

Giancarlo Genta

The Hunter

A Scientific Novel

 Springer

Science and Fiction

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Preface

Humankind is on the verge of epoch-making changes: as Tsiolkovsky would say, human beings are leaving their cradle, the Earth, to build a spacefaring civilization. We cannot say when humans will return to the Moon, land on Mars or launch the first interstellar spaceship; it may be just a matter of years or of centuries (particularly for the last enterprise), but one thing is certain: our development cannot continue indefinitely on a single, overpopulated and overexploited, planet.

Space is a harsh, dangerous and new environment, and new technologies must be developed to venture across its gulfs. This is however nothing new: Humans have been playing this game since the early Stone Age, when they left the plains of east Africa, the only environment in which they could live without the need to develop increasingly advanced technologies.

The new environments encountered and the new technologies required will, in turn, compel the human species to change, to develop new skills and new behaviours, on top of the basic human background that has characterized us ever since we first appeared on the surface of this planet.

Science-fiction novels are (in practical terms) experiments: the author creates a new environment and puts his characters in it to see how they react to the new challenges, and how they build their lives or succumb to the overwhelming stresses of life. In this novel, the action develops at the frontier of the tiny zone of our galaxy that has been colonized by humankind, where the few people who venture so far from Earth live in artificial habitats—space stations, mining colonies on asteroids and space ships—owing to the lack of naturally inhabitable, or already terraformed, planets.

In this situation, humans come in contact with something alien; not living creatures with whom they could have a relationship of some sort—friendship, understanding, hostility, hate or even just indifference—but machines that have presumably been sown into the galaxy by some intelligent species that intended to use them to explore and colonize its neighbouring stellar systems. This strategy—which had already been proposed by some scientists in the 20th Century—leads to a disaster because of the tendency by these self

replicating machines to undergo evolutionary processes in an almost Darwinian way.

The confrontation with these alien machines causes a disruption to the usual standards of life in the affected zones at the frontier, and the characters have to face a situation that deteriorates progressively. While facing the new dangers and difficulties, they try to understand the limitations of artificial intelligence, a still controversial subject, in an effort to assess whether really intelligent machines might, after all, be possible.

The story is followed by a short appendix, summarizing the scientific and technological facts, theories and hypotheses that are behind the novel. It is subdivided into three sections: space travel, astrobiology, artificial intelligence and robotics. This feature is a characteristic of this new *Science and Fiction* series that has been introduced by Springer.

The section on space travel is the most hypothetical, because it is based on ideas which have, up to now, received no theoretical or experimental confirmation: A way of allowing the characters to overcome the speed-of-light barrier had to be devised and the warp drive approach was chosen. The astrobiological part is consistent with what is today considered most likely, whereas, for artificial intelligence and robotics, the book reflects my strongly sceptical views about strong A.I.

The author wishes to express his sincere thanks to Clive Horwood, the publisher of Praxis Publications, who produced my book *Lonely Minds in the Universe*, on the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, under the Springer/Praxis label; to Chris Caron (publishing editor at Springer), Stephen Webb (Science and Fiction book series editor) and Storm Dunlop (language editor) for their constructive criticism and suggestions, which resulted in a great improvement to the present text. The gratitude of the author goes also to his wife Franca, for the editing work she performed, as usual, on both the novel and the scientific commentary.

Giancarlo Genta

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Part I

The Novel

The Hunter

1

The corridors of the space station were empty, dimly lit by the night lights. Mike Edwards, second-class technician from the maintenance department, was walking slowly, trying to reach his quarters. He realized he was stumbling: twelve hours working outside were clearly too much. ‘Safety rules would not allow shifts of this kind in any civilized place’, he thought. But he was there for exactly that reason. A boy like him would never reach the status of second-class technician in one of those civilized places. And, above all, he was there because it was exactly in places like this that he had a chance to meet the Hunter.

Moreover, now that he had met Ann, this forgotten space station in the middle of nowhere could turn out to be heaven. Or hell, because there was still that bloody Madame ... He didn’t even know her name. Everybody simply called her that.

He was now in the private quarters section, located in the outer part of the huge rotating ring that provided an artificial gravity of a sort. Not much of a gravity, actually, but at any rate better than the weightlessness of the smaller space stations. Because true artificial gravity required too much energy, it was used only in starships. The floor was clearly curved, and your eyes were always telling you that you were walking upwards, while your equilibrium organs were telling you that the floor was flat.

The doors of the small rooms for the employees were set along the side walls of the corridor. In many places the paint was flaking off, and many of the doors were half open: empty rooms, not used for years. It was months since Mike had stopped being aware of the derelict look of the living quarters on the station, too big for the number of people that now lived there. Actually Mike was too tired to think about such things. He was walking like a robot, eager only to get to his room and to throw himself on his bed. Suddenly he realized he was there. With what felt to be the last of his strength, he raised his right hand and pressed his thumb on the scanner.

“Open!”, he whispered, hoping that the lock could recognize his voice. He heard a low squeal and thought ‘I should find time to fix that door, before I get locked out of my room’. Finally he pushed open the door and, without even looking around, he let himself fall onto his bed.

He ordered the door to close and realized he had not even the strength to undress and take a shower. (Another safety rule overlooked: you were not supposed to leave the airlock without showering and, above all, without changing the coveralls worn under the space suit.) He laid on the bed ready to sleep, still in his dirty gray coveralls, covered in oil and sweat.

‘To hell with the alarm clock. After a shift like that, tomorrow I will be late for work’. He realized he had promised Steve to take a look at his waiter robot, but he decided that the robot could wait too.

He was almost asleep when he noticed a small blue light blinking under his communication screen. ‘No, not now’, he thought, Even so, he ordered: “Message on the main screen”.

The screen came on:

New Shanghai space station
Internal communication network
Message recorded by traffic control room—urgent.

Under those few lines there was the signature of the acting traffic controller, Joe Ivanovich.

Mike jumped out of bed and sat on the edge. The sudden surge of adrenalin made him oblivious of the tiredness his body was still feeling. There was just one reason for a message like that from Joe: a simple message saying nothing, but that could cost both of them their jobs. Actually the charge would be one of giving out classified information for Joe, and one of corruption for himself—who would believe that Joe would run such a risk just for the sake of their old friendship? A traffic controller could do nothing worse than giving out the movements of the ships that arrived or departed from the station.

He opened the case where he stored the tools he used to fix his friends’ robots, and took out a small metal box with two connectors trailing from it. He connected one to the output of the communication screen and the other one to his small portable screen. The screen came on, and a single line appeared: *Your friend will be here for dinner at 18.00.* He was really proud of that duplicated encryption. The message was coded in hardware by that innocent looking interface, but even if someone could decode it, only something that was still apparently uncompromising would appear. And, finally, even if somebody could understand who the ‘friend’ was, the time would tell them nothing, because no ship would dock at 18.00.

The *Morning Star* would dock eight hours earlier, at 10 a.m. As soon as his heartbeat returned to a normal rate, he realized that it was not as lucky as he had thought at first. He looked at his watch: five a.m. He had just five hours. How could he get some rest and organize what he had planned in just five hours? It was impossible, absolutely impossible. He fell back on his bed. He could almost have started crying, more out of tiredness and anger, than from disappointment. He had been there for almost a year, just waiting for this moment. He had prepared every detail with a view to meeting the Hunter; he had rehearsed and re-rehearsed a hundred times the words he would say. And now he also had something of value to offer him, a piece of information that could make the difference. But everything was useless if he was deeply asleep when the Hunter left his ship.

He reconsidered the situation. The *Morning Star* would dock at 10. The last checks would take 2 h, the antimatter transfer could not start before half past noon and the Hunter would not leave his ship before it was strictly essential. For years he had studied the man's habits and he was sure he would behave as usual tomorrow. He would not reach Steve's canteen before one: he had three hours more to get ready. It was not much, but he could manage.

Now he had a decision to take. He had promised Ann to let her know when the Hunter was due to arrive. And if he didn't call her Madame would certainly get very upset. And what about that? What if she wouldn't let him work on her RGs? No, he had to call.

"Call Ann, private address", he said in a loud voice.

A few seconds went by slowly, then a sleepy face, sticking out from under a blanket pulled up to her chin, appeared on the screen. Certainly he couldn't say that under these conditions she was beautiful, but he remained there, speechless, contemplating her face.

"... the hell calling at this time? What's the matter?" was all he caught as soon he managed to focus his attention again. And suddenly he was aware of two things. First, it was five a.m.; second, she had answered and, above all, she had not switched off the video. He was starting to speculate on the possible implications, when he realized he had to answer her.

"I've learned that the Hunter will be here tomorrow morning. I think that he and his crew will be at Steve's for lunch at about one. Tell Madame to get her RGs well spruced up and perfumed, ready for action", he answered hurriedly.

"Thanks, Mike", she answered with a smile. "We'll all be at Steve's at one ...".

That 'we' spoiled all the pleasure her smile had caused.

"Please, tell Madame to go easy and, above all, not to have them wear those dresses ... And instruct the RGs not to try anything with him. The Hunter is

known to be a puritan, and since his wife died in that accident with his fifth replicator, he has never looked at a woman ...”, he answered.

“All right, your idol is above anything material. He has never looked at a woman, and soon he will grow a pair of angel’s wings. I will look out for a small statue so that you can make an altar in your room and worship him as he deserves ...” she answered with evident sarcasm. “We will make sure we tempt your idol suitably”.

“No, don’t say that. And, above all, don’t distract him. He has to listen to me. Tell Madame to instruct her RGs to deal with his crew. The first mate should be a good target: they say that he spends most of his share of the rewards on that kind of thing. It is a pity I could not finish that work on RG46B/G, but anyway she should work well enough to siphon a good quantity of money from the first mate’s pockets into Madame’s ...”

“All right, you mean that whore called Lulu. There’s no point in you going on calling her by that official designation ... Very professional, no doubt, but we all know what you do with her”.

Mike refrained from smiling. He wanted to tell her the actual reason he spent all that time working on that robot, but obviously he couldn’t. But why that reaction? Was she jealous? Perhaps he should say more.

“Well, that piece of junk is no longer as she was when came from the factory. But where did Madame get her RGs? You cannot ask me to re-program a robot without testing it, can you?”

“If you want to test a robot, get Steve’s waiter. At any rate thanks for the tip. We will all be ready at one.”

Yes, undoubtedly Ann was jealous of that robot. Mike pulled up his blanket and tried to sleep. But he was too excited: The Hunter was due to arrive soon; moreover, Ann was showing some interest in him.

It was a pity he could not finish his work on that RG46. When he had suggested to Madame that he should improve her program, the robot had a voice that was not as sexy as that of an emergency beacon. Now, on the other hand ... He had downloaded tens of porno videos and put the voices of the actresses through a spectrum analyzer, then used those spectra to re-program her voice synthesizer. For days he had spent all his free time on that job, and now the results were impressive. Then he had started working on the controls for the actuators that allowed the robot to move. And now she was able to perform a striptease like a high-class dancer.

He remembered the old joke about striptease: do not try to understand how they do it, just enjoy the show. He didn’t enjoy any show, but on the contrary he had analyzed every detail of her movements, and had re-programmed all the amplifiers powering the tens of electrohydraulic actuators that gave life to those seventy kilos of machinery that was covered with synthetic flesh

and skin. And now that robot could be the star of a first-class night club on Earth, instead of performing in a brothel on a space station in the middle of nowhere.

Another few weeks of work and Madame would have no reason to ask Ann to do that job. RG46 would have been better than any flesh and blood girl: That was the aim of all this work. It was a real pity he could not finish his job before the Hunter arrived.

That thought brought him back to the present. He needed badly to sleep, otherwise tomorrow he would miss the opportunity for which he had come all that way out there. He opened the small cabinet where he stored the few prescriptions he sometimes used, and took one of the pills Joe had given him a few months ago, with the recommendation to use them only in case of absolute need: the pills astronauts used when they needed to get some rest in an emergency. He looked at his watch: it was forty minutes past five. He set the pill on four hours and a half, and swallowed it.

His head did not even touch the pillow before he was asleep: a heavy and dreamless sleep.

2

New Shanghai was a large space station located at the L5 Lagrange point of the fifth planet orbiting the main component of the double star BD -05 1844, 9.2 parsecs from the Sun. The red-orange star, slightly smaller than the Sun, was known well before humans started their expansion in space, even if it couldn't be seen from Earth with the naked eye. It could be found in star catalogs under various names, such as BD -05 1844 or Gliese 250. Fifty years earlier the Shaanxi Terraforming and Space Engineering Corporation had the space station built in the shipyards of 40 Eridani. Towing it to its final position had been considered a technological miracle: four deep space tugboats propelled by warpdrive, had worked for two years to tow it the 6.2 parsecs separating the two star systems. Actually it had been an epic feat, that was, however, only a part of a much more complex project. The space station was meant to be the logistic headquarters for the terraforming operations to be performed on the star's second planet: a planet slightly larger than Earth, located right in the middle of the habitable zone.

Owing to the complete absence of lifeforms, the planet had an atmosphere made of carbon dioxide and nitrogen, but could become perfectly suited for human life with relatively simple terraforming operations. It had some large oceans, mountains, rivers and lakes and a water cycle similar to that on Earth. Once terraformed, it would host a few billion human beings, becoming the

most important planet in that part of the Galaxy. The STSE Corp. had obtained all rights to the planet and had launched a large-scale colonization operation. The hopes were so high that the planet was even provisionally designed 'New Earth' and provided with a space elevator. The first stage of the operation had been to build some huge nuclear power stations orbiting the fifth planet, powered by deuterium and helium 3 mined from the atmosphere of the gas giant. The energy thus produced was used to produce antimatter, which was then stored in the tanks on New Shanghai, where the thousands of starships participating in the project could be re-fuelled. Other space stations were due to be built, and the value of the shares of the STSE Corp. were soaring in the stock markets on Earth and on the largest colonized planets.

At the same time a rocky satellite of the third planet of the small component of BD -05 1844, a red dwarf, was discovered. The satellite had the peculiarity of hosting some primitive lifeforms, nothing more than bacteria, that through the millennia had transformed its atmosphere, enriching it in oxygen and making it breathable. The satellite, named Ceres owing to its potential for agriculture, had been immediately colonized and, over time, came to host a population of a few millions. They too were employed in the terraforming operations on the main planet, mostly supplying agricultural products.

The system seemed to be bound to become one of the main centers in the outer parts of the galactic zone colonized by humankind, when suddenly, as often happens in human enterprises, disaster struck. In this case the disaster took the form of some strange objects, apparently huge self-replicating robots of alien origin, which attacked a few human colonies at the frontier of the inhabited zone towards the Monoceros constellation, where the New Shanghai station was located. Human expansion in that zone faltered and the value of real estate sank. Following this crisis, the companies operating in the terraforming sector, like the STSE Corp, had a severe setback. Only the direct intervention of the Chinese government avoided the bankruptcy of a company that just a few month earlier seemed to be booming. The situation had been stagnating for twenty years and, although operations on the planet never completely stopped, nobody now called New Earth anything more than just a derelict planet, with little prospect of being terraformed in the predictable future.

Slowly the colonists who had settled Ceres also started to leave and now the colony had slightly more than 30,000 inhabitants. Most of the settlements were now nothing more than ghost towns.

New Shanghai was now reduced to a lonely station at the periphery of the colonized zone, a harbor where the few starships that still ventured into that forgotten region of space could find antimatter and some assistance.

3

Mike woke up with a terrible headache. He looked at his watch and realized it was ten past ten: those pills worked like a precision clock, although he could not tell whether they were free from side effects.

If Joe was right, the *Morning Star* had just docked. Mike switched on the monitor to check the arrival schedule: it was showing that a private ship was completing the docking procedure. Nothing strange in the Hunter asking for the name of his ship not to appear on the list: he was too famous and preferred to have some privacy.

Mike took a quick shower, put on his best technician coveralls and started walking towards Steve's canteen.

He sat at a table, and within a few minutes the waiter robot came by to take his order. He asked for a low-calorie breakfast and added "Tell your master to come as soon as possible. I need to speak with him about an important matter."

Not a minute later Steve came out from the back of the shop where the kitchen was located and sat down in front of him.

"What's going on? And why are you here at this time? Maintenance technicians on strike today?", he asked.

"Never mind about the time, I need your help. The Hunter has just docked and ..." Mike started to say.

"If you are here for what I think you are here for, the answer is no", Steve interrupted him. He had immediately understood what kind of help Mike was asking for. There was little guesswork needed: together and with Joe they had discussed how to talk to the Hunter tens of times.

"But why? We've discussed it so many times, we've ironed out all the details ... And now that he is here, you just pull back?", Mike reacted, seizing his wrist. He was not prepared for a reaction like that.

"Listen, Mike, it's one thing to talk when you think these things will never happen, it's quite another allowing yourself to get into trouble. Or rather, to get all of us into trouble. Joe was wrong to tell you he was arriving: he's risking his job. And me too. If it comes out that I allowed you to disturb an important person in my canteen, I could have my license taken away. And you too can get fired. Wait, if he is here to have his ship fuelled up, he will spend at least 24 h in this station. When they give the news of his arrival, you can send him a written request for a meeting, and everything will be above board."

"You know full well that won't work ... As soon as the news of his arrival is made public, his terminal will be jammed with emails. And he will read none of them. And if I miss this chance ...". Initially he had been able to remain calm, but now he was getting really angry.

“Don’t do it like this, Mike. You know that it would be better my way. For all of us. Dreams are one thing, but the real world is another.”

At these words Mike was unable to restrain himself any more. Squeezing Steve’s wrist, he interrupted him: “Nice friend you are. Think of all the hours I’ve spent fixing that robot of yours that is falling to pieces. Now I can call it and disable it with a high frequency discharge. Instead of pretending you have a broken waiter, you will have to play the waiter for a week ...”

“But what do you think you can gain in this way? You cannot just get to him, saying that you know where a replicator is hiding and offering to tell him the coordinates if he takes you on his ship. It’s nonsense, he will never believe you.”

“Leave that to me. I’ve rehearsed tens of times what I’m going to tell him, and I will be able to make him believe me. Only help me to get close to him, and I’ll do what’s needed”. Mike was a bit less excited now and realized that perhaps he could still convince his friend.

“But you cannot stay here the whole day. It’s late, and you should be at work by now ...”

He could easily get around that objection. And, once this marginal point was overcome, perhaps he could convince him. “Yesterday I worked outside adjusting the long-range warning system for twelve full hours and today I deserve a whole day off. And then, if all goes well, tomorrow I’ll resign and say goodbye to this rathole. Please, let me try”.

Steve shook his head. “Do whatever the hell you want, but I know nothing about it. You can disable my waiter. Now I’m going, do as you wish” he concluded, with a skeptical expression.

Mike felt he had heaven within his grasp. “No problem, if we get into trouble, I will take all the blame. And I will enable your waiter again as soon as this is over”. He stopped to think for a few moments, and then added: “and next time I have RG46 to do a full rehearsal, I will tell you, so you will enjoy a striptease that you can see only on Earth”.

“All right, don’t forget it. I am sure that tomorrow you will still be here. This thing will never work.” He finished by getting up and going back to the kitchen.

Mike called the waiter. As soon as the robot got close, he switched on the tiny high-frequency generator he had in his pocket, and the machine froze. He got up suddenly and went to knock at the door of Steve’s kitchen. “Steve, your waiter’s frozen, I think a power amplifier has burnt out and it lost its power. I’ve no time now to fix it, shall I bring it in?”, he said in a loud voice. He saw that two technicians were walking along the corridor and he wanted them to be able to testify that the waiter had a problem, just in case. He hoped it was a needless precaution, but you never knew.

Steve came out. “No, not again? That’s the third time in a month. Why can’t you fix it better? And now, what can I do if some customer shows up for lunch?” His desperate expression was almost credible. At least as far as one of the two technicians, that now were quite close, was concerned, because he told him: “You can’t blame Mike, he knows how to deal with robots. You should get a new waiter, can’t you see that this one is falling into pieces?”

“Yes, and where do I get the money? When you come here to fill up with beer I’ll just double the price, so that I can pay for a new waiter. Can’t you see that this hole is falling apart?” he answered with an unhappy face. “And now what can I do?”

“Don’t worry, if you need help, I am here”, Mike assured him.

They pushed the robot into Steve’s room without saying a word and Mike went back to his table. He took out his small screen from his pocket and started reading the news. Now the only thing he could do was wait. At one, he saw Madame coming along the corridor with her four RGs and Ann. As usual she was elegantly dressed, and the RGs had on their working dresses ... if they could really be called dresses. And Ann had very little more on. Just as if he had not warned Ann not to exaggerate what the girls were wearing ... And then for Ann too, to go around dressed like that, like a whore! ‘Well, and what is she, after all?’ he thought. ‘No, it’s Madame that forces her to do this’, he concluded, trying to keep his sense of proportion.

For a moment he thought of getting up and telling them to go away and change their dresses, but then he decided it was useless. If Madame had decided to have them dressed this way, he would not be able to get her to change her mind by making a scene.

For a while he watched how RG46 was walking—he continued to refuse to call her Lulu—and compared her movements with those of the other RGs. There was no comparison, he had done a terrific job. If he just could carry on with it, Madame would definitely not need Ann any more.

He suddenly realized that there was something wrong: how could he re-program those RGs if he was leaving with the Hunter? Only now he realized that his goals were in conflict with one another. But he could not abandon his dreams so soon. And then, he had always thought that if he could participate in the hunt and have a role in destroying a replicator, he would earn enough money to take Ann away from this place, get her free from Madame, and perhaps even marry her.

Thinking about the Hunter brought him back to the real world. It was already a quarter past one and he had not yet shown up. Was it possible that Joe was wrong and the arriving ship had nothing to do with him? There were a lot of people who preferred to keep their movements secret.

He sat down again, trying to keep calm. From time to time he threw a quick glance at the door leading to the docking zone, and at the six women—or rather two actual women and four robots—sitting about twenty meters from him, beyond the canteen area, on the sofas of a small waiting room just off the corridor leading towards the private quarters.

At half past one he was so nervous that he got up and went to the door of Steve's kitchen. He knocked and asked Steve for a drink. "If you hadn't done your nice job on my waiter you would not have had to come in person" Steve said. And then he added: "I see that Madame and her whores are all here, ready to hunt for the Hunter. Artificial whores and natural whores, I mean".

Mike pretended not to understand. He knew very well what his friends thought about Ann, but he didn't want to start the endless discussions on the subject yet again. And he knew quite well that they thought that the main reason he wanted to go away with the Hunter was to get away from her—and hopefully to forget her.

"At any rate your Lulu is gorgeous, you've made a wonderful job of her. I dare say that the only human in the group looks more like a cheap RG than her", he ended.

Again Mike pretended not to hear, and went back to his table, resisting the impulse to answer him as he deserved. It was useless to repeat for the hundredth time that if Ann was there it was only Madame's fault, and if he could only get her away from the station everything would be fine. He knew full well that Steve and Joe had taken on a sort of crusade to make him forget Ann. For his own good, obviously, but that upset him even more.

Suddenly, at about two, the door opened and a group of people came in from the corridor. He looked at them one by one: he had seen their pictures so many times that he recognized all of them. Leading the group there was Andrei Romero, the first mate. The second one was Ali O'Connor, the chief engineer, and then, one by one, all the others. The last one to come in was the Hunter himself. He realized that he was staring at him. For years he had been dreaming of meeting that man, the man who had destroyed six replicators, those awful alien machines that were bringing havoc and death to the colonized worlds.

Soon the group was in the area where the corridor widened to become the canteen area. They all sat round a long rectangular table. There were eighteen of them, but there was enough room for all of them, and some space to spare. Mike noticed that many were taking quick glances at the small room where the RGs—and unfortunately Ann as well—were sitting, giving what he thought was an indecent show. Romero had managed to sit in a position from which he had an unobstructed view in that direction. 'Then it's true what they say about him', Mike thought. 'Madame will be happy. Now it is up to me to have him make the best choice'.

He got up, and took the eighteen menus he had prepared. He came up to the table and, trying to behave as he had seen human waiters behaving in old movies, before robots had completely taken over those menial jobs, he gave them the paper sheets.

“Eh, boy, since when did they have a technician, and nothing less than a second-class technician, serving at table? Don’t they have robot waiters in this hole? Or is this perhaps your hobby?”, Romero said to him in a derisory tone.

“I am sorry, sir, but the owner of this place had a problem with his waiter, and since he is a friend of mine I am trying to help him get over this emergency”, Mike answered, blushing.

“And you are a maintenance technician? Fix his robot, instead of acting the clown like this”, the first mate went on.

“Sorry, sir, but my specialization is long-range warning systems. Working on robots is none of my business”, answered Mike, hoping he would not realize that he was lying. “The waiter was sent to the robot maintenance section, but will not be operational until tonight.” Things were turning out badly. He hadn’t expected a reaction like that.

“Stop it, Romero”, the Hunter cut him short. “Don’t you see you are embarrassing the boy, who after all is here only to help a friend, and to allow us to have a good lunch?”. And then he continued, addressing Mike with a smile “Don’t listen to him, boy. We understand the problem, and we thank you for your help. After all, it is not something that happens often to have a technician, and a second-class technician at that, bringing us food”. “Thank you, Sir. I will try to do everything properly”, Mike answered, starting to take the orders. Luckily that emergency looked to be over.

He served the appetizers, without any problem. Then it was time for the main course. Every time he got close to the Hunter he tried to start the short speech he had prepared, but he didn’t manage to do so. There was little he could do about it, because the man made him feel ill at ease.

Every time he went out to the kitchen to get the food, Steve asked him how things were going.

When he went in to get the main course, Steve scolded him: “If you do not start, you made all this mess just for nothing. At least try ... the worst thing that could happen is being sent to hell. If you don’t even try ...”

“I just cannot. I am too nervous. Perhaps tonight at dinner ...”

“No, don’t even think about it. For tonight my waiter must be ready. Go on.”

When he got out he was ready to go on with his self-appointed mission—but he left the Hunter to be served last.

As soon as he put a dish in front of Romero, the first mate stopped him: “I see you have a good number of those creatures that polite people call robogirls