

THE CITY OF MASTERS

CHAPTER 1

I learned to remain silent for hours, to show the utmost respect, the greatest devotion. It was not complicated, it sufficed to stare into space, toward the hypno-screen, leaving the garbage to enter into the head, in the most absolute lack of criticism. I learned to say always yes to the screen, it was an automatic reflex, let's say involuntary.

At the veliport of Northbrooke there was usually no one, apart from certain ugly mugs. But those didn't count, they simply stared at the rusted floor, subduing their instincts to the authoritarian screen dictate. But today it was different: a distinguished gentleman dressed in black was chatting with an official of the line, insistently looking in my direction. This made the waiting scaring, but the screen had accustomed us humans not to ask too many questions. "Clora Lite!" extolled the smiling man. It was the hundredth time that I swallowed this. "Clora Lite! The secret to a beautiful smile." I began to believe he was right. "Clora Lite, Buy it from our authorized dealers. Bzzz"

The deafening hum of the astro-bus awoken me up. After fifteen hours of work, my legs were tough like cement. I performed the usual automatic actions to have a sit, while the ads went on inside my head like a chant: "Buy Clora Lite, buy Clora Lite ..." The man in black was standing few steps away and turned his head a couple of times, as he was

searching someone. Was that someone me?

I skimmed the magnetic sensor and my name, H9-F-OX-14-11, was recorded by the network and shown on the display, just a precaution, because every move was already tracked by the satellite telecommunication companies.

I sat behind the driver and scrutinized the strange gentleman to work out how he would behave. He paced back and forth a few times, then noticed an empty seat next to mine. I ignored him and began to watch the video-inducer in front of me. The smiling man, with his formidable Clora Lite, returned. A row of heads was watching the same images in a permanent state of ecstasy. No one moved.

For a moment I thought that the stranger was about to say something, then blew his nose. I could have changed the seat, but to do that I would have needed to talk him. I didn't know how to behave. I looked at the driver. At the numbed people. I looked at the man. The clock.

I looked out, the columns of light that lit up the high altitude smog. Then appeared him, the smiling man. Underneath, aircrafts of any kind whizzed, like mad missiles weaving a close web of trails. The glass skyscrapers of the Financial Center towered in the distance, overbearing and arrogant; below the winding Blue River broke in two an endless sea of concrete, of which nobody knew the limits and outside of which no one knew what there was.

Suddenly, the stranger stood up. It couldn't be a coincidence: I was getting off at Northville too! The astro-bus approached, swinging midair for several seconds, then the doors opened. I pushed my way through the crowd and started running. The man collided with two elderlies who nearly fell. Now he meant business. I turned suddenly a couple of times, he never

slackened. I ran into a procession of "zombies" descended from another line.

<<Excuse me, Sir!>> I shouted to one of them. <<Help... >> He walked on my feet like a mechanic soldier.

I shouted to another: <<Stop!>> Not even saw me, for him I was only a hologram come out from the screen. I continued to run against that insignificant mass of bodies. They all moved in the same way, with their looks lost in the space, one meter before them.

I caught the wrist of someone. <<Help me!>> Two placid eyes looked at me surprised.

Meanwhile the man in black reached me and stretched out an hand to grab me. I slipped down an alley and kept on running. After several blocks I started walking along a road lit by ads panels. Finally I was alone.

"Does the fear assail you?" reminded the speakers. "There is Vali, the insurance against cancers, heart attacks and arrests". Then, again: "Buy now the oil for your velicopter".

"Buy Croc! And for your children you'll receive Crac". The last few yards, then I pulled the handle closing the door immediately. I leaned back and heaved a sigh of relief. I plodded up the dark stairs, to the first floor. At the door threshold a thought hit me: what if someone was waiting me? I stepped inside firmly. The screen immediately turned on and I felt reassured.

"Linasil, and the tiredness goes away".

I lumbered to the couch, making my way in the trash. How could I find the time to tidy, fold the laundry and remove the cobwebs from the ceiling? I hit a plate that shattered on the floor and finally I collapsed on the couch. A cloud of dust rose from the furniture around and a note moved away from

the door, gliding slowly toward me. I picked it up, perplexed. The wind banged remote shutters, the cry of a crow made my blood freeze. Probably I was going to die.

YOU HADN'T TO DO IT!

Below was signed: YOUR SHADOW

I had not to do what? I didn't commit crimes and the police, anyway, wouldn't wait a minute to throw someone in jail. Who hell could it be?

I pocketed the note, trying to forget the horrible day; the screen in the meantime was sucking the last strengths. The System wanted us exhausted: I would have slept five hours and I would have been back at work. Who could think of protesting, after being exhausted by the fatigue and worn by the abuse? The system wanted us to be perfect automas! I had never disobeyed the screen, I always respected my seniors: the System did it for our own good, to protect us from criminals. No one would doubt it!

Had it been up to them, they would have taken away even the thought, would have entered it into a central computer, elaborated and re-elaborated, arresting all those not conformed to the correct thought.

How I loved the evening! That fleeting and intimate moment of freedom, where it was possible to free the mind from the work, allowing oneself the luxury of some incorrect thoughts. I also learned to ignore the speaker and the screen. How I loved the evening! The only time I could still dream. But this time maybe I wouldn't awake.

CHAPTER 2

The conveyor belt was almost perfect: all the pieces of tin at the same distance, the gruelling buzzing, the eternal click-clock of the gears. None was jamming, none of the valves was non-working. There was something terribly hypnotic, boring to death: the hands snapped back and forth, always with the same steady pace, as part of the gears.

The work of the Sector Chief Rick, in some ways, was even more boring. He spent the day in front of grey panels, ready to rip the head off to everyone, at the sight of a red light. He was a big man, wild-eyed. There was to stay away, leaving him to walk back and forth like a wild beast, with his big truncheon in hand.

In order not to incur his wrath was sufficient to do one's duty and regularly review the propedeutic hymns, printed in large letters in every room:

WORK IS MONEY AND MONEY IS WORK

The Visio Ltd was proud of his conditioning messages and we respected them, worshipped them. We knew them at our's fingertips, but few really understood the meaning and for me they were only a pile of crap!

My thoughts were illegal, I was aware of that, and to jolt me out of the torpor was something equally illegal.

<<Fitz>> I started. <<What are you doing here without a permission?>>

He waved to me to be quiet. <<At 1 pm, do you remember?>>

<<In the usual place>> I answered, but he had already left.

The big man grimaced, then came up with a slow pace, without speaking. I noticed from his glance he wanted me to go deep in trouble.

<<Why have we stopped?>> he grunted. <<I hope there is a valid reason!>>

The snout full of sores looked like that of a pig dulled by a flurry of punches.

He grunted a second time.

My arguments weren't to his liking and two guards interpreted a gesture from him as an order, carting me off to the Recovery Room. The matron was glad to see me for the second time in a day, and lifted the big syringe.

<<The Floren no!>> I cried.

<<Be still!>> The fat woman seized my arm, like a piece of meat to bite. I kicked, lashed out in the gloom, while she was holding me to the mat with her size. The needle penetrated the flesh like through butter.

<<End of the treatment!>> she held, satisfied.

I ran out with wounded and the blood was gushing from the neck. The fat woman with the buffalo-like head just called the next employee. That work was routine for her and it wasn't so different from working at the tin belt.

The corridor began to buckle, the walls to dissolve. I ran like a madman. The Floren was entered into the blood stream, the heart was beating like a piston. I felt strong, powerful. I would have worked as an automa for hours.

"Euphoria!" I threw the steel door open like I were going to take it off its hinges. The blood flowed to one thousand miles per hour and the arteries were strangling me. I worked non-stop for hours, like a well oiled machine, until I remembered

the appointment. The tungsten clock, one of the most advertised models, said the thirteen and five. Unobtrusively, I crossed the Dining Room and I came out in the courtyard. I went on along a wall topped with barbed wire, that marked the boundary with the outside, and I reached the oak tree where there should have been someone.

<<Fox>> a voice called. I turned and saw Fitz, whose real name was F-GB-Z24-16-7F-21. He sat near the big oak tree, expecting me to do the same.

I waited without speaking. His eyes stared at me, those of a wise and intelligent person.

<<What have you come to tell me?>> I asked, going to the point.

<<Nothing>> he said. He couldn't say anything illegal, every word was being recorded by our implanted microchips and the police could have used them against us.

<<Why are we here then?>> I asked.

He looked around, slipped his hand into the jacket and pulled out something.

<<Learn to use it!>> he Said, without adding more.

I took what seemed like a digital radio and hid it away.

<<What is it?>>

<<A distance interference radio-controlled pulse transmitter>>.

<<How on the earth can I use it, if I don't know what it is?>>

<<Actually>> he explained <<this is not the real name>>.

Then he pointed to the satellites to remind me that the chips would have recorded every speech, sending it to the surveillance system.

He pulled out a booklet and said: <<Study this!>>

I didn't want to end up in jail and I hid it immediately in the

jacket. I was going to talk about the message of the night before, but he waved to me to be quiet. Someone was approaching.

<<Now it's better to go!>> he Said.

<<When will we meet again?>> He didn't answer and we returned to the building following different paths. I was still entitled to five minutes of rest, so I pulled out a kilo-dollar coin and inserted it into the machine number 15, in the Dining Room. Two genetically modified pills felt down in my hands: that was my meal. I swallowed it, holding the breath for a moment. "That's all I need!" I thought, watching with horror the grey placard:

WORK IS MONEY AND MONEY IS WORK

CHAPTER 3

<<You have seen nothing yet>> laughed sardonically, the engineer, opening the heavy asbestos door. The girl followed him, without regard to the sophisticated alarm devices. A glowing object was placed at the centre of a glass globe, on a pedestal.

<<The criminals will be short-lived!>> Continued, proud, the engineer. <<The lost children instead ... the old chip powered by body fluids don't reach similar transmission powers...>>

<<At what point is the approval?>> she interrupted.

<<The Office of the Internal Affairs will let us know soon. We are confident, we believe to be able to implant it on the babies in June>>.

I watched more and more horrified. The chip had a ghostly appearance, under the plasma spotlight. The young journalist

brought the microphone to her mouth: <<What will happen to the old electronic vaccines?>>

<<Oh, medieval stuff!>> Laughed haughtily, the scientist. <<We are pressing the Internal Audit Commission for the re-implant on adults>>.

Nothing new, in a few years the technology would have been improved and we would have been programmed again; the important was to track every conversation, every movement, in the name of a secure environment. It was just that tiny bug on the screen, my enemy. I challenged it with a stern look.

The reporter continued: <<There is talk of health monitoring, can you explain what it means?>>

The man smiled meanly, not to say diabolically. <<Well>> said <<The chips provide medical testing and can save lives. But the point is another and I really want to stress it: the reduction of crime. The arrests are inversely proportional to the crime rate>>.

<<Could you give some figures to our viewers?>> That was the tiny voice of a journalist by disarming beauty and abysmal stupidity.

<<In the next year>> explained the man <<we are confident of increasing the arrests of a good thirty percent>>.

That was a shame. There hadn't been a crime for a long time, the people were unarmed, obsessed by the police, dazed by the Floren and zombified by the media. In return, new crimes had been introduced, such as the vagrancy or the unorthodox language.

There has been an electric bzz. The hand of an operator had turned down a lever and three lasers lit an ovoidal device, not bigger than a walnut.

<<Vaccines?>> asked the reporter.

The man, coolly: <<What do they look like?>>

The reporter looked better. <<They seem eyes!>>

<<Yes, but artificial. They are the next generation of vaccines. We'll record frame by frame; we'll punish those who avoid the screen with their eyes, those who masturbates, those who read books not approved by the law or write words that violate the institutional code. Isn't this wonderful?>>

Had this something to do with the strange device Fitz gave me? As the journalist announced the commercial break, I pulled it out and started watching it carefully. If shaken, it produced a metallic sound. I had never seen anything like this on the screen. How the hell did it work? Apparently it was a normal pair of headphones, but stuff like this had been out of production for at least one hundred years.

I read on the package, "Effective against all types of vaccines"; there was no mark from the Consortium of Consumption. I was facing the greatest crime of my life!

I opened the manual, I had to make it working! The first chapter was about the hacking of electronic vaccines, the second about the government espionage and the last one, the practical use. There was an appendix with the list of the multinationals in power and a list of the laws violated by the device. Really a nice way to get killed!

I had to throw that material out, but where? The rubbish was controlled by Clean Systems Ltd, a subsidiary of Burton Oil Ltd, the main shareholder of Anti Crime Ltd. So there was all the interest in finding evidences against me.

I had to disintegrate this device, piece by piece!

CHAPTER 4

I was only thinking to run, the rain was coming in the eyes and soaking the clothes. At one point, Fitz stopped and I squinted a few times to relieve the burning sensation caused by the sulfuric acid, then began to focus the squalid buildings, the flaking walls and, in contrast to everything else, an imposing cathedral of the twenty-second century. I felt lost, in front of the heavy stone columns.

Fitz pointed a finger. <<That way!>>

Not only we were lost, now we were about to drive us into serious troubles.

<<Do you intend to enter?>>

Fitz shouted to be heard in the rain. <<Do you prefer to remain under the rain?>>

I followed him up the steps, squinting to withstand the storm. A gust of wind nearly sent me to the ground.

<<Quick!>> shouted Fitz, disappearing behind a huge chestnut door; it seemed he had been eaten. I looked, for a few seconds, at the ancient high relieves and the sacred stained glass windows, ruins of a dark temple, echo of ancestral fears. What was I doing in that cursed place? The police would soon arrest me for vagrancy, I hadn't any permission to get away from the route that went from home to work. But I couldn't turn back and leave Fitz to his miserable fate, so I plucked up courage and opened the heavy door, venturing into the darkness. Someone was lighting a row of candles.

<<Where were you?>> swore Fitz, bent, holding a candle. He was now removing the dust from a plate.

<<It seems latin>> I said.

He immediately silenced me, the satellites were recording every word; he drew out the headphones and asked: <<Have

you brought them?>>

I slipped my hand into the jacket and turned on the central unit, then I hung the signal transmitter to the collar and put the headphones on. I hoped not to have forgotten anything.

<<Are you sure this stuff work?>>

<<Now I'm going to show it to you>>. He stood on a bench and began to read a long list of banned words. Then we laughed heartily.

<<How long will they permit us to do this, Fitz?>>

<<Until when they will implant the new vaccines. But now I want to explain you how it works>>. The tinkling of the rain was in background. After a brief pause, Fitz resumed: <<The electronic vaccines aren't infallible, if we superimpose to the signal an other identical but inverted ... >>

<<Do you mean it's possible to clear the wave sent to the satellite?>>

<<I mean to say that the result is a background noise, not dissimilar from the one already present in any environment>>.

<<Are there others in circulation?>>

<<I don't think there are, they are illegal>>.

<<And how did you get them?>>

<<I'll tell you this too, but first let me confide a secret>>.

I didn't come this far for nothing and I would have gone through with it.

<<Fox>> said with ardour; the voice echoed down the broad aisle. <<Aren't you tired to work like a slave, don't express your thoughts, be trampled on by the screen every day ... do you remember when blaming the System wasn't a crime? When the children were permitted to play together? The screen convinced us that only a lonely child grows strong and

healthy ...>>

<< Fitz, what are you talking about?>>

He spoke with his eyes shining: <<I'm asking you to leave with me. We will go where no one has ever returned, into the stronghold of the Mighty ... The Financial Center!>>

<<WHAT? I thought you had something serious to tell me>>.

I stood up to leave.

He stood up too. <<Wait!>>

<<I'm returning to my normal life, like everyone else!>>

<<Like the zombies?>>

<<Better than dead!>>

<<Ok, I'll get you to speak to Barney>>.

<<Who?>>

<<Barney>> he repeated.

I looked at him surprised. <<I don't think there are people with something important to tell us>>.

I walked away with long strides, without saying goodbye, but I stopped incredulous on the apse steps. I rolled my eyes several times: the candles along the broad aisle were extinguished and lit again, one by one.

<<Who is there!>> I cried.

Answered the thud of the front door. Fitz seized my arm.

<<We were spied!>>

<<No, just a desperate came to seek shelter>> I explained, but didn't believe it myself.

Then I left, disappearing into the rain.

CHAPTER 5

The ruins of an ancient arch marked the end of the narrow

alleys and the dull shops of Huntley Street; from then on I only saw factories. A four-lane uneven road sloped down along a row of black smokestacks. There was no sign of life since I had lost my way, not even a screen, only the whistling wind, as a deadly warning. The cars, rusted by time, lied neglected on the edges of the highway. An alien world, that the screen had wisely cancelled: the cars had been removed from the collective consciousness and no longer had to exist. But they weren't the steel demons we had been told, didn't caused accidents and weren't dangerous.

I passed under a rail junction. Charred wagons lied overturned in the fields, amid weeds two meters high. That place was too silent to be quiet.

As I thought this, something came up.

Wretched screen!

I lifted the biggest stone, I took a run-up and hurled it. Dissatisfied, I took a second one, and this time I hit the bull's eye. A bzzz was heard and the image disappeared.

<<It serves you right!>> I cried, proud of me.

The thirst for revenge made feel itself again after few miles, in an abandoned petrol station, surrounded by old billboards, still of the kind without animations. I took a kick to one of them, full of hate, and right then a red light appeared above my head. It moved very slowly, then began to descend. What hell was that? The light descended a little more, splitting into two distinct lights. A fatal presentiment flashed through my mind.

<<THE POLICE!>>

The bluish object, with a white stripe on both sides, touched ground, few meters away from the station. I could run away, but where? The aircraft would have taken off and I would

have been caught. I tried to stay calm, while two officers came down from the vehicle. Perhaps the luck was on my side, maybe they weren't searching me.

The trampling of heavy boots approached. "I have to ignore it!" I thought, remaining still, head-down, next to the gas pump.

One of them stood behind me and spoke gruffly: <<What are you doing here?>>

I turned slowly and looked at them without speaking. What ugly mugs! They wore black sunglasses and anti-riot suits. One was arrogantly smoking a cigar, proudly wearing the gleaming symbol of the Baxton Petroil Ltd on his chest, one of the cartel polices; every major industry had one.

<<Are you deaf?>> shouted the policeman. <<I asked you a question>>.

I kept staring at them without saying a word. Any answer would have been used against me and it was virtually impossible to speak without violating the Code.

The older man laughed heartily: <<Maybe we have to use bad manners>>.

<<Of course>> said the other, rhythmically beating a truncheon with studs on his hand.

Without warning the air slashed, and I felt a deadly stroke. When I opened my eyes I was at their feet, lying on the ground, with the blood coming down from the jaw.

<<Why are you doing this?>> I cried. <<I haven't done anything!>>

The cop stretched out and pulled me up by my arm. <<We'll see that! In the meantime, you'll get a ride to the police station>>.

The icy and cold handcuffs metal clenched my wrists. <<You

are wrong! Let me go!>>

The man, without listening, pulled me into the aircraft. The other one, to let me in, kicked me in the back and then got on board, gripping the control stick. The aircraft lifted in an instant and whizzed to the west, flying over streets and skyscrapers never seen before.

At the police station the landing strip was on the top of the building. They let me out in a not too polite way, and took me to a poorly lit office. "Recovery Area" I read on the door. Something that I had never seen on the screen.

One of the policemen sat me down by force, then he undid the handcuffs. The other man sat back, his legs on the desk, and lit a cigar.

<<Then>> began. <<Tell us what you were doing there! Today Tom and I want to laugh a little>>.

The two laughed gruffly.

<<Maybe>> went on the young <<he will tell us he went out for a walk>>.

<<Uh, that's right>> said the other, starting to laugh again.

<<So we'll give him three months for perjury>>.

I watched horrified, like a rat under torture.

<<Not only he's deaf>> kept on the big man behind the desk.

<<Perhaps he's also mute. What do you say to make him to talk again? >>

I felt another slap in the face and ended up on all fours.

<<I don't know>> I screamed. <<I don't know what I was doing in that place>>.

<<Ah! That's a good one>> The commissary had never had so much fun in his life. <<Maybe you moved away from home without realizing it. Ah! Ah!>> He returned serious, turning to his colleague: <<Get his particulars>>.

The other brought a detector near my neck to read the microchip. On a dusty and old computer, in rapid sequence, appeared tables of all kinds. I thought back to everything I had said, to the places I had been.

<<What were you doing here?>> The commissary asked, pointing to a map on the monitor.

"The cathedral! Damn, they were discovering all!"

<<Do you know you're going to be in a deep trouble?>> said, sadistic. <<Not only we caught you in the act of wandering, you also kicked a Ellypolis Ltd billboard and avoided answering our questions more than once. All offences under the Criminal Code, you know?>>

<<I don't know... >> I muttered.

<<Then you'd better get it in your head for next time. Now, if you don't have anything to declare, I'd proceed with the realignment>>.

I looked at him surprised, I never heard anything about it on the screen.

<<We are only ensuring you don't do it a second time>> explained he with simplicity.

Three policemen dragged me down the corridor by force. The Realignment Area was immense, there were bloodstains on the floor and screams of pain. The policemen sat me down on a seat, ensuring wrists and ankles. Above me I saw what looked like a giant brush covered with sharp needles, just waiting to pierce my soft flesh.

<<You wouldn't like to do this>> I cried, flinging.

The machine operator turned to me with empty and white eyes: he was just been injected of Floren. I felt lost.

<<Number 140>> announced, then pulled the lever.

He wasn't a man, was a robot! As me in the factory, working

the tin.

Something came over me, I gnashed my teeth for the pain.

CHAPTER 6

The smokestack was continuously spitting black clouds, that were slowly rising in a darker and darker sky. From Visio were coming the most dreadful noises, in sharp contrast to the words that headed the main entrance:

THE WORK MAKES YOU HAPPY

At a certain point a voice startled me: <<I hope you had a second thought, Fox>>.

I didn't answer, then Fitz began to walk, pretending to be followed: <<I have to show you a secret>>.

<<But... my cubicle flat is on the opposite side!>>

Even though I knew it was illegal, I decided to follow him. We arrived in Gardenville and continued to the intersection with Dayton Road. The aerial speakers went on with the usual litany.

"A serene jail? From today there is Siu and someone will pay for you".

Fitz stopped in a narrow and dark street. The dustbins were overturned and scattered all around; a terrified black cat slunk away, going to hide among tattered black sacks. We climbed a stone staircase up to a landing. Someone was singing, brazenly violating the law. Fitz knocked a couple of times on the heavy ebony door, but none came to open.

Then he knocked with more energy and the voice fell silent.

<<Who is there?>> mumbled an old man.

<<It's Fitz>>.

<<Who?>> The door was flinged open. <<Ehi, what lucky chance brings you here?>> The old man hugged him so strongly that almost strangled him. He was a sprightly man, about seventy years old, with a long white beard and thinned hair. He seemed coming out of a comic book.

<<And who is this guy?>> Said, moving his trembling finger to my face.

<<A colleague. Fox, this is Barney>>.

<<Well>> exhorted he. <<What do you do on the threshold, enter!>>.

Inside it looked like a hurricane had just passed: shards and used tissues were lying on the floor, the laundry was hanging from the chandelier... and almost as a joke, on the screen paraded products for household cleaning.

<<This way>> he led the way, letting us sit in an unusual veranda without any screens.

What a fool of that age had of so important to tell. Fitz distributed the headphones, talking in group was a serious crime. But what the old was about to tell would be even worse.

<<Now, can you explain why you brought me here?>> I urged, impatiently.

<<Have you ever read books?>> said Fitz.

<<Books?>> I repeated, incredulously.

The old man coughed, then made it clear: <<Not that rubbish from the multinationals. Ancient texts ... let's say prior to the twenty-second century>>.

<<Weren't they burned?>> I asked.

Barney cleared his throat. <<Sure, my son. They set fire in front of my eyes, right here in my house, and not with good

manners... can you see this scar?>>

<<When was that?>>

<<Fifty years ago. I doubt that today someone still possesses books... >>. The old man was trembling as about to have a failure. <<You see, once upon a time, long before the System, there were the governments... >>

<<What kind of industries were they?>> I asked naively.

<<Boy... I said governments. To rule there weren't any shareholders, but politicians>>.

<<Politicians?>> Fitz had never heard this word.

<<Yes, boy, that was their name. Giving a definition today is not easy, but basically it was the people to elect them>>.

<<How could such a thing work. Who were they paid by?>>

<<The Government>>.

<<And who paid the government?>>

<<We, citizens, with the taxes>> explained the old man.

<<But the taxes go to multinationals>> I objected.

<<At that time it was different: the world was divided into independent zones and every government ran its own territory, however absurd it may seem>>.

Fitz intervened: <<The multinationals have no boundaries, how could they submit to the governments?>>

Barney coughed before to answer. <<You have to imagine a completely different world: to begin with, there were wars. Let me tell you about the last: the books were unanimous in dating it in the early twenty-first century, when a state became so strong to endanger the rest of the planet: it possessed nuclear weapons, long-range missiles, invisible aircrafts... >>

Completely incomprehensible terms to us.

<<...they were called United States; the arch rival had

collapsed some years before, so was trying to extend the boundaries by any means, before the Yellow Enemy would dawn on the horizon. The countries were annexed one by one, through democracies controlled by Washington: Iraq, Syria, Iran, North Korea ... until all ended up in an apocalyptic confrontation with China, where more than six billions people lost their lives. Nothing remained of the previous civilization>>.

<<Except for the language>> I commented.

<<In fact, the real winners were the planet's most powerful financiers, that from London, made use of the American war machine for their dirty purposes. When the dollar collapsed, they grabbed all the remainings>>.

<<You talk as if it was easy to move from one city to another>> noticed Fitz.

<<It was>> confirmed Barney. <<There were cars and all kinds of vehicles>>.

<<Do you know what there is outside the City?>> I asked.

<<The countryside, I think>>.

<<Have you ever been there?>>

<<No, but I don't think that other cities are still inhabited. The world is this city, built on the soil of the ancient France, after the settlement of the British>>.

<<So the war was won by the British>> I inferred.

<<No>> he corrected. <<It was won by financiers and bankers, when the governments collapsed. The system as we know it today is made of the rich families which once conspired the Great Revolution>>.

Having said this, the old man stood up with his hand on his back and tried to reach the living room. Fitz felt it was time to speak: <<Barney ... we want to leave!>>

The old man stopped. <<What do you want to do? >>
<<I'm speaking about that place where the people are free to roam around the streets, where everyone has a personal velicopter, where the skyscrapers touch the sky... >>
<<WHAT?>> The elder almost got an heart attack. <<This is pure madness! I won't allow it!>>
<<Have you heard, Fitz? >> said I sarcastically. He gave me a venomous look.
<<Whatever it takes... we'll go to the FINANCIAL CENTER!>>
<<My son>> continued the old man. <<Why do you want to search the death. You know well that no one has ever returned from there>>.
<<Someone will return one day and tell what he saw>>.
The old man seemed visibly fatigued. Mumbled something unintelligible, then had a sudden movement.
Fitz went pale. <<Barney!>>
The old man knelt down, bringing a hand to his chest. He was breathing heavily.
Fitz caught him. <<Take him by the arm!>>
We lifted him up and laid him on the couch. The screen was advertising a new model of funeral coffins.
"Hell!" I thought.
The old man didn't move any more. Fitz picked the cold wrist up to hear the pulse beat.
<<Is he alive?>> I asked.

CHAPTER 7

An heartrending cry went from the upper floors to the street, crossing all Klein Street and drawing the attention of those

who were blissfully putting up with the screen.

I stood still in the doorway, the warning couldn't be more clear; two feathers were still fluttering, after the pillows had been tattered with the utmost ferocity. The furniture had been smashed and the contents of the drawers thrown to the ground.

"Why did they do this? What did they want from me?"

Before to enter I looked around a couple of times, the enemy could still be there. I looked toward the road: it was all too quiet and the screen continued its litany unperturbed, as if nothing had happened.

I had immediately to inform Fitz, but how to reach him? I searched through the wrecks, but the box with the headset had disappeared. Damn! I had to be calm, maybe they were still there or I'd forgotten them to the old man's house. In any case, I had to get away: if they were seeking me, they would return soon. But who were they? The police not for sure, they could locate me whenever they wanted.

Perhaps the answer was in the note attached to the door.

CLEAR FROM YOUR MIND THE WORD FINANCIAL
CENTER

Signed: YOUR SHADOW

I re-read the message several times to grasp every possible clue. Then the tele-communicator rang. It never happened, it was an instrument too unsafe and no one would use it, every word was recorded and controlled by operators. I had to make a decision: respond or run away. I didn't have much time to think, the orange led of the unit waited I lifted the

receiver.

<<Hello>> I said.

<<Am I talking with Z-15-H9-17-11?>>

<<In person>>.

<<To talk is the police. As a result of the infringement for vagrancy number 324/18 of the Criminal Code and later 726/38, please be in the station for the routine checks>>.

<<But... I've been there>>.

The man to the other side of the cable confabulate with someone, then asked: <<Are you talking about the Braxton Petroil Ltd?>>

<<Yes>> I agreed.

<<Sorry, sir. This is the police of the Oxy Petrol Ltd and such a treatment doesn't appear on our systems>>.

<<I have received one... >>

<<Sir, the measures taken by Braxton are ineffective for us. You must present yourself within 24 hours or we will have to follow the procedure in force>>.

There was a pause and the official went on: <<we recommend the maximum compliance with the applicable regulations, also note that wandering is prohibited. Goodbye>>.

Followed the busy signal.

"Damn! That's the last thing I wanted!" I rummaged in the junks in search of anything useful to survive a few days. That night I would flee, even if I didn't know where yet. There were no alternatives.

Ten minutes later I was running in the street. Those damned words surfaced to my mind: "We recommend the maximum compliance with the applicable regulations. Wandering is not allowed!"

CHAPTER 8

The steps echoed in the silence of the night, to the door. There was a ghostly solitude, interrupted by the chilling hooting of distant owls. The pale reflection of projected ads settled down on gloomy and dilapidated buildings.

I began to scroll through the codes on the intercom, then hastily fumbled in my pocket and pulled out a greasy sheet:

F-IT-Z24-16-7F-21

Systems Alpha-1, maintenance engineer,

Visio Ltd, cubicle flat in Groam Street, site X-11-12,

Common name FITZ

I pressed the button and heard a ring from above. I regretted of having done that, the intercoms were under control, however Fitz was not in his cubicle flat. I had absolutely to find him! Wandering at night was a serious crime and he should at least have had a reason as important as mine to do so.

I made my way but I was immediately stopped by a strange noise. The street was deserted, and again I heard what seemed to be coughing. From one of the side streets came the sound of footsteps, but I didn't notice anything. It wasn't the police, I would hear the sirens. The light was pale and ghostly.

I began to run. My steps broke the silence in a city of deads, I couldn't give up. I crossed Havillon Street, towards the cathedral, until I finished in a dead end. I thought it was all over and a cop would soon come up saying: "Gotcha! Don't

you know that wandering is forbidden?" But, after a long pilgrimage, I arrived at the foot of a building of mammoth proportions. It stood with arrogance over building old at least one century. "Eureka!" I thought, finding the strength to run for the last few meters. At the top of the stairs I looked around one last time and went in with the flame of the lighter in my hand. There was a deadly silence. I reached the presbytery and laid down on a bench, exhausted. The infinity around me was entrancing, though I didn't know the dangers of that unknown place. A sense of freedom pervaded me, I had never had so much space without a screen around: a great peace of mind! At last, I was free to let my thoughts go. I closed my eyes.

Then I gave a tremendous cry. The echo crossed the broad aisle several times, as if I had been slaughtered. A hand had just hit me and an emaciated face, with a bushy beard, was looking at me frightened, from the twilight. After my shout had retreated and now tried timidly to come closer.

He mumbled something unintelligible.

His intentions weren't bad, but the smile was odd.

<<Who are you?>> I asked.

He looked at me as if he had never spoken to another human being, then said: <<Alvin>>.

<<In full I mean. Do you mean you don't have a code?>>

The man bowed his head humbly. How could he have an illegal name and take refuge in that place, without being haunted by the police?

<<Ok>> I said <<I'll call you Alvin, okay?>>

He nodded, pleased.

<<What are you doing here?>>

<<I live here>> he explained, like the most natural thing in

the world.

<<But... >> I couldn't pronounce the word "police", he then pointed to a scar on his neck.

<<What is it?>>

<<A sad memory>> he explained. <<The family was still legal, my father had crowned his life's dream, a velicopter all for us ... the television had convinced him, so that without a velicopter his life would have become pointless. That was the happiest day of his life, and mine too, I had never flown before and had never seen the people so small. But the trip didn't last long, at one point I heard my father crying. When I turned back I saw a black shadow approaching. I didn't understand what had happened, we hadn't probably complied with the route and the aircraft was diving toward the Blue River. I only remember that the water was approaching at full speed but I don't know what happened next. I woke up in a hospital with a wound to the neck. I had lost the vaccine, so I made the doctor believe to be still in a coma, not to be subjected to the intervention of insertion. The next night I escaped from the hospital in search of a safe place, and I found this cathedral>>.

So he was the one that a few days before went out banging the door.

<<How long have you been living here?>>

<<Six years, I think. I go out just to eat>>.

<<How do you live without money?>>.

<<I have an aunt nearby... I buy the drugs and she always gives me something to eat. But she is sick and I can't no longer rely on her >>.

<<Why don't you come with us?>>

<<You who?>>

<<Fitz and I>>.

He looked at me worried. <<What are you searching here?>>

He could talk, I didn't. <<I'll explain it to you, first I need to find Fitz>>.

He didn't seem satisfied with the answer, but it was enough to dismiss the matter and I laid down on the bench again. I never felt so tired in my life.

<<Goodnight>> he said. <<You haven't told me your name>>.

<<You can call me Fox>>.

<<Good night, Fox>>.

<<Night, Alvin>>.

CHAPTER 9

<<Do you like some coffee?>> asked tenderly the girl, with her little mouth and those innocent eyes asking for protection.

<<With pleasure>> I answered.

She began to put the ingredients in the foam machine. It didn't seem real to be there. How many times at the Visio we had crossed the eyes, without talking. Our ways weren't meant to meet, I was a lowly worker for the treatment of the tin of the screens, but she had a good reputation and a long accounting experience. He had studied all the types of forgery and false accounting techniques that teach in the high level masters.

So far there had been only chance encounters in the dining room. Nothing special.

<<You haven't said your name yet>>.

She turned back to me, with a smile: <<Annie, my name is

Annie>>.

<<Annie?>>

<<Yes, the short for A-AN-12-IE-14. What about you?>>

<<Fox>>.

<<I like it>>.

She was lying, but that was what I liked about her.

<<How long have you been living here, Annie?>>

<<Since I was a little girl. The family at that time was legal, we used to shop together, they were always buying what the ads said... it was funny... >>

<<To see the ads?>>

She laughed. Then resumed: <<When the family was abolished my mother found a cubicle flat in Elizabeth Street, now I can hardly see her without... >> She almost named the police.

<<My father lives in this same road and I can see him in the weekends. Compared to other girls, I think to be lucky>>.

Her sweet voice had hypnotized me.

<<I always dreamed of having a family too, you know?>>

From my look she caught the two-way words and dissimulated with a question: <<Have you ever had one?>>

<<I was raised in an orphanage by EPSO Ltd and when I had a cubicle flat assigned, I didn't even know who my parents were. It must be nice to have a family>>.

<<Of course>> she nodded, pouring the steaming coffee into the cups. <<But today you never know what the future holds for the children, it depends on the corporation that runs the orphanage. If they assign them a cubicle flat in another part of the city, you will never see them again>>.

<<Yes>> I admitted, while the aroma rose up to the nostrils.

<<Drink it>> she said. <<Before it cools>>.

I brought the steaming cup to my mouth, while the screen was advertising a new model of lamps. I learned to be indifferent to the luminous images and with Annie I did it effortlessly.

<<Do you live around here? >> she asked.

<<In a certain sense>> I said.

She looked at me doubtfully, I couldn't tell her the truth.

<<Why did you say "I was passing" before? What did you mean?>>

I became serious in the face. <<Annie... I don't have a cubicle flat any more>>.

<<I'm sorry>>. We looked each other for a long time without speaking.

<<If you want you can stay here this night>> she suggested.

<<Really?>>

<<Until you settle it>>.

It was illegal and I would have got myself into even more trouble, but I agreed. <<Thank you, Annie>>.

Her eyes shone full of joy and our looks exchanged signs of understanding.

<<We'll pass the evening together>> I said. Who knows how long she hasn't been with a boy. <<What will we do tonight, Annie?>>

<<We could watch the screen>> suggested her, thrilled.

CHAPTER 10

All the traces of Fitz were lost, the cubicle flat was empty and for days he hadn't appeared at work. I had absolutely to find him or I'd have welded pieces of tin for the rest of my life. That day a sense of revolt was reboiling in me:

reverberating in screws and bolts, permeating the pieces of tin that passed, insignificant, before my eyes. I was feeling it in the creaking of the machines and becoming more intense whenever the Sector Chief Rick strolled before me, with the displeasure printed in face.

The Floren injection that morning hadn't been enough to placate my anger. The last time it took three people to hold me still, while the fat woman injected the syringe liquid into the back.

<<The next time, I'll smash your pig's nout!>> I had screamed.

<<What?>> she had replied. <<I'll annotate you in the company register>>.

I had gazed her through the eyes of a madman, under the effect of the Floren, eager to cut her head off. There was no way to resist the chemical storm, when it took possession of my body, and I started running down the corridor.

After other two hours the sense of rebellion reached its peak: I wanted to find Fitz and run away, I wanted to be with Annie and tell her more things. Unrelated thoughts swirled in my head until I carelessly dropped a piece from the conveyor belt. The Sector Chief Rick approached me menacingly, ready to order a fourth dose of Floren.

<<What happens?>> he grunted.

I gazed him straight in the eyes: <<I'm not a slave!>> Dozens of heads tamed by fear, turned back surprised.

<<You're just a tyrannical braggart!>> I continued.

The eyebrows of Rick bended menacing and he clenched his fists out of anger. <<Poor fool! How dare you to say such a things at your senior?>>

<<Senior to what?>> I replied, defiantly.

<<You will regret it!>> shouted him, bringing his nose to few inches from my head.

<<Take him away!>> ordered then, with an eloquent gesture. Three security guard moved without hesitation, ready to inject me another dose of Floren. But with a quick move, I slipped under the conveyor belt, coming out on the other side.

<<Take him!>> yelled the Sector Chief Rick, with the veins of the neck swollen. I picked up a handful of pieces from the conveyor belt and threw them on the ground.

<<This is where the tin should remain!>>

A security guard seized an hem of my overalls, others were coming, but once again I slipped under the belt conveyor.

<<Fools!>> cried the Sector Chief. <<In that way!>>

I was taking the pieces from the belt and throwing them. I grabbed slabs, pipes, cables. <<Take your rubbish!>> A glass shattered on the ground.

<<Death to the financiers! Death to the filthy masters... Let me!>> They had caught my arm.

<<He is crazy!>> shouted Rick. <<Fill him with Floren! Take him away, I don't want to see him any more!>>

Two sort of gorillas dragged me down the hall and locked me inside a cell. Shortly after, three men entered armed with batons.

I stepped back and ended up to the corner, with my back to the wall. <<What do you intend to do with those clubs?>>

One of the guards laughed heartily: <<We want you to understand once and for all who command here>>.

CHAPTER 11

It was late to change my mind, I was groping along a narrow and dark street, violating the law again. A black cat jumped out scared and went to hide among the dumpsters, as I was climbing the steps. I knocked a couple of times, but no one came to open the door. The wind whistled and a stench of dead rat permeated the air.

I knocked again and this time a croaking voice was heard.

<<Who is it?>> It came from far away.

<<It's Fox, I took you the medicine>>.

<<It's open>>.

I pushed the door, the old man was lying on the couch. He was not the same I had seen a few days before: the face was pale and emaciated, the breathing laboured.

<<It's imprudent to leave the door open, Barney>>.

He mumbled something, before saying: <<I've no fear, I'm a poor old man... one day or an other this damned world will find a way to get rid of me>>.

<<I took you the drugs, Barney>>. I walked to the bedside.

<<I don't want that rubbish>> he protested, gathering his last strength.

<<But you have to get back on your feet again... you have fever, you're sick>>.

<<Crap! If I want I can get up by myself>>. He tried to stand up on his feet and almost fell on the floor.

I laid him down again, with care, on the couch. <<You don't have to get up until you aren't healed. The medicines will help you>>.

<<I don't want that rubbish!>> He said like a rabid dog, then he calmed down, pointing to the bedside table. I gave him the headphones and I put on a pair too.

<<I want to tell you something>> he began. <<Do you know

the advertisement of Star Body Ltd or Secure Health Ltd... the figures are rigged: they are certified by Veryglobe Ltd and do you know which are its major shareholders? My dear, the same pharmaceutical companies>>.

<<Oh, Barney, the medicines... >>

<<Will cure me>> he anticipated. <<Have you ever heard of the Team 21?>>

I had never heard of it.

<<It has the infamous task of identifying the active ingredients that cause side effects. To be marketable of course they must also cure to some extent, for this after are scrutinized by the Team 22. In practice, first it's found the negative effect and only later the healing one. The ideal drug controls the symptoms without to cure completely, and at the same time cause the maximum long-term damage possible. The more harmful a substance is, the more customers and more profits will be made, you know?>>

<<Do you mean that the real purpose of the medical research is to discover side effects?>>

<<It is their business, the customers are the sick people... The important thing is that the damage will not be directly attributable to the substance. Do you see why I hate drugs? As long as I'm not moribund and I will be able to stand up on these legs... >> He tried to get up and nearly fell on the floor even this time.

<<You'd better stay in bed, Barney>>.

He wheezed something incomprehensible, then sighed. <<My son ... after the destruction of the books the people entered into an eternal sleep. They can't imagine a different world, they have only one, imposed by the screen: made of football matches and talk shows devoid of any meaning. A

man without knowledge can be transformed into an suicidal automaton>>.

<<An hypnotized zombie>>.

<<Yes, that's right, and the makers of all this have always got away with it. I speak of the psychiatrists>>.

<<They should treat the madmen>> I said, without grasping the connection.

<<Oh>> he laughed <<they have never done this, otherwise there wouldn't be of them, what do you think? In fact they deal with the mind control>>.

<<The Floren is a psychiatric drug, right?>>

<<Yes, that's why that people are precious for the power, that's why they sit on boards of directors and research committees... They believe the psychiatry to be a science, but it's simply a scam. They speak of cure, but they simply use control. They talk of communication, but instead they use tricks>>.

A suspect began to form in my mind.

<<Barney!>> I said with a start. <<This may have something to do with men dressed in black?>>

<<Why do you ask me that? >>

<<They ransacked my house and took the headphones>>.

<<WHAT?>> Barney attempted to rise on his feet, but a sharp pain forced him to lie down again. <<Why didn't you tell me that immediately?>>

I pulled out something. <<Read this!>>

He read the note carefully and assumed a gloomy face.

<<You have to bring Fitz here, there is no time to lose!>>

<<Barney, it seems he disappeared>>.

<<WHAT?>> He leaped over the mattress. <<You have to find him!>>

<<Why, Barney? What is happening?>>

Hardly passed a moment of hoarseness, he announced:

<<You are in serious danger!>>

CHAPTER 12

<<Oral-smoke>> said the smiling man <<the cigarette that protects your teeth: smoke Oral-smoke!>>

"Oral-smoke" I thought, inhaling from the cigarette that Annie had offered to me.

<<Do you know that this stuff is detrimental to the health?>>

I said, while the ads went on listing the pros.

<<What are you saying, Fox? It prevents caries, you should smoke a pack a day>>.

<<Annie, the screen lie>>.

She stared at me with queer eyes, as if I were crazy. <<All the people do it, Fox>>.

I coughed a couple of times. <<Do you see? I'm poisoning myself>>.

<<Oh>> she explained <<don't you know that smoking disinfects the throat from the microbes?>> she said it with a voice sweet, but so naive.

<<Are you offended?>> asked then, not having received answer.

<<How could I feel hurt near you>>.

The witticism made her laugh. <<I thought you were different, you know?>>

<<Really? How did you think I was?>>

<<Well, like anyone else. I never thought to host you in my house>>.

<<Annie, are you ever been in love?>>

At the question she became serious. <<Only one time>>.

<<And you?>>

<<Once too... right now>>.

Our eyes melted into each other.

<<Kiss me>> she pleaded, full of desire. I held her close to me and kissed her. Our Oral-smoke-flavoured breath became one.

That night we wouldn't have slept.

CHAPTER 13

The street was darker than usual, the only points of reference were the flickering screens in the distance. From the gully-holes came a nauseating stench and a cold mist moistened the ankles. Something would have quickly happened, you could feel it in the air; an unpleasant feeling came over me again: someone was following me! A shadow began to move toward me, then the same figure mewed. "A stupid cat!" I thought, stumbling over the waste. A tremendous clank noise was heard and, in response, something moved behind me. The silence returned and those feelings remained a faint doubt in my mind.

But this time I heard some footsteps for real: I felt lost. Someone was running in the distance. I stood staring at the figure, more and more clear.

<<Fitz!>> I shouted, as I recognized him.

<<Fox!>> he cried, hugging me.

<<Why were you following me?>>

He was still gasping. <<The situation is more serious than you can imagine... take>> He handed me a pair of headphones.

<<Here we'll be heard anyway>>.

<<We'll talk softly; I'm in trouble, Fox. I left my cubicle flat; I underwent harsh punishments for the absences at work; I was caught by the police and re-educated. I am exhausted, I haven't eaten for two days>>.

<<Fitz, calm down! Could you tell me what is happening?>>
He showed a wound on his right arm, but I still didn't understand.

<<Someone wants us dead!>> he explained.

<<Someone who?>>

<< I have no idea, but a private company of killers is keeping an eye on us. Whoever are the instigators, I think they discovered our plans to reach the Financial Center>>.

<<If so, why not to catch us immediately? The corporation polices can locate us in every moment with their satellites>>.

<<Because only them can access it and not the killer agencies>>.

<<Why not to involve the police then?>>

<<What they are doing is illegal and the police have no license to kill>>.

<<Then we could involve the police ourself>> I suggested.

Fitz smiled. <<It wouldn't work, probably the leaders are the same and... there are already too many crimes on our records>>.

<<The instigators could be the same, but how the hell do they know of our plans, when the police know nothing?>>

<<Never heard of bugs?>>

<<Do you mean they're listening us?>>

<<Not here, but our cubicle flats are under control>>.

I had an idea: <<Do you think that Barney will get us out of troubles?>>

Fitz caught my arm: <<Is he alive yet?>>

<<Yes, but seriously ill>>.

He became apprehensive. <<We must run to him then!>>

<<Hey, why so much haste?>>

<<He will explain us how to reach the Financial Center!>>

he declared, as if this were granted.

It was happening all so quickly that I was unable to utter a word. <<Fitz, I ... won't come>>.

<<What?>> he flared up. <<Please, try to understand: as long as we stay here we are in danger. We'll be killed!>>

<<The fact is that... I fell in love>>.

Fitz gazed at me ferociously. <<Do you prefer to endanger your life for her?>>

<<Yes!>> I replied, without hesitation. He gazed at me for a few seconds and I stared back at his eyes defiantly.

<<Fitz, now let me go my way>>.

His eyes became moist. <<You can't do this>>.

I turn my back to him and began to walk towards the flickering screens.

<<Goodbye, Fitz!>> I said, turning to him a last time.

He followed me on behind. <<You can't leave your best friend in the street>>.

I looked at him angrily. <<If we are in this situation, it's only thanks to you!>>

<<Don't you understand that some killers are on our trails? It's only a matter of time...>>

<<I do not care for anything, I just want to spend one last evening with Annie>>.

He kept begging me as I walked away, then bowed his head. Reached the dazzling light and the billboard speakers, I had completely forgotten of him.

CHAPTER 14

The door was open and I went in. Two faces turned back surprised, in unison.

<<I see you've changed your mind>> was surprised Fitz.

<<I'm not here for what you think>> I clarified immediately.

He made me sign to look at the bedside; the old Barney was breathing heavily, his face in pain.

<<Has he fever?>> I asked.

The old man snapped: <<What fever!>> He tried to stand up on his feet with all his strengths, but Fitz caught him on the fly, before he fell.

<<He doesn't want to take the medicines>> told Fitz, on one side, putting on the headphones. I spoke softly: <<Without him we are lost>>.

The old man reached out enraged. <<What are you confabulating about, over there? I am old and sick, but not brainless!>> He dragged himself to the edge of the bed. <<Listen, there are all kinds of traps... you will never be able to reach the Financial Center>>.

I was about to breathe a sigh of relief, when the old man said:

<<I'll come with you!>>

Barney was getting up, but Fitz stopped him. <<In these conditions you'll never do it. Why don't you tell us how to get there?>>

The old man shook his head. <<It's not easy, boy. You won't do it anyway, I have spent my life studying the techniques of control, the occult symbolism... >>

<<We don't need all this>> snorted Fitz.

<<You're Wrong, my son. For this reason I won't leave you

go alone>>. With an extraordinary effort of will, the old man sat upright on the edge of the bed. He remained in perfect balance, supported only by his trembling arm.

<<Don't dare to stop me!>> he grumbled, when Fitz tried to approach him.

With amazement, we saw the old Barney stand up. He swayed as he came towards us. <<You see, I can stand by myself>> He wobbled, with one hand on the aching back. He passed us and reached the door.

<<My legs can say no, but I'm stronger!>>

We watched him amazed as he opened the door.

<<So, what do you do there like two fools? Let's go!>>

<<Actually, I... >> I didn't come there to leave.

<<Come on!>> urged the old man.

I didn't believe all could happen so quickly, but this was really time to leave.

<<Ok>> I said. <<I'll come with you!>>

Fitz and Barney cheered with a cry of joy.

I proposed: <<Why don't we ask Alvin to join?>>

<<Who is Alvin?>> asked Fitz.

<<The man of the cathedral>>.

He didn't understand, but the old man liked the idea. <<I don't know who the hell this Alvin is, but the more we are, the more chances we have to do it>>.

<<So, it's time to leave>> I exulted.

<<Yes, it is!>> cried the old Barney, who came down the stairs like a young boy. His white uncombed hair made their way into the night.

CHAPTER 15

The man had stopped panting, now was gazing at us like a wild man about to be executed, the pupils dilated like those of a frightened cat in the night. The dim candlelight made primitive and wild the long beard, the vulnerable look, the torn clothes worn for a lifetime. Never had entered so many people in what had become his dwelling.

<<Are you here for me or for God?>> he asked.

<<Both>> I answered. <<They are Barney and Fitz>>.

The man looked at them from the bottom upwards. <<I guess you want something from me>>.

<<We want you to come with us!>> enunciated the old.

Alvin jumped, astonished. <<Ask me what you want, but not to leave this place!>>

<<Do you think it is safe here?>> I asked.

<<There is God to protect me>>.

<<Have you ever seen him?>> assailed Fitz, overbearing.

Alvin shook his head. <<And have you ever seen a thought?>>

The answer left all speechless. But hadn't God the freedom of men at heart?

<<What do you think God wants from you?>> I asked.

<<Does he want us unhappy? Why doesn't he free us from the oppression and the slavery? Perhaps because he wants us to have dreams of freedom and this is the only true way to be happy. That's what he's asking you>>.

Alvin looked at me surprised and something lightened in his eyes. <<You've convinced me, I'll come with you!>>

We all rejoiced and I immediately stood up on my feet.

<<What are we waiting then>>.

<<It's time to leave!>> shouted Fitz, standing up too.

Shortly after we were all four outside, in the dark of the

night.

<<Come on, guys, it will be a very long night>> ruled Barney.

CHAPTER 16

We didn't count anything, we were only consumers, gears of a machine to generate money. What mattered was buying frozen fruit from Brond Ltd or synthetic bread from Green Soup Ltd.

<<More ads>> I snapped, throwing the newspaper on the ground.

We had walked for about an hour and Barney was at the head. <<Boy>> started <<Never heard to talk about kiosks? >>

<<What?>> asked Fitz, regaining a little of interest.

The old man continued: <<Once the magazines were not distributed at the street corners and were only partially financed by ads>>.

<<Do you mean that the people would paid to read?>> I asked.

<<It's as if the people paid to watch the screen>> was surprised Fitz.

Barney laughed. The memories of the ancient world were still vivid in him, despite the Floren and the compulsory treatments to clear the memory.

<<The mass media back then would be today considered utopian>> continued. <<Just think that rewriting the news was considered in the same way as censorship and everyone was free to express his ideas in the global electronic network that there was at the time, without being arrested for that. The

job wasn't compulsory and existed the unemployment. There was the family and the children lived with their parents, without being deported to the orphanages and moved far away, once a cubicle flat was assigned them... >>

<<Look!>> I suddenly exulted, pointing to an orange light that was finding its way between the buildings.

Fitz was inebriated by that. The dawn we had sometimes seen on the screen wasn't as bright and sublime. The work had deprived us of the beauty of life, the people had stopped having interests, they were no longer thinking by their own. It was easier to adapt to the system. A mental mechanism of self-censorship had been developed and we believed only in what we were told to believe in.

Fitz noticed something down the road. <<Look at that sign! >>

<<A tavern!>> pointed out Alvin. Strange they hadn't been all closed after being acquired by Mark Doll Ltd, several years earlier.

<<This is just what we need>> exclaimed Barney, at the front of the group.

When we entered, there wasn't soul to be seen, there were waste and bottles of beer scattered everywhere. We stopped at the counter smeared by hymns to the power. The screen was yelling above of our heads, making us feel small; the blow-up of a capitalist with a black top hat was gazing at us from the top of the wall, in the way the devil would have looked. I gripped the chain Annie had left me with the promise to remain united, in case we hadn't seen each other any more. Then a "sort of corpse" appeared from behind the counter and I almost got a heart attack. The skin was yellowish and the white eyes were staring at the emptiness,

as hypnotized by the screen.

<<Hello!>> greeted Barney.

The figure moved, as if it had noticed us just now: <<What are you doing in my tavern at this time?>>

<<We'd like to eat>> said Fitz.

The innkeeper studied us one by one, with eyes that had nothing of alive. <<Why don't you eat at canteen of your company like everyone else?>>

After insisting a little, we persuaded him to serve us some delicious sandwiches full of synthetic laboratory meat at one of the tables.

<<Do you know why I wanted to enter?>> asked Barney, softly speaking. Fitz had just savaged the sandwich. <<Not to eat?>>

Barney made a sign to get closer. <<I think we are very near to the Financial Center>>.

The innkeeper, until now still a few feet from us, tuned on a different frequency and the empty eyes pointed to us.

<<You won't want to go there! You can't pass through the Wall of Force!>>

<<Which wall?>> asked Alvin.

<<There is a wall that separates the City from the Financial Center and there is an infallible radar system that no aircraft can circumvent>>.

<<Who lives in the other side will go out somehow>> I refuted.

Barney spoke again in a low voice: <<Probably no one go out of there, they consider us animals and exploit us to permit a hundred of wealthy people to live in luxury and splendour>>.

<<Then what about the other cities?>> asked Alvin.

<<There aren't other cities after the last war. There is only this, in what the ancient called Paris>>.

<<But the War was won by the British>>.

<<Not really>> explained the old man <<Let's say the old British aristocracy and industry>>.

The innkeeper was observing us, without understanding what we had of so interesting to confabulate about. He moved his large head shaped like a monitor, to reiterate the concept: <<Stay away from the wall!>>

What risk were we running into by going on our's way? Many things didn't convince me, after all the rich people consumed what was produced outside.

<<How do the goods pass to the other side?>>.

The innkeeper had a moment of hesitation, remembering the spy satellites and the police, then answered: <<It's said there is an access point... somewhere near Stratford Road, not far from here. They use old locomotives>>.

<<Overland transportation?>> was surprised Alvin.

Barney burst with ardour: <<We will take that train!>>

The innkeeper became alarmed: <<I'll call the police!>>

<<Stop>> cried Fitz.

<<No, calm down>> cried Alvin. <<Look what I've found>>.

Fitz took the note. <<Where was it?>>

<<Under one of the plates>>.

WE ARE FOLLOWING YOU!

WE ARE WAITING THE ORDER, THEN WE WILL KILL YOU.

Signed: YOUR SHADOW

Fitz was puzzled. <<How do they know where we are without the police satellites?>>

<<They are professionals>> explained Barney.

<<Hey>> worried Alvin. <<The innkeeper is closing us inside!>>

<<What?>> I jumped.

The zombie was approaching us, with blank and fixed eyes. He had just taken a dose of Floren. <<I am pleased to announce that you are my guests>>.

I was gripped by a terrifying thought: the killers had to be inside!

We'd never come out alive from there.

CHAPTER 17

Alvin stopped, discouraged: <<We will never make it. I come back!>>

Fitz got a shock. <<Now that we are arrived?>>

Barney looked back, breathless. <<Do what you feel right, but don't forget that the innkeeper has alerted the police>>.

Fitz had had a brilliant idea: by threatening to break the screen, which would have led to the arrest of all, the innkeeper let us go, without considering that the police, not finding us, would have arrested him anyway for perjury.

Alvin hadn't decided yet when, around the corner, a mountain of glass loomed before us; it darkened all the sky. It didn't seem real to be so close to the Financial Center, the Damned Area avoided by the velicopters. What was awaiting us beyond the Wall of Force? The answer would come soon, the train station wasn't far. A wind, icy and sharp like a knife,

blew in our faces, reminding us how the death was near.

<<I'll come with you!>> decided Alvin, finding again the courage. The screen on the other side of the road seemed to reply: "Don't worry, buy an anti-imprisonment insurance and the life will be safer".

<<We already pay the tax on the "presumption of infringement">> protested Barney <<Tell me if this isn't already an insurance! They assume infractions that we have yet to commit, while the multinationals commit crimes and get away with it. Always the same old story since when the courts were abolished>>.

<<Courts?>> Fitz had never heard that word.

<<A great good thing>> continued the old man. <<The law at that time also served to defend oneself, not only to accuse>>.

<<Then it wasn't a law>> I confuted. <<And however if there was a law, what was the need of the courts?>>

<<Boys, in those days it was different. You could prove your innocence. Think the innkeeper, in those days he'd been entitled to a lawyer; there was a judge. Now at the best there is the psychiatrist, always useful to get rid of troublesome people; while the re-education is a great excuse to hand out lobotomies to everyone, in the vain hope to clear out the bestial emotions from the men. But look how many zombies around... >> Some poor devil were sat on a bench, staring at the emptiness, completely ignoring the gutted buildings around them.

Alvin had just noticed the palaces. <<They have been bombarded>>.

<<Maybe some velicopters are crashed>> supposed Fitz.

Barney was doubtful. <<They might have been shot down,

they were all directed towards the walls>>.

The high wall began to show up among the buildings, marking the impenetrable border between the aristocracy and the ordinary people. Shortly after we reached a building much longer and older than the others.

<<The train station!>> exclaimed Fitz.

<<Quick, let's go in!>> spurred Barney.

The goods yard was huge, employees in uniform drove forklifts back and forth, while others loaded the packs. The tracks ended there and some trains were ready to leave. No one had noticed us, everyone was absorbed in his work. But at a certain point was heard a shout: <<Hey, you!>> An officer in an orange uniform was coming towards us.

Only a fence separated us from the tracks.

<<Why don't you have the uniform?>> asked the officer, after stopping a few yards from us. He was staring at us with big white eyes, besides which there seemed not to be any thinking being.

The official continued: <<Don't you know that this is a sector... >> A jab hit his face, Fitz didn't believe to have so much strength.

<<Quick! To the gate!>>

The legs of Barney followed us for half the distance, then gave up and he ended up on all fours. Another official noticed us.

The one on the ground was standing up: <<Call the police!>>

The other run into the cabin from which was just come out and spoke into a transmitter. The sirens began to sound. Fitz and Alvin had almost reached the gate, but I couldn't leave Barney. I went back and loaded him on my shoulder.

Four policemen came out from the side exits, brandishing big

batons. <<Stop!>>

The gate was in front of me, but with Barney I wouldn't have been able to climb over it.

<<Hurry up!>> fidgeted Fitz on the other side. At that moment was heard a terrible cry. Alvin had been flung to the ground and the cops were kicking him.

<<Come on!>> continued Fitz, as I loaded Barney over my shoulder to get him through the gate; two policemen were coming toward us. With a jump, I clung to the top of the gate.

The policeman stretched out catching my ankle, but the hold slipped. I fell on the other side, over Barney.

<<Call Reinforcements!>> shouted a policeman.

We had to get on a train!

<<We've lost Alvin>> became alarmed Fitz, in a panic. But we couldn't do anything for him and we had to make a decision, so I jumped on the train and the others followed me. We crossed one by one the carriages, until the engine room.

Fitz looked around, puzzled. <<How the hell is it started!>>

The panel was rusty, centuries old.

<<Barney>> I said. <<Do you think to be able to start it?>>

<<I've never seen one... but I can try>>.

<<Please, do it!>> fidgeted Fitz.

<<They're passing the gates>> I exclaimed, after having looked out.

Barney observed the buttons for a few seconds, then reached out his hand. A rattle was heard and something was set in motion. The images out of the windows began to move.

<<We've made it!>> exulted Fitz.

Barney let him slide down on the seat, exhausted. <<I think I

do not feel well>>.

<<What happen?>> I asked.

<<My hearth is stopping>>.

CHAPTER 18

The train was running at full speed, leaving behind the ignorance and the silly conceit; further and further away from the collective somnambulism, from the screen, from the ads of Bingo. The train couldn't go back, couldn't do anything for Alvin, now it had only one task: reach its destination. Nothing could stop it. I firmly gripped the chain that Annie had given me and thought: "One day we'll hug again". Meanwhile fell the darkness.

<<We are going through the wall>> informed Fitz.

Barney, sprawled on the seat, grumbled something, then turned on one side. He was really in a bad state, but he couldn't give in now. Without him we were done for.

<<Hey, look!>> shouted Fitz at one point. <<It was behind the door>>.

He handed me a familiar note:

WE ARE ON THE TRAIN.

YOUR TIME IS NEAR.

Signed: YOUR SHADOW

<<Damn, they're aboard!>> I exclaimed.

<<WHAT?>> Barney looked up with a start.

<<The killers are on board>> I repeated.

Barney became agitated. <<They want to set a trap for us,

once we set foot in the other side. They are waiting for the final order>>.

<<What order?>> I asked.

<<The one to kill us! Quick, we must reverse course!>>

Fitz shouted desperately: <<Don't do it!>>

Too late, Barney had already extended his hand. The hands of Fitz rushed on the same lever, in an exasperating struggle. Was heard a crash and Fitz fell backwards with the lever in his hand.

<<We'll get killed!>> he shouted, brandishing the brake.

<<Quick>> urged Barney <<We have to run to the last carriage, to reduce the impact>>.

<<In that way there are the killers>> remembered Fitz.

Whatever decision we would have taken, we would have died.

<<Do as you please!>> cursed Barney, making for the last carriage.

<<Stop!>> Fitz followed him.

I remained watching the tracks approaching at breakneck speed, then the dark corridor beyond the door. I chose to follow Barney, while the train was running wildly, without any driver. He was right, the killers were the smaller danger. But if we were able to pass them, at the terminus we would have still found the police.

Fitz and Barney were a few meters ahead, when a shadow moved across the ceiling, above them.

I cried in a loud voice: <<Watch out!>>

The shape suddenly sprang, like a spider about to attack the prey. Fitz turned back too late and something fell on him, grabbing his neck. The man in black gripped firmly, with the intention to strangle him. I threw myself into the fray. A hand

disappeared and reappeared with a dagger. Barney made a rapid movement towards the wall and our bodies rolled back, along the corridor. Daringly, he pulled again the red lever and the wheels were heard whistling.

<<What happened?>> I asked, picking myself up.

<<The emergency brake>> realized fitz, holding his head while was getting up.

The train had stopped.

We didn't know where we were, but we knew we had crossed the Wall of Force. The black man had got up on his feet and now was slowly walking towards us, with his dagger raised.

<<Quick!>> yelled Barney. <<Get out!>>

The door burst open and Fitz threw himself down; Barney followed closely behind. Once a blade slashed the air just few inches from my neck, I threw myself too. Nothing could be seen, two high walls were bordering the tracks.

<<Let's make it off!>> cried Fitz.

After a hundred yards Barney collapsed on the ground and I loaded him on my shoulder, continuing to run. The black man followed us along the tracks.

All of a sudden Fitz shouted: <<There seems to be something out there!>>

Barney raised his head and turned pale, the pupils dilated as if he had just seen a monster: <<It's a train and coming right towards us!>>

CHAPTER 19

The dazzling splendour left us breathless: domes made of glass surrounded us like feet of giants, imperious pyramids and steel monsters rose powerfully to infinite heights. It was

the heaven so jealously guarded by the Masters: the Slave man had helped to this, but he wasn't even allowed to watch the shining squares made of crystal, the blinding glare of the golden walls, the rows of tulips almost perfect, the tropical palm trees and the wide boulevards. He had never seen the fountains, the ponds with the reflection of the broad green leaves, among which opened views of skyscrapers. The screen had never shown such wonders, belonged to men of another rank, such as those crossing the street now: parading with suits of extraordinary sheen and elegance; advancing erect, with the bearing and the magnificence with which a saint would have walked on the water.

We took a step backwards, as some cave primitives would have done at the sight of the civilized human.

<<We have to dress like them>> realized Barney.

Fitz was thoughtful. <<It won't be easy to talk like this people>>.

Most of all, what would have we talked about, if they didn't watch the screen.

<<There aren't screens>> I pointed out.

Barney wasn't surprised. <<Here they don't need means of control>>. It was there that the deception was hatched. What would be happened if one day the people had given a look in there and had suddenly awakened?

<<How can it be that nobody here have tried to change the things?>> I said.

<<The mentality is shaped by the birth>> explained the old man. <<In addition to the School Realignment treatments and the Floren injections, they are taught from an early age to hate the poors and the "inferiors" outside, and when they really do not conform are thrown out, with the "beasts">>.

We were the only ones who could change the things. "These are the dreams that count" I thought, recalling the encounter with Alvin. "This is what God wants from us and makes us happy".

At one point, Fitz pointed to some signs. <<These are not ads>> explained Barney. <<These are the headquarters of the multinationals>>.

<<Why don't we enter into those towers?>> I suggested, defiant.

Barney hadn't heard, his face was contracted, as if struggling with himself.

<<What happens?>> asked Fitz.

<<My heart is stopping>> pronounced Barney in a low voice.

<<You can't abandon us now!>> implored Fitz.

The old man knelt. <<I believe in you: I know you will succeed. Good ... luck, guys>>.

Fitz bent down, but Barney didn't move. In the meantime, some voices were approaching. Not only we had entered illegally, but a dead body was lying at our feet.

"The real mission starts now!" I thought, putting a hand on the shoulder of Fitz.

<<I think it's time to run!>>

CHAPTER 20

Our shadows wandered lonely along roads made of metal in an unknown world, a city within a city, from which no one had ever escaped.

"What would have Barney done now?" I thought.

The Internal Police, stationed at the terminus, sooner or later

would notice that the train didn't arrive and would give the general alarm, while someone would find the body of Barney. To complicate the picture, there were professional killers on our trail, ready to kill us at any time. That paradise of flowers and plants would soon be transformed into an inferno. I wondered if the people there were really calm as they seemed. They lived off the labour of the slaves, but perhaps they had never met one, for this reason they ignored us, walking back and forth with exquisite poise and noble carriage. They believed to be free, but how could you be free in a square mile prison? They had never reached the true happiness and had never had dreams. Here are the rich people of New Babylon, a magnificent city, made up of palm trees, water channels and elevated roads.

<<Do you want to explain me where we are going?>> I asked at one point.

Fitz pointed the finger to a black tower, a hundred floors high, the headquarters of the psychiatric establishment.

<<I'll show you what Barney would have done>>.

We continued to run, until we reached the entrance, on the top of which stood out an enigmatic slogan:

THE GOOD IS EVIL AND THE EVIL IS GOOD

<<Hurry up!>> rushed Fitz. <<To the elevator!>> We run across a large lobby and someone immediately called us back: <<Hey, where are you going?>> A man not higher than a yard and a half in the back of the room, got down from the chair and started running toward us.

The hand of Fitz had pressed the button.

<<Top floor>> spoke with ardour.

The doors reopened to the ninety-ninth floor on a deserted corridor. We walked a few meters in an unknown silence, then Fitz swung around.

<<Watch out!>>

A man in black was waiting with a raised dagger, a black bandana was covering his face. We turned back, but also on the other side a man in black was waiting us. He was moving towards us with his arm raised.

<<In this way>> I caught one arm of Fitz, throwing ourselves against the wall. A door flung open and we continued to run, while the men were following us. The corridor ended in front of a door different from the others, on which there was written: "Presidency".

<<We're arrived!>> exulted Fitz. We entered with a start. A row of heads rose up towards us: men educated, cordial, in suit and tie, who had never met the primitive inhabitants outside the Wall. One of them stood up and walked towards us, without speaking. The expression was of someone not used to receive orders, a cold and ruthless man. He stopped a few feet from us and his look blinded us. He was aware of the power he had.

<<Who are these?>> he asked, pretending an immediate answer. Surely he would have cut off the head to someone. Behind us was heard a thud, the killers had entered the room, blocking the only escape route.

<<They are slaves!>> shouted one of them. This confirmed the idea the rich people had about us.

The man in suits and tie growled and showed all his contempt. <<Take them away!>> ordered.

One of the spy caught my arm. I didn't make a stand, it would have been useless, but he stopped immediately. A

murmur of disapproval was heard, Fitz had escaped and was running towards the back of the room. Facing him there was a glass wall and beyond that the empty space. He didn't stop: the glasses shattered into a thousand pieces and the body fumbled in the vacuum, then made an amazing athletic move catching a pipe. The heads appeared at the window astonished and soon after saw a speck on the road running.

I still couldn't believe: he had jumped from a one hundred-floors building and touched safely the ground.

The President was purple for the rage: <<Bring him here! Alive or dead! It's an order!>>

All nodded, then someone said: <<What will we make of him?>>

The President looked at me with disgust: <<For now rid me of him>>.

The spy invited me to go out with bad manners. In doing so, something fell from my pocket at the center of the room. He picked it up.

<<LOOK, seem a pair of headphones>>.

CHAPTER 21

When I opened my eyes I was behind bars. A memory assailed me: the blurred image of a "doctor of the mind", with a nervous twitch at the mouth and the look of a madman. He laughed sadistically, after having pronounced its verdict: "This man is crazy!" This was enough to order armed men to take me away by force, while I screamed like a madman.

But there was a hope and if Fitz was alive, there was still a possibility. One day the truth would crop up and the world

would be freed from the bondage of the Financial Center. I was thinking this, when a guard beyond the bars approached the gate. He removed the handcuffs to a girl and pushed her inside. The hair of the girl ended up at my feet. As she looked up, I recognized her.

<<Annie!>> I exclaimed.

<<Fox!>>

The guard turned back, startled. <<Do you know each other?>>

<<Never seen her before>> I lied, without uttering anything else. He looked at us for a bit with hard and suspicious eyes, then walked away.

<<What are you doing here?>> asked Annie.

<<Tell me what are you doing here, instead?>>

<<I've to confess you something: I knew you would have left, so I decided to follow up you to the Financial Center...>>

<<Really?>> I said, incredulous.

<<Yes, Fox. Because you have to know that I...>>

<<Yes?>>

<<I love you madly!>>

Her fleshy lips approached mine, I closed my eyes and sank in her. In the meantime, the footsteps of the guard were resounding in the corridor.

<<Dear, we can't!>> Our lips touched for a moment, then moved away.

<<What are you saying?>>

<<It's forbidden>>.

She looked at me surprised. <<Forbidden? Now that we are free? Who can arrest us again!>>

Yeah, I thought. Free at last!

My hot lips touched hers, chilly. Bursts of fire unleashed.

CHAPTER 22

<<Wake up! They are waiting for you in the Rectification Hall for the cure>>.

<<For what?>> I startled. I opened my eyes to focus the guard beyond the bars.

Annie whispered in my ear: <<He's talking about the screen>>.

<<Exactly>> confirmed the guard, making the lock snap. <<Law 15-12/4 ... the prisoners are prescribed 12 hours of screen a day, plus additional for aggravating about unreported crimes, according to the law 11-27/5>>.

He led us in an oval room where we were tied to the chairs. Other prisoners were waiting in silence and the screen turned on in front of us.

<<Enjoy!>> said the guard, closing the door.

Thousands of lights lit up the faces, demanding obedience and acceptance. The monotonous litany of psychedelic sounds lowered more and more the level of consciousness; a deadly boredom. The images were warping, moving... as hallucinogenic vapours, entering into our weak minds, in the form of hypnotic commands.

The smiling man was always telling the truth! The Fric fries always made Froc! It had to be like that because was said by the screen.

Damn! now we were really free!