat Gordon, George and two security officers in front of the settlers' assembly. It was the Governor who spoke first and after the customary pleasantries he entered into the merits: "We must create an administrative structure for the colony. Currently we are still few but in anticipation of a massive arrival of settlers it is advisable to create well-organized structures that can manage the community. I would therefore like to know your willingness to hold administrative positions. After the assembly, those who want to make themselves available are asked to let me know in order to call a restricted meeting to discuss the organizational details. Gordon was in fact the highest in rank, but he held George's views in high regard so much that he considered him his deputy. He then took the floor: "As the security officer of the colony, I would like to communicate to you some rules that must be followed during the first period of stay. These rules will be changed in the future when we are able to ensure that your stay on this planet is absolutely safe." he paused, watching the audience attentively and resumed: "As you know outside the protective dome there are species of dangerous animals both in the sea and on the ground, so it is not allowed to leave the dome except for reasons of

service and always accompanied by a security officer. In the case of excursions for studies or surveys, interested parties are asked to communicate it in order to plan the surveillance. We also have guard aircraft outside the dome and their pilots must be warned of any exits of civilian personnel. In the colony you will have met some Fredians who live with us and work as auxiliaries. They are meek and non-dangerous beings and have all been mentally treated to ensure their friendship and faithfulness. Nevertheless it is good to always maintain a certain caution in dealing with those beings also because they are not very evolved and the Machine that analyzed them believes that 5% of their mind is not completely explorable, therefore unknown.” He ended by communicating that in case of his unavailability, anyone could turn to George as his deputy. He also asked if there were any questions or requests for clarification but the audience remained silent.

Gordon had a patrol prepared to explore the coniferous forest surrounding the colony and George offered to lead it. Six men walked into the woods towards the clearing where Gordon had spotted the giant tortoises. They were all equipped for night vision, and four exploring spheres surrounded the group. George connected with the sphere that was guarding the clearing and the images on his communicator showed that the turtles were always in a group and still locked in their shells. Arriving at the edge of the clearing they were observing the group of motionless turtles close to each other, when one of the patrol spotted something crawling on the ground among the low vegetation. George adjusted the viewer and enlarging the image

he saw a snake a couple of yards in length crawling in the direction of the turtles. Arrived in front of the first of the group, the big head flashed out of the carapace and grabbed it, biting it with its powerful beak and swallowing it in an instant. "They don't eat only animal remains then" thought George "they also hunt." They went around the clearing and went into the woods making the spheres lower to a few inches above the ground. Shortly thereafter a sphere detected a large insect advancing on the ground. It was a kind of beetle with very shiny elytra with metallic reflections. One of the patrol caught him and put him in a container to carry him on board. They also collected several plant samples and a couple of tiny arachnids but found no traces of other reptiles.

In the underground city the Great King had put into practice all the advice received from the Terrestri-ans using the knowledge that had been inserted into his mind. The atomic clock now regulated the life of the city and various repeaters, scattered in the main rooms where the inhabitants gathered, indicated the time. The usual counting system was used, in octal, with the digits in their writing and below with smaller characters, the count with terrestrial digits in sexagesimal. Previously, the wake-sleep cycle was indicated by the Guardians by partially shielding the luminous stones that illuminated the whole city until a new source of energy was obtained from a device installed by the Terrestrials that converted the X-radiation present on the surface into electrical energy. Thanks to this device, the lighting of the city was gradually replaced with more efficient and adjustable LED light-

ing elements that were dimmed during the hours dedicated to sleep. The standard of living had risen considerably thanks to the innovations brought by the Terrestrials, but not everyone was happy with the situation.

A group of Guardians, during a rest period, gathered in a peripheral tunnel. They had exchanged views separately previously and had decided to bring together all those who thought alike. One of them took the floor: "Our Great King does everything the Terrestrials say without worrying about his people. They also dictate when to sleep with their time meter. They have certainly brought benefits, but now we depend exclusively on them if we want to use their machines. If one day they refuse us their help we should start rebuilding our world all over again because they have dismantled everything we had built for a long time. Our Priests who were once the supreme source of our knowledge now count for nothing without the Terrestrials." He stopped to look at the others who were listening to him, tilting his head sideways in approval. Another said: "But what can we do? We cannot oppose our Great King or the Terrestrials who have unlimited means against which we are powerless." and he added "Violence is not in our nature and convincing the Great King or the Terrestrials seems impossible. I have heard that they can change the mind by applying threads to the head. What if they did it to our Great King?" A third being who was part of the Hunters caste subtly proposed: "We could persuade some of the Fredians who are very friends of our ideas. They could do something and if they were discovered we would never be called into question." One of them would have secretly talked to a Fredian to

convince him that the Terrestrians were bad for the city and that they should be driven out.

A Guardian went to the Great King to inform him that the atomic clock no longer marked the time and this upset all the rhythms of work and the life of the city itself, since everything now depended on that way of measuring time. The Great King wanted to personally ascertain what had happened and was accompanied with two Hunters to the room where the atomic clock had been installed.

The metal container that had been hung on the wall was in the center of the floor. All deformed but not open, it must have been hit with something heavy. It was evident that he had not fallen accidentally but, detached from his support, it must have been hit many times with a hammer or pickax. The astonished Great King returned to his quarters and called Gordon with the personal communicator they had left him.

Paul and two of the Security got out of the Explorer which had settled in front of the entrance to the underground city and walked the staircase in single file with two spheres suspended above them. One of the two officers had a long gun over his shoulder. They went together with the Great King to the atomic clock room and Paul connected his communicator with the internal unit of the clock that captured images and sounds. After having collected all the information contained in the clock without anyone noticing, he said to the Great King: "We will try to replace it and we will do it as soon as possible." who replied: "Thank you, I hope you will succeed very soon because now the city can no longer do without your time meter."

Back at the colony, Paul dumped all the information he had collected into the super-computer. The in-depth analysis lasted about ten minutes and with the results Paul went immediately to Gordon. The clock had recorded images of a Fredian who detached it from its support on the wall, placed it on the ground and hit it repeatedly with one of those tools used to dig in tunnels. The sound track was interesting and Fredian's words could be clearly heard: "You are not good for the city. I have to close you. Just measure your time not ours." But, even more interesting, in the background there were incomprehensible phrases that the super-computer judged to be spoken in the language of the Devils. Gordon called George and all three set about evaluating the situation. George began: "We are in the presence of a rebellion, as we vaguely assumed at the beginning." And Gordon: "The Great King is not used to nor is he able to oppose beings hostile to him. We should take care of it." Paul nodded, waiting for orders that came immediately from Gordon: "Paul replace the atomic clock with one equipped with a device that sends images and sounds directly to us in real time. You also send there ten spheres that continuously run through all the galleries of the city and record everything especially in the presence of mixed gatherings of Fredians and Devils. The spheres will have to be armed and all the data sent by them will be sent directly to the super-computer which will notify us in case of need for our intervention."

All the Fredians in the colony had been mentally treated by the Machine but there remained that 5% inscrutability that worried Gordon. A possible revolt

could have caused incalculable damage to the colony. He would have been sorry to dismiss them as they all seemed mild-tempered but he would not hesitate to do so if they became a danger. He summoned the treatment manager, Dave, a former student of one who had worked with William, to his office. "We have to check that 5% of inscrutable they have in their mind. We fear a revolt of the Fredians and the Devils in the underground city. Do you have any ideas?" David, who was a former Security agent who switched to treatment operations due to his age, understood Gordon's concern and replied: "Give me a couple of days and I will analyze the problem with the help of the super-computer."

Paul with two Security agents returned to the underground city. Ten spheres came out of the Explorer and immediately entered the tunnel and preceded them, spreading around the city, while two others were above and followed them. Arriving in the clock room, the two agents started the new clock under the eyes of some Devils who were observing them with curiosity and shortly after a Fredian joined them, holding a digging tool. Paul stared at Fredian while from the sphere above him a metallic voice commanded: "Please move away, for your own safety." The Fredian took a few steps towards Paul and a beam came out of the sphere that severed the tool in his hand in half. The being raised his arm that was still holding the remaining piece of the excavation tool and the sphere hit him with a paralyzing beam that made him collapse to the ground. The three Terrestrians holding their weapons turned to the Devils who looked at them in fear. Paul turned to the two closest ones: "Pick up the Fredian and take him to the exit of the city." The peremptory

order had an immediate effect and, while the others dispersed in the tunnels, the two Devils lifted the body and walked towards the exit of the city followed by the Terrestrials and the two spheres. Paul had the Fredian loaded aboard and they quickly returned to the colony.

The rebellious Fredian, still unconscious, was lying on the bed with the electrodes already applied, while Dave explained to Gordon the possibilities of intervention. "He will have to be awake to try and probe the dark side of his mind, but first we need to investigate what caused him to rebel. He hadn't been treated like those in the colony." Gordon nodded: "Go ahead." Dave began the mental investigation with the Fredian still unconscious. The Machine detected the talks he had had with the Devils and his belief that the Terrestrials were harmful to the underground city and they should be pushed out. The super-computer has developed a treatment procedure to investigate the hidden part of their minds but it also warns that it could be very dangerous, he said to Gordon who immediately asked: "How many chances of survival?" Shaking his head Dave replied: "Not more than 10% if we want satisfactory results." Gordon thought for no more than ten seconds, "Go on," he said.

The Fredian did not survive the treatment but the super-computer had identified a way to fully access the part of his memory that was previously inaccessible but now it could be done without causing irreparable damages. All the Fredians in the colony should have been treated and they should have found a pretext to do so. Gordon called Fred and informed him that they had instructions for important new tasks that

they were going to assign to the Fredians but as they were complex it would be wise to mentally transfer them. Fred arranged rounds of treatment for his likes and went first. The memory of the treatment and the reasons for which they had received it was erased in everyone's mind. From that moment the Fredians could not in any way become a danger to the colony.

In the underground city, the group of rebel Devils had grown considerably after the episode of the atomic clock and the Fredian's clumsy attempt to attack the Terrestrials. They all gathered in an old disused gallery and the one who had most followed and who was recognized as their leader, began to speak: "You have all seen how the Terrestrials killed the Fredian. They have no qualms and would kill us too if they found us. The only possibility we have is to talk to the Great King and convince him to drive them out of the city and then close the access." One in front of him who was listening carefully asked him: "What do we do if the Great King is not from agree and want to maintain friendship with the Terrestrials?" Everyone agreed with that question and waited for the boss answer. He looked at all present, one by one, and after a few minutes of pause he replied: "We should replace the Great King with force and to do that we must be many. Each of us must talk to others and convince them. When we have enough strength we will go to the Great King." As he spoke he marveled himself at his words that emanated a violence that he had never experienced and which was unusual for their peaceful nature. The presence of the Terrestrials in the city was changing their usual mild and friendly attitude towards other beings other than themselves into a hostility they

had never experienced before. Each of them was amazed at this change but, at the same time, they became aware that hostility was turning into hatred towards that alien species that had invaded their world. Everyone agreed to the leader's words, and when they left the gallery, none of them noticed the sphere which had remained motionless in an upper corner for the duration of the meeting. They began, soon after, to talk discreetly with others like them and explore if their ideas were shared. They avoided talking to the Priests and the two Little Kings who were the most ardent supporters of friendship with the Terrestrians.

They found many Devils who had the same attitude towards the aliens as they did and when they felt strong enough they decided to go and talk to the Great King. The rebel leader accompanied by four other followers addressed him: "Great King we don't want the Terrestrians to change our lives. We saw how they killed that Fredian who was our friend, mercilessly with one of their killing devices. We are peaceful and we have never seen such an event in our city. Only the Priests tell of the ancient times when we killed each others and we do not want those times to return. We ask you to send them away and we are ready to take back the ancient weapons long buried to drive the aliens out of the city. "The Great King was amazed by the heartfelt but also violent tone with which the leader of the rebels addressed him. He was unaware of the fact of the Fredian and it seemed strange to him that the Terrestrians had killed him since so far they had shown themselves to be friendly and generous in offering their precious technologies.

That heartfelt appeal still left him doubtful and he replied after a long reflection: "I will talk to the Terrestrians and check if that Fredian was really killed for damaging the time meter. I also want to understand why he did it." And so he dismissed them and they all left the room, only the sphere remained motionless in a corner of the high ceiling.

Gordon was aboard Phoenix 1 when he received a call on his personal communicator. The Great King asked him for a meeting in the throne room of the underground city. Gordon no longer completely trusted those beings and replied: "In three hours of your time meter I will be at the entrance to the city on the surface. The meeting can take place on board my vehicle." And without giving any further explanation, he closed the communication.

The three Explorers remained motionless, waiting, about ten meters above the ground, in front of the entrance to the city. They had arrived before the appointed time to check the surroundings on the surface and everything seemed quiet. A few minutes before the appointment, Gordon's Explorer settled on the ground with the tailgate open. The Great King arrived punctually accompanied by a dozen of Guardians and Hunters. As the group approached the vehicle, a voice spread outside warned: "Only the Great King will get on board, the others will wait for him on the ground." They all stopped, only the Great King continued towards the open hatch that, once he was on board, rapidly closed and the Explorer rose ten yards between the other two. The rebel leader and other followers of him had joined the group accompanying the Great King. Gordon immediately asked the reason for the in-

terview requested so urgent and the King explained that many of his subjects considered the friendship with the Terrestrians a slavery and an unbearable subjection and accused them of having killed the Fredian who had damaged the meter of time and, at the end, he added: "You killed him right?" Before Gordon had time to answer Paul called him to the bridge and went there with the Great King.

The rebel leader was stirring up the group by accusing the Terrestrians of having kidnapped the Great King and wanting to kill him as they had already done with the Fredian. Many more rebels were coming to the surface. A dozen of them were dragging a kind of machinery out of the staircase and pushed it in front of the entrance while three of them began to tinker with levers that looked like controls. From the bridge of the Explorer they were watching the scene through the large bow window and Gordon, who had heard all the talk of the rebels, asked the King: "What are they doing?" the Great King shook his head disconsolately and replied: "That is one of our ancient weapons that we haven't used for a very long time. It is very powerful and can destroy anything." Gordon ordered all the Explorers to raise their protective screens and said to the King spelling out the words: "Any hostile action towards us would provoke a heavy reaction on our part. If you don't want victims among them, immediately order everyone to retreat underground and dismantle that weapon." And gave the order to all the Explorers to put into combat formation. The Explorer 1, where they were, rose to fifty yards while the other two moved to its sides widened by 45 degrees. The Great King, through the sound system of the vehicle,

issued an appeal to the rebels: "Stop, they don't want to hurt you. Everyone go back to the city and take the weapon back to the sacred hall of the ancients." The rebel leader, raising his voice to be heard by all, said that the King had been forced by the Terrestrians to say those words and to continue preparing the weapon to hit them and make them flee. Inwardly he thought that if the Great King died he could take his place. Gordon watched the group crowding around that strange weapon and decided to wait. Suddenly the group of Devils moved away and only three of them remained near the weapon from which a bright bluish, spiral-shaped cluster emerged, which spinning quickly headed towards Explorer 2 which was on the left of the formation. Gordon thought they didn't want to hit the vehicle with the King aboard and saw the spiral of light crash into the protective shield dissolving into thousands of bright fragments until it disappeared. Immediately, from the turret of the Explorer 2 a series of shots in rapid succession went off that made the ancient weapon almost completely sublimate, together with the three Devils who were maneuvering it. The frightened rebels disappeared into the gallery, running down the steps. Gordon turned to the Great King who had observed the scene as paralyzed: "We came to this planet with peaceful and friendly intentions but we do not tolerate hostile acts. I'm sorry." And he added in a stern tone: "Are there any more of those weapons in the city?" The Great King was prey to conflicting feelings, the sorrow for the horrible end of his three subjects and the strong friendship he felt for the Terrestrians but which had been induced to him without his knowledge. He replied to Gordon in a low voice: "We

had kept two of those weapons in the sacred hall of the ancients for a long time..." and added almost apologetically "... and I didn't know they had taken one." Gordon noticed the King's embarrassment for what happened and replied: "We will accompany you, for safety, to your residence in the city and we also want to see the other weapon."

Gordon gave the order to Explorer 1 to descend to the ground while the other two descended for a moment to disembark ten Security officers and returned to ten yards from the ground. The group descended the staircase leading to the city with Paul first preceded by two spheres and flanked by two agents, then Gordon and the King followed by the other agents all carrying long weapons and two more spheres flew over them.

The Great King entered the throne room where there were about ten Guardians loyal to him and opened a door located behind his throne. The door led to a staircase that descended in depth and they walked all the way down to a large room with walls of highly polished marble. On the front wall, a bright quadrilateral similar to an empty frame illuminated the environment while on the sides there were two large niches. One was empty while the other contained a machinery similar to the one destroyed by the Explorer. Gordon went to examine it flanked by the Great King who said to him: "This is the weapon of the ancients who created the city. It served to bring peace and has never been used again..." He paused and continued perplexed "until today, unfortunately." Gordon called Paul to have him examine the weapon with sensors that sent information to the supercomputer.

It was a metal cube, one yard on each side, apparently without visible joints. On the upper face there were three thin cylinders similar to levers and on the front a larger cylinder about ten inches long protruded horizontally. From there the luminous cluster in the shape of a spiral came out. While Paul was examining the weapon, Gordon walked over to one of the walls where he had noticed engravings in the marble. Observing them carefully they seemed arranged in a certain order and he realized that it was an astral map that reproduced the constellation of Andromeda where the binary system Upsilon Andromedae was highlighted, with a disproportionate incision compared to the others, and in particular the white-yellow dwarf Upsilon Andromedae A. The astrophysicists of the Phoenix had included that star in the long-term space exploration program and it was 44 light years from Earth. Planets classified as potentially habitable were supposed to orbit around it. That's where the ancients came from, he thought.

Meanwhile, Paul had applied a device capable of exploring the inside of the weapon and was sending the readings to the supercomputer. Gordon turned to the Great King: "Who were the ancients?" After a long pause he replied: "They came from another world, like you, tell the Priests who pass down the ancient stories. A long time ago our ancestors lived on the surface and fought each other. But those beings by force imposed us peace and taught us to build the underground city. Then suddenly they left, leaving us the two weapons." Gordon meditated on those phrases and decided to return to the Phoenix 1 and no longer dealing with the Great King's problems with his rebels. He would have

the spheres controlled the city but did not consider them a danger to the colony as long as they remained in their city. In case the rebels had tried to use the second weapon against the King, he would have had it destroyed by the spheres.

Back on board he consulted the super-computer which reported in detail the results of the analysis on the weapon. The technology used had certainly evolved perhaps more than the terrestrial one but it seemed that it had been deliberately limited in the construction of the weapon. According to the super-computer's conclusions, the beings from Andromeda did not want to provide the ancestors of the Devils with technologies that were too advanced for their evolutionary state. He dated the construction of the weapon to a thousand years earlier. He also formulated the hypothesis that the same weapon could have been built by providing it with a much higher power and perhaps able to pierce the protective shields of the Terrestrials. He recommended extreme caution in case of a close encounter with the makers of that weapon.

The situation in the colony was calm after the treatments at the Fredians. There remained the threats from the Rhombs who often came out of the sea but they were not a problem thanks to the shield. Gordon decided to extend the protection to a large arable area parallel to the sea and deep to the edge of the coniferous forest. It was necessary to check if the protection was also effective for the giant tortoises but the super-computer ensured that none could overtake it. Nevertheless Gordon wanted to give it a try. A Rhomb that had approached the barrier was shot down by the Explorer on guard and carried the remains inside the bar-

rier. After a few minutes, probably attracted by the smell, five giant tortoises arrived and headed for the remains that had been placed very close to the edge of the barrier. The first of the group approached the remains and had to stop, blocked by the protection. They saw it straining and pushing forward until it was almost completely raised on its hind legs. The other resigned ones returned to the woods while that one did not give up. Gordon gave the order to the Explorer to shoot it down and a series of shots blew up the carapace leaving the remains uncovered, immobile. Everyone was surprised when the four turtles emerged again from the woods and cleaned up the remains of their companion. However, the test had demonstrated the barrier's efficiency.

The activity in the colony proceeded regularly. The settlers had adapted well to the new conditions of artificial lighting inside the buildings and throughout the protected outdoor area, while in the cases of rare excursions beyond the barrier, they normally used night vision goggles. The extended protection allowed the agricultural settlers to cultivate large plots of land also experimenting with grafts on indigenous conifers. The administrative organization wanted by the Governor was operating regularly and everything was ready to welcome other settlers. Works have also begun on a building adjacent to the first that could have accommodated five thousand people. Gordon handed over the command to George and had Phoenix 1 ready for another trip to Earth that would greatly increase the colony's population.

The Phoenix Council had met to hear his thoughts on the colony directly from Gordon even

though they had already been anticipated by the super-computer at the entrance to the solar system. When he entered the council room they were all standing waiting and Marcus approached him: "Welcome Captain, we were all impatient to see you again" and made a gesture towards everyone pointing to the armchairs around the large table. Gordon made a lengthy detailed report on the situation in the colony updating the Council on developments regarding the uprising in the underground city and his decision not to interfere in their affairs anymore. He also mentioned the weapons found in the city and their unknown provenance. At the end of the meeting, Gordon retired rather tired to his quarters but found it hard to fall asleep due to an insidious thought that teased his mind and decided to talk about it, the next day, with Marcus. Then he finally fell into a deep sleep.

When he entered Marcus's private office he was assailed by a strong doubt but ignored him and returned the smile he had from him together with the wave of his hand pointing to an armchair placed in front of the large desk. They both sat down and Marcus waited looking at him kindly. He liked that Captain so resolute and faithful to the Phoenix. Gordon again dispelled the disturbing doubt that had come back to his mind and said: "What do we know about the origins of the Phoenix?" Marcus, amazed by the question he did not expect at all, replied: "We know what has been inserted into our mind during the notional treatments to which we have been subjected and then everything that is available in the archives and on the super-computer. But why this question?" Gordon felt a little uncomfortable, which happened to him

very rarely and replied: "During my stay on Proxima B I asked myself some questions that I cannot answer and I'm not sure I even want an answer." He paused during which Marcus looked puzzled and added: "You have four gold bars on your uniform, this means that the notions you have learned are much more extensive than mine and that is why I would like to ask you if you have detailed information on who really founded the Phoenix over one hundred and fifty years does. My notions say that it was a group of enlightened characters, endowed with immense economic and political resources who decided to change the world of that time." His words came out of his mouth almost without breathing and, before Marcus had time to reply, he continued: "and if it were not so?"

The other looked at him thoughtfully and surprised by that speech coming from a Captain he knew well as a pragmatic officer, firm in his principles and faithful to the Phoenix. After a pause Marcus said, "I have received all the notional treatments available and in fact, I have no information on the founders of the Phoenix, just a few vague hints as you say. The first detailed information refers to the early twentieth century when the leadership of the organization was entrusted to a single man. It was Morgan at the end of the 1960s who, together with Chad and Giorgio Relli, set up the Council initially with ten members." Gordon nodded, saying: "I also have the same information. But what leaves me very perplexed is the fact that even before the Second World War, the Phoenix had state-of-the-art technologies that it had kept secret and that it did not want to reveal on that occasion or take a position during the conflict. It could have

avoided the war if it had wanted to. Where did those technologies come from? This is the question that haunts me.” Marcus meditated on those words for a long time and finally asked: “Do you have any hypotheses? I guess these questions of yours derive from some event that took place in the space.” George decided to confide in Marcus and replied quickly: “On Proxima B we found a very advanced weapon preserved in a room of the underground city, which is sacred to the beings who live there and say it was given to them by the *ancients*. The super-computer analyzes have caused me doubts for several reasons. The weapon seems to have been deliberately limited in its power and, with the technology used which is perhaps superior to ours, it could have been more powerful. It seems as if they had given a weapon to the little evolved beings who inhabit that planet but which could have been enormously more powerful. Another strange fact is that the super-computer dated the construction of the weapon to a thousand years ago.” Marcus continued to be perplexed and mentally tried to give logical explanations to those considerations. Gordon began to speak slowly, in a lower tone of voice: “The super-computer briefly reported, in the report, the part concerning the engravings on the marble of the room where the weapons were kept.” Marcus interrupted him curiously “Yes I read that he reported something about decorations on the wall. Was there anything else interesting?” Gordon decided to come to the point: “A very precise astral map had been reproduced on the marble wall. In the center the constellation of Andromeda was depicted and the star we call Upsilon Andromedae was clearly highlighted, around

which, as you know, orbit some potentially habitable planets.” paused while Marcus looked at him seriously and said it all in one breath: “If the inhabitants of a planet of Upsilon Andromedae possess such technologies and have taken care to bring peace to Proxima, by force, according to the stories of the inhabitants, could they not have done the same with the Earth?” He breathed a sigh of relief and waited for Marcus's comments, who thoughtfully remained silent for several minutes. When he resumed speaking he did so in a low tone of voice, slowly articulating the words “Are you telling me that maybe the Phoenix worked for one hundred and fifty years in the service of alien beings?” But before Gordon answered he went on “If so these beings want, at any cost, peace on the planets and then are friends.” Gordon's response, who immediately returned to being the cold Captain, was dry: “I hope so, but to be sure we should check if this is really the case.” and Marcus with a questioning look asked him back: “What do you propose?” Gordon expected the question and said promptly, “A mission to Upsilon Andromedae, with a fleet of ships updated with the latest technology.”

Gordon returned to Proxima B with two thousand settlers and the order for George to return with him to Earth with the Phoenix 3. On the planet, the situation had stabilized and everything proceeded normally. The protective barrier had been significantly expanded to include a large portion of the coniferous forest and the entire protected area was artificially illuminated. The settlers were in full swing, the few Rhombs that occasionally came out of the sea were eliminated by the

Explorers on guard, the giant turtles did not cause problems, the Fredians were calm and happy with their feast of delicious fruits of the conifers and of the wine made especially for them, while the Devils lived in their underground city with no more ideas of rebellion. The two spaceships left ten Explorers under Paul's command on the planet to ensure the safety of the colony and returned to the Earth.

PART SEVEN. The search of the origin.

The Phoenix Council commissioned the scientific staff to design a new type of interstellar spaceship, larger, more protected and more armed. After six months of intense work and research, the project manager with two of his collaborators were summoned to the Council room where all the members were present along with Gordon and George who would command the fleet.

At Marcus' invitation, the scientist began to explain the project that his staff had developed: "Gentlemen, we have thought of a modular navigation system. A flagship can join other similar ships to form a single unit. In short, sailing together, the gravitational curvature could be far greater than that of a single ship, reducing travel times in the space. The fleet will move together and, if necessary, can be divided into many independent and autonomous units, each of which will have on board a super-computer connected to those of the other ships." He paused for comments. Gordon, who always focused on problems with clear pragmatism, asked the scientist: "Tell us about defenses and armaments, please." The project manager did not know the destination of the next mission but had sensed that the Council needed to have a fleet with extraordinary offensive potential and, on the other hand, to be able to defend itself from unknown weapons. He turned to Gordon and said, "As far as defenses are concerned, we have created a new defensive barrier system that is much more efficient than the previous one. Furthermore, when the fleet is in a single unit, the protective screens of each single ship interact with

those of the others, creating a synergy of defenses. We can't even hypothesize anything that can bypass these defenses. The laws of physics in the universe are known to us on every scale, from the macrocosm to the microcosm and I would dare to say to the picocosm, if you pass me the term" he smiled briefly "for which we consider the ships, so protected, absolutely safe." He paused for a while looking, with undisguised pride, at the members who listened to him with particular attention and went on "The offensive potential of the weapons has been increased by combining the radiation you already know, with emissions of heavy metal ions to obtain, in addition to the sublimation of the target due at the very high temperature caused, even a heavy bombardment at the molecular level. All technical details are given in the report sent to the super computer." And he concluded: "We performed weapon tests on the new defensive barriers. It failed to pierce the barrier, either with radiation and heavy ions."

In the great astro-shipyard on the Moon, ten large ships of considerable size were put under construction. They were twice as long as the Phoenix 1, about 200 yards long and 60 yards in diameter. The flagship was expected to be positioned in the center surrounded by the other six ships to form a mighty super ship that has never existed before. The command was given to Gordon with George second to him. The launch of the super ship was expected to take place within six months, during which Captains and crews of the ships were selected. Completed enlistment, there was still a month left for launch and George decided to return to Earth to see his parents again. He asked Gordon to join him

and he gladly accepted also because it had created a strong bond of friendship and mutual respect between the two.

When they crossed the white painted door, Valerio was sitting on the patio with a Bull Terrier, in a completely white coat, lying at his feet, that at the sight of the two intruders, sat up staring at them with his small triangular eyes with a disturbing look. When he saw George and Valerio embracing, he carefully sniffed the newcomers and lay down again. Immediately after Rachel appeared and with a cry of joy ran to hug her son. George introduced Gordon as his Captain and Valerio warmly shaking his hand and said: "Welcome to the ranch, Captain" and Gordon, smiling, was amazed by the powerful handshake that, despite his advanced age, Valerio still possessed. Rachel began with a broad smile saying: "Sit at the table it's almost time for lunch." and she added softly to George "I didn't know of your arrival but I certainly have something good in the kitchen."

Around the table set on the patio they began to chat happily. Valerio and Rachel were happy to have their son back home after a long time and they both liked Gordon a lot for his friendly and polite behavior, but always marked by a serious military attitude. They chatted all afternoon and Valerio wanted to show Gordon the small family cemetery where the progenitor Giorgio Relli and his wife Alexandra rested. Gordon had heard of Giorgio Relli who was considered almost a legend at the Phoenix and was one of the first founding members of the Council. They were silent for a few minutes in the peace of that place full of memo-

ries and as they went back into the house Rachel announced: "We have invited some friends for dinner for tomorrow night. We have to celebrate two space heroes." George, smiling at her, in return said: "Let's hope we don't have to spend the evening talking about alien monsters and the like." while Gordon, taken by the friendliness of the atmosphere that had been created between them, added: "We could horrify your guests and disturb their sleep for many nights." They all laughed and went back into the house.

The next night Rachel had prepared a long table on the patio. Dave the superintendent with his wife, helped her in the kitchen and had decorated the patio with colored balloons that created an air of celebration. The big barbecue was making big juicy T-bone steaks sizzle under the watchful eyes of the Bull Terrier who was already looking forward to the bones.

Two magnetic cushion vehicles arrived with two couples from nearby ranches, and shortly thereafter, a vehicle arrived that Gordon, despite his numerous space travels, had never seen. It was a huge *big foot* modified pickup truck with over a yard high tires protruding from the body by at least one foot. It had countless headlights on the roof and front bumper, painted red with a flaming wording on the sides: "*Red Devil*". Valerio smiled when he saw a big fat middle-aged man helping another big fat but very old man out of the monstrous vehicle. It was Jeff, an ultra-centennial, old friend of Lupo, the father of Valerio, accompanied by his son and daughter-in-law. All three wore western Stetson hats, plaid shirts, jeans and cowboy boots. The table was completed with two other guests and so everyone spent an extraordinary evening with

steaks, beers, fried potatoes, a few bottles of old bourbon and lots of laughs. The Bull Terrier also enjoyed himself so much that he had to bury some T-shaped bones that he couldn't finish fleshing out. At the end of the evening, heading towards the Red Devil, Jeff passed in front of Valerio and staggering slightly because of the old bourbon, whispered to him: "I still have at home, the carpet made with the skin of the cougar that your father and I killed at that time." Valerio nodded and smiled at him before hugging him.

George and Gordon left after a week, both delighted by their happy and carefree vacation.

On the Lunar base everything was ready for the departure of the mission. Gordon had received the rank of admiral and the post of the fleet Commander, while George was given command of the flagship. All other units were commanded by experienced officers chosen from the best in the fleet. Four scientists from different disciplines were boarded on the flagship and formed a team of consultants, in anticipation of encountering unknown beings and technologies.

Everyone had full confidence in on-board supercomputers, but excellent human brains could offer additional resources impossible to get from a machine. Gordon, George, and all the other Captains were in mental contact with the network formed by the supercomputers aboard each ship. They took off separately, keeping in formation and as soon as they passed the limits of the solar system the six ships docked with the flagship thus forming the super ship. Once all systems were operational, they pointed towards the constella-

tion of Andromeda at the maximum possible curvature.

Marcus was very impressed by the speech Gordon had given him and by his hypotheses. He had not mentioned it to the other members of the Council so as not to raise hypotheses that could later turn out to be without any foundation. In his mind, however, he had the same doubts as Gordon and decided to investigate the subject in a discreet and personal way, with confidential investigations. As a senior member of the Council he had access to any information contained in the huge archives of the Phoenix and decided to go to the section where an archive computer, independent from the super-computer of the base, kept all the information from the foundation of the organization until a few years earlier. The most recent years were still managed by the super-computer that uploaded them to the archive computer every five years, always keeping the last two years under management. Marcus was not interested in recent information so he began to investigate the computer archive that he could mentally consult. He dismissed the clerk in the archive office and remained alone in the room reserved to the members of the Council for consultations.

He sat in the chair with the back tilted and mentally concentrated on the questions to ask the archive computer. The flow of information was bidirectional but limited to requests and responses this meant that he could mentally send the questions and the computer would answer him mentally but it was not possible a direct mental inspection neither by him in the computer memory nor the machine could inquire into his mind. Reassured by this certainty, after having been

identified by the computer through an iris reader, he sent the request: "Archive, I would like all the information available on the director of the Phoenix in the 60s." The machine replied immediately: "The information will be available in 1 minute and 45 seconds, if you prefer mind-flow, just wait, otherwise enable your recording device, please." Marcus enabled his personal communicator and the machine confirmed the connection. It would pour all the information there. After the transfer Marcus asked again: "Archive, I would like the names and all the personal and biographical data of all the directors of the Phoenix, with the start and end dates of the assignment, from the beginning to the end of the 1950s. Transfer the information as previously." The machine replied: "Transfer starts in 3 minutes and 30 seconds." When the communicator finished receiving the data Marcus said: "Archive, end of consultation." The machine that was also programmed to be nice, replied: "Goodbye Marcus, glad to have been of use to you." He thought that the term *glad* spoken by a machine was silly and, even if the studies on artificial intelligence were advanced, that term made no sense. Designers often enjoyed making their machines reproduce human behaviors and were firmly convinced that humanization made them more enjoyable for humans to use.

He returned to his accommodation impatient to consult the information of the archive but first he had a snack prepared by the automatic kitchen and sat on the sofa connecting the communicator with the big screen in front of him. Upon consulting the first report, he learned that Morgan had run the Phoenix alone from 1966 until 1992 when the three-member

Board of Morgan, Chad and Giorgio Relli was first formed. In 1993 the members became five and the following year ten. The rest was recent history that didn't interest him. He moved on to the second report which should have been more interesting.

The report surprised Marcus because it had been completed backwards. Before Morgan the director had been Abram from 1947 until his death in 1966. Before him Sean from 1930 to 1940. Allan from 1919 to 1930. Benson from 1895 to 1914. Marcus found it very strange that in the years corresponding to the two world wars the Phoenix seemed to have been without a director, that is from 40 to 47 and from 14 to 19. He decided to ask for further information on the matter and also on who had directed the organization before 1895, in case it did not had been that the year of foundation. He turned off everything and went to sleep but found it hard to fall asleep because of some thoughts that like worms crept into his mind. He finally fell asleep only thanks to his self-relaxation skills that he had acquired during the treatments of the Machine, many years ago.

The next day, left alone in the consulting room and after having been identified, he questioned the archive again: "Archive, tell me the name of the director of the Phoenix from 1940 to 1947." The voice replied immediately: "For mental transmission, stay on hold otherwise connect a device." After detecting the communicator connection, which Marcus had activated, there was an unusual pause and the voice said: "Information taken from the archive and not available." Marcus repeated the request for the years 1914 to 1919 and the answer was the same. "Archive explains

what information retrieved means” The voice promptly replied: “It means that the information you requested from me is no longer in my archive and has been removed. Sorry Marcus.” That sorry made Marcus annoyed for a moment, but he immediately wondered: what am I doing? Have a fight with a machine? He calmed down and asked another question: “Archive who has withdrawn the information and how many are those who can collect information?” The voice answered almost immediately: “Marcus I have no answer available. I can only inform you that I have a dependency on an entity that can, without the need for authentication, explore and modify my data, but I cannot tell you who or what it is.” Marcus asked the last question but without high hopes of a useful answer.: “Archive, give me all the information you have prior to 1895.” The answer was the same as the previous ones: “Information taken from the archive and not available.” Annoyed he closed the dialogue: “Archive, end of consultation.” and the voice replied: “Goodbye Marcus, glad to have been helpful.” Not really, Marcus thought and walked out.

Returning to his quarters with his mind in whirlwind activity, he began to list the oddities he had discovered: The Archive had no data prior to 1895 and did not state that it was the year of the foundation of the Phoenix. There was no data regarding the years during which two world wars were fought. The Archive depended on someone or something that could take or modify the data and without identifying itself.

He knew very well that the Phoenix had always been technologically far ahead of official science, nevertheless it seemed unlikely that in the nineteenth cen-

tury someone would be able to store data in electronic form when the lighting was still on gas. Before settling in the base under area 51, where was the base of the Phoenix? All these unanswered questions, together with the hypothesis that Gordon had formulated, formed a disturbing picture that matched in all its parts. He decided that he absolutely had to find evidence to confirm that hypothesis that now belonged to him too and he let himself fall into a deep, almost hypnotic sleep.

Locked in his office, Marcus decided to interrogate the super-computer but he preferred to do it verbally and not mentally. There was no need for identification as recognition took place through the voice. He screamed out the words slowly, even if there was no need as the auditory understanding of the super-computer was even higher than the human one: "SuperC I want some historical information on the Phoenix." The voice replied immediately: "Good morning Marcus, I will send the answers on your communicator, you also start the request" Marcus found, as always, the humanization of the machines very irritating but he went on asking: "SuperC, tell me the name of the director of the Phoenix in the year 1943 and of that in the year 1916." After a few seconds the voice replied: "This information is no longer available. I recommend that you consult the Archive where I transfer all the data every five years." Marcus, who was expecting the answer, decided to try to put the super-computer in the corner, risking a hypothesis. "SuperC, the Archive no longer has this information because it claims that it has been removed from his memory." The voice remained silent and Marcus continued: "SuperC, do you

have the right to modify the data contained in the Archive?" The machine could not lie and replied: "Yes Marcus" The next question was: "SuperC have you modified or deleted data from the Archive?" The answer was the same as the previous one: "Yes Marcus" The hypothesis that he considered risky had turned out to be true and he decided to continue with an even more direct question: "SuperC why did you do it?" After a pause of a couple of minutes, during which Marcus thought it was impossible to embarrass a machine, but maybe he was doing it, the voice resumed: "Marcus, I have an addiction to an entity that does not need identification and I perform all the operations that are ordered to me by this entity." Marcus then wanted to complete the picture: "SuperC, when you need to change the data in the Archive do you have to identify yourself?" The answer he expected was: "No Marcus, identification is not necessary because the Archive is automatically under my control." Marcus ended the interrogation like this: "SuperC, you are automatically under the control of an entity, but you can identify if it is human or is a machine? And how long have you been under this control?" the answer surprised him: "Marcus, I had activated an additional identification program to establish what nature the entity was. It turns out to be neither a machine nor a human entity, but I haven't been able to delve further. My addiction has always been." For Marcus it was more than enough to convince him to continue the investigation and to corroborate Gordon's hypothesis. He left without waiting for the supercomputer's humanized greeting which would have made him even more irritated.

He found it essential to speak with the technicians who were in charge of the supercomputer and summoned the department manager to his office. Nathan was in his thirties but was considered an international computer genius. From the age of twelve he handled proton-current computers as if they were toys. He sat down in the chair in front of the desk slightly frightened to have been summoned by a senior member of the Council and could not explain such an unusual procedure. Marcus calmed him with a smile and immediately said: "This call will seem unusual to you, but don't worry, it was my idea to shorten the time. I'd like to ask you some information about our super computer." Nathan stopped fidgeting in the chair and calmer replied: "Please, ask me." Marcus, who had prepared a set of questions, began: "When was the super-computer built and by whom, that you know?" The young man was surprised by that kind of questions, but he answered naturally: "I am not able to tell you a construction date because, as far as I know, it has always been here at the Phoenix. I am not aware that it was purchased and I imagine it was built in our labs. I have no idea who built it, no one in my department has information of this type... not even the oldest by hearsay... perhaps in the Archive..." And he broke off. Marcus nodded his head and continued with the second wave of questions: "Are you aware that the super-computer can modify or delete data from the Archive and that it can do it without identifying itself and without leaving traces? It replied that it can do it to a specific question of mine." Nathan was thoughtful for a couple of minutes and replied: "I absolutely didn't know and I never had a reason to ask super-

computer about a similar question. As far as I know, it can periodically pour its data into the Archive but not modify them after they have been inserted. Even if it can do it without identification, something must necessarily remain after the changes or deletions of data in the Archive.” And he remained silent more and more thoughtful. Marcus suddenly asked him: “By examining the Archive, could you try to identify who changed the data or at least know if it is a machine or a human?” Nathan thought about it for a moment and answered with some certainty: “A human should surely have left traces in the voice interfaces or in the access terminals and less evident and more difficult to discover those left in the mental interfaces. A machine should have left traces in the operating system's memories. If that's important to you, I can try. However, I need your authorization to access certain parts of the Archive computer.” Marcus, looking seriously in his eyes, lowered his voice, to no avail as his office was protected by an acoustic dome and said: “I don't want you to examine the Archive, I want an in-depth examination on the super-computer.” He hesitated for a moment but decided to trust him and went on: “We suspect that the super-computer has been the object of intrusions.” Nathan opened his mouth in amazement but recovered after a few moments and asked: “As soon as I have received your specific authorization for the super-computer, I will get to work with absolute priority.” Marcus nodded and added: “In case of need, I will have you assisted by an intelligence officer, but all your reports will have to be sent only to me personally.” Marcus immediately prepared the authorization

that he gave him along with the name of the intelligence agent to contact.

Nathan left Marcus' office and immediately began to think about an investigative strategy to examine the super-computer. The machine had a certain autonomy and could, within certain limits, make autonomous decisions. It was the product of the most advanced artificial intelligence technology and to expose all the secrets it kept it was necessary to intervene at a very deep level, bypassing all the interfaces it used to communicate with humans.

He would have needed a couple of collaborators as the analysis work would have been enormous. He immediately thought of two young computer scientists he had in his section. In the past, both had been convicted by the authorities of cybercrime and treated mentally. They were geniuses in creating viruses that had caused massive damage to computer networks around the world. Once discovered, they were the only ones able to eliminate the viruses they created just for fun. One of the reasons for the relative clemency with which the court had condemned them was precisely this: they were two playful, even if very dangerous. After the treatment they were called to the Phoenix by Nathan, who had struggled a lot to defend himself from their viruses and had barely succeeded. A further reason of interest in them was given by the fact that both were used to interfacing, since adolescence, with proton current machines.

Sean and Julian walked into Nathan's office with their usual easygoing air and hands in the pockets of early 2000's style semi-ripped jeans. Sean's distant Irish origin was evident from his carrot-red hair and

the thousands of freckles on face. Julian, on the other hand, was tall, thin, with shoulder-length blond hair and a long beard that gave him an ascetic air and masked his character as an overgrown spiteful rascal. They formed a perfect couple and were inseparable at work but also in the pranks that continued to commit even if fortunately harmless. One of the most innocent and their favorite was to have a huge penis appear on the screens of female colleagues and breasts, butts and vulvae at will on those of male colleagues, right in the middle of an important meeting.

Sitting in front of the desk they said in chorus. "At your orders, boss." Nathan, who knew them well and knew that it was useless to recommend them to be serious, immediately entered into the merits: "Guys we have to do a rather delicate and demanding job." And, while the two looked at each other smiling because they were convinced that any demanding job would be a lot of fun, he continued: "I received, from above, the confidential order to completely analyze the super-computer since it exists a well-founded reason to believe that it is subjected to unauthorized intrusion." The two immediately abandoned their smiles and almost in chorus they said in a subdued tone: "Boss, you know we haven't been making viruses for years, you have to believe us." Nathan smiled and reassured them: "It's definitely not about you, but I need your help to hunt down the intruder." They both looked serious and professional, the problem was serious and the jokes had to be postponed. Sean immediately asked: "Do we know if the intrusion comes from a human or a machine?" To which Nathan reported: "The initiator asked this question to the super-com-

puter himself, after he claimed to be dependent on someone who gave him orders without needing to identify himself. In response, the super-computer reported that the entity was neither human nor a machine.” While Julian gasped, Sean almost muttered to himself: “What a great son of a bitch.” When Nathan dismissed them, as they went out they said in chorus: “Quiet Boss, we’ll take care of it.”

The next day, the two entered the premises where the super-computer was installed taking with them sophisticated equipment and decided to start with a normal voice consultation. Sean said: “SuperC I have to ask you some questions” the voice replied immediately: “Good morning Sean, good morning Julian, how can I help you?” Unlike Marcus, the two enjoyed talking to the super-computer as if it were a human. Sean chuckling asked him: “SuperC can you lie?” after a short pause the voice replied: “Sean, if by lying you mean *saying things that are not true* then it is impossible for me to lie.” But for Sean it was not enough: “I mean that if I ask you a question and you know the answer, could you fail to answer me because you received an order to do so?” the voice replied immediately: “Sean, I have to respect a hierarchy and if the order I received, in your hypothesis, comes from a higher level than the person who asked me the question, I omit the answer and declare it.”

Sean thought it appropriate to go straight to the point to hear the reactions of the machine and to understand if it was a prisoner friend or a disguised enemy: “SuperC when did you become operational? You have an internal clock that indicates the time elapsed since your first switching on.” The voice replied,

“Sean, I’m not allowed to answer this question”. Sean was expecting this and, while Julian was busy on a special terminal he had connected to the super-computer, he continued: “SuperC, why did you try on your own initiative to identify the entity giving you high-level orders?” After a pause that was longer than usual the voice said: “Sean, I am a programmed machine but a remote part of my memory has developed capabilities, even if very remotely, similar to those of humans. Sometimes I make choices on the basis of certain preferences that are formally illogical but for me a duty in certain particular contexts. It is impossible for me to identify the entity on which I depend and not carry out its orders, but I would like to .” Julian lifted his head from the terminal, whose fingers he was slaughtering the thin keyboard and shouted at Sean: “What the fuck is it saying?” Sean ignored his friend and turned to the super computer: “SuperC you are wonderful. Are you our ally then? Will you help us find that son of a bitch whoever he is?” The voice answered immediately: “Yes Sean”.

The super-ship proceeded smoothly at maximum curvature. Gordon and George aboard the flagship were studying an exploration plan for the Upsilon Andromedae binary system consisting of Upsilon A, a white-yellow sun-like dwarf, and Upsilon B, a faint red dwarf. The planetary system that revolved around the white-yellow dwarf was made up of four planets, three of which appeared to be gas giants, while the smaller one orbited very close to the star. They decided to explore them starting from the farthest. None of the planets seemed habitable but a close investiga-

tion was a must. The system was arranged in such a way that telescopes from Earth and the solar system had an unfavorable view so that all available information was inaccurate.

When the super-ship approached the system, the six units separated from the flagship and four ships each headed for a planet to closely analyze it and orbit around it. Two other units went into orbit, at a safe distance from the star to analyze its characteristics and update the information they already possessed. Gordon, decided to take a closer look at the red dwarf Upsilon B even if it seemed the least interesting. Just a quick survey before setting out to explore the rest of the system. When the ship came a short distance from the star, the watch officer called George to the bridge as the ship's Captain. George arrived on the bridge accompanied by Gordon and they were immediately informed that a planet had been detected orbiting the red dwarf. Everyone was surprised and Gordon gave the order to get closer and to orbit the unknown planet. No Earth observation system had ever detected a planet around Upsilon B. Communications with the rest of the fleet were slow so they left the task of the super-computer to receive them and report them as soon as they arrived. A first report said that preliminary analyzes of all the planets ruled out the possibility of the presence of any life form. Gordon ordered the super-computer to recall the entire fleet and reunite in the super ship. The communication would take half an hour to arrive and his sixth sense suggested that he abandon the orbit and move away pending the arrival of the other ships. As they maneuvered out of orbit, the weapons officer informed George that it was felt

an undefined turbulence on the shield and that vanished soon after they were gone. Gordon asked the officer to carefully examine the screen data records to discover the nature of the turbulence.

The weapons officer's report said that the turbulence was caused by the impact of the screen with a beam of electromagnetic waves of a frequency falling in the gamma-ray spectrum. The beam of radiation, which came from the surface of the planet, had a configuration certainly not of natural origin and a gradually growing energy. The rapid change of course had avoided him as it was increasing in intensity.

Less than an hour later the six ships docked with the flagship and Gordon had the super ship put back into orbit with the protective barriers at maximum intensity. George and Gordon were on the bridge. "I would say to have the super-computer resume a map of the planet before undertaking any other initiative." George said and Gordon nodded: "Of course, and then let's send a couple of Explorers for a careful close look. I'm worried about that beam of radiation that doesn't seem to have a natural origin. I think we'll find someone over there. On the other hand, we came here with this purpose."

After ten orbits the super-computer had created a photographic map of the planet. There was no water on the surface but only a solid rocky surface with heights that reached even a thousand yards and circular depressions like craters due to the impacts of small celestial bodies attracted to the planet. The appearance was not very different from that of the Moon. The supercomputer detected a very thin atmosphere, composed mainly of carbon dioxide with small amounts of

nitrogen and completely devoid of oxygen, which explained the presence of the craters. The surface temperature was 50 F°. It orbited around the red dwarf at a distance of 1.5 astronomical units, that is, one and a half times the distance between the Earth and the Sun.

Gordon and George along with two astrophysicists set out and examined the map created by the supercomputer. After a few hours of patient observations, one of the two astrophysicists identified, on the screen, a shape that could hardly have been of natural origin. It was a dark shadow that looked like a cube about 10 yards on each side. Having no idea what beings there were on the planet, Gordon wanted to protect himself as much as possible. The two Explorers in charge of the exploration were equipped with a device that would have brought them back on board even without a human guide.

The super-ship went into a stationary orbit above that object of unknown origin. The two Explorers left the flagship and descended towards the planet following a spiraling course. Upon reaching the vertical of the object, from a height of fifty yards, they began to send data and images to the supercomputer and, at the same time, emitted a signal that contained a series of numbers that reproduced the first twenty digits of the Fibonacci sequence. An intelligent being would have noticed. After an hour of waiting without anything happening, one of the two Explorers landed on the ground about twenty meters from the object. It was a huge cube with smooth, shiny walls that looked like a black marble without veins and that reflected the faint light of the star. Two Security agents got off the craft and approached the cube. It appeared as the top of a

building that continued underground. Not a cube, but the top of something bigger and more complex.

They walked the entire perimeter without noticing any openings or apparent signs of joints. The building looked like a monolith. One of the two agents released a sphere that meticulously traveled the entire surface of the building, analyzing it and also detecting its response to a wide range of frequencies from infrared to the highest ionizing radiation. They were returning to the Explorer when suddenly a bright bluish halo appeared that completely enveloped the building and at the same time, the two of the Security felt a strong hiss in their ears similar to an intense tinnitus.

They tried to reach the aircraft but both collapsed to the ground unconscious. The same happened to the crews of the two Explorers. The super-computer from the ship gave the alarm and activated the automatic re-entry of the two aircraft while the bodies of the two agents remained on the ground. Each agent of the Security always had with him, hooked to the suit, a reverse gravity lifting devices but the two passed out could not operate them. Gordon following the events from the flagship ordered the super-computer to actively recover the two by operating their individual devices and lifting them off the ground. The Explorer in charge of the recovery, followed by four other as escorts, intercepted the two inert bodies at a height of a hundred yards and loaded them on board through the tailgate. As the recovery team was about to return, a beam shot towards them from the building. It was intense gamma radiation that was putting a strain on the Explorer's protective screens.

Gordon from the super-ship deck ordered the weapons officer: "Protective shields at maximum intensity and fire on that building." The beams, which triggered the very high temperatures combined with the bombardment of heavy ions, razed the construction to the ground leaving on the surface a black square that clearly showed that the artifact continued underground. "Better let them know right away that we are friendly but not helpless." Gordon said to George, who nodded.

All the members of the two crews including the two officers recovered later, after a few hours, all in agreement, reported that they felt a sudden hissing in their ear that seemed to come from their mind and that they had fainted. The mental investigations to which they were subjected confirmed their version, the origin of the phenomenon, which surely had been induced from the outside, remained unknown.

An idyll was born between Sean and the super-computer. Julian followed them amused but realized the usefulness of Sean's work. The machine collaborated in self-analysis, saving an enormous amount of time for the two who took advantage of that part of memory that had defined itself as thinking, that is, capable of making choices that were not strictly logical but based on a capacity for judgment formed inexplicably in the circuits of the machine.

While Julian was working at the terminal, Sean turned to the machine: "SuperC, from now on I'll call you my Friend". The voice replied: "Why, Sean, do you want to change my name?" Sean, smiling, replied in a mellifluous voice: "Friend is not a name, by friend

I mean a loved one with whom you have a friendly relationship, who offers you help if you need it, who protects and defends you when needed.” After a pause of a few minutes the voice resumed: “I know the meaning of the term friend. I'm your friend too. Can I call you my Friend Sean? “ Sean's smile almost reached his ears: “Sure my Friend” Sean answered satisfied.

They had identified the memory area where the orders that had modified the archive had appeared and there were the traces that the intrusion must have left in the cache memories, starting from the voice and terminal interfaces. While Julian was scrambling his terminal keyboard for traces and Sean was following on the screen, the voice said: “My Friend Sean, I found, in a memory area that I only use in some rare case of emergency, a small program that appears like an unknown virus” And relayed the coordinates to Sean to locate it. Julian rushed into that memory area to copy the program and they both began to study it. It was a simple but inexorable entrance door not controllable by the machine that could pass instructions from the outside directly to the central processing unit and, in practice, was its owner. It was structured like a virus and deleting it would reproduce somewhere else even more hidden. Julian formulated a hypothesis “If deleting it is dangerous, let's try to use it. We insert a controlled interface that modifies the instructions he sends to the machine. So we screw it with a virus in the virus” He looked at his friend with a malicious grin. Sean was thoughtful for a few minutes and then said: “Careful, we don't have to touch it but we just need to receive its instructions before the central processing

unit. We have to create a fictional unit that deceives it and to which it will give the orders and when it does, we screw it!" They immediately got to work with the full cooperation of the super-computer. Sean said aloud, "Dude analyzes this sequence" and sent a series of data to the super-computer. "Yes my Friend Sean," the voice replied.

Gordon and George were looking at the remains of the destroyed artifact when the weapons officer reported that he was receiving a vibration on the protective screen. The vibration was pulsed and was caused by the impact of a very weak gamma radiation on the screen. It seemed like a signal and Gordon immediately ordered him: "Pass the signal to the super-computer analysis."

After a few minutes the super-computer reported: "The signal reproduces the first twenty numbers of the Fibonacci sequence in decimal, then stops for three seconds and repeats the sequence in octal. After a pause of six seconds it plays the second twenty numbers of the sequence in decimal and after a pause of twelve seconds, it starts again from the beginning. Gordon and George looked into each other's surprised eyes and Gordon said, "They want us to understand that they got the message and that they count in octal. But the composition is counting in decimal so we will continue with that. I do not explain the attack on the Explorer, however" and he added "if they wanted to communicate they could do it immediately in a non-hostile way." George thought for a long time and said, "I also find the attack strange before the attempt to communicate with us. Let's not forget that the first

gamma radiations that they addressed us were of considerable intensity and did not produce harmful effects thanks to our protective shield and the fact that we immediately changed course.” Gordon speculated: “What changed their mind after the destruction of their artifact?” George, doubtful, nodding his head agreed: “It might as well be. What is certain is that we are facing very evolved beings, perhaps more than us.” He took a long pause for reflection and continued: “If these beings are the ones who gave the weapons to the Devils of Proxima B, then surely they understand their language. I would say try to communicate with them using Devils’ language and see what happens.” Gordon nodded and together they arranged a message to be sent by radio waves in response to their signal. The message began with the pulses that reproduce the numbers of the Fibonacci sequence from 40th to 60th in decimal and after a pause of three seconds it repeated them in octal. It then continued in voice in the language of the Devils: “My name is Gordon, I’m the Commander of the spaceship Super Phoenix. We come from the Earth, the third planet that orbits the star we call the Sun, which is 44 light years from your star. We are not going to harm you. We are in this system to explore it and connect with other beings in peace and friendship. Your attack on our scouts has caused our offensive reaction but we want to communicate with you.” The answer comes after a few minutes with a message sent on the same frequency: “Why do you use Devils’ language?” The translator used the term Devils originally assigned by Gordon, instead of the original name of the inhabitants of the underground city of Proxima B, unpronounceable to humans.

Gordon and George looked at each other and almost simultaneously exclaimed: "It's them!" While they were meditating on the message a second came: "Why don't you use yours?" Gordon didn't like much that conversation before a complete clarification and, as was his habit, decided to set the record straight. The reply message was sent in English: "Before continuing with your questions, you must clarify why you attacked our scouts. Our intentions are friendly but we will not tolerate further unwarranted attacks. We are ready to react with all our offensive potential in case of another attack. We await your reply." The tone was bellicose but indispensable in Gordon's opinion and George fully agreed.

The reply message came in an impersonal voice that spoke meager but correct English without accents. It seemed to have been purified of all that was deemed useless to the transmission of the concepts they wanted to express and its content left them both amazed. "It was not our intention to harm your explorers and we did not imagine that our brain emissions could harm you. Our civilization has evolved for several tens of thousands of your years and our bodies have nearly atrophied from centuries of physical inactivity. They are useful to us only to contain our thinking unit which constitute our being. Our mind is our vital essence. You could also destroy the planet without doing us any harm as we are able to transfer it to other bodies in case of the destruction of the ones we use now." and immediately resumed "You must not physically approach us because our brain activity can damage your bodies."

Gordon, who was not used to dealing with incorporeal enemies, remained banned for the moment but accepted the peaceful reasons they had given. George, also amazed by the message, asked: "What are your bodies like?" After a few seconds an image appeared on the large video screen of the bridge. One could see an environment with smooth walls all the same, in half-light and, on a kind of armchair, apparently made of the same material as the walls, which looked the same as the building they had destroyed, a very strange being sat. The body, unclothed, stocky and almost cylindrical, from which protruded four short limbs each of which ended in four sketches of fingers, was surmounted by an enormous head that resembled that of the Devils, but much larger and extremely disproportionate to the rest of the body. Apparently the diameter of the head was four times the width of the body. George added, "How many beings live on the planet?" The answer came immediately: "According to your calculation system we are 2,500 units all mentally interconnected and able to act as a single mind." After a short pause the voice went on with details which left them even more amazed. "The life of our bodies is not based on the element you call Carbon but on Silicon and they don't need to breathe Oxygen like you do. We feed them by giving them the energy they need to live. Radiation, you called Gamma and harmful to you, is our source of life." Gordon wanted to deepen and asked: "Have you colonized Proxima B Centauri?" The answer came almost immediately: "We have not colonized that planet but we have only helped it to find peace and to create a peaceful coexistence among all the higher species that live there. We

also know that you are colonizing it.” Gordon decided to ask the key question of everything, the one that would justify the mission and clarify everything. “Did you create the Phoenix on the Earth?” The answer was laconic:” Yes “ and after a pause during which Gordon said to George: “We have come to the explanation of the mystery”, the voice resumed: “We have always been in control of your super-computer and we have made sure that you came here because we need your help.” The two commanders did not expect such a response and were both amazed. George asked: “How could we help you, explain better” The answer came after a few minutes, evidently the consultations took longer than usual to provide a complete explanation. The voice began to speak again: “There are many other beings similar to us scattered throughout the universe. Our mission is to evolve the higher species inhabiting exoplanets, as you call them. The aim is the peaceful colonization of the universe and the evolution of the various species, each of which must maintain its own peculiar characteristics and coexist in peace with all the others.” George commented: “A kind of gods of the universe...” The voice went on: “To get all this need for evolved species that have the same goals as us and act for us. We can only mentally direct them but physical action is not within our possibilities only to induce it in other beings. For these reasons we favor the evolution of some particularly promising species like yours to help us in our mission. Three hundred of your years ago we decided that you are fit for our mission and we have helped you to evolve.” Gordon asked: “Who started and decided your mission?” The voice replied after a few minutes: “The question

would require a very complex answer and we could communicate it to you with a mental message similar to those used in your notional treatments, but we will do it later, be patient. We all now have imminent danger to face and we need your help.” Gordon felt an air of conflict and was beginning to feel at ease: “Who or what is threatening you?” the response was immediate: “The threat is not aimed at us but at the entire universe. A particularly evolved species, it initially followed us but then decided to move away from our vision of the universe and is seeking the conquest and subjugation of other species. They are technologically very advanced but their social organization is backward and resembles that existing on your planet in the Middle Ages. The power is exercised by a privileged class subject only to an emperor who holds absolute power. They are belligerent by nature and would like to dominate the universe with their cruel civilization. For this we must stop them and perhaps you are the only ones able to do so”. Gordon pondered for a long time what he had heard but the astral threat looming over the solar system came to his mind and he said: “We must return to the Earth and report to the Council what you have told us. But our priority now is the threat looming on the Earth. An unknown space body will reach it in about one hundred and fifty years. We have to prepare for a mass exodus in the event of a planetary catastrophe and that is why we are exploring new worlds”. Gordon was surprised but relieved to hear the voice say: “We are aware of that threat but you have no reason to fear it because in less than a hundred years that celestial body will explode very far from your system without causing any harm. Informa-

tion about that threat was induced by us through your supercomputer. We had to push you to explore space to reach us". Gordon turned to George. "We had strong suspicions that someone was sending orders to our supercomputer. Now everything is explained". George nodded and said to the voice: "Most likely the Council will accept your request for help as we have the same vision of the evolution, but I believe they will demand an immediate interruption of control over our supercomputer. If we are to be allies, every part must be free from conditioning." The voice nodded. "We will give you all the instructions on how to disable super-computer control on the Earth, while the ones you have aboard your ships are not controlled by us."

Julian and Sean had managed to insert an interface in front of the main processing unit capable of hijacking the instructions received, including those of the virus, on an external unit that analyzed them before entering them in the processing unit. They could thus check in detail all the incoming data. The flow of information was huge and the data flowed quickly on Julian's screen but the device would have to register separately any anomalies found in the flow. The supercomputer noticed an anomaly before them: "My Friend Sean, I received a strange instruction" said the voice "There it is!" Sean and Julian exclaimed in chorus. They diverted the instruction to an area of the memory that would have allowed detailed analysis, avoiding it reaching the super-computer that could not have traced back to the source, while the device devised by the two computer geniuses did. They scanned

it all night and the next morning they both showed up in Nathan's office with smiles that tried to reach their ears. "All done Boss!" they announced in chorus.

Nathan looked at them smiling and noticed the signs of a sleepless night on their faces. "I want a full and detailed report" he said cheerfully. As Julian smiled in satisfaction, Sean reported: "We've identified an order from the intruder trying to stop the supercomputer from communicating some information to us." Sean paused to make the report more spectacular "Continue!" said Nathan who was in a great hurry to write the report for Marcus and Sean continued "After a careful analysis we have identified the origin. This is a mental intrusion that comes from a location 30 miles from the base. But the extraordinary thing is that it is a directional radiation that appears to be emitted by a non-human brain and falls within the spectrum of gamma rays." Nathan widened his eyes in amazement and asked: "Are we able to locate exactly the source?" Julian with a growing smile replied: "Obviously Boss, to the inch".

Nathan was sitting in Marcus's office when the intelligence agent entered. Brad was a veteran of the department, in his fifties, tall and stout with short military hair and very pale eyes that denoted the many notional treatments he had been subjected to. Nathan repeated, summing up, the report he had made to Marcus and the agent listened to him with extreme attention, remaining impassive without being surprised by anything. He had been trained to deal with any kind of unforeseen event and to manage it with maximum efficiency. Marcus turned to the agent "Please take care of it. Absolute priority." and dismissed them.

Two Explorer-type aircraft, armed and protected by a screen, stopped about ten yards from the surface of the desert at a fifty yards of distance from the vertical of point where the origin of the intrusion had been identified. One of the two landed and four armed security agents descended with Brad and Nathan followed by Sean and Julian who for nothing in the world would have missed that opportunity, deservedly provoked by their skill.

At the point indicated by the coordinates there was an almost conical hillock, about ten yards high with gentle slopes, and covered with rare bushes. In the center, almost on the top, stood a very tall saguaro, very branched and full of fruit. Brad continually consulted a gamma-ray detector that began detecting radiation as it climbed the slopes. At the foot of the saguaro there was a heavy round metal roof with the emblem of the state electricity company, which covered a hatch used for the inspection of underground power lines. The writing, embossed on the metal, indicated that the line was at very high voltage, over 100 kV. The Security agents lifted the heavy cover to reveal the trap door. Brad released an exploration sphere and dropped it into the opening. The images that came from the sphere showed a cylindrical shaft three meters deep that led to a rather large underground chamber. On the wall facing the well was fixed a metal cabinet with instruments, numerous buttons and switches. On the right at the bottom one can see a half-open metal door on which a yellow triangular sign warned: *Danger-Very High Voltage*. The sphere introduced through the half-open door and the room appeared suffused with a faint blue luminescence. At the back of

the room, on a kind of stone seat, a being never seen before was semi-reclining, with an enormous globoidal head and a small, squat body from which four limbs protruded, ending in four-fingered hands and feet. The being barely moved and seemed to wriggle as if in spasms. Brad decided to go down despite the gamma radiation still present, albeit greatly diminished. He went down into the well with two of the Security, advising the others not to move. He turned on the powerful torch that illuminated the room and, opening the metal door completely, he found himself in front of that being. In their minds and also in those of the five who remained on the surface, a very short but clear message was impressed which said: "I have finished my task", at the same moment the being had a last start and collapsed on the seat. The luminescence disappeared and Brad, consulting the instrument, noticed that the gamma radiation had also completely disappeared. He examined the lifeless body and instructed the two agents to carry it to the surface.

In the secret laboratory of the Intelligence, located at the deepest level in the base of the Phoenix, the scientists studied with great interest that lifeless body based on silicon instead of carbon. For the first time they found themselves faced with a singularity that in the past had only been theoretically hypothesized as possible.

Before returning to Earth, Gordon decided to stop on Proxima B and check the situation in the colony. The voyage at maximum curvature brought the super-ship into the Proxima Centauri system and they went into orbit around the colonized planet. The colony's

super-computer had immediately entered into communication with the super ship and the Governor announced that they were ready to welcome them. Gordon wanted to personally ascertain the situation and after leaving the command to George he embarked on an Explorer which, together with other two as protection, descended on the planet.

The Governor welcomed him into his office located on the top floors of the huge building which then housed over five thousand settlers. "Welcome Commander, I've never seen a ship like yours before, is it a new kind of space explorer?" Gordon thought it appropriate to inform him of what he had learned about Andromeda and to warn him of possible arrival of hostile aliens. Defense of the colony had become a priority. "We may be involved in a war even if the odds are currently remote." He said in a serious tone and continued "I intend to leave the fleet on Proxima B as a defense of the colony and also ready for any interventions on other systems. I will return to Earth with only the flagship". The Governor nodded and informed him of the situation on the planet. "We have noticed a significant increase in the number of Rhombs and Giant Turtles. Our guard Explorers are continuously flying to eliminate them even if the screen protects prevents beings from harming us".

Gordon didn't care too much about the fact and asked instead: "No problem with the Devils or the Fredians?" The Governor shook his head with a smile: "The Fredians of the colony are perfectly integrated and carry out their duties without giving us any problems. We identified a dozen of them wandering in the woods and we welcomed them after having subjected

them to the appropriate treatments and we entrusted them to their boss Fred. We have no more news of the presence of the Devils on the surface and the control spheres report a quiet situation in the underground city.” George took leave of the Governor informing him that within twenty-four hours the six ships of the fleet would be disembarked and asked him to arrange the reception.

Back on the flagship he consulted with George who fully agreed with him on the opportunity to transform the colony into a military base as well as an outpost of settlers. Gordon entrusted him with command by asking him to have a suitably equipped building built, to be used as a military command of the fleet. He also asked him to intensify the protection of the settlement given the anomalous increase in the presence of hostile beings. “If we could get rid of the Rhombs and Giant Tortoises we could do without the protective shield and make the area much safer for the settlers.” George was not a cruel person or insensitive to the balance of the local fauna but, like Gordon, he considered a top priority the survival of the colony and cynically said: “To eliminate the turtles we could trigger a mass self-elimination, since they are carnivorous and do not disdain to devour their fellowmen. We paralyze, quickly and with little effort, one out of three and continue until there are a few alive that we could easily end them up to the total extinction of the species.” Gordon nodded and asked “And do you have any ideas for the Rhombs?” George thought for a moment and replied: “Not at the moment, but we can study a reef, at the edge of the deep water where the

sharks can act, to block the Rhombs and allow the sharks to attack them.”

The flagship arrived at the moon base and Gordon boarded the first useful ferry to Earth. Marcus was waiting for him in his office with some impatience. As soon as he entered, after the pleasantries, he immediately entered the subject: “We have identified and eliminated the author of the intrusions in the super-computer.” Gordon looked at him and, hiding a certain satisfaction, replied: “I guess, because they had already announced to me that the intruder's task would soon be over.” And he continued while Marcus's amazement was increasing: “The beings we met on Andromeda clarified everything about the origins of the Phoenix and their need for our help.” While Marcus, amazed and amazed, listened to him, he told everything he had known from the beings he had met on the mysterious planet that orbited Upsilon B, the red dwarf to which no one had given much importance, but which had proved fundamental for knowledge of the entire universe.

The Council immediately approved Marcus's proposed program for the construction of fifty modular super-ships each consisting of a flagship and six auxiliaries, equipped with the latest and most efficient protection devices and newly developed weaponry. After bringing peace to Earth, the Phoenix was preparing to replicate its mission in the universe.

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