

The

Acronis

CHRONICLES

Alexey Kavokin

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Contents

C H A P T E R S

1	5	6	43	11	83
2	17	7	53	12	89
3	25	8	67	13	95
4	33	9	69	14	103
5	37	10	75	15	107

About Alexey Kavokin	111
About Acronis	113





Chapter 1

“Eleven-year-old girls don’t wear such silly pigtails,” said Mum firmly.

“Well, first of all, I’m not eleven yet,” answered Acronis, “and secondly, what’s silly about them? If you mean I look silly with pigtails, so what? I like them, so let people think I’m silly.”

She walked out of Mum’s study and went looking for Dad. She found him in the kitchen.

“When are we setting off?” asked Acronis.

“Very soon, sunshine,” replied Dad, who had just taken a package of French cheese out of the fridge and was about to make a sandwich.

“Do we really have to go to this awful race?” sighed Acronis. “Why don’t we go to the waterpark or catch some Pokemon instead?”

“You know it is a big day today,” he reminded her. “Your brother starts third. I wouldn’t be surprised if Balena Azzurra scores a podium finish today.”

“Then let’s go, Dad! Stop eating,” said Acronis, snatching the sandwich away from him and heading for the door. He broke off a corner of a chocolate bar left on the table and followed her outside.

An hour later they found themselves stuck in traffic on the 56th exit along the A6 motorway to Côte d’Azur. Cars were crawling under the roof of the tollbooth while drivers dropped coins into baskets, shoved their cards into the machines and sighed with relief when the toll barrier was finally lifted, opening the way ahead to the Principality of Monaco.

“Do you know where to go?” she asked Dad, when they were finally on the streets of Monte Carlo.

“Sure, but it is all closed off today,” he complained.

“No wonder,” nodded Acronis. “It’s because of the race. Well, stop at any car park and let’s walk!”

He pulled into a nearby parking area, slightly scraping the rear bumper against a concrete pole.

“We have an hour and a half to spare,” he said, looking at his watch. “Are you hungry, sunshine?”

“Not even a little bit,” Acronis said. “Let’s get to our suite... at least it won’t be so hot there!”

The day was warm as they moved along the pebbled pavement of the old city: Acronis first, Dad behind. The Garage Club suite for VIP guests, as luck would have it, was on the opposite side of the city from the car park. On the way, he gazed longingly at restaurants with terraces, while Acronis examined her own reflection in shop windows: a slim freckled girl with red pigtails – what a lovely sight! When they were only half a block from the suite, someone pulled both of her pigtails from behind, holding them tight. Acronis tried to turn around, but the stranger’s grasp did not let her turn her head. Then she kicked him with her left foot and called out to Dad:

“Is it Aeneas, Dad?”

“Yes, sunshine, it is. , Aeneas, dear,” Dad said smiling, “Why aren’t you in the box?”

“I popped out to get an ice cream!” explained Aeneas cheerfully. He was a handsome redheaded young man dressed in a black fire-resistant race suit with an emblem on the chest: a beautiful blue whale with a yellow sun in the background. “Have you seen Johnny? He said he’d meet me at the ice cream shop.”

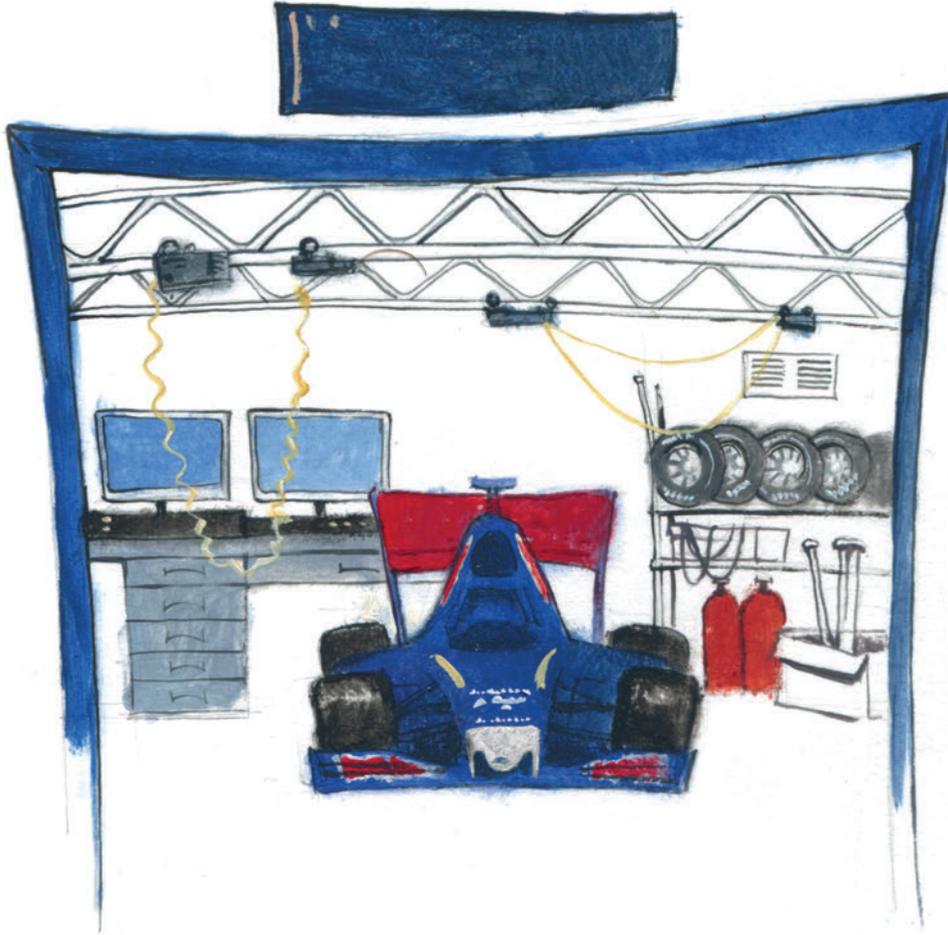
Aeneas was Acronis’s brother and a famous Balena Azzurra racing driver. Johnny was his best friend. He also drove for Balena Azzurra.

“Who would ever eat ice cream before a race?” asked Dad in surprise. “What if you get a stomach ache?”

“Will you let me go, Aeneas?! You are a real pain in the neck!” cried Acronis. “I want an ice cream, too!”

“All right,” Dad said. “Let’s all go and get some ice cream. I will have a pistachio cone.”

“Excellent,” said Aeneas. “But I have to find Johnny. He wanted to tell me a terrible secret.”



BOX

A team's garage. A place where racing cars are kept during a race, as well as a storage room for the team's equipment.

At that moment Johnny appeared in the crowd: just as handsome and athletic as Aeneas, and wearing the same black racing suit with a blue whale on the chest. He was holding two waffle cones, each with two scoops of ice cream: one watermelon and one chocolate.

“Hey guys!” he greeted everyone. “Sorry, I didn’t know there’d be four of us: I only got two cones.”

“Not to worry, I’ll get two more!” exclaimed Dad as he hurried off to join the ice cream queue.

“I will have your watermelon scoop,” said Acronis to Aeneas. “And leave you the chocolate one.”

Aeneas shrugged. They sat down on a stone bench by a fountain.

“So...What was the secret you wanted to share with Aeneas, Johnny?” Acronis asked excitedly.

Johnny looked around to make sure no one was listening and whispered:

“A spy was caught in the parc fermé last night. He had a bottle of strawberry syrup.”

“No way!” exclaimed Aeneas. “How do you know that?”

“An assistant mechanic told me,” Johnny lowered his voice. “He thinks that the spy was going to pour the syrup into the fuel tanks of our racing cars. Very clever – there is nothing you can prove. Carrying a bottle of syrup isn’t an offence, is it? One can always say it’s for a fruit salad. There was really no reason to call the police, so they had to let him go.”

“Sugar water causes engine failure,” explained Aeneas to his sister.

“So someone wanted you to crash?” Acronis gasped. “If the spy is at large, he might try to cause you trouble again! Do you know what he looks like?”

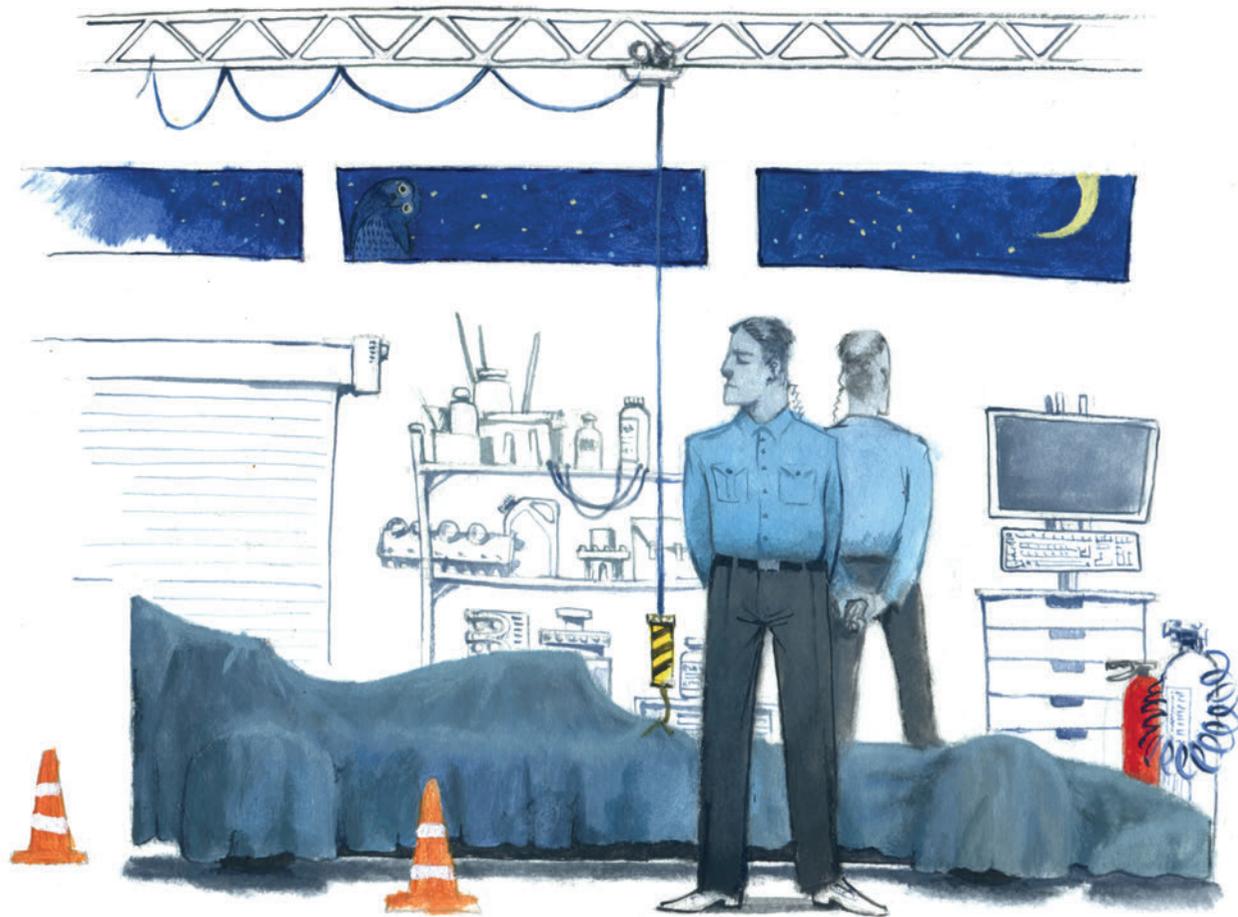
“No, but the mechanics swear they’d recognise him,” said Johnny.

“I see,” nodded Acronis. “You should be very careful today. If you notice anything strange, call security, the mechanics, the stewards – anyone. And I will take a walk around the Corvo Nero area as soon as we get to the suite. We’ll see who’s in there!”

“Do you think the spy works for Corvo Nero?” asked Aeneas. “But why?”

Acronis answered, “Because Corvo Nero will take the lead if you lose this race”

Dad came back with two ice creams, a watermelon cone for Acronis and a pistachio one for himself.



PARC FERMÉ

A secured area at a race circuit where racing cars are stored at night between qualifying runs and the race.

“Give my ice cream to Aeneas, Dad” said Acronis, “I had his scoop of watermelon, and it's time we get to the suite and Johnny and Aeneas head for the box. We'll talk after the race.”

The two drivers nodded, left the bench and headed for the police cordon that marked the restricted area where only the lucky few were allowed to entrance – race of Monaco participants. Acronis and Dad went in the opposite direction toward a sign that said “Garage Club”, where a crowd of onlookers and journalists had already gathered. Several sturdy ticket collectors guarded the entrance to the terrace, but Dad flashed the invitation cards, and he and Acronis entered the VIP suite. Acronis glanced at the signs: “Maranello”, “McGregor”, “Black Dog”, “Williamin”, “Ancor”, “Dolores”, “Balena Azzurra”, “Corvo Nero” – each stable had its own suite on the terrace. The Corvo Nero suite was on the right side, next to where cars are released from at the start of the race.

Acronis made sure that Dad got them two seats in the front row, before she went off to the Corvo Nero suite. She pretended to wander about to get a glimpse of the boxes out of curiosity. In reality, she was closely studying the guests. There were around twelve of them already: some elegantly dressed ladies, a couple of Japanese visitors, two journalists and some wealthy men who looked boring. Finally, a man in a white suit and sunglasses caught Acronis's attention. He was reading a newspaper and seemed oblivious to what was going on around him.

“He looks like a spy,” thought Acronis. She decided to keep an eye on him. In the meantime, a waiter approached the suspected spy, bowed and placed a glass with pink liquid in front of him.

“Your Campari and soda, Mr. Pellegrini,” Acronis heard him say.

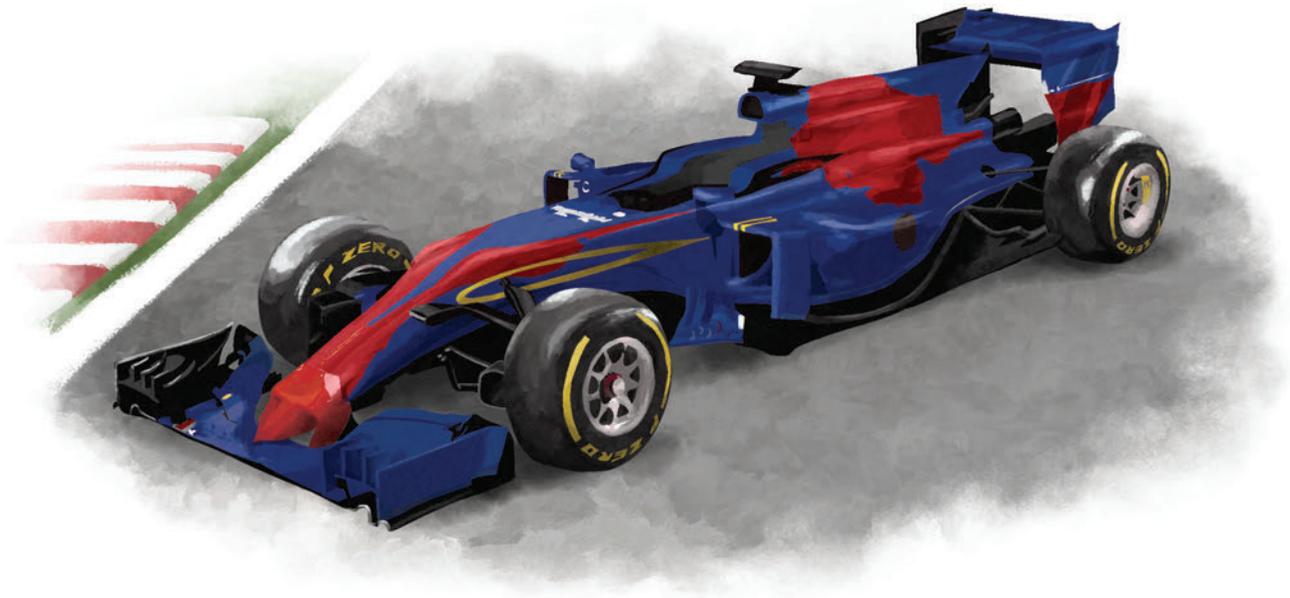
Her observation was interrupted by another waiter, who bluntly asked her to take her seat in the Balena Azzurra suite. Acronis sniffed and went to join Dad.

“Dad, you have told me about the most famous criminal in the world once. What was his name again?” she asked.

He was happy to show off his knowledge:

“Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro, sunshine!” he answered. “He has been on the run for twenty five years. He has the blood of at least five dozen innocent people on his hands. In 1996 he placed a bomb in the Uffizi gallery and almost destroyed Botticelli's ‘Venus’...”

Seeing the pit-lane was opening, Acronis interrupted her father saying, “Look, Dad!”



A RACING CAR

A racing car is an open single-seat car. Its design and characteristics are subject to strict regulations. Each racing team builds its own cars, so that every year every team builds 7-8 new cars. A car of such type costs several million dollars.

as racing cars emerged from the boxes.

The drivers were heating their engines and leaving the pit-lane one by one to cover a lap before taking their starting positions. A crowd had already poured from the boxes: mechanics, technicians, team managers, photographers and good-looking girls holding signs that marked the position of each car. The audience roared with delight as the famous racing cars, created by the best car designers on the planet, took to the track. Five big double signal lights were flashing red. Silver cars with black ravens happened to be standing on the starting grid very close to the dark blue cars driven by Aeneas and Johnny.

“What are the names of the Corvo Nero drivers?” Acronis asked Dad.

“Gaetano and Bruno Campomorto, of course,” he replied. “Don’t you remember?”

“To be honest,” said Acronis, “I’m not that interested in car races. I just don’t want anyone to pour syrup into our Aeneas’s fuel tank!”

Meanwhile, the Prince of Monaco, Albert II, and his wife, Princess Charlene, greeted the drivers. Acronis glanced at Charlene’s white suit, which had a pretty pink stripe down her leg, before focusing again on the Corvo Nero drivers.

“What an ugly surname – Campomorto,” she said. “What does it mean in Italian?”

“It does sound a little gloomy,” agreed Dad. “Literally it means ‘cemetery’. But in Sicily it is a famous and very respectable family name. Just two hundred years ago, the Campomortos were running the show in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

At that moment two of the five signal lights flashed green. Engines roared, and the cars began the formation lap. But one car remained on the grid, and several marshals ran up to it immediately.

“It is a Balena Azzurra car!” exclaimed Acronis.

Dad focused his binoculars on the car.

“Yes, it’s Johnny’s car. We should wait for an announcement.”

The marshals were taking Johnny’s car to the pit-lane. He took off his helmet and shouted something to the mechanics that were running to meet him.

“Balena Azzurra driver Johnny Macintosh has been unable to enter the race due to ignition problems,” announced the commentator.

Acronis cast a side glance at the man in the white suit in the Corvo Nero suite and saw him lower his newspaper for a second and nod in satisfaction. Acronis snatched



PIT-LANE

A separate part of the track where the competing teams' boxes are situated and where the cars stop during a race for refuelling, getting new tyres fitted and repairs.

away the binoculars from Dad's hands and tried to get a closer look at him. He had already disappeared behind his paper again, as though nothing had happened. Acronis only managed to get a glimpse of his black sunglasses.

Having completed the formation lap, the drivers were now returning to the grid. They were driving slowly: overtaking is not permitted before the start of the race. Behind them, a silver limousine was flashing yellow lights: a security car. Acronis and Dad saw Aeneas. Passing the suite, he waved his hand in a fireproof glove. Aeneas's car was in the second row, which was a very good position. Right behind him were two silver cars featuring black ravens: they were the cars of the Campomorto brothers. Acronis saw the man in the white suit and sunglasses look up from his newspaper again. He quickly glanced at the starting grid and gave another satisfied nod.

"Dad, we'll have to make sure that the start is delayed!" cried Acronis.

"Why?" he replied in surprise.

"I think something terrible is about to happen."

"No one will listen to us," he said, shaking his head. "To put off the start, one of the drivers has to raise both hands over his head."

"Aeneas!" cried Acronis at the top of her voice. "Aeneas!"

The people around them were now looking at her and hissing. She climbed on top of her seat and began to jump, leaving marks on the red velvet with her trainers.

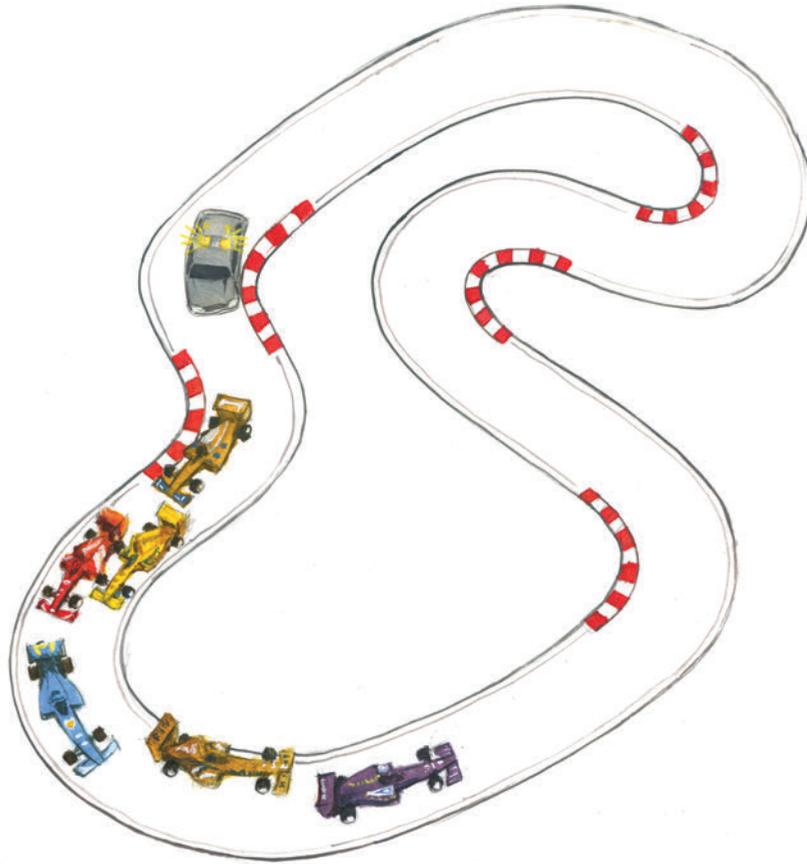
"Aeneas!"

Aeneas happened to turn around. Seeing his sister waving to him, he smiled and waved back.

"Raise your hands, idiot! You are in danger!" cried Acronis.

Aeneas smiled again. He could not hear anything in his helmet with all of the engines roaring. Suddenly all five lights were off. The cars dashed off. The race began.





FORMATION LAP

The lap right before the start of a race when drivers warm up their tyres and brakes. Before the formation lap and on its completion the cars are positioned on the grid according to their qualifying results.



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Chapter 2

By the twenty-eighth lap, Acronis had considered every possible crash scenario that she could think of..

Again and again, as the engines roared and the racing cars dashed past the stands, she imagined spinouts, collisions, split tyres, broken gearboxes stuck in the wrong gear. The people in the audience put on their earphones when the peloton came closer and took them off when it was far away. Acronis took advantage of these breaks to talk with Dad.

“What will happen if his fuel tank catches fire, Dad?” she asked.

“There is a built-in fire extinguisher,” he replied. “And don’t forget that the fuel tank has many separate sections, and its walls are bullet-proof.”

“And what if he loses control and crashes against a bridge pillar?”

“Balena Azzurra racing cars have successfully passed all the crash tests. The cockpit, where the driver sits, should keep him safe even in a head-on collision.”

“And what if the tyres catch fire, Dad?”

“The on-board computer reports the tyre temperature to the driver. If there is a problem, he will go to the pit-lane, and the mechanics will change the tyre. They spend weeks on end rehearsing this procedure. It doesn’t usually take more than three seconds.”

Little by little, Acronis began to calm down. Aeneas was still holding the third position. Ahead of him there was a Black Dog and a McGregor, with two Corvo Nero cars close behind. The race was going well. No one had yet been given time penalty. The man in the white suit only occasionally peeked out from behind his paper, but the race did not seem to interest him very much.

“Dad,” asked Acronis at last. “How many drivers have died while racing?”

“Fifty-one, if you mean throughout the entire motor racing history,” he said.

“If it is so safe, why did they die?”

“For various reasons. Ayrton Senna, for example, thought that the steering wheel of his car was too close to the control panel. The engineers welded in another tube to set it further away. During a race, the tube split at the welding spot and he lost control of the car. Ayrton crashed into a concrete wall, and the right wheel came off and smashed his head.”

“This is terrible, Dad,” sighed Acronis. “Why wasn’t racing banned?”

“That’s a difficult question,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I guess the races are like climbing Mount Everest. It may be hard and very dangerous, but people will always dream of conquering Everest...”

He stopped short, because at that moment the racing cars had again emerged from behind the curve and his words were drowned in the deafening roar of the engines. The position of the cars on the track had changed. The Black Dog driver was in the lead. The McGregor car had fallen behind, and Aeneas had shot ahead to the second place, closely followed by the Campomorto brothers.

“Isn’t it absurd that we are sitting here doing nothing, while something terrible may happen to them any time?” muttered Acronis, as the cars disappeared behind the curve again. “How many more laps are there to go?”

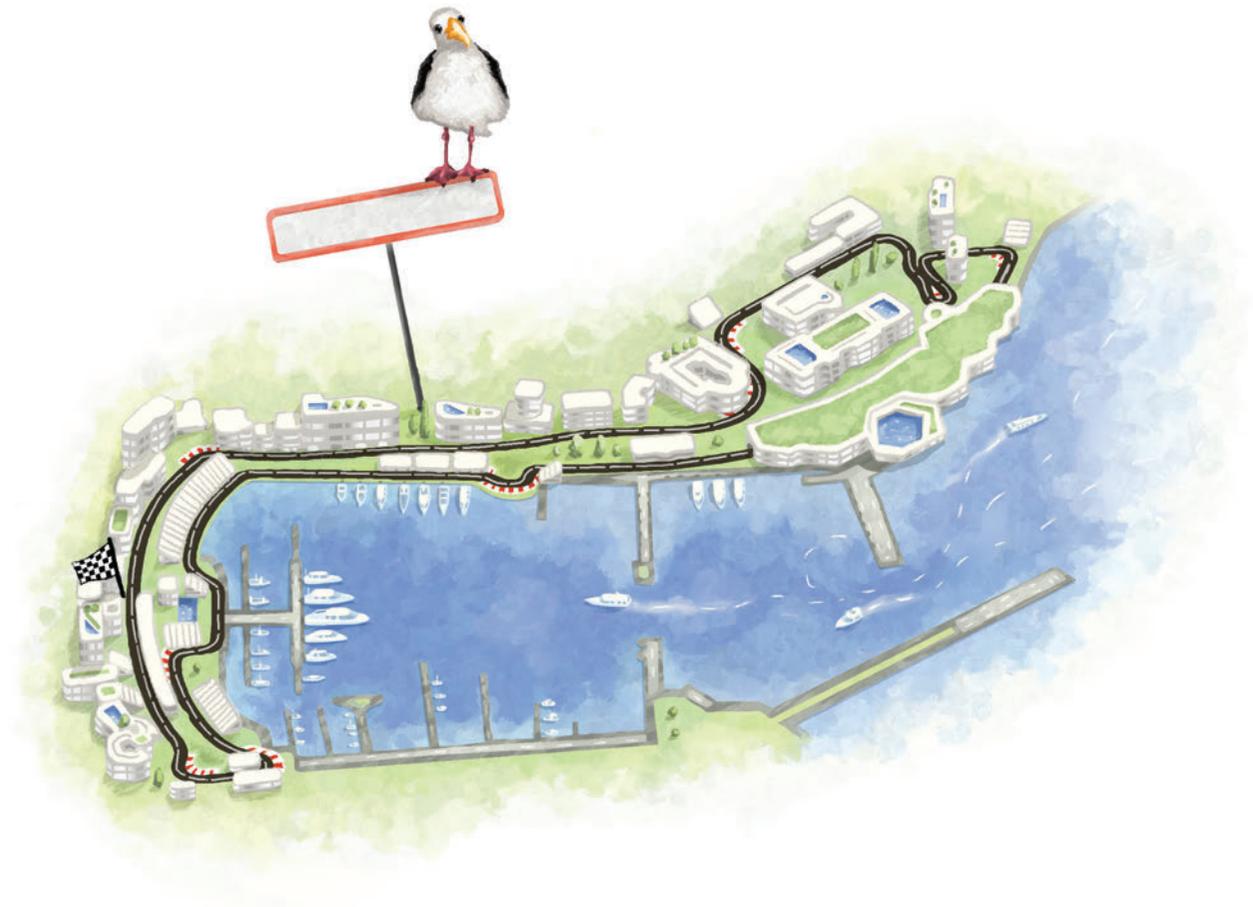
“Eighteen,” said Dad.

“Do you think Aeneas will manage to hold on to the second position?”

“Hard to say. He’ll have to change tyres soon. It all depends on how much time he loses on the pit-lane.”

The sound of roaring engines became stronger. Again the cars approached the terrace where Acronis was sitting. The race leader, the Black Dog driver, turned into the pit-lane. Right after him, Aeneas pulled up by the boxes. The mechanics came running towards them. In a matter of seconds, both cars had their tyres changed. From above it looked like a ritual dance performed by people wearing the same uniform around two great bugs: one dark blue and red and the other black and red.

“He’s put on super-soft tyres,” commented Dad, lowering his binoculars. “He is hoping to keep them till the finish line.”



LAP

On average, a lap is 5 km long and the number of laps the drivers need to make varies from 52 (in Baku) to 78 (in Monte Carlo).

Acronis was not listening to him. She was quickly shifting her gaze from the track to the nearby suite and back. As soon as the Black Dog car had left the track, the man in the white suit folded his paper, got up hastily and stared intently at one of the Corvo Nero cars. The car shot past the pit-lane and disappeared at the turn, closely followed by the other cars.

“What’s the matter?” wondered Acronis. “What is he staring at?”

The driver of Corvo Nero had not done anything out of the ordinary. However, he might have passed a little too close to the pit-lane...

In the meantime, the Black Dog driver and Aeneas were getting back to the track. It only took them a few moments, because a racing car accelerates to a speed of a hundred kilometres per hour in less than two seconds. But something strange happened at the exit from the pit-lane. The Black Dog car had already gathered great speed, and once on the track, suddenly turned sharply and went into a wide curve. Aeneas, who had been close behind it, hit the brakes and also skidded sideways. For a moment Acronis thought that the two cars would collide. She closed her eyes in horror. However, the other drivers managed to avoid the crash. They slowly drove away from each other, getting their cars back on track to continue the race. There was no need to hurry now: their hopes of mounting the podium were dashed, in those lost seconds.

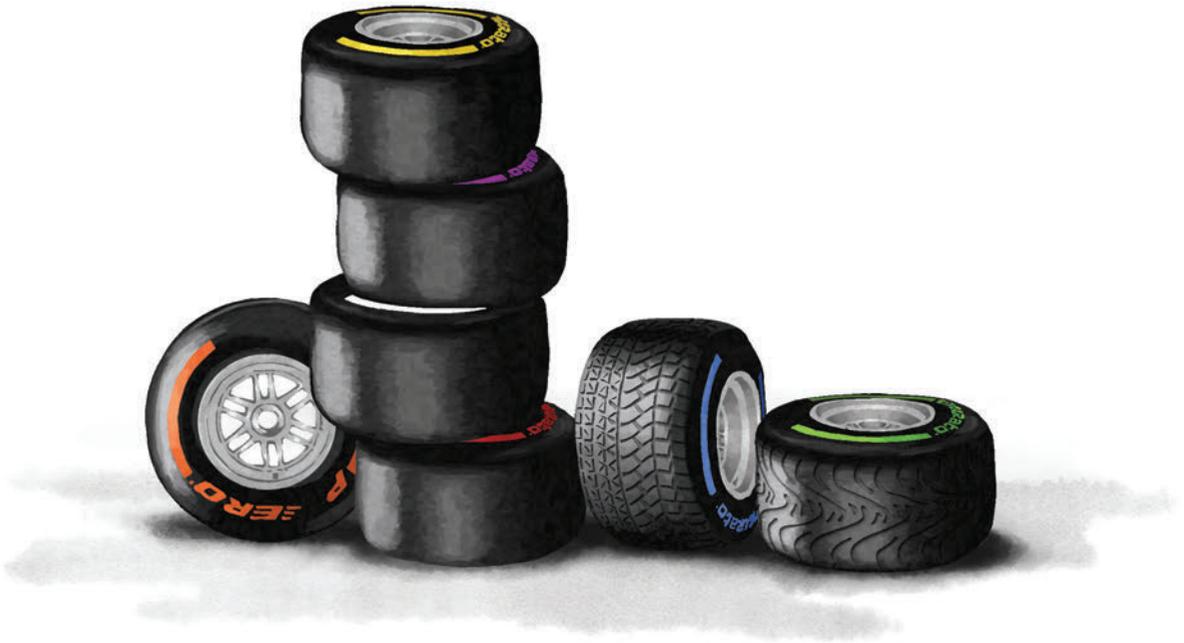
The rest of the race went on without a hitch. The Corvo Nero drivers took the lead. Aeneas and the Black Dog driver caught up with the peloton and even overtook several cars in the last lap. But neither of them made it into the top ten.

The two Corvo Nero drivers and a Maranello driver, who came third, took the podium. Prince Albert II presented Gaetano Campomorto with a huge silver cup. Gaetano bowed before lifting the cup above his head.

The audience was bursting with applause. Acronis looked around for Aeneas. The man in the white suit who sat in the Corvo Nero suite was no longer interested in the race. While the winners were splashing each other with champagne, he folded his paper, got up and left.

Acronis and Dad waited for Aeneas by the door of the changing room. He finally appeared, disheveled and with a look of frustration on his face. He had already changed out of his racing suit into a pair of jeans and a T-shirt.

“What happened at the pit-lane exit?” Acronis asked her brother.



TYRES

Racing tyres are quite different from a normal road tyre and are built to last less than one race distance. There are ultra-soft, super-soft, soft, medium, hard, intermediate and wet tyres.

“I swear we slipped up on some motor oil!” exclaimed Aeneas. “It was splashed on the track and we just skidded.”

“Did you tell the marshals?”

“No one believe us! They went round claiming they would check, but are now saying, ‘There’s no oil there – end of story.’”

“Could your super-soft tyres have let you down?”

“Why should they? And talk about a coincidence: both cars skidding on the same spot.”

Dad suggested carrying on with the discussion on the way back. The three of them went to look for his car, parked on the other side of the city. Aeneas sulking, while Acronis was lost in deep thought.

“And what happened to Johnny’s car?” she asked at last.

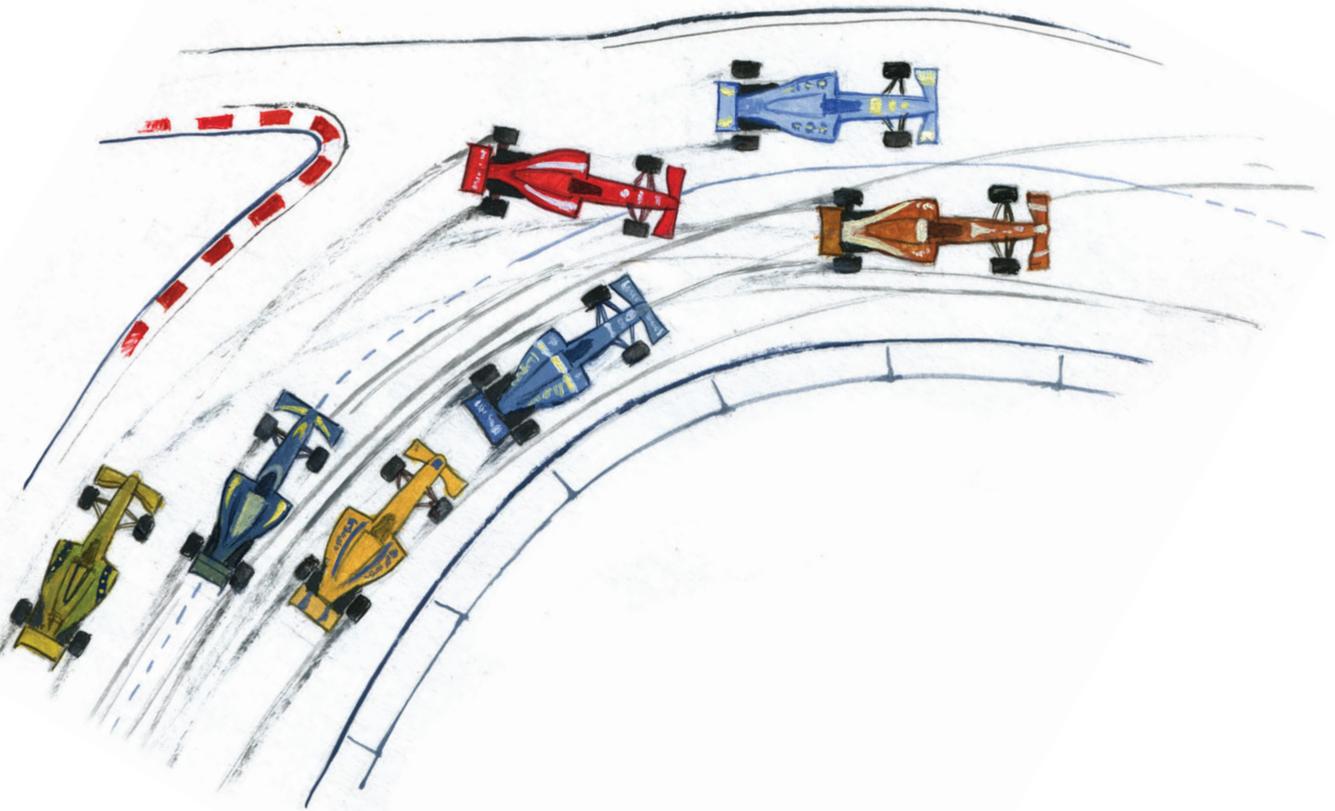
“Another mystery!” exploded Aeneas. “Two out of six spark plugs turned out to be faulty. Cracks in central electrodes or something. The plugs have already been sent to Marino for testing. But in the morning the engine was running without a hitch!”

“When is the next race, Aeneas?” asked Acronis.

“In two weeks, in Canada,” answered Aeneas downheartedly.

“Then we have two weeks to figure out who is trying to do you harm and why!” she said resolutely. “For now, we all need to recharge our batteries. Why don’t you take us to your favourite restaurant, Dad?”





PELOTON

The main group of cars competing in a race.



Chapter 3

The two weeks between the races in Monte Carlo and in Montreal were over in a flash. Having spent a day at home (sleeping through most of it), Aeneas set off for the training camp in Marino. On the phone, he told his parents that after the incident during the race in Monaco, security in the stable had been considerably tightened: the pit area, the stands and the workshops had been equipped with video cameras, and two dozen security guards were keeping a close watch on the racing cars day and night.

In addition, Balena Azzurra hired a private detective agency to investigate how the invisible motor oil had appeared on the track in Monte Carlo, what could have caused damage to the spark plugs of Johnny Macintosh's car and why the spy with a bottle of strawberry syrup had been able to get access to the cars on the night before the race.

Acronis went back to school, but in her free time scoured the Internet for clues. She placed the files relevant to the case in special folders she had created on Mum's computer: "Constructors' Championship", "Corvo Nero", "Car Accidents", and "Criminal World".

She spent most evenings trying to convince her parents that she had to go to Montreal to make sure that nothing interfered with Aeneas' performance this time round. Dad immediately agreed, but Mum would not hear of it. She said that if Acronis missed class on Friday, she could be expelled.

In the end, Acronis stayed at home and had to check out the Montreal race track online. It turned out to be a dangerous, winding track that had long stretches designed for fast speeds. The night before the qualifying sessions Acronis read about the history of the "Wall of Champions" – a terrible spot at the exit from the last chicane, where Damon Hill, Michael Schumacher and Jacques Villeneuve all crashed into the same wall in 1999.

Dad seemed anxious too. On Thursday, the day before the race, he announced that he had to fly to Canada on business as a matter of urgency.

“I’m going with you!” said Acronis at once.

“No, you are not,” Mum cut her off. So Acronis stayed at home. She moved the computer close to the TV set, took a plate of doughnuts and a glass of milk, and prepared to watch the race on two channels at once. Mum gave her a disapproving look, but did not say anything and settled down in the armchair beside her.

A light rain was falling in Montreal. Both commentators kept telling the audience that the rain was forecast to stop during the qualifying sessions. All the drivers started off on wet tyres, but the mechanics were ready to change to intermediate or even soft tyres, depending on the weather.

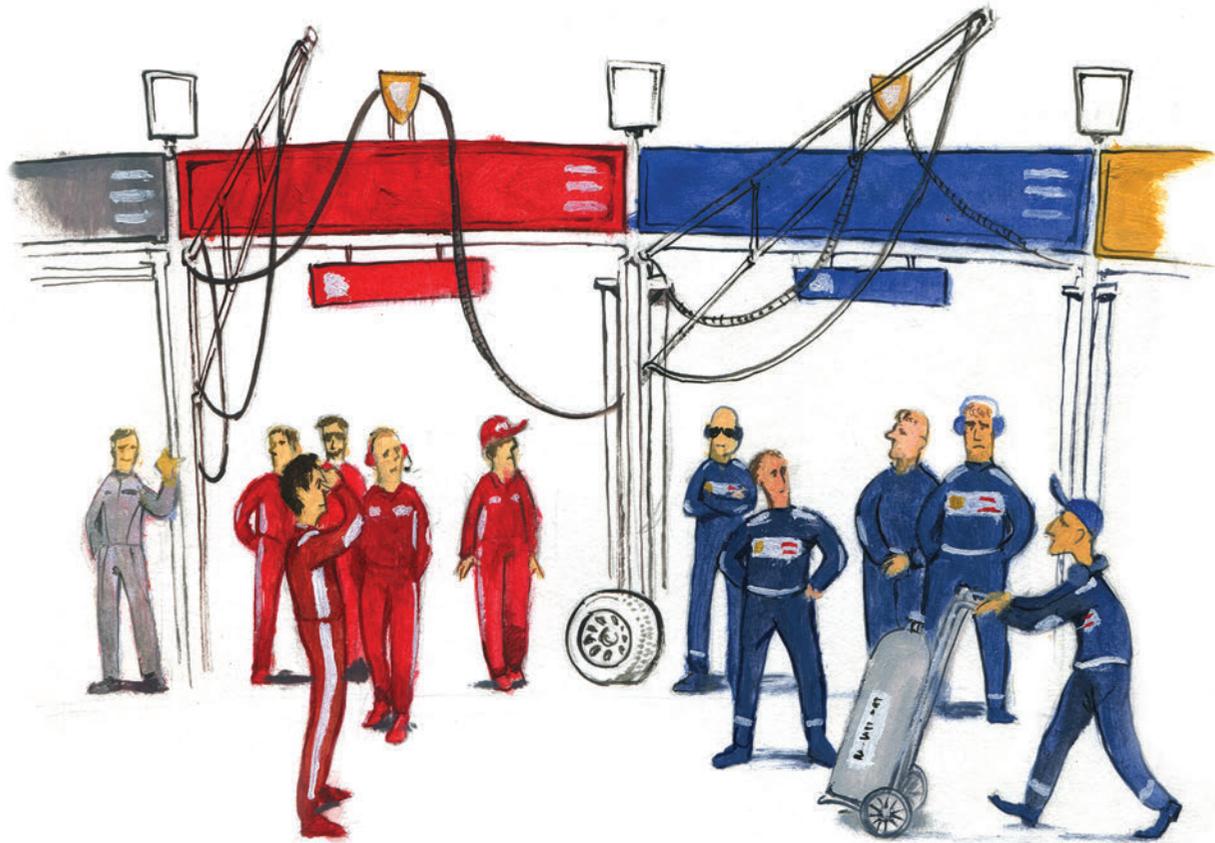
In the qualifying sessions it is important to show the best lap time. Drivers start off separately, in random order. After the first qualifying session, the sixteen best drivers are selected for the second qualifier, and only ten proceed to participate in the third one. The third session is held to decide the pole position and the starting order for the top ten grid places in the Sunday race. This time neither of the Balena Azzurra drivers had any trouble at the start. All the team members were working in unison making sure that things were running smoothly; the mechanics on the pit-lane were moving with a machine-like precision – changing tyres from wet to intermediate, and from intermediate to soft. It was clear that all of them were determined to make up for the previous race. Johnny Macintosh delivered the best time in all three sessions. Aeneas came third. Gaetano Campomorto from Corvo Nero secured a position between them. Both commentators were predicting a victory for Johnny Macintosh in the main race on Sunday.

Mum cleared away the empty plate where the doughnuts had been and said to Acronis:

“Now brush your teeth and off to bed.”

Reluctantly, Acronis wandered off to her bedroom, climbed into bed and began to read the biography of Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro downloaded from the Internet. When she came across the sentence “...Don Matteo likes to boast of having filled a small cemetery with his enemies,” Acronis fell asleep. Two hours later a Skype call woke her up.

“Is that you, Dad?” she asked in a sleepy voice. “Is anything wrong?”



STABLE, *or* SCUDERIA

A team. The term comes from the world of horse racing, after its fans switched their attention from hippodromes to motor racing tracks.

“No, no,” he replied. “Everything’s absolutely fine. We are all safe and well. I just wanted to tell you and Mum not to worry when the morning comes.”

“Why would we?” asked Acronis.

“Well, you will hear on the news that Aeneas had a car crash. But that’s not exactly the case. The bottom line is that he is perfectly fine and will participate in the race tomorrow.”

“But what on earth has happened? Will you tell me?”

“All right, all right. Make sure you pass this on to Mum. It’s just that, as you know, Aeneas doesn’t really like the way I drive,” he began.

“Nobody does!” put in Acronis.

“Maybe so. Well, we had to drive from the Circuit Gille Villeneuve to Hotel Ambassadeur in Montreal, and Aeneas was behind the wheel.”

“And?”

“When we entered the ring road, a truck popped up in front of us with its headlights off. The driver must have mistaken the road signs or something – I don’t know..”

“And?!”

“It was impossible for us to pass. I thought we were about to have a head-on collision but you know – your brother is a natural-born driver.”

“What did he do?”

“He dodged the truck somehow, bounced off the barrier and steered the car slowly into a ditch. We hit a rock and broke the crankcase, but we didn’t turn over or even crash into anything. I called the insurance company and ordered a taxi. We had a smooth ride back to the hotel where we had some decent duck with cherry sauce for dinner.”

“Did the police arrive?”

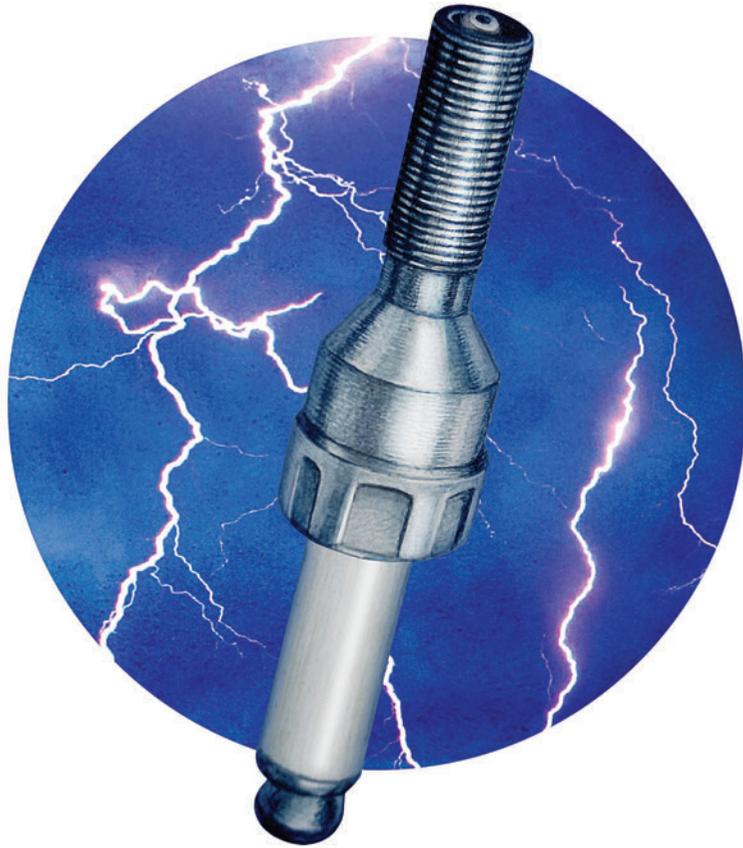
“Well, yes – the police, the press, Balena Azzurra security and an ambulance. But now they are all gone.”

“What happened to the truck?”

“I don’t know. It left, as if nothing had happened. But the good news is we are both okay. Please, tell your Mum.”

“All right.” said Acronis. “Ask Aeneas to check the brakes properly tomorrow.”

“I will. Good night , sunshine.”



SPARK PLUG

An electric device that ignites the compressed fuel and air mixture in the engine cylinder.



Chapter 4

Dad might have gone to sleep in Canada, but Acronis was wide awake. She was sitting on her bed, pondering recent developments.

“So, the enemy has struck again,” she concluded. “But it’s harder to get to Balena Azzurra racing cars because of increased security, so now they’re targeting drivers. Aeneas was lucky to escape this time... but what if they start following him wherever he goes? He is not a president or the Pope who walks around with a security team. What can we do? I doubt the police or private detectives will catch these gangsters. But the criminals have no reason to go after Aeneas in particular. He hasn’t done them any harm. He is just a Balena Azzurra driver. They don’t want his team to win the Constructors’ Championship. They want their team, Corvo Nero, to win. But Aeneas is only the second driver. Sure, he does bring points to his team. But not as many as Johnny Macintosh. This season Johnny is the best. He is steadily heading towards the World Champion title, leaving Gaetano Campomorto and all the others behind.”

Acronis jumped from her chair.

“If they have sent a truck to get rid of Aeneas, they will stop at nothing to bump off Johnny! I have to warn him. I have to warn him immediately, because he is in great danger right now. But how do I contact him? Who has his phone number?”

She stared at the computer screen. Dad had already logged out of Skype. It was useless trying to call him: being his usual absent-minded self, he forgot his phone when he left for Canada. Acronis had found his phone on the coffee table in the living room the night before. Aeneas should know Johnny’s number. She tried to

call Aeneas. It was hardly surprising that there was no answer and she was directed to voicemail. The night before the race, Aeneas always turns off his phone and goes to bed early.

“What do I do? What do I do?” she kept repeating. “Should I wake up Mum? No. She will turn the whole Canada upside... but I’ve got to warn Johnny.

Acronis went down to the living room and picked up Dad’s phone. There was a slim chance that Johnny’s number was on his contact list.

“McGregor, McMurphy, McDonald,” she read. “Here it is: Macintosh! But it’s not Johnny. It must be his dad, Mr. James Rodrick Macintosh. I think he knows my Dad from work. Ugh, I do wish I didn’t have to call him!”

Acronis took a deep breath and touched the green dial symbol on the screen. After a few long beeps, she heard a grumpy voice saying:

“Hello?”

“Mr. Macintosh, it’s me, Acronis, the sister of Aeneas from the Balena Azzurra team.”

“Hello, Acronis. What can I do for you at this time of night?”

“I’m afraid Johnny is in danger, Mr. Macintosh!”

“Oh, really? Well, I appreciate your concern. But there’s nothing to worry about: Johnny is right next to me, and I assure you, he is in no danger at all.”

“May I speak to Johnny, Mr. Macintosh?”

“He is about to go to bed. He has a race tomorrow. But if you insist, I’ll give him the phone.”

Acronis heard Mr. Macintosh say in low voice, passing the phone: “It’s for you. Just be quick, will you?”

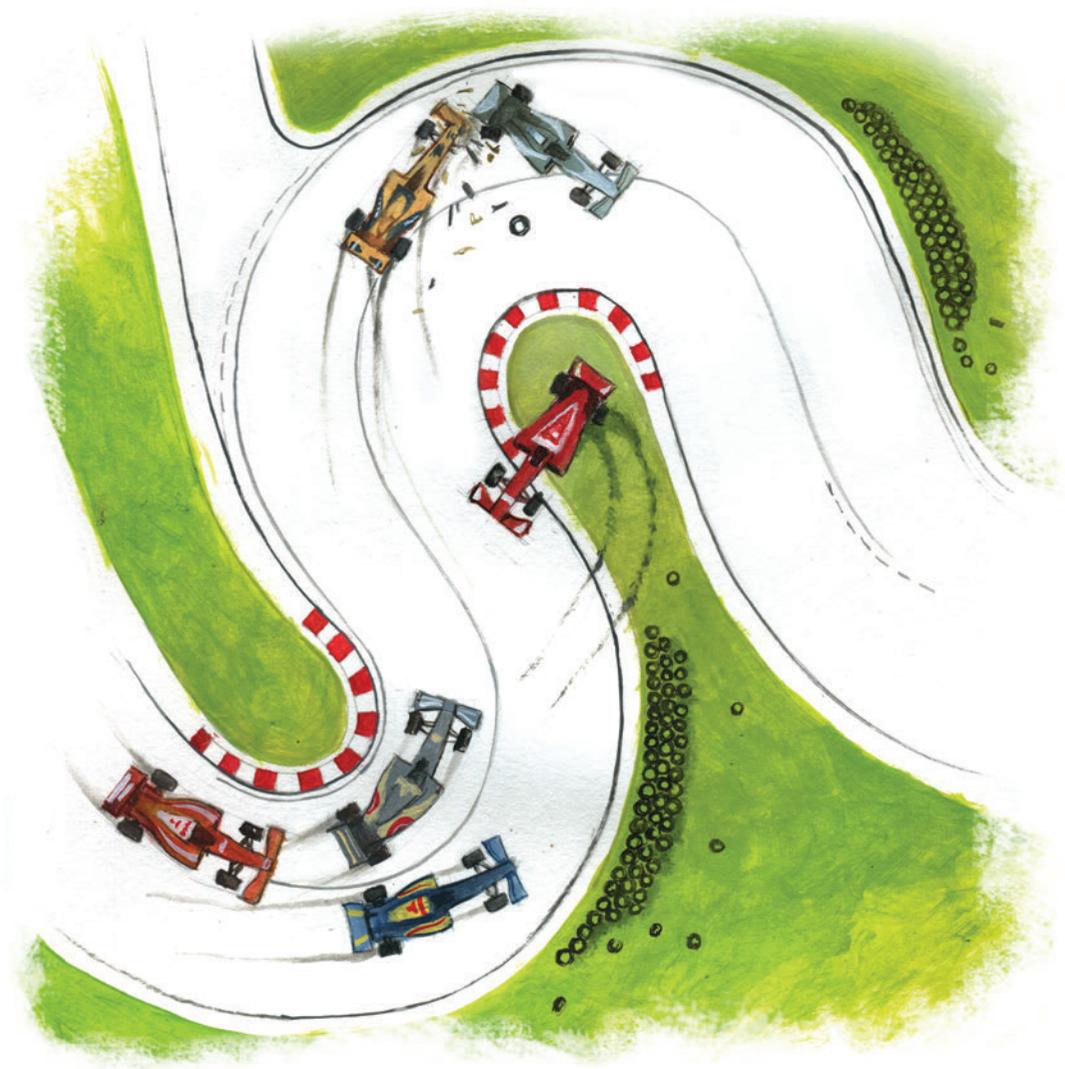
“Johnny Lightning speaking!” Johnny sounded cheerful.

“I need you to focus, Johnny!” ordered Acronis. “Try to remember: did you notice anything strange, unusual or suspicious after the race?”

“Hello, Acronis!” he greeted her, as polite as ever. “Why aren’t you in bed? It’s very late in Europe.”

“I’ll explain later,” replied Acronis. “So, did you see anything strange?”

“No, I didn’t,” Johnny sounded confused. “What exactly do you mean? Everything went as usual: the race, the photo call, the dinner, the hotel... My Dad was with me all the time. What are you all so worried about?”



CHICANE

A sharp turn or a series of turns on the track, intended to slow the racing car down. Chicane are usually placed after long straights, making them perfect locations for overtaking.

“A truck has nearly crashed into Aeneas’s car!” exclaimed Acronis. “Listen, Johnny, think hard. Was there anything out of the ordinary? Try to remember! There must have been something. If only a tiny detail.”

“No, nothing at all,” said Johnny slowly. He sounded reflective. “Except perhaps a minute before you called a bowl of ice cream was delivered to our room. And a note that said: ‘Johnny, here is your favourite ice cream. Best of luck. CLN.’ Who is this CLN? I usually get flowers or ties, or some souvenirs. But an ice cream is something out of the ordinary.”

“You didn’t eat it, I hope?” cried Acronis.

“I was just about to, when you called. There is a watermelon scoop and a chocolate one. This ice cream is really my favourite...”

“Don’t even think of touching it. Do you hear me: don’t even think of it! And give it to your security officers or a doctor for testing tomorrow.”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you think it could be poisoned?”

“Exactly!” cried Acronis. “Yesterday, my Mum and I watched the play ‘Masquerade’. In the play, someone got poisoned with ice cream too. And then, this mysterious CLN reference... Do you know who it could be?”

“Who?”

“Corrado-Luigi Novarro!”

“Who’s that?”

“Oh, forget it. Go to sleep,” said Acronis crossly. “Just promise to do as I say.”

“All right, all right,” agreed Johnny. “Dad is already grumbling, I’m going to bed.”

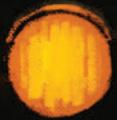
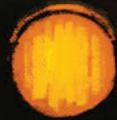
“Sleep well, Johnny Lightning...” said Acronis as she hung up. Just in time, because at that moment Mum walked into the living room in a night gown, looking cross.

“Don’t worry, Mummy,” said Acronis beaming an angelic smile at her. “I just wanted to warn Johnny not to eat poisoned ice cream because Dad and Aeneas have narrowly avoided being hit by a truck.”



CRANKCASE

A metal cast case that holds all the other engine parts together, including the cylinders and the crankshaft. If the crankcase is damaged, the oil drips out and the engine stalls.



Chapter 5

The top ten racing cars that make it through qualifying spend the night before the race in the parc fermé. The mechanics are not allowed to change their engines or chassis settings, install new fairings or adjust the spoiler's angle.

The cars have to start with the same tyres with which they finish the qualifying race. In other words, from Saturday night to Sunday morning no one is allowed to touch the top ten racing cars. They are parked together, hidden from view, and watchful security guards are responsible for keeping them safe. Each of the ten cars is a masterpiece of engineering, created in strict compliance with the regulations approved by the International Automobile Federation. Each costs several million dollars.

The appearance of a stranger in the parc fermé at the race in Monaco was an exceptional incident. Although the security staff in Monaco were confounded by the spy's absurd explanation, they were at a loss about what to do and had let him go. But he was caught on video cameras, and the detective agency hired by the Balena Azzurra team was able to track him down. Acronis was still unaware that while she had been watching the man in the white suit and sunglasses on the stands in Monte Carlo, the spy from the parc fermé was already boarding a plane bound for Montreal. On his arrival in Canada, he bought a ticket to the Circuit Gilles Villeneuve and, after a thorough examination of a map of the curvy and tricky track, he took up a position by the sharpest turn near the notorious "Wall of Champions". Mindful of the strict security measures, he brought nothing with him, but smuggled in a small mirror in the inner pocket of his jacket.

The day of the main race in Montreal was warm and sunny. The stewards decided that the teams should change the wet tyres from Saturday to hard slicks that are designed for use on a dry track.

An hour before the start, the mechanics were allowed to enter the parc fermé. A thorough examination of the Balena Azzurra racing cars revealed no faults. The team manager called Johnny and Aeneas.

“Today all should go well,” the manager said. “The cars are in perfect condition. The detectives have checked the cameras: no one has entered the parc fermé. Don’t worry; everything’s going to be fine! But beware of the ‘Wall of Champions’”

“Thank you.” replied Johnny. He held out a plastic bag. “Will you take this to the laboratory for testing?”

“What is this?” the manager asked, surprised.

“It was ice cream. It’s melted, but a friend of mine thinks that it could have been poisoned.”

“You didn’t eat it, I hope?” asked the manager.

“I didn’t have the time to” said Johnny. “It would be a shame if it turns out that there was no poison in it now that it has melted.”

With these words he headed for the changing rooms. Aeneas followed him.

Acronis was glued to the television set, nervously chewing on a doughnut. Dad had called an hour ago to reassure her once again that he and Aeneas were well. The cars were being rolled out onto the grid, and Johnny was to start from pole position.

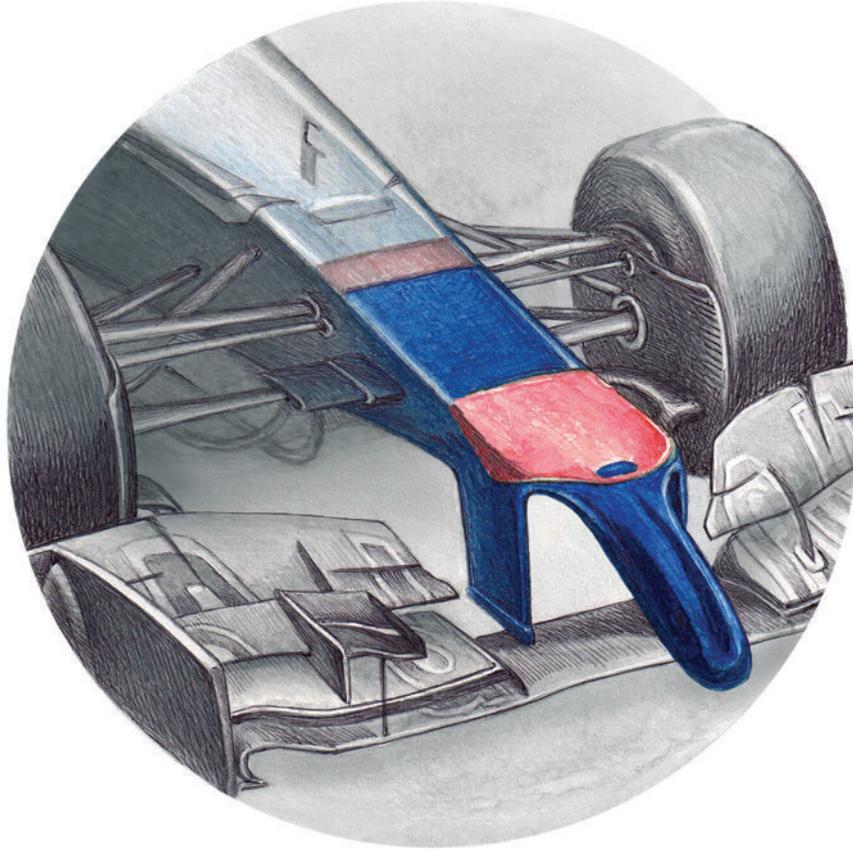
Beside him was a silver Corvo Nero car. Aeneas was positioned behind it. The commentator was saying how tricky the Montreal track was and recalled the 2011 race, remarkable for its five re-starts, numerous accidents and the unprecedented rivalry between Webber and Schumacher.

“Why don’t women race, Mum?” asked Acronis.

“Because they are smarter than men,” grumbled Mum, not looking up from the computer.

“And they don’t climb Mount Everest either?”

“They do”, muttered Mum without taking her eyes off the computer screen. “Now, would you keep quiet, please?”



FAIRING

A long and narrow shell placed over the frame of a racing car whose purpose is to reduce air drag and help the car move smoothly through the air.

Acronis remembered getting into the cockpit of Aeneas's car once. It was cramped and uncomfortable. Getting out, she hit the wheel and the instrument panel with her foot. Aeneas was annoyed. Why would anyone spend millions of dollars on such cars? Or was there something good about them after all?

“And I know it's hard when you're falling down
And it's a long way up when you hit the ground
Get up now, get up, get up now.
'Cause I'm on top of the world,
I'm on top of the world...” –
she recalled the lyrics of Aeneas' favourite song.

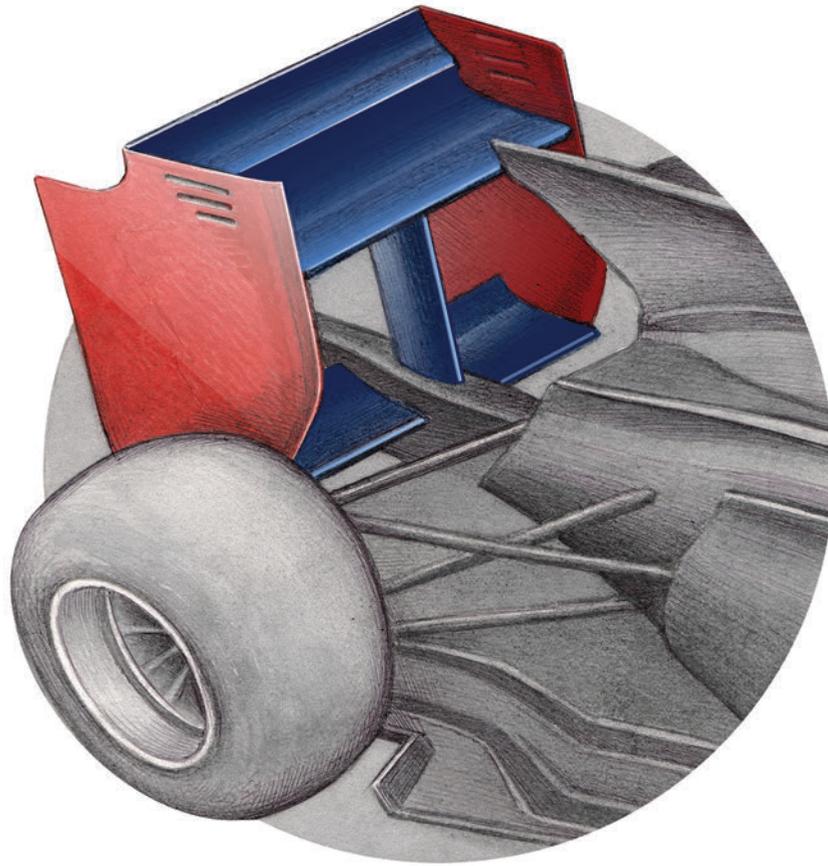
As the signal lights flashed green, the racing cars started the formation lap. This time no one got stuck at the start and things were running smoothly. The cars moved ceremoniously at moderate speed. Having completed the formation lap without incident, they resumed their places on the starting grid.

“Where is Dad sitting?” asked Acronis.

“In the first stand, in the Garage Club. Be quiet, please,” said Mum, without looking up. She had to finish a business plan before a certain deadline and had no time for such trivial matters as the Canadian race.

Meanwhile, tension was mounting in the stands. Thousands of spectators stood up – no one wanted to miss a single detail of the spectacular event. A close-up of the race leader, Johnny Macintosh, flashed on the television screen. He was sporting a blue-and-red helmet with the Balena Azzurra logo. Johnny smiled and waved to the audience. Then the camera moved to Gaetano Campomorto's car. He was wearing a silver helmet with a black raven sitting on top of a cliff. Gaetano was not smiling. His gaze was fixed on the red signal lights.

At exactly two o'clock local time, all the double signal lights over the motor racing track went out. The cars surged forward. The race began. The spy, who was standing near the “Wall of Champions”, took the mirror out of his pocket and began to direct flashes of light across the track. Two bystanders who were close by approached him suddenly. One of them quickly wrestled the spy's hand behind his back, while the other took away the mirror.



SPOILER

A strange-looking structure on the back of a racing car. Its purpose is to use the force of air resistance to push the car against the track when moving. Without spoilers, racing cars would be impossible to control at high speed.



Chapter 6

If all drivers had the same cars, the race would be different and the driver's skills would be the only success factor. But that's not the reality of racing. A driver's success depends on many factors, such as the technical perfection of his unique car, the detailed team strategy that is based on in-depth analysis of data collected from dozens of sensors in the car, and undoubtedly the efforts of the security service. Apart from protecting the drivers and the cars, the service ensures that the invaluable information gathered by the team during the test runs, training sessions and races does not get lost or fall into the hands of competitors.

The Balena Azzurra team would always remember the Canadian race as both a day of triumph and a day of defeat. Aeneas emerged victorious, but for some reason, Johnny had a bad start. Five cars overtook him during the start, and although he then picked up speed and began to show good time on each lap, he was playing catch-up for the rest of the race. Meanwhile Gaetano Campomorto and Aeneas were battling for the lead, with Gaetano going first and Aeneas trailing behind. They continued in this way until the twentieth lap, when Gaetano drove down to the pit-lane to change tyres.

According to the strategy of the Corvo Nero team, the tyres were to be changed twice during the race. Gaetano and Bruno chose soft tyres, which gave them advantage on the curves, but wore out fast. The Balena Azzurra team had a different strategy: Johnny and Aeneas were using hard tyres. They were losing a few fractions of a second on every lap, but hard tyres don't wear out as fast, so they only had to stop by the pit-lane once.

While Gaetano was having his tyres changed, Aeneas forged ahead. Johnny had already moved up to fifth position by then: the McGregor car that had overtaken him at the start with an overheated battery, forcing the driver to the pits to have it replaced. With his new tyres Gaetano set off in pursuit of Aeneas, getting closer with each lap. On the thirty-second lap Aeneas drove to the pit-lane. The mechanics changed his tyres in record time: one and seven-tenths of a second. When Aeneas drove back onto the track, he almost collided with Bruno Campomorto, who was now in second position: Gaetano had taken the lead.

Watching the race on television, Acronis shrieked at the near collision and even Mum, who was always so composed, jumped up from her chair. But it was alright: Aeneas and Bruno shot forward alongside each other, and at the first chicane Aeneas overtook Bruno along the inner edge.

Johnny had also changed tyres, but maintained his fifth position. A red Maranello in front of him was beginning to have problems. Johnny did not know that one of the Maranello mechanisms had stalled mid-race. Something was wrong with the system supplying water to the driver's helmet.

Drivers experience severe g-forces and must drink water during the race to avoid dehydration which can cause extreme fatigue and can even be fatal. The brave Maranello driver did his best to keep going, but on the fiftieth lap he became really unwell and made a mistake. Breaking into the last chicane on the outer edge, he lost control and brushed the right front wheel against the "Wall of Champions". The car went into a spin and crashed into the concrete. Fragments of spoilers and fairing flew in all directions. Johnny, who had been following the Maranello closely, was lucky to dodge a hail of debris. The Maranello car came to a stop on the side of the track.

Yellow flags emerged across the entire track. Display panels lit up with the announcement of the "safety car" mode. In such circumstances, all cars are required to slow down: overtaking is not permitted.

A safety car appeared on the circuit, and the marshals jumped out. Acronis' heart raced as she watched the brave driver being pulled out of the crashed Maranello. The driver waved to the audience, smiled at the camera and, limping, steered towards the first-aid cars. The marshals were supporting him on both sides.



SLICKS

Extra smooth tyres used in dry weather. Slicks do not wear out as quickly as treaded tyres, but they can slip on wet surface.

After the accident, the race continued at a reduced speed for five laps. The technicians were clearing the track. Gaetano and Bruno Campomorto used this opportunity to pull into the pit-lane and change tyres for the second time. As the entire peloton was moving relatively slowly, the advantage Aeneas and Johnny gained from the stop made by their opponents was rather insignificant. By the penultimate lap Aeneas had moved very close to Gaetano and Johnny was following closely behind Bruno. The audience was standing watching the dual contest between Balena Azzurra and Corvo Nero. The television commentator was rather incoherently explaining that with the new tyres the Corvo Nero drivers had gained an advantage. The hard tyres of Balena Azzurra were not as suited for the winding sections of the track.

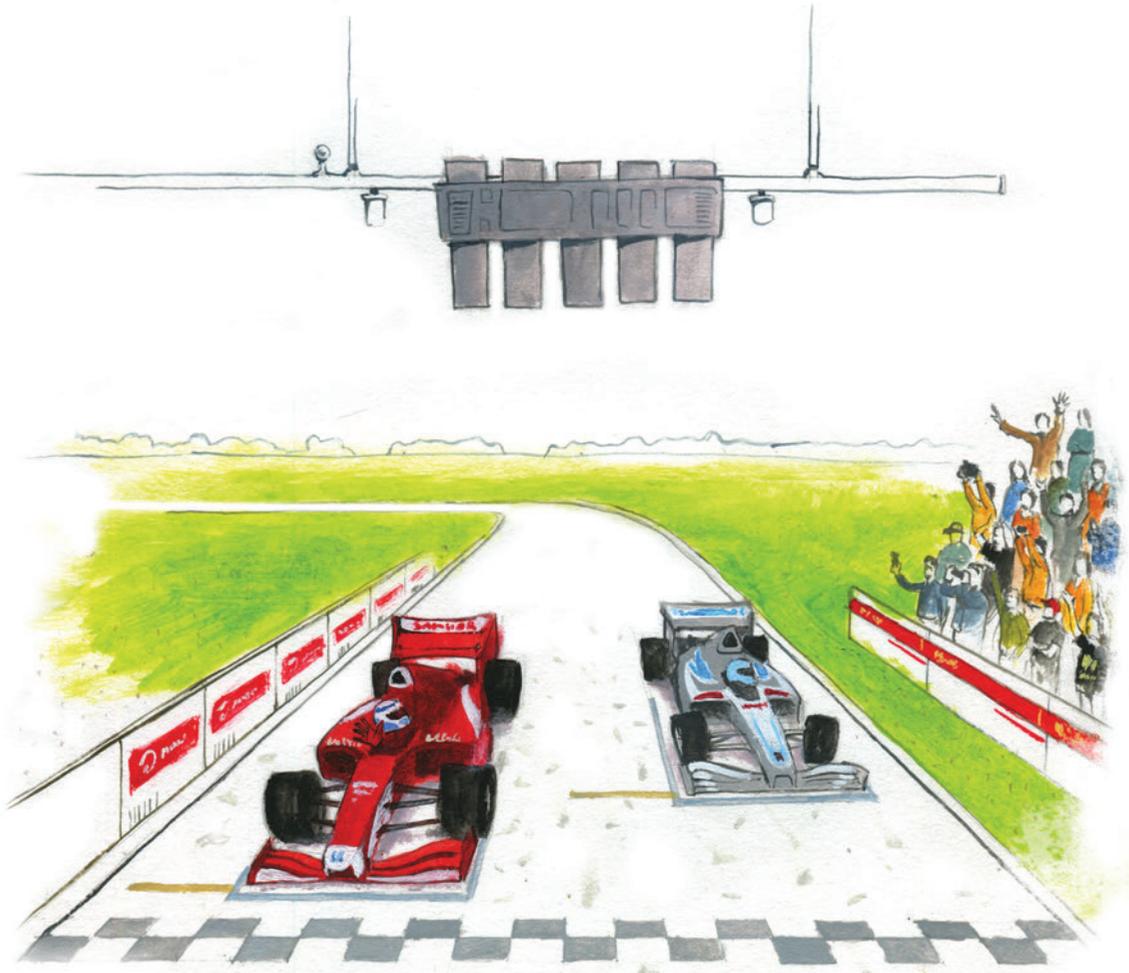
Nevertheless, Johnny launched an attack at the first chicane. He sharply changed sides and went to overtake his opponent on the outer edge of the curve. This was unexpected: overtaking on the outside rarely works. Bruno Campomorto realised that his rival was taking a great risk. He decided not to give Johnny a chance to outstrip him. To strengthen his position, he shifted his car to the outer edge of the track, forcing Johnny off the lane.

“This is against the rules! Aggressive driving! He is risking disqualification!” cried the commentator. But Bruno knew what he was doing. Making it look as if he was about to perform a manoeuvre, he returned to the safe central position on the track without completing it. Apparently he was hoping to scare Johnny off and make him slow down. However, Johnny kept his cool. He approached the opponent’s car and, when the latter drew back to the centre of the track, shot forward. In a fraction of a second the situation changed drastically: Johnny surged to third position and Bruno was trying to catch up with him.

It was the last lap. Gaetano Campomorto was still in the lead with Aeneas going second, and Johnny third. The drivers approached the last chicane and the “Wall of Champions”.

“I know he will try to overtake at the wall,” whispered Acronis. “It’s his only chance.”

The camera zoomed in on the curve by the “Wall of Champions”. Aeneas and Gaetano flew into the turn almost side by side. Gaetano was only half-a-car length ahead of Aeneas. Leveraging the soft tyres, Gaetano was moving along the inner edge, taking a sharp turn. Aeneas accepted the challenge by going along



POLE POSITION

The starting position of the driver who wins the qualifying race. The pole position is located in the left part of the front row of the grid. Beside it, to the right and half-a-car length behind, is the starting position of the car whose driver qualifies second. Those who qualify third and fourth start from the second row.

the outer edge. His car flew over the spot where the Maranello had crashed only a short while ago. It seemed that Aeneas was about to touch the curved concrete wall too. Acronis buried her face in her hands.

A moment later she opened her eyes. The chicane had been left behind! The cars of Aeneas and Gaetano entered the home stretch at the same time. They were running side by side. On the straight sections of the track, soft tyres give no advantage. Moreover, Aeneas was a bit lighter than his rival, and at high-speed sections every pound of body weight is crucial. To the roar of the crowd, Aeneas's car crossed the finish line five-thousandths of a second ahead of Gaetano's.

"Yes!" cried Acronis. "Aeneas has won the race!"

Mum resumed her work on the computer, and Acronis stayed on to watch as the other participants hit the finish line one by one. Johnny had maintained the third position, which meant that the Balena Azzurra team had earned as many as forty points against Corvo Nero's thirty.

The green, white and red flags of Italy and Balena Azzurra flags with blue whales were fluttering over the stadium. Aeneas did a "lap of honour" and carefully steered the car to the Balena Azzurra box. Everyone hugged, congratulated and photographed him. Reporters bombarded him with questions about the race and about his last attack by the "Wall of Champions".

"Tell us, how did it occur to you to attack on the outer edge? Weren't you concerned about crashing?" they asked.

"I wasn't," answered Aeneas. "We have been practising this overtaking manoeuvre on a simulator for a long time. I was well-prepared, that's all."

The awards ceremony began. To the sounds of "Toreador, en garde!" Aeneas, Gaetano and Johnny mounted the podium. They were presented with cups and medals. Then, a huge champagne bottle appeared in Aeneas's hands. He shook it vigorously and popped the cork. Johnny stood under a shower of champagne beaming. He stuck out his tongue to catch more droplets. Gaetano drew back sullenly.

In the evening, Dad called Acronis on Skype.

"Well, are you celebrating?" she asked.

"We are at the airport already. Tomorrow we'll be home," he did not sound very happy.



COCKPIT

A capsule where the driver sits. The cockpit has an open top, making it possible to pull the driver out of the car quickly in case of an accident.

“Is everything alright?”

“Yes, yes, everyone is very proud of Aeneas and Johnny, and we are now in the lead in the Constructors’ Championship...”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

“Tell me the truth, Dad, or I’ll call Mum,” demanded Acronis.

“While the race was on, someone hacked into Balena Azzurra’s computers and wiped twenty terabytes of information.”

“Is that a lot?”

“One terabyte is supposed to give an advantage of one-tenth of a second per lap. That’s not a precise number, of course.”

“I see!” said Acronis. “We’ll start looking for the spy then.”





INNER EDGE *and* OUTER EDGE

Edges of the track in a curve. The centrifugal force pushes the car moving along the inner edge to the middle of the track, while the car moving along the outer edge runs the risk of flying over the track edge and crashing into the barrier like that of the 'Wall of Champions'.



RICERCATO
MATTEO MESSINA DENARO

SICILIA

CUR

CAFE

191-915

SALYA

Chapter 7

Once again, Aeneas did not stay at home for long. But he was less sleepy this time. Acronis had a chance to talk with him about the course of the recent events. On Tuesday, after school, she entered Aeneas's room looking determined, closed the door behind her and said:

"Now tell me the truth!"

"What do you mean?" asked Aeneas, surprised.

"Why are some silly terabytes more important for you than winning the race?"

"Well," said Aeneas, laughing. "In girls' schools they study the multiplication table too, don't they?"

"What does the multiplication table have to do with it?"

"If one terabyte costs us one-tenth of a second of delay per lap, how much will twenty terabytes cost us?"

"Two seconds!" said Acronis after some thought.

"Now, supposing that there are sixty laps in a race, how far behind will we fall before the end of the race?"

"Two times sixty. One hundred and twenty seconds."

"Correct! That is two minutes," summed up Aeneas. "You do realise that no driver can win back two minutes? Even Schumacher or Ayrton Senna wouldn't be able to do that."

"So, you will lose the next race?"

"The next one, and several more after that. We will keep losing until we get the data from the sensors located in the cars."

“And still, I don’t understand. What’s the use of this information? After all, the cars are still the same, so are the drivers, and the tracks.”

“Sure. But you must remember that we practise the next race dozens of times on a simulator. It is a machine that takes into account everything: tyre temperature, aerodynamics, engine behaviour, and so on.”

“But your simulator hasn’t been stolen, has it?”

“No, but without accurate data on all the car systems, it is as useless as the racing game on your iPad.”

Acronis nodded.

“And hadn’t it occurred to you to make a copy of those terabytes and store it in a safe place?” she asked.

“It had, of course. From time to time the information is saved in a ‘cloud’, where it can’t be stolen. But this time there was no time to save it. The race was too exciting!”

“I see,” said Acronis. “The picture is becoming clear.”

“What picture?” sighed Aeneas.

“It’s not just one man that is working against you, but a powerful organisation, and it strikes from many different directions at once. This organisation knows which route you will be taking to your hotel and what Johnny’s favourite ice cream is. It knows how to hack computers and splash invisible motor oil under car wheels.”

“And what is this organisation?” Aeneas asked with interest.

“Cosa Nostra,” declared Acronis solemnly. “The great and mysterious criminal society. It is headed by Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro – a man in a white suit and black sunglasses.”

“How do you know?”

“It’s elementary, my dear Aeneas,” went on Acronis knowledgeably. “Remember the initials on the note attached to Johnny’s ice cream: CLN. It’s him! Besides, I saw him with my own eyes in the Corvo Nero suite at the Monte Carlo race.”

“Well, suppose that everything is exactly as you say,” agreed Aeneas. “But what does it mean? We can’t catch the entire the Mafia so we can’t avert their next attack. Johnny and I are lucky we have survived... but this can’t go on forever.”

“There’s only one way out,” summed up Acronis. “You should leave Balena Azzurra.”



SAFETY CAR

A safety car sets the speed limit: no one is allowed to go faster than the safety car while it is on the track.

“What about Johnny? No, it’s impossible!” exclaimed Aeneas. “We have a contract. We can’t leave our stable mid-season. Do you really think that I would let the team down this way?”

“No, I don’t think that,” Acronis said soothingly. “That’s why I have decided to take action myself.”

“Good heavens, what are you up to, you cheeky devil?”

“We need to track down and stop Don Corrado.”

“But how? He is uncatchable, you know that.”

“Yes, he is,” agreed Acronis. “The police have been looking for him for twenty-five years, and he is still on the loose. That is why I hope to catch him at the next race. And you must help me do it!”

“How?”

“Listen closely,” whispered Acronis. “It’s very simple...”

* * *

The next race was to take place on the Black Dog track in the Austrian city of Spielberg. Having finished her business plan, Mum announced that she was going to the race on her own. Acronis had to stay at home with Dad because her holidays had not started yet.

The two weeks that separated the race in Spielberg from the one in Montreal were very eventful. Aeneas was the first to leave – as always, he went to the team camp in Marino. Dad seemed very anxious when he went to see him off. He had also advised Aeneas to leave the team and was now worried because Aeneas decided to stay.

“During the next few of races, we won’t be a threat to anyone,” Aeneas assured him. “Our results will be so poor that no one will think of trying to kill us.”

Mum was also present, but she did not say a word. She must have had a plan of her own though, because when he arrived in Marino, Aeneas called home and complained that now there were two blokes following him everywhere – they were bodyguards hired by Mum. On the first night, they nearly had a gunfight with the Balena Azzurra security. Mum promised to call Balena Azzurra and tell them that



POINTS

The driver who wins the first place in the race gets 25 points. 18 points are awarded for the second place, 15 – for the third, and 12 – for the fourth. It is easy to calculate how many points Aeneas and Johnny brought to their team, and how many were awarded to Gaetano and Bruno.

the team security service should do their own job and mind their own business. Apparently, she had kept her promise, because there were no further incidents with the bodyguards.

But on Saturday Mr. Macintosh called. The phone began to ring in Dad's pocket at the worst possible moment: Dad was frying sausages on the grill and laying the table at the same time.

"Hello?" he said a bit irritably, but immediately his tone changed: "Yes, James, what a nice surprise! No, I'm not busy at all. I was walking in the garden... Ah, Acronis? Yes, sure, she is here. I will pass her the phone..."

Dad shoved the phone into Acronis's hands and dashed off to turn over the sausages.

"Hello, this is Acronis," said the stunned girl into the phone.

"Hi, dear Acronis!" said a polite and affable voice. "This is James Macintosh, Johnny's dad."

"Hello, Mr. Macintosh!" she greeted him politely.

"Acronis, I owe you," went on Mr. Macintosh. "I didn't take your phone call and your warning seriously last week. But today it has been discovered that there was a strong sedative in Johnny's ice cream!"

"I knew it!" said Acronis. "I'm glad Johnny didn't eat it."

"Yes, but it's incredible! How could you have guessed from the other side of the ocean that Johnny would receive poisoned ice cream?"

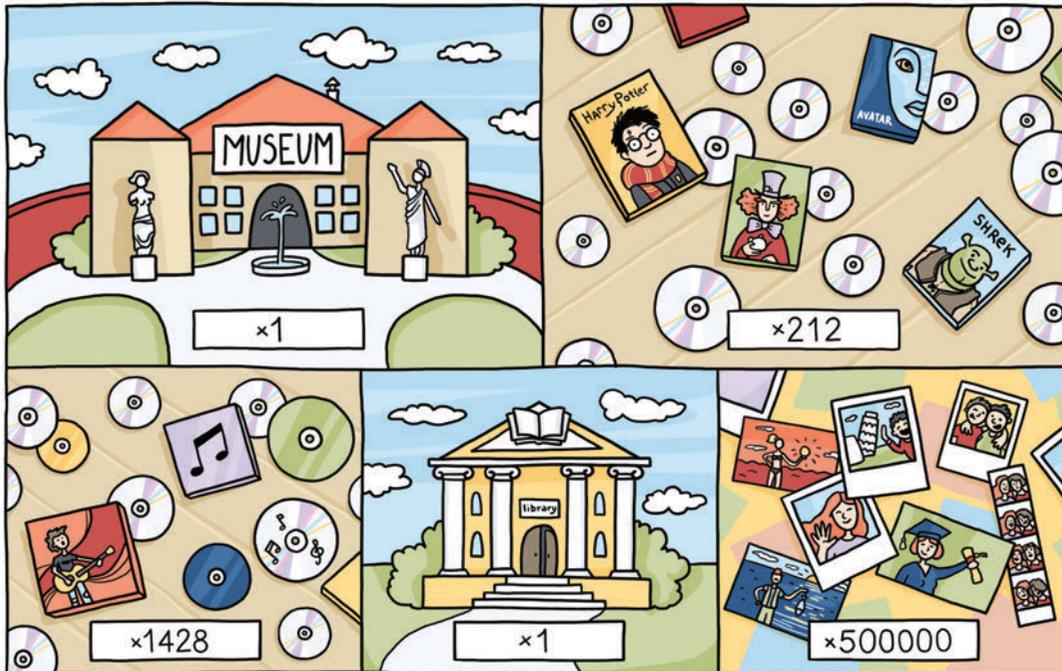
"Oh, it's nothing, Mr. Macintosh. It was no big deal. I knew that they would target Johnny after I'd heard that Aeneas had closely escaped an accident."

"Yes, it is all horrible. I have spoken to Balena Azzurra's detectives. They caught some Italian fellow who had been sending flashes of sunlight across the track in Montreal. But they didn't have any real evidence, so they had to let him go."

"They let him go?" gasped Acronis. "Do you know what his name is and when exactly he was released?"

"If I remember correctly, his name is Toto Terracino. Allegedly, he sells second-hand bicycles in Corleone. A piece of bicycle mirror happened to be in his pocket by pure chance. At least that's what he told the detectives. A very suspicious character!"

1  TB =



TERABYTE

*A unit of data equal to about a trillion bytes (eight-digit numbers consisting of ones and zeros).
About the same amount of data can be stored on a hard drive of a high performance PC.*

“When was he released?”

“Right after the race. But they’ve been keeping an eye on him. If he tries something else, they’ll catch him in the act.”

“Thank you very much for letting me know, Mr. Macintosh. Did you know that my Mum hired bodyguards for Aeneas?”

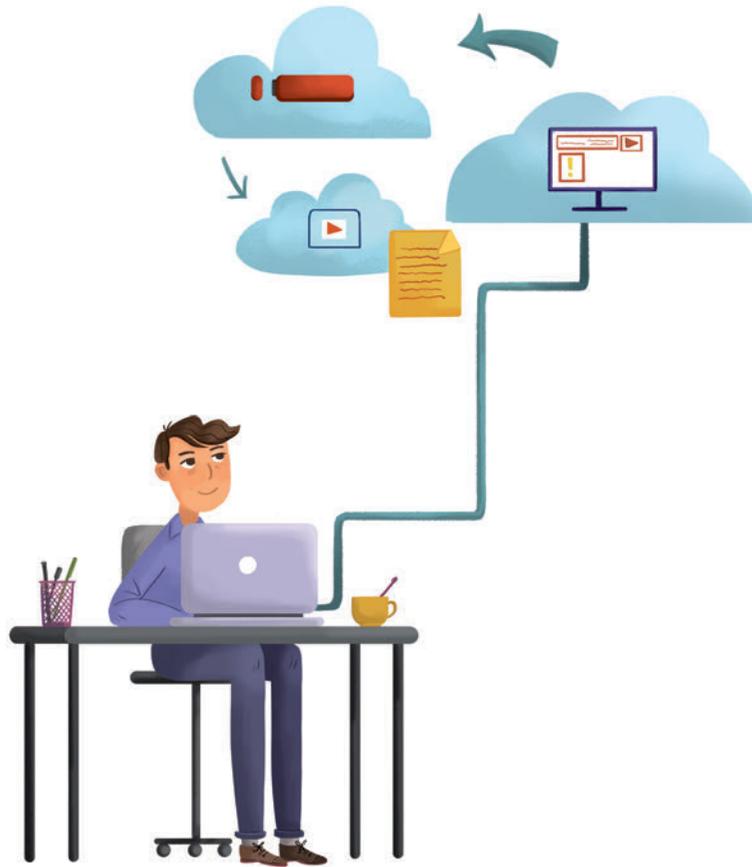
“I did the same for Johnny. Still I feel very anxious.”

“Don’t worry,” said Acronis. “I’m sure that after the race in Spielberg you’ll have nothing to worry about!”

Mr. Macintosh thanked Acronis warmly, told her that she would always be welcome at Macintosh Manor in Cheshire, and bid her goodbye.

Acronis gave the phone back to Dad, went to her room and sent an encrypted e-mail to Aeneas. She wrote: “In the southeast of England, the weather is warm and sunny. The sky is clear but for two or three clouds.” This meant: “Going ahead with Plan A. The subject has two or three accomplices”. Five minutes later, came the answer: “Travellers enjoy sunbathing and the sea air”. This meant: “Everything is ready, our people have been warned”.





CLOUDS

Remote computers that are used for storing information. The information is transmitted over the Internet and placed in a well-protected system of computers within a cloud.



Chapter 8

As expected, Balena Azzurra did not qualify for the race. At the end of qualifying Johnny was thirteenth and Aeneas sixteenth. Gaetano Campomorto earned the pole position. The Maranello driver, who had crashed into the “Wall of Champions” in Montreal, would be starting from second position, and Bruno Campomorto from the third.

The day before the main race, Mum and Mr. Macintosh met in the Garage Club bar and were making small talk over a glass of wine. After exchanging a few words about the weather (it was stiflingly hot in Austria) and the teams’ chances in the Constructors’ Championship (it seemed Corvo Nero would take the lead again), they agreed that they both felt more at ease now that Aeneas and Johnny were not competing for the podium places. Then they moved on to a topic that was of great interest to Mum: school education in the United Kingdom. She talked excitedly about Acronis’s prospects of winning a scholarship to study at a local grammar school for girls. Mr. Macintosh recalled his cousin, who had been expelled from Harrow, despite his sports scholarship.

Meanwhile, the stadium exploded into applause. An open-box truck appeared on the circuit with twenty-two drivers and several journalists with cameras riding in the back. The audience greeted them from the vast stands. The drivers were not wearing helmets. Some of them were waving cheerfully to the crowd while others were standing still. The truck was moving slowly. Cameras caught close-ups of the drivers’ faces, which immediately appeared on huge digital screens, placed in the Garage Club. Mum and Mr. Macintosh fell silent, looking at the screen. Aeneas and Johnny were standing side by side, holding on to the handrails and talking. It was impossible to hear what they were saying. Then Johnny laughed. The camera moved,

and the Maranello driver appeared on the screen, answering the questions of an Italian journalist.

Mum turned away. She was not a sentimental kind of person but even she felt unnerved by the slow movement of the truck with the drivers in the back.

“It all looks as if they were heading for an execution,” muttered Mr. Macintosh, who did not find such moments before the race enjoyable either. Mr. Macintosh’s cousin who had been expelled from Harrow had been a driver. He had died on the track in Monza in 1989.

Waiters were hurrying past them, and VIP guests were passing by ceremoniously on their way to the suites. The man in the white suit and sunglasses whisked through the doorway of the Corvo Nero suite. Meanwhile, the truck leisurely completed its lap of honour, and the drivers went back to the boxes. Sport airplanes were flying over the circuit, leaving trails of coloured smoke behind. Mechanics in bright overalls were wheeling the racing cars to the pit-lane.

Mum pulled out her mobile phone and dialed Acronis’s number. Acronis picked up at once.

“Have you done your maths homework?” asked Mum.

“Sure,” said Acronis light-heartedly.

“And have you practised the harp?”

“I’ve been doing it all morning!”

“That’s a likely story,” Mum snorted. “And has Dad prepared something to eat?”

“He has.”

“Don’t forget to water the plants in the kitchen and tell Dad that the door to the study has started to creak again.”

“All right.”

“I’ll arrive late. Have some yogurt before going to bed and don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

“All right, Mummy!”

“There’s something suspicious about your voice. And what’s all that noise?”

“It’s the TV,” said Acronis.

“All right,” said Mum, who sounded reassured. “I’ll call you later.”

She put the phone back in her bag and looked around. The racing cars had al-



THE CONSTRUCTORS' CHAMPIONSHIP AWARD

An award given to the most successful team over a season, as determined by a points system based on the results of 21 races.

ready taken their positions on the starting grid. The mechanics were bustling around them. They were recharging the car batteries, taking the last readings from sensors, and pushing the trolleys with spare tyres to and fro.

“I think I’ll go to the suite now,” said Mr. Macintosh.

“Me too,” said Mum and got up from the bar stool, almost knocking down a passing waiter.

“Sorry, Fraulein,” grumbled the waiter and dashed away at the speed of a racing car.

“I’ve seen him somewhere before,” thought Mum.

Five minutes before the start, an orchestra played the national anthem of Austria. Thousands of red-and-white flags fluttered over the stands. After the anthem, the VIP guests took their seats in the team suites.

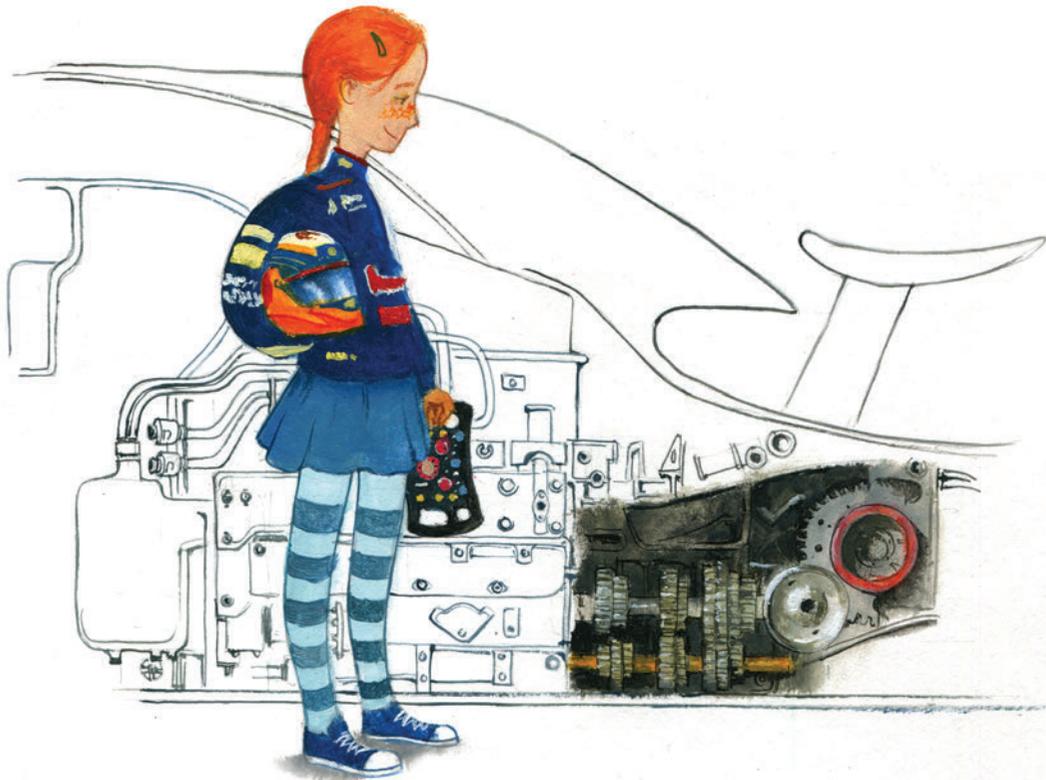
“Your Campari and soda, Mr. Pellegrini,” said the waiter who was serving the Corvo Nero suite.

The man in the white suit and sunglasses accepted the cocktail and put it down on a round table. Mum turned her binoculars to the nearby suite. The waiter clearly reminded her of someone. But who?

The double lights flashed green, and the cars started the formation lap. Mum put her headphones on: the roar of twenty-two 770 horsepower engines was unbearable. In her head, she multiplied twenty-two by seven hundred and seventy. She got sixteen thousand nine hundred and forty. So many horses in one place – what a nightmare!

A minute and a half later, the cars were already back on the grid. Numbers were flashing on the screens counting down seconds before the start. Mum spotted Aeneas’s car on sixteenth position. Mr. Macintosh waved to Johnny, but the latter did not notice him. The crowd stood up again. The stopwatch counted down to zero, and all the lights went out at once. At the same instant, Gaetano Campomorto’s car darted diagonally to the right and blocked the way for the Maranello, which had started from second position. The Maranello slowed down and moved further to the right to avoid a collision. This cleared the way for Bruno Campomorto, who sped up abruptly and took the lead. Gaetano was now in second.

The man in the white suit and sunglasses picked up his glass and took the first sip.



GEARBOX

Racing cars use semi-automatic gearboxes enabling smooth changes from first gear to seventh. The gearbox is reset before each race.



Chapter 9

Acronis was sitting hunched up behind a trolley with spare tyres in the far corner of the Balena Azzurra pit-box. To kill time, she was reciting a poem under her breath that Dad had composed the night before the race:

For twenty-five years has been on the run
Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro.
Instead of a passport he pulls out a gun
And hides in the Mafia's burrow.

Time was passing incredibly slowly. According to the plan, Acronis was to wait until twenty laps had been completed. She was trying to control a tangle of thoughts rushing through her mind. "What if he doesn't drink the cocktail?" "What if they catch Dad?"

He wears sunglasses and dresses in white –
Don Corrado has excellent taste.
He rules over Palermo, holding it tight,
Always ready a battle to face.

"We should have shut off the helicopter pad! He might try to escape by helicopter – why did it not occur to me before?"

He is cruel and ruthless, incredibly sly
And persistent in his evil plans
Who can stop him at last? Who dares to try?
It is all in Acronis's hands!

“I wish it were so! What if it's not him at all? What if an innocent person is drinking that cocktail this very moment? What if Mr. Pellegrini is law-abiding Italian, a school teacher, a good family man?”

To get rid of the horrible Mafia boss
And his lot for ages to come
She heads for the race, risking to cross
Her highly disciplined Mum.

“It's amazing that Mum didn't suspect anything! The car engines were roaring so loudly that, even pressing the phone to my ear, I could hardly hear her. I hope my remarks didn't come across as odd to her.”

Her talented Dad has waited too long
For a chance to act on the stage:
Disguised as a waiter, he comes along
To help put the villain in cage.

“Dad looks very silly in a dinner jacket. He doesn't look like a waiter at all. And he is dead clumsy. I'm concerned about him.”

The waiter has served an unusual drink
To the dangerous don for a reason:
He'll fall asleep to wake up in a blink
On a bed in Italian prison!

“Time to go,” decided Acronis, jumped up and headed for the back door of the box.

* * *

The first nineteen laps were uneventful with nothing remarkable going on the track. The Campomorto brothers were maintaining the lead being pushed all the way by the Maranello driver, with the Black Dog, McGregor and Dolores drivers hot on his heels. Johnny and Aeneas were battling it out in the second group of ten. The Ancor car had withdrawn from the race due to gearbox issues.

The situation changed dramatically during the twentieth lap. One by one, the three race leaders stopped at the pit-lane to change tyres. Everything went without a hitch for the Maranello, but not for the Corvo Nero drivers who were faced with unexpected issues. First, Gaetano approached his team boxes too fast and was too late hitting the brakes. His car careered an extra metre forward, and the mechanics had to push it back to quickly change the tyres. As a result, Gaetano lost several precious seconds. Bruno was even less fortunate. He did the twentieth lap on his old tyres so that Gaetano’s could be changed in the meantime. On the penultimate chicane he failed to follow the curve, his car careered off the lane and its right front tyre punctured. He had to slow down and carefully drive to the pit-lane to get the tyre replaced. The Maranello driver was the first to get back on the track. The fans in the main Grandstand cheered and greeted him by waving red flags – a symbol of the Maranello team.

Suddenly, a small round object thrown from the stands hit the Maranello’s spoiler when the car was already doing three hundred kilometres an hour. It shook, the spoiler cracked, and the driver slowed down instinctively.

“What on earth is going on?” cried the commentator anxiously. “Unbelievable! Someone has thrown a tennis ball on the track! The Maranello car is damaged. It will have to go to the box to get the spoiler replaced!”

While Security was taking the troublemaker who had thrown the ball away from the stands, in the Corvo Nero suite, the man in the white suit raised the glass to his lips and took another sip of his drink.

With her heart sinking, Acronis was walking along a dark corridor. Where was Dad? He was supposed to meet her by the door. He was not there. The girl approached the staircase that led to the spacious hall of the Garage Club. The VIP guests walk up and down these stairs on their tour of the pit-lane an hour and a half before the race. Now the staircase was empty with the exception of a guy in a black suit who was hovering at the top stairs. Acronis headed up the stairs trying to look calm and confident.

“Where are you going, young lady?” asked the man in the black suit, blocking her way.

“To the Balena Azzurra suite, my Mum’s in there,” said Acronis.

“And what were you doing down there?”

“Catching Pokemon!” lied Acronis and, to add credibility to her words, pulled out her mobile phone from her pocket.

The man in the black suit let her through. The hall of the Garage Club was almost empty, apart from a stout man who was sleeping on one of the couches and a cheerful bunch of Corvo Nero fans chilling out over a drink at the corner table. A waiter hurried towards them carrying a tray laden with drinks.

“Well, Dad?” whispered Acronis to him.

“I am doing my best!” he groaned as he hurried off, adjusting the glasses that kept slipping down his nose. Acronis tiptoed closer to the Corvo Nero suite. At the entrance there was another black-suited man. By the look on his face she could tell that he had no intention of letting her into the suite.

“The Campomorto brothers have really got an edge today!” said the commentator. “There is no doubt that the Corvo Nero stable will surge into the lead in the Constructors’ Championship.”

Suddenly, the man in the white suit and sunglasses appeared right in front of Acronis. He left the Corvo Nero suite and strode towards the exit. Both men in black followed him. Dumbfounded, Acronis watched them leave. When the sinister trio was out of sight, Acronis called Dad.

“Did you give him the drink?”

“Of course!” he assured her.

“Did he drink it?”

“Let’s see!” Dad dived into the Corvo Nero suite and was back in a minute with an empty glass on his tray.

“It seems so...” he muttered, puzzled.

“But why didn’t he fall asleep?” insisted Acronis.

“I have no idea,” mumbled Dad, looking distressed. “I added three sleeping pills to his drink – that’s a huge amount!”

Acronis looked around the hall and noticed the stout gentleman who was taking a nap on the couch.

“Tell me, did that man order anything from you?” she asked sternly.

“Yes, I made him a Campari with soda,” admitted Dad. “Good God, I must have given him the wrong cocktail!”

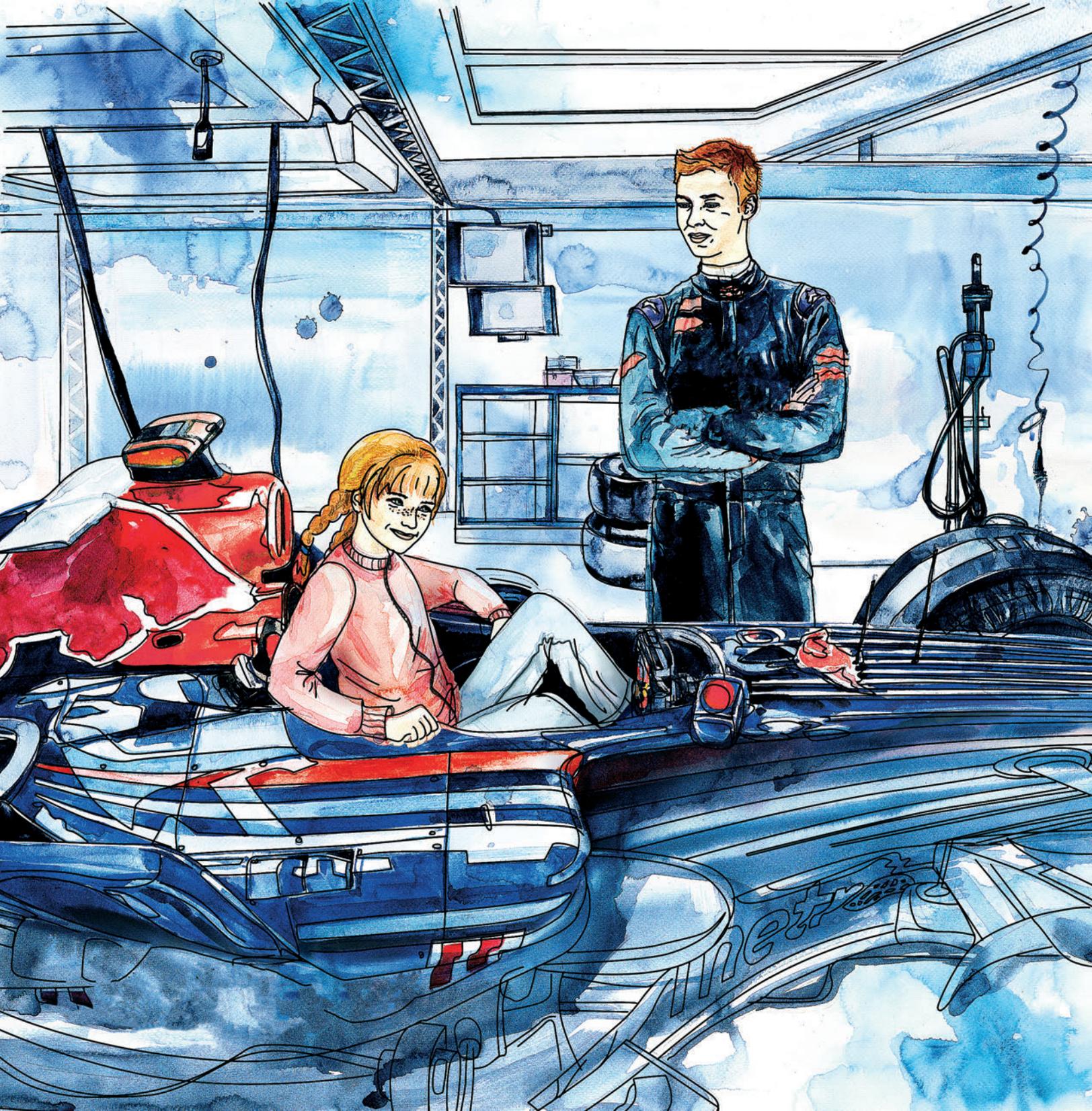
“At any rate we now have Mr. Pellegrini’s fingerprints,” noted Acronis. “Please take this glass to the Balena Azzurra detectives for fingerprinting. The detectives are waiting in the box downstairs.

Dad obediently steered towards the staircase.

“Darling!” said a menacing voice from somewhere close by. Mum was standing in the doorway of the Balena Azzurra suite. She looked livid.

“Run, Dad!” cried Acronis. “Let me just explain a few things to you, Mummy...”





chapter 10

The race in Spielberg ended without further incident. Gaetano Campomorto won. His brother Bruno had been unable to retain the second position since a Black Dog driver had overtaken him on the last lap. With a huge effort Johnny and Aeneas made it into the top ten: Johnny came ninth, and Aeneas was tenth. In the tussle for the Constructors' Championship title Corvo Nero and Balena Azzurra were almost neck-to-neck, but Corvo Nero had a slight advantage.

* * *

The following morning Dad, Mum, Aeneas and Acronis were on their way home. The plane was passing through a storm front, bouncing and shaking. Aeneas and Acronis never suffered from travel sickness. Mum and Dad, however, had turned a pale shade of green and were both looking annoyed. Mum kept flashing disapproving looks at Aeneas's bodyguards, who were asleep in their seats in the back row. Dad mentioned a nagging pain in his joints: his work as a waiter turned out to be an ordeal for him. Acronis kept pestering Aeneas:

"Couldn't you have made them detain this Mr. Pellegrini before he left the Garage Club?"

"Well, first of all, I was driving along the track at the time," said Aeneas, who sounded somewhat defensive. "And there was no legitimate reason to detain him. According to the Corvo Nero manager, he is a respectable Sicilian lawyer, one of the team's sponsors. But if it turns out that his fingerprints match those of Corrado-Luigi Novarro, he will certainly be arrested at the next race."

“I doubt that he’ll show up at the next race,” snorted Acronis. “He’ll send his side-kicks instead. They’ll start throwing tennis balls again or something similar.”

“At any rate one of them has already been locked away,” Aeneas tried to comfort her. “Toto Terracino won’t wriggle out of this one. He will be fined for attempting to cause an accident and get a twelve-month suspended sentence.”

“A suspended sentence!” repeated Acronis indignantly. “And what if the ball had hit the driver on the head? I’d send him to a Mafia prison for at least ten years. Dad says there is such a prison in Sicily...”

“Bicocca,” moaned Dad. “Near Catania.”

“That’s right,” nodded Acronis. “But first we should arrange a face-to-face confrontation between him and Mr. Pellegrini.”

“This would be pointless,” said Dad. “Neither of them will say anything. These men took a vow of silence.”

“Tough luck,” said Acronis. “I’ll have to take care of Balena Azzurra’s security myself.”

“You’ll have to take care of maths, English and the harp,” Mum reminded her, without turning around. “And do the homework given on all the days you’ve missed.”

“Whatever...” retorted Acronis under her breath. “Dad and I only skipped two days.”

“Don’t worry,” her brother comforted her. “The next race is in Silverstone, not far from home. And you’ll already be on holiday.”

“Did you hear that, Mum?” brightened up Acronis.

“Don’t even think of asking to go there!” Mum retorted.

“But, Mummy, I’ll be on holiday!”

“Only if you score eighty-five percent or more on your maths test,” said Mum firmly. “For now, be quiet please, all of you, I have a headache!”

“And what if she gets eighty-four percent?” asked Dad.

“I said be quiet!” said Mum sternly.

They all fell silent. Dad pulled out a notepad from his jacket and scribbled a note to Acronis. “We’ll do your maths homework in the evening, after bathtime.” Acronis nodded.

* * *

The Silverstone track is located on a military airfield that was abandoned after the war. During the first race seventy years ago, an English driver hit a sheep that had accidentally wandered onto the track. Since then, the British race has been known as the Mouton Race – a “lamb race”.

Aeneas said that the IT support service of Balena Azzurra had been working wonders: the simulator for wet tyres was fully functional again. It was still impossible to practise for dry weather, though. They could only hope that it would rain during the race.

“It often rains in England,” said Dad optimistically at breakfast on Friday.

Mum, who tended to trust weather forecasts, shrugged skeptically.

“It will rain on Saturday during the third qualifying session,” she said. “But on Sunday there’s a less than twenty percent chance of precipitation.”

“When will the results of the test become known, Mummy?” asked Acronis.

“Soon,” promised Mum.

The phone rang. It was Aeneas.

“Are you coming to the training session?” he asked.

“Dad will definitely be there, but I don’t know yet,” said Acronis.

“Well, then I’ll have to share some secret information with you over the phone, Do you know whose fingerprints were on that glass?”

“Corrado-Luigi Novarro’s?” gasped Acronis.

“Not exactly. Our detectives have contacted the Italian carabinieri brigade called Nemesis. It turned out that they didn’t have Novarro’s fingerprints – he has never been arrested. But they ran the fingerprints of the man in the white suit through their database in search of a match. It turned out they belong to a certain Nino di Celestino, a restaurant owner from Palermo, involved in kidnapping several British citizens ten years ago. He managed to do a runner then. Nemesis believes that Novarro may be hiding under the name of Celestino.”

“I told you! It’s him!” exclaimed Acronis, jumping with excitement.

“Nemesis will send their agents to the race to get this guy arrested if he turns up. And you and Dad will have to identify him.”

“Yay, so I’m going to the race anyway!” exclaimed Acronis, delighted. “Get dressed, Dad, we are leaving immediately.”

“Eighty-four,” said Mum, who had just received an e-mail with the results of the school test.

“Eighty-four is nearly eighty-five. Anyhow, it doesn’t matter, because I am a witness for Nemesis,” said Acronis triumphantly.

“We are all going,” Mum decided. “Darling, why aren’t you dressed yet?”

* * *

After a couple of training sessions it became clear that with soft tyres Aeneas and Johnny were still far behind the Campomorto brothers. Their only hope was that it would rain during the race. During the break, Mum, Dad and Acronis took a stroll along the pit-lane and had a good look at the cars of the Balena Azzurra and Corvo Nero. Dad showed Acronis the roll hoops that protect the driver in case of an impact from the back.

“Under current rules, in the event of an accident the driver should be able to leave the car in five seconds. To do that, he only has to remove the wheel and unfasten the belt,” said Dad.

“Ah, that’s why I couldn’t get out of Aeneas’s car,” remembered Acronis. “It just didn’t occur to me to remove the wheel.”

One of the Balena Azzurra mechanics asked Acronis if she would like to get into a racing car again.

“No, thank you,” said Acronis. “If anything breaks there during the race, then Aeneas could blame it on me.”

“And what if the driver can’t leave the car on his own?” asked Mum.

“Then he is pulled out,” explained the mechanic. “There are loops on the shoulders of the driver’s overall – like shoulder straps. They are used for pulling the driver out.”

“Ugh,” shuddered Mum.

A stranger in jeans and a T-shirt had just come out of the box.

“Could I have a quick word with you, sir?” he said to Dad.



OMERTA

The rule of silence respected by nearly all 'men of honour' – members of the Sicilian Mafia, their friends and relatives. 'I saw nothing, I heard nothing, I know nothing' is what they invariably say in reply to any questions from the police or outsiders.

“Yes, of course,” said Dad.

“Sebastiano Guarneri, colonel of the carabinieri brigade,” the man in jeans introduced himself. “I understand that you and your daughter can identify a man who calls himself Mr. Pellegrini?”

“Yes,” said Dad. “We can try. Although he was wearing sunglasses, when we saw him, so it won’t be easy to recognise him.”

“I wouldn’t mistake him for anyone else,” chimed in Acronis.

“Very well,” said Colonel Guarneri. “Here's what we’re going to do: you’ll take these signal devices with you to the race.”

He pulled two small plastic boxes out of his pocket.

“It’s a very simple device,” he said. “See this round button? As soon as you press it, we’ll know that you’ve spotted Mr. Pellegrini. Our people will take care of the rest.”

Dad and Acronis turned the wonderful boxes over in their hands, practised pressing the button several times and, finally, pocketed them.

“Just one more thing. If you see me in the Garage Club during the race, act as though you don’t know me,” said the colonel.



BALACLAVA

An item of headgear worn under the helmet, made from fire-resistant material used to protect the driver's head and neck from fire.



Chapter 11

As Mum had predicted, it started to rain between the second and third qualifying session. The Balena Azzurra box greeted the raindrops with delight: Aeneas and Johnny managed to stay in the first top ten this time, finishing tenth and eighth respectively. This meant that they were eligible to participate in the third qualifying session, which determined the pole position and the order of the cars on the starting grid during the race.

Mechanics rolled out a trolley loaded with Piccioni tyres with deep grooves in the tread pattern. Each tyre was wrapped in a blue cover: the colour of the cover makes it easy to distinguish wet tyres from hard, soft and super-soft slicks.

“We’ll see what kind of a ‘lamb race’ it’s going to be!” exclaimed Johnny cheerfully, leaning out from under the box’s canopy. “Just look at that dark cloud!”

He pulled on his balaclava and helmet and got into his car. Aeneas followed suit. During qualifying sessions cars go out on the track in random order – it is more important to show the best lap time rather than cross the finish line first. Johnny and Aeneas could not wait to try out the wet tyres in the rain. They had good reason to hope that they could fight for the pole position.

Mum, Dad and Acronis were sitting in the Balena Azzurra suite. Acronis kept glancing at the Corvo Nero seats every now and then. The man in the white suit was not there.

“Never mind,” thought Acronis. “Last time he only appeared at the main race. As long as we don’t miss him tomorrow.”

She felt the signal device in her pocket and looked at Dad, who was finishing a fruit salad he had bought at the bar.

“Listen carefully to what I have to say, Dad” said Acronis. “Tomorrow, when I go for a walk along the pit-lane, you will stay here to keep an eye on the bar. Order the same fruit salad and take your time eating it. If Don Corrado appears downstairs, I will see him, and if he goes upstairs, you will.”

Dad nodded in acquiescence. At that moment, the third qualifying session began. The two Balena Azzurra cars were the first to fly onto the track, followed by the Corvo Nero brothers. The cars were raising a cloud of mist along the way.

“He’ll get soaked and catch a cold,” said Dad, watching Aeneas’s car disappear behind a turn.

“Don’t be silly, darling,” Mum cut him off. “He’s wearing a waterproof overall.”

The screens showed the drivers passing tricky chicanes, accelerating in high-speed sections and slowing down at the curves. On the second lap the stopwatch was turned on. It became obvious that the ten days Johnny and Aeneas had spent practising this race on the simulator had not been wasted. Johnny showed the best time, completing the lap in one minute, thirty-eight and six-tenths of a second. Aeneas followed with a delay of only three-hundredths of a second, leaving Gaetano and Bruno Campomorto significantly behind. They crossed the finish line thirteen-hundredths and nineteen-hundredths of a second later, respectively. The next couple of laps did not change the results: Johnny won the pole position and Aeneas took the second place.

“Are you sure it’s not going to rain tomorrow, darling?” asked Dad timidly.

“There’s a twenty percent chance of rain,” reminded Mum.

Dad sighed.

“What a shame. They could have had a real chance of winning for the British race.”

“And get targeted again?” said Mum resentfully. “No, let them stay quietly in the second ten.”

* * *

Despite Mum’s hopes, the day of the big race in Silverstone was overcast and grey. The audience in the Grandstands was shivering with cold: it was freezing.

“That’s British weather for you!” chirped Mr. Macintosh. He was sitting next to Dad at the bar, glancing at the TV screen from time to time. The cameras showed

a close-up of Prince William, who was talking to the drivers in the pit-lane. For a short moment, Acronis's worried face flashed in the crowd.

"Have you finished your salad, darling?" said Mum, giving Dad a nudge. "It's almost time for the anthem."

"Yes, dear," said Dad distractedly. A man in a white suit and sunglasses was walking across the hall of the Garage Club.

"Is it him or not?" wondered Dad.

The man in the white suit walked to the bar, ordered a Campari and soda, glanced at Dad's fruit salad and retired to the Corvo Nero suite.

"It's him!" decided Dad, pushed the button on the signal device, swallowed the last strawberry and got up from his stool.

"Let's go to the suite," he suggested to Mum and Mr. Macintosh.

"You go, and I'll go down and fetch Acronis," said Mum.

She left her half-finished glass at the bar and briskly went to the staircase leading to the ground floor. Dad and Mr. Macintosh were heading slowly for the suite. On his way, Dad passed Colonel Guarneri, but pretended not to know him.

Acronis met Mum in the middle of the staircase. The girl was beaming.

"I just saw him," she whispered to Mum. "He is in the Corvo Nero box, talking to the mechanics. He won't escape now – the Nemesis are coming for him..."

Suddenly, she stopped talking and stared at the bar. Mum followed her gaze and saw that a man in a white suit and sunglasses was occupying the same stool that Mr. Macintosh had been sitting just a minute ago. He was sipping a pink cocktail through a straw. Campari and soda, guessed Mum.

"I don't get it," whispered Acronis. "He was in the box only a few minutes ago. Why did they let him go?"

She pulled the signal device out of her pocket and pressed the button several times with force. The next moment, Colonel Guarneri appeared at her side.

"Is that him?" he asked, looking a bit confused.

"Yes, that's him," whispered Acronis. "Get him, he's very cunning!"

"Wait for me in the Balena Azzurra suite," said the colonel and held up the race programme in his hand. Two Maranello fans joined the man at the bar and got talking to him, exchanging some cheerful remarks.

Mum and Acronis took their seats in the suite. The orchestra was playing “God Save the Queen”, and the audience was on their feet. Dad leaned over to Acronis and whispered into her ear:

“I found him! There he is, look!”

Acronis looked at the neighbouring suite and saw a man in a white suit and sunglasses. He had a drink in one hand and a newspaper in the other.

“Impossible...” gasped Acronis. “How could he have got there?”

“Have you called the Nemesis?” she asked Dad.

“I did indeed. Twice,” he said proudly.

Engines roared, and cars started to appear on the track. Mechanics, marshals and journalists were waiting for them at the starting grid. There were ten minutes left before the race. The guests of the Garage Club leaned over the railing to see the multitude of people, scurrying like ants between the boxes, the pit-lane and the starting grid. There was an atmosphere of great anticipation: the strong performance of the Balena Azzurra drivers in the qualifying sessions promised a tough battle in the big race.

Two tall men in branded Maranello T-shirts slipped into the Corvo Nero suite and, grabbing the man in the white suite firmly by the elbows, told him something quietly. The man shrugged his shoulders, left his drink and the paper on a table and followed them out.

“Did you see that, Dad? They’ve arrested him!” whispered Acronis excitedly.

Meanwhile, the cars began to take their places on the starting grid. The position of each car was marked with a number on a long pole. Johnny was starting from pole position. Aeneas was in second. Both drivers kept looking up at the sky: the rain had not started. They would have to start on soft tyres.

Colonel Guarneri peeked into the Balena Azzurra suite. Dad and Acronis stood up to meet him.

“Sorry to bother you,” said the colonel with a look of concern on his face, “but I need your assistance.”

“Of course,” said Dad. He began to make his way out of the suite to the annoyed hissing of the other guests. Acronis followed him. After a moment Mum decided to come along, too.

The double red lights over the track went out. The racing cars dashed forward. The race began.



MARSHALS

Course officials. Marshals stand around the track and their job is to provide security during races.



Chapter 12

Aeneas and Johnny managed to maintain the lead at the start, but by the second lap it was already clear that it wouldn't be for much longer. They both made a tactical mistake when passing the first chicane, allowing four cars in a row to overtake them. Gaetano Campomorto surged ahead, with his brother Bruno at his heels, closely followed by the Maranello and the Black Dog cars. Johnny was able to hold on to this four-car peloton during the next four laps. Aeneas ended up a hundred metres behind Johnny, in sixth place.

While engines roared on the Silverstone track and twenty-two racing cars covered one lap after another, equally dramatic events were unfolding in the conference room of the Garage Club. Three men in white suits and sunglasses were sitting in chairs in the centre of the room. All three looked extremely irritated. Behind the chairs stood five burly young men dressed in Maranello colours. They were keeping a close watch and ready to prevent any dangerous moves on the part of the suspects. Dad, Mum and Acronis were milling around by the door, looking confused. Colonel Guarneri was pacing the room.

“Look carefully one more time: which of these people did you see in the Corvo Nero suite during the Spielberg race?” he asked Dad.

“I think the one on the right... But I'm not quite sure...” said Dad.

“And you, Acronis, do you recognise any of them?” the colonel continued.

“They all look very much like that man,” admitted Acronis. “However, since Dad has chosen the right one, I'll go for the left one. Dad is always getting things wrong.”

“Why don’t you take their fingerprints and compare them to those you already have?” asked Mum.

“We’ve done that already,” replied Colonel Guarneri. “The fingerprints have been sent to the laboratory. We’ll have the results in half an hour.”

“We are not going to stay here for another half hour,” exclaimed one of the men in the white suits. “You’ve obviously got the wrong people. Let us go immediately!”

“We are investigating a crime,” the colonel replied firmly. “It’s about detaining a dangerous criminal. So you’ll have to spend as much time in this room as necessary. And not a second less.”

“And what about us, can we go?” asked Mum.

“Yes,” agreed the colonel. “Let me know if you come across anyone else in a white suit.”

* * *

Mum, Dad and Acronis returned to the Balena Azzurra suite. Acronis was dismayed. There was something that did not feel right. It seemed that Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro had outsmarted them again.

Dark foreboding clouds had gathered over the track and, all of a sudden, rain started pouring down. The marshals, who were standing on either side of the circuit, began to wave yellow flags. One by one, the cars began to drive over to the pit-lane. Wet tyres had to be fitted.

“The situation in the race may change dramatically!” cried the commentator. “The qualifying sessions have shown that the Balena Azzurra drivers have an advantage with wet tyres. Yesterday Johnny Lightning was simply unstoppable. Now the Corvo Nero team will have to do their damndest to stay in the lead. And there are still twenty-nine laps to go!”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this, Dad,” said Acronis. “I don’t like the look of it at all...”

“Why?” asked Dad in surprise. “Now Aeneas and Johnny will be able to surge ahead. They have a fighting chance of winning the British race.”

“And this doesn’t sound good to me...” whispered Acronis. “But what can we do about it?”

The cars were getting back to the track and the race continued. The first to emerge in a cloud of rainy mist were the silver-black cars of Corvo Nero. The mechanics serving Gaetano and Bruno had done an impeccable job changing the tyres. The gap between the Corvo Nero team and the cars of Maranello and Black Dog, which were trailing in third and fourth respectively, had grown to several dozen metres. Johnny and Aeneas, however, were now hot on the heels of the Maranello and the Black Dog. Now they were able to handle the chicanes with greater confidence than their opponents. By the end of two laps, Johnny had overtaken the Black Dog car. The Maranello driver had maintained the third position for two more laps before Johnny sped past him too. Only a hundred metres separated him from the Gaetano–Bruno tandem. Aeneas was battling it out with the Black Dog driver for the fifth position. It was pelting with rain. The race had slowed down, and the cars were moving with more caution. Marshals and medical staff were on full alert: the Silverstone circuit was known to be very dangerous in rainy weather.

With ten laps remaining, Colonel Guarneri walked into the Balena Azzurra suite again. Acronis rushed to meet him.

“Well?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, we had to let all three of the men go,” he told her. “None of their fingerprints match those taken off the glass during the Spielberg race.”

“That’s too bad,” said Acronis, shaking her head. “Please place your men in the stands. Get the police helicopters up into the air. Something horrible may happen.”

The colonel gave Acronis a serious look, nodded and left the suite.

The Campomorto brothers were sticking together. On the turns, Gaetano drove closer to the inner edge and Bruno squeezed up against the outer edge, so as to block any attack by the pursuers. Johnny was going close behind the two Corvo Nero cars, but could not get a chance to overtake them. On the other hand, things were going well for Aeneas: on a speed section of the track he dashed past the Black Dog car, confidently negotiated a corner and levelled up with the Maranello.

Three laps before the finish Gaetano and Bruno were still in the lead. Johnny was on their heels. Aeneas and the Maranello driver were following Johnny at a distance of about fifty metres. The Black Dog car was in sixth position. On the penultimate lap, Johnny launched a decisive attack. He performed a risky manoeuvre at the Woodcote Chicane: he wedged himself between Bruno and Gaetano and, having chosen the right position, forced Bruno to go off track and lose speed. Two kilome-

tres before the finish, Gaetano was still leading, Johnny was half-a-car length behind, and Bruno was locked in a struggle for the third position with Aeneas and the Maranello driver. Eight hundred metres before the finish, at the exit from the deadly Woodcote Chicane, a terrible accident occurred.

Johnny, who had almost caught up with the leader, suddenly lost control of his car, and it went into a spin. The cars that were following behind him had no time to react. Bruno Campomorto was the first to collide with Johnny. Breaking the fairing, his car rammed into Johnny's, swayed to the left before it was sent flying over Johnny's car, crashing at full speed into the concrete wall at the finish line. Johnny was still conscious and frantically trying to straighten out his car on the track. Then he was hit by Aeneas. After the collision of the two Balena Azzurra cars, Johnny's car lost the right rear wheel. A fragment of the spoiler hit Johnny on the helmet: he lost consciousness and let go of the steering wheel. The car continued to spin on three wheels. It flew onto the lawn, buried its nose in the ground, flipped over and flew another two dozen metres before finally coming to a stop in a cloud of smoke.

When Aeneas's car bumped into Johnny's, it bounced off to the left and crashed at full speed into the Maranello. Dad and Acronis closed their eyes, but Mum was already dialing the emergency service. Helicopters appeared over the track right after the cockpit of Aeneas's car, separated from the chassis, performed an incredible acrobatic figure in the air and crashed into the concrete wall a few metres away from Bruno Campomorto's car, which was enveloped in flames. The Maranello driver escaped with only a light shock: the front part of his car flattened like an accordion when it hit, but it protected the cockpit with the driver. The Maranello driver managed to detach the wheel and jump out of the car before it caught fire.

* * *

Gaetano Campomorto crossed the finish line, but by that time no one was paying any attention to him. The Black Dog car that had been in the sixth position managed to slow down in time. The driver jumped out of his car and rushed to what was left of Aeneas's car. Firefighters were already on the scene. The marshals were waving black flags frantically to stop the race. The emergency helicopter landed on the track.

"Let's get to the car, quick," commanded Mum, putting down the phone. "They are taking him to St Mary's Hospital in Silverstone."

Mum was the first to rush out of the suite, sweeping a waiter off his feet and turning a trolley with drinks. Dad and Acronis dashed after her. As they hurried to the exit, they whisked past the confused guards of the Garage Club, Colonel Guarneri and the journalists. Acronis was not sure where she was going, but ran as fast as she could.

Suddenly, in no time at all, they found themselves near Dad's car. He started the engine and, beeping frantically, rushed to the exit of the huge car park. Mum was setting the route to the hospital on the sat-nav. Acronis huddled nervously in the back seat – she was scared. “At the crossroads, turn left, then go straight for three hundred and fifty yards,” said the navigator.





chapter 13

Dad was not a racing driver, but he was doing his best. The car was racing along the wet road, three times faster than the allowed speed limit. Acronis was being tossed from side to side in the back seat. She even gave a little whimper when she bumped her head on the ceiling. Mum barked, “Fasten your seat belt,” which made her forget about the bump on her head. The news from the crash site was being broadcast live on the radio. “The firefighters have put out the flames that enveloped several racing cars. The three drivers with the most serious injuries are being airlifted to hospital. They are accompanied by the Royal Marines Intensive Care Unit Crew. Team managers have declined to comment. What had made Johnny Macintosh’s car drift? A Piccioni representative is denying that his company’s tyres may be defective. Prince William has expressed admiration for the drivers’ courage...”

“Darling, go faster!” Mum commanded.

Dad decided to overtake a beautiful black car with tinted windows. The driver of the black car was clearly not happy about this. He beeped nervously for a while, but then decided it would be safer to let Dad through. At that moment the navigator said: “In two hundred and fifty yards, make a sharp left turn”. Dad hit the brakes and tried to move to the inside lane. This rather clumsy manoeuvre caught the driver of the beautiful black car off guard and the luxurious car crashed into the back of Dad’s car. Dad’s car jumped to the left, hitting the pavement and knocking down a traffic light pole. The windshield cracked all over and sagged as if it were made of plastic. The engine stalled.

“Darling, I just wanted to change lanes...” Dad tried to justify himself. He opened the door and looked out. The black car was stopped in the middle of the road with a broken radiator and flashing yellow lights.

“We’ll have to order a taxi,” said Mum.

She began to call the taxi service and then the insurance company. Acronis and Dad got out of the car. It was wet and dank outside.

“Why does it all have to happen at once?” thought Acronis to herself. “A mere fifteen minutes ago, everything was fine.”

Dad approached the black car to apologise to the driver and exchange insurance details. Acronis trudged after him. The driver rolled down the window, nodded indifferently and rolled it up again. For a second Acronis got a glimpse of the passenger in the left front seat of the black car – and Acronis recognised him. It was him, there could be no mistake!

The man in the white suit and sunglasses – Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro – was sitting in that car!

Acronis casually went back to Dad’s car and climbed into her seat. Only then did she pull out of her pocket the signal device she had not had the chance to return to Colonel Guarneri. Pressing the round button again and again, Acronis wondered if this was a long-range alarm and whether the Nemesis officers would get the signal. No one was paying her any attention. Dad had pulled out his smartphone to go online to find the latest news about Aeneas. Mum was talking to the insurance company.

* * *

The minutes of anxious expectation dragged by slowly. Two broken cars stood side by side on the empty road. It started to drizzle. Mum managed to get through to the hospital. She was told that the helicopter had already landed. “The drivers are being transported to the hospital. It’s too early to talk about their condition. Two of them are conscious and one is unconscious. That’s all we have to say for now. Please call later.”

Dad was skimming through online reports about Aeneas and Johnny. They made such terrible reading that he did not dare read them out loud. He showed the phone to Mum, but she commented coolly.



COCKPIT

The part of the racing car in which the driver sits. The cockpit is cramped and uncomfortable, and during a race, the driver has to spend hours on end inside it. In the event of an accident, the cockpit should provide maximum protection to the driver from injury.

“Rubbish. They don’t know anything and are making it up. Better try to hail a passing car. It will take ages for the taxi to get here.”

Dad got out of the car and waved to a passing truck. But the truck did not stop. Then a yellow minibus appeared on the road. It slowed down by the crashed black car. A passenger climbed out of the black car – he was wearing a white suit and sunglasses.

“Excuse me, could you take us to St Mary’s Hospital, please?” asked Dad, running up to him.

The man in the sunglasses did not answer. He casually sat down in the front passenger seat of the yellow minibus and slammed the door shut. Enraged by this act of indifference, Dad started to bang on the window of the minibus. At that point, Acronis’s phone rang in her pocket. She pressed the green icon on the screen and held the phone to her ear.

“Hello?”

“Have you found someone again?” asked Colonel Guarneri’s voice.

“Yes, it’s definitely him!” exclaimed Acronis. “He is getting into a yellow minibus with the number plate WRIO TNL. They will probably be heading in the direction of Silverstone.”

“Could you hold him up for a few minutes?” asked the colonel.

“I’ll try,” promised Acronis.

Dad was still standing near the minibus, but no one was paying attention to him. The driver of the black car was talking in Italian to the driver of the minibus. Acronis ran up to Dad, took him by the hand and pulled him aside.

“What are you doing?” asked Dad, surprised.

“If we stand in front of the minibus, it won’t be able to move,” said Acronis. “They can’t run us over, can they?”

Dad dutifully took a position near the front bumper of the minibus. This dangerous move finally attracted the attention of the Italians. The driver of the black car looked at him and said:

“They can’t give you a lift. Call a taxi!”

“Listen,” said Dad. “We need to get to the hospital quickly. My son has had a serious accident...”

“I’m very sorry, but my friends won’t be able to help you,” repeated the driver politely but firmly.

Acronis’s phone rang again.

“Are you coming or not?” she cried into the phone.

“Why are you shouting?” asked a familiar voice.

Acronis held her breath.

“Aeneas? Is it you? Are you alive?”

Tears poured down her face. She rarely cried. The last time was a year ago when Dad accidentally shut her finger in the door of the study.

“Yeah, I’m alive... Tell Mum and Dad I’m alright.”

Mum had already come up to her. She snatched the phone from Acronis.

“What have you broken?” she asked in a panic.

“Nothing special, just two ribs and one leg,” he replied casually.

The driver of the minibus got tired of watching this touching scene. He backed off, pulled to the roadside, turned the wheels to the right and was preparing to steer the car into the motorway.

“How’s Johnny?” Mum wanted to know.

“A concussion... but he has a strong skull,” Aeneas told her optimistically.

The minibus followed a Peppa Pig ice cream truck onto the motorway. Suddenly, a serving window on the side of the truck fell open and several shots were fired. The brakes squealed. The minibus turned sharply and sped down a side road that went around the abandoned Silverstone airfield. Three men in black balaclavas jumped out of the Peppa Pig truck.

“Get down!” one of them waved to Mum, Dad and Acronis. The other two continued to fire at the minibus. They shot out its back tyres. The minibus drove another fifty metres, flat tyres slapping the asphalt, and then stopped.

Acronis had been so absorbed in what was going on that she had forgotten to lie down. She realised that only when the black car driver grabbed her roughly by the arm and pulled her towards him.

“Drop your guns or I’ll kill the girl!” he cried.

The men in balaclavas reluctantly put down their guns and rifles. Holding Acronis tight, the evil driver moved back to his car. He smelled of garlic and tobacco. Acronis

was not frightened, but she definitely wanted to escape.

Suddenly there was a dull thud. The driver let go of Acronis and collapsed to the ground.

“Bravo, madam!” one of the men in balaclavas approvingly said to Mum. “What did you hit him with?”

“A phone, of course...” replied Mum. “Darling, you’ll have to buy a new one.”

“Why did it have to be my phone, I wonder?” asked Dad in surprise.

Further conversation was drowned in the noise of helicopter propellers. Two military helicopters landed near the minibus that was stuck on the side road. More people in balaclavas started to jump out onto the ground. The man in the white suit and sunglasses offered no resistance to being arrested. When handcuffing him, Colonel Guarneri asked politely,

“So how are you doing, Don Corrado?”

Don Corrado (if it was indeed him) did not reply.





AQUAPLANING

An effect in which a vehicle loses traction with the road due to a thick layer of water on the surface. The tyre protector does not manage to displace the excess of water from under the wheel in time, and, as a consequence, the field of contact with the road decreases rapidly, which causes the car to slide uncontrollably.



Chapter 14

When the taxi arrived, Acronis and Mum went to the hospital, leaving Dad waiting for a tow truck. Acronis was very eager to see Aeneas. She was also starving. They had to wait for a while at the hospital.

First the doctors put Aeneas's leg in a plaster cast. Then they put him on a trolley and took him to a ward. Johnny was already there, lying on a bed with his head covered in bandages. He was conscious, but he spoke little and soon fell asleep. While Aeneas was away, Acronis strolled up and down the corridor, studying medical posters on the walls. The door to the neighbouring ward was half open. Bruno Campomorto was there. Of the three drivers, his injuries were the most severe. He had broken both arms when he crashed into the concrete wall. Because of the broken arms he had been unable to detach the wheel and get out of the car before it had caught fire. As a result, he had sustained severe burns.

Gaetano was sitting at his brother's bedside with a depressed look on his face. Acronis did not dare enter and peeking through the gap in the door was bad manners. She went back to Aeneas and Johnny's ward. Mr. Macintosh was already there. He was talking to Mum in a low voice.

"First they suspected a basilar skull fracture. But the X-ray showed that there was no fracture: just a neck dislocation and a concussion. In a couple of months everything should be back to normal."

"Have you spoken to the Balena Azzurra management about their plans for the drivers?" asked Mum.

"No, but it's obvious, isn't it?" said Mr. Macintosh, shrugging his shoulders. "This season Johnny is definitely out of the competition. And so is Aeneas, by the

look of it. Balena Azzurra will bring in reserve drivers. In addition, two racing cars have been smashed to pieces. It's a serious loss for our stable."

"Aeneas says he's going to take up skydiving now," complained Mum. "To make sure he breaks all the remaining bones."

"There's nothing we can do about it," Mr. Macintosh tried to comfort her. "Racing drivers will be the first men to land on Mars. It's just the way they are. And even if some of them don't make it, it will not deter the others."

Acronis walked over to Aeneas's bed. Despite his cheerful assertions, Aeneas did not look well. After an injection of an anesthetic he was sleepy and pale.

"Hey, what actually happened on the track?" Acronis asked him. "Why did Johnny start skidding?"

"It looked like aquaplaning," replied Aeneas. "When tyres suddenly lose traction with the road, the car begins to slide on water film."

"But why did it happen only to Johnny and why in that place?" wondered Acronis.

"Something similar happened to me at the Monte Carlo race. Remember that?" asked Aeneas. "I skidded on dry track at the exit from the pit-lane. It looked as though motor oil had been splashed on the track."

"Yes. And then you were also riding behind Gaetano," remembered Acronis. She got up decisively and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Mum.

"I'll go and get something tasty from the vending machine," said Acronis.

"Anything but crisps!" Mum warned her.

Acronis came out into the corridor and quickly ran to Bruno Campomorto's ward. The door was still ajar. Acronis peeked inside the room cautiously. Nothing had changed. Bruno, all covered in bandages, seemed to be sleeping. Gaetano was sitting on a chair beside his bed.

Acronis walked up to Gaetano and looked him in the eye. The driver looked away.

"Listen, Signor Campomorto," said Acronis. "I know you won't tell me anything. But you must swear that you will never do what you did in Monte Carlo six weeks ago and in Silverstone today."

Gaetano looked up, gazed at her intently and nodded silently. Acronis nodded back and walked out of the ward.

She met Dad in the corridor.

“Well?” he asked anxiously.

“Let’s go,” replied Acronis. “I’m absolutely ravenous!”

* * *

Ten minutes later, Dad, Mum, Acronis and Mr. Macintosh were busily consuming sandwiches that Dad had bought. It was still drizzling outside. It was nearly time for the evening medical round, when relatives are asked to leave the hospital. But the relatives concerned were in no hurry to leave. They were slowly regaining composure after the day. Sandwiches were disappearing one by one.

“I’ve heard that the British race awards ceremony was held today, but the winner wasn’t there,” said Mr. Macintosh. “Gaetano Campomorto disappeared from the circuit right after crossing the finish line.”

“He is sitting in the next room,” Acronis told him, with her mouth full.

“It is clear that he has been greatly upset by his brother’s accident,” continued Mr. Macintosh. “At any rate, Gaetano stands a very good chance of becoming the world champion. The points scored by Johnny up to now are still not enough to secure him a leading position all through the season.”

“How stupid and unfair,” said Acronis.

“Remember the words of Ayrton Senna,” Dad objected. “‘We all know what we get paid for.’ He said this before his last race in Imola.”

“Darling, could you pass me the tuna sandwich?” Mum interrupted, trying to change the subject.

“Speaking of money!” remembered Acronis. “I deserve a reward for capturing the most notorious criminal of our time. How much is the head of Don Corrado worth? Ten million dollars?”

“You must be mixing him up with Osama bin Laden,” Dad corrected her. “That was the reward for capturing him. But if you really helped catch Don Corrado-Luigi Novarro, I’ll give you twenty pounds to buy crisps, hula hoops, Pokemon and whatever else there is.”

“Better get me a new iPad instead,” asked Acronis eagerly.



Chapter 15

A week later, Aeneas was discharged from hospital. At home he quickly learnt to slide down the handrail of the stairs, holding his leg in a cast in front of him. Acronis and her brother spent time playing field hockey, with Aeneas using his crutch instead of a hockey stick. Mum had booked a cruise along the coast of Scandinavia during the last week of August.

“It doesn’t make sense going to a beach resort: Aeneas won’t be able to go swimming. And at least on the ship some nice food will be served”, she explained.

The day before their departure, Johnny and Mr. Macintosh came to visit them. Johnny was wearing a thick white collar, which prevented him from turning his head. Otherwise, he looked like his usual self. Dad was roasting steaks on the grill. Mum was lounging in a deckchair with a glass of white wine. Mr. Macintosh was describing his round of golf from the day before with great enthusiasm. Acronis, Aeneas and Johnny were sitting on a swing in the far corner of the garden, talking about the latest developments.

The investigation into the accident at the Silverstone race had not revealed any technical defects in the track or the cars. It had been determined that the most likely reason why Johnny’s car had skidded was the driver error, which had led to aquaplaning. The Balena Azzurra stable had bravely endured the loss of two drivers and two racing cars. Two new drivers had made their debut at the Dutch race. They had not managed to bring points to their team yet, but both showed solid skills on the track. Gaetano Campomorto had brought a convincing victory to the Corvo Nero team and was being called the new Schumacher. Experts believed that the Italian race in Monza would be his moment of triumph. On the other hand, there were

rumours that the financial situation of the Corvo Nero stable was rather shaky. The team was on the verge of bankruptcy. Perhaps Dolores or McGregor would buy them.

“Any news of Bruno Campomorto?” asked Acronis.

“He has been transferred to a private clinic in Switzerland,” replied Johnny. “He seems to be on the mend.”

Dad invited everyone to sit down at the table. This time he managed to roast the beef perfectly and serve it in neatly cut slices. The weather was wonderful, and the Sunday lunch in the garden was simply splendid. Once the meat was eaten, Dad brought out a cheese plate.

“I would like to propose a toast to putting all the trouble of this year behind us!” said Mr. Macintosh. “And I would also like to raise my glass to an insightful and fearless girl, who has helped us to avoid even greater trouble – to Acronis!”

Everyone began to clink glasses with Acronis, who was a bit embarrassed by all the attention. She felt like doing a couple of cartwheels or jumping on the trampoline. But that was not all. Mum spoke after Mr. Macintosh.

“And somehow this girl managed to get decent marks in her preliminary tests. The local grammar school is prepared to offer her a place provided that she passes her exams in January.”

“Really?” exclaimed Dad. “Why didn’t you tell us before?”

“Moreover,” continued Mum, “she has been promised a sports scholarship!”

“Crikey!” exclaimed Johnny. “Not for her passion for motor racing, I hope?”

“Not only that,” explained Aeneas. “Acronis is the school long and high jump champion.”

“Well, in that case,” said Dad smiling, “she deserves a little present.”

“Have you bought her something again, darling?” asked Mum suspiciously.

“It’s only an iPad,” he said, handing a box to Acronis. “Well, and a little extra something. It’s in the garage.”

Acronis did not always behave like a polite and well-mannered girl. But this time, with the guests being present, she thanked Dad first and only then ran off to the garage. Intrigued, Aeneas and Johnny followed her.

Mum, Dad and Mr. Macintosh remained at the table finishing the French cheeses

that Dad had brought.

“What will she be when she grows up, I wonder?” asked Mr. Macintosh.

“At the moment she intends to become a private detective,” replied Dad.

Mum sniffed skeptically. Meanwhile, screams and shrieks were coming from the garage. Then they were replaced by a buzzing noise.

“Did you get her a vacuum cleaner?” Mum asked Dad.

“Not exactly...” answered Dad mysteriously.

The next moment a small car painted dark blue and red flew onto the lawn – an exact copy of the Balena Azzurra racing car. Acronis was sitting in the cockpit, wearing a real overall and helmet. Aeneas and Johnny were hobbling behind.

“Don’t speed up on the turns!” cried Aeneas. “Slow down!”

Acronis skillfully manoeuvred between the apple trees, speeding up and slowing down, as though she had spent all her life behind the wheel of an electric car.

“Kart racing!” exclaimed Mr. Macintosh. “A sport for fearless girls! Bravo, Acronis!”

“Darling, if she gets this contraption in the pool, you’ll have to pull it out!” said Mum.

Acronis made a sharp turn and pulled up by the table.

“Are you happy, little rascal?” asked Dad.

“Oh, yes!” answered Acronis.

THE END



About Author

Alexey Kavokin, born 1970 in St Petersburg, is a Professor at the Physics and Astronomy School of the University of Southampton, a Head of the Spin Optics Laboratory at the State University of St Petersburg, a Scientific Director of the Mediterranean Institute of Fundamental Physics and a Principal Investigator at the Russian Quantum Centre. Previously published books include “Microcavities” (Oxford University Press, 2007), “Cavity Polaritons” (Elsevier, 2003), “Saladin the Cat” (ERA, 2006), “Men of Science” (Altasphera, 2014). The interests include history, chess, cooking.

Acronis

About Acronis

The main character of the book – the brave red-haired girl – was named after the international company Acronis. Acronis protects computer data of millions of users and hundreds of thousands businesses around the world. Acronis loves new technologies, and it is this passion for progress that brought it together with racing. The engineers are always looking for innovations to make modern racing cars faster and safer. Winning a race requires collecting data from hundreds of sensors installed on every racing car. And that is where Acronis steps in – the company helps engineers to store their data safely.





