

#### TRADUZIONE N. 1

The machine buzzed loudly as it cleaned the floor. I was wearing headphones. I was listening to my mum's tape called 'Music for Sleep'. But I could only hear the cleaning machine.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 2

I opened my eyes and looked at the clock. It was one seventeen AM – the middle of the night – but the bright white lights of the airport terminal made it feel like the afternoon.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 3

I turned around, feeling uncomfortable. My rucksack was my pillow, my coat was my mattress, the metal bench was my bed. Nearby I could see my parents, and a few other travellers, snoring.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 4

Our next flight was in ten hours. "Let's save money!" my mum had said. A direct flight was very expensive. It was much cheaper to stop here in the middle of the journey. We could have stayed in a hotel for the night, but that was very expensive too.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 5

I took off my headphones and turned off the tape player. Then I saw a boy crouching behind a bench. He was using his fingers like a gun. "Bang! Bang!" he whispered.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 6

I pretended to be shot. I rolled off the bench and laid down on the floor. The boy ran over and put his fingers on my neck. Then he put his hand against his ear. "The enemy is dead," he said. "Understood, commander!"

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 7

That was the first chapter in the story of Special Agents Fourteen and Seventeen. Over the next few hours, we fought terrorists (other travellers), robots (the cleaning machine) and aliens (the airport staff). Together, we saved the world.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 8

The next morning, we woke up before everyone else. We walked up and down the airport together, talking and looking in all the shops. We spent a long time in a toy shop. "When I grow up, I'll have a big house, with toys in every room," said the boy.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 9

The boy's mum looked at me. "We aren't getting the same flight as you, dear," she said kindly. "Our flight leaves in three hours." "Come on, we're late," my mum insisted.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 10

She was pulling my arm. I continued looking at the boy as I walked away. He looked sad, but I couldn't see him clearly. There were tears in my eyes.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 11

I continued crying, quietly, in the queue at Gate Thirty-Two. Then I saw the boy running towards me. I quickly wiped my tears. He held out his hand. There was a plastic ring in it.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 12

"It was the cheapest toy in the shop," he said. "Mum bought one for me, and one for you." I took the ring and put it on. The boy smiled at me. His eyes looked wet too. Then he ran away.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 13

In those days, there were no mobile phones. There was no email or social media. There was no internet. I never saw the boy again, but I wore the ring until it broke.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 14

Even today, I still imagine visiting his house. The door opens. "I've found you at last, Special Agent Fourteen," I say. We never told each other our names.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 15

The chef placed the plates on the counter. The steak was perfect. The vegetables were fresh and tender. The smell of the sauce was mouth-watering. Henry picked the plates up and carried them gracefully into the dining room.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 16

There was only one table in the lavishly decorated room. In the corner, a woman was playing soft piano music. The walls were made of glass, and the view of the sea was magnificent.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 17

Henry bowed, left the room and returned to the kitchen. He washed his hands, and went to the bathroom. Inside a cubicle, he checked his hidden camera. The device was still working correctly.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 18

Henry was an undercover reporter. For over five years, he had pretended to be a waiter. He'd worked at ten different catering companies. It was all so he could serve dinner to the three men this evening.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 19

Everyone who worked for the company had a strict contract. If they revealed anything they heard, the penalty was extremely harsh. But Henry didn't care: it was more important to show the world the truth.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 20

He washed his hands again, returned to the kitchen, and helped to prepare the dessert. It was a luxurious tart, made with rare dark chocolate and decorated with gold.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 21

"I don't care whether the President believes in climate change," said a man with curly hair. "I have secret underground homes on every continent. She can burn with everyone else."

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 22

The third man scoffed. "Space? I'm staying right here on Earth. If it's hot, I've got air conditioning. If it's cold, I've got heating. If there's something I need, I've got an army of robots."

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 23

Henry looked at the chocolate tarts. He felt sick. He placed one in front of each man, and poured more wine. "You know, I feel bad for them sometimes," said the bald man. "Billions of people, working so hard, for so little. Like our waiter."

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 24

"Look at this man. Do you realise he's worked for five years just to be here tonight?" The gladiators were ready to fight. One was a large man with big muscles. The other was skinny and short.

#### TRADUZIONE N. 25

Ten minutes later, the crowd was cheering. The skinny gladiator was bleeding, but he jogged out of the arena. "Bad luck," said the master's friend sympathetically. "Bad luck," said the master's friend sympathetically.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 26

Two days ago, at midnight, the god Apollo had visited Lucia. He had offered her a choice: gain the ability to see what will happen, but lose the ability to lie. So, she had to tell her master everything.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 27

One week later, the master met his friend again. "Let's play for twenty gold coins, today," said the master. "I'll bet on the fat guy." "Actually, I like the tall one," the master said. "He looks like me."

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 28

"Fine," said his friend, "but what happened to your slave girl? She's covered in bruises!" "That's none of your business," the master snapped. "Will you play?" They shook hands.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 29

After a horrible fight, the master laughed at his friend. "You should lose more often," said the master. "I like you more when you lose!"

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 30

Over the next few months, the master's wealth doubled and tripled. And although he could win anywhere, he loved winning against his friend the most. Each week, he insisted on a larger bet. Slowly, the master's friend lost a fortune.

#### TRADUZIONE N. 31

One evening, during a banquet at the master's house, Lucia offered him a large plate full of delicacies she had made. "What is this?" he asked. "Stewed apricots, freshly-baked bread, stuffed olives —"

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 32

The master slapped her. "I'm not blind. What is this knife for? I'm an important man now. Do you expect me to slice the bread myself?" He pushed her away, and she tripped. The dish fell. Lucia hit her head on the floor.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 33

At that moment, the door burst open. The master's friend charged into the room. "Cheater!" shouted the friend. "I believed you were lucky. But you have no honour!" The master stood up. "You were not invited! How dare you insult me in front of my guests!"

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 34

"In fact, I've come to gamble with you. Will you play? If I win, I will take what you owe me. If you win, you will take my house, everything in it, and the rest of my money." The master's eyes opened wide. "And the game?"

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 35

Lucia looked at her master's friend. The friend looked at her. He saw that she was bleeding. His eyes were full of sympathy. Lucia saw what would happen.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 36

"How dare he insult you," she said carefully. "The fight will last less than a minute... Afterwards... everyone will congratulate my master. They will call him a man of honour. And tomorrow, I will smile all day."

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 37

“Right now, on Earth, it’s New Year’s Eve,” said Alex. “My family is eating a hot, delicious dinner. Instead, I’m here on this awful spaceship, eating nothing.”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 38

“When I was chosen for this mission,” Alex said, “I felt lucky.” “It wasn’t luck,” said the Captain, while continuing to work at her computer. “I chose you because you were the best.” “I wish you hadn’t.”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 39

Three months ago, there had been an accident. Now, their spaceship’s batteries were almost empty. Without energy, they couldn’t call for help, and they couldn’t go home. They were floating in space. Their food and water had almost run out.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 40

Someone came and stood beside Alex. It was the Chief Scientist. “This time last year,” she said, “my father made a traditional cake.” The Scientist smiled, thinking about the taste. “He makes it with oranges, vanilla and almonds. And there’s a coin hidden inside. Whoever finds it will have good luck.”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 41

There was only one thing that could save them. If they found an asteroid containing the right metals, they could make new batteries. It was a one in a hundred chance.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 42

“New Year’s Eve has always been my favourite day,” said the Engineer, who had come to stand with them. “We used to eat seven, nine, sometimes twelve different dishes! Fresh fish, roast pork, potato salad...”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 43

The Captain looked up. “Catch,” she said. She took something from her pocket, and threw it to Alex. It was a spiky piece of metal. “We melt the metal and drop it into cold water,” she said. “Each shape is unique. Some people believe that the shape predicts the future.”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 44

They all laughed. Then, suddenly, the entire spaceship shook. Alarms began to ring. Everyone jumped and ran to their computers. “Report!” shouted the Captain. “We have detected —” cried the Scientist.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 45

Then the spaceship filled with light. The light was coming through the windows, from space. “Raise the solar panels!” cried the Captain. It was a supernova – a huge burst of energy from a nearby star. It was a one in a billion chance.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 46

A little while later, the whole crew was standing together, looking out the window. The supernova was more beautiful than any fireworks they could imagine, and it was a hundred trillion kilometres in size. They were all silent for a long time.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 47

“You know,” said Alex at last, smiling at the crew, “I *do* feel lucky.” “A supernova close enough to charge our batteries, but far enough not to be dangerous? Yeah, that’s lucky!” laughed the Scientist.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 48

“The *what?*” asked Elizabeth. She had only worked in the tourist office for a week, but she’d lived in the area for years. She knew there wasn’t much to see, and there definitely wasn’t a famous bus-stop.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 49

“The *Bus-Stop of the Spirits*,” the man repeated. “It’s one of the most significant landmarks in the whole area. I read about it online. Can I walk from here, or do I need to get a taxi?”

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 50

“That won’t be necessary, sir!” Elizabeth said quickly. “The Bus-Stop of the Spirits. Of course! I was only joking.” It was Friday, and nearly the end of the day. Elizabeth didn’t want an argument. She wanted the tourist to go away, so she could go home.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 51

“I know we’re in a bad situation,” said the Chief Engineer. “But hey – look at the stars! No one on Earth has that view.” Alex looked out the window. All he could see was black. He imagined the fireworks outside his family’s window, on Earth.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 52

She thought about one of the town’s many bus-stops. “Yes, you can reach our world-renowned bus-stop on foot. Follow that path towards the river, and it’s on your right. It’s the bus-stop with the sign that says ‘No Dogs’.”

#### TRADUZIONE N. 53

When Elizabeth arrived at work on Monday morning, there was a long queue of tourists outside the door. When she arrived at her desk, she saw a pile of booklets with the title: 'The Bus-Stop of the Spirits – The Thousand-Year Curse.' On the bottom, it said: 'Includes a discount voucher for cabbages.'

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 54

Elizabeth sold the booklets all morning. When the tourists had finally gone away, she was exhausted. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. It was quiet at last.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 55

Amanda lived in a dull, grey apartment block. A small garden surrounded it, but it was overgrown with weeds. It made the building look even uglier.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 56

No one took care of the garden, because it was no one's responsibility. So the thorns grew and grew, and the garden looked worse and worse. It made Amanda hate living there.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 57

One day, Amanda couldn't stand it anymore. She woke up early, put on her gloves, and started chopping and digging. She cleared away the weeds and dug out their roots. It was hard work. At eight o'clock she had to stop, put away her tools, and go to work.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 58

Amanda continued working on the garden early in the morning, every day. It was weeks before the last weed was finally removed. Then she planted flowers, vines and berry bushes.

#### TRADUZIONE N. 59

The flowers bloomed, summer arrived, and the fruits grew. The garden looked gorgeous. The whole building was transformed: it actually looked inviting. It made Amanda look forward to coming home after work.

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#### TRADUZIONE N. 60

At the weekend, Amanda strolled through her new garden. She brushed the leaves with her fingertips. She smelled the fresh scent of the flowers. She felt the soft grass beneath her feet, warmed by the sun.