THE STORY OF A SEAGULL AND THE CAT WHO TAUGHT HER TO FLY
PART ONE
“School of herring port side!” the lookout gull announced, and the flock from the Red Sand Lighthouse received the news with shrieks of relief.

They had been flying for six hours without a break, and although the pilot gulls had found currents of warm air that made for pleasant gliding above the waves, they needed to renew their strength – and what better for that than a good mess of herring?

They were flying over the mouth of the Elbe River, where it flows into the North Sea. From high above they saw ships lining up one after the other like patient and disciplined whales waiting their turn to swim out to open sea. Once there, the flock would get their bearings and spread out towards all the ports of the planet.

Kengah, a female gull with feathers the colour of silver, especially liked to observe the ships’ flags, for she knew
that every one of them represented a way of speaking, of naming the same things with different words.

“Humans really have hard work of it,” Kengah had once commented to a fellow she-gull. “Not at all like us gulls, who screech the same the world round.”

“You’re right. And most amazing of all is that sometimes they manage to understand one another,” her gull friend had squawked.

Beyond the shoreline, the landscape turned bright green. Kengah could see an enormous pasture dotted with flocks of sheep grazing under the protection of the dykes and the lazy vanes of the windmills.
Following instructions from the pilot gulls, the flock from Red Sand Lighthouse seized a current of cold air and dived towards the shoal of herrings. One hundred and twenty bodies sliced into the water like arrows, and when they came to the surface each gull had a herring in its bill.

Tasty herring. Tasty and fat. Precisely what they needed to renew their energy before continuing their flight towards Den Helder, where they were to join the flock from the Frisian Islands.

According to their flight plan, they would then fly on to Calais, in the strait of Dover, and on through the English Channel, where they would be met by flocks from the Bay of the Seine and the Gulf of Saint-Malo. Then they would fly together till they reached the skies over the Bay of Biscay.

By then there would be a thousand gulls, a swiftly moving silver cloud that would be enlarged by the addition of flocks from Belle-Île-en-Mer, the Île d’Oléron, Cape Machichaco, Cape Ajo, and Cape Peñas. When all the gulls authorized by the law of the sea and the winds gathered over the Bay of Biscay, the Grand Convention of the Baltic and North Seas and the Atlantic Ocean could begin.
It would be a beautiful time, Kengah thought as she gulped down her third herring. As they did every year, they would listen to interesting stories, especially the ones told by the gulls from Cape Peñas, tireless voyagers who sometimes flew as far as the Canaries or Cape Verde Islands.

Female gulls like her would devote themselves to feasting on sardines and squid, while the males prepared nests at the edge of a cliff. There the female gulls would lay their eggs and hatch them, safe from any threat, and then, after the chicks lost their down and grew their first real feathers, would come the most beautiful part of the journey: teaching the fledglings to fly in the Bay of Biscay.

Kengah ducked her head to catch her fourth herring, and as a result she didn’t hear the squawk of alarm that shattered the air: “Danger to port! Emergency take-off!”

When Kengah lifted her head from the water, she found herself all alone in the immensity of the ocean.
“I really hate to leave you by yourself,” the boy said, stroking the big fat black cat’s back.

Then he returned to the task of putting things in his backpack. He chose a cassette of The Pur – one of his favourites – put it in, thought about it again and took it out. He couldn’t decide whether to put it in the pack or leave it on the table. It was hard to know what to take on holiday and what to leave at home.

The big fat black cat sitting in the recessed window, his favourite place, was watching the boy closely.
“Did I put in my swimming goggles? Zorba, have you seen my goggles? No. You wouldn’t know what they are, because you don’t like water. You don’t know what you’re missing. Swimming is one of the most fun sports. Want a treat?” the boy offered, picking up the box of Kitty Yum-Yums.

He shook out a more than generous portion, and the big fat black cat began chewing, slowly, to prolong the pleasure. What delicious treats, so crunchy and deliciously fishy! *He is a good kid*, the cat thought, his mouth filled with crumbs. *What do I mean, a “good kid”? He’s the best!* he corrected himself as he swallowed.

Zorba, the big fat black cat, had good reason for his opinion of this boy, who not only spent money from his allowance on delicious treats for Zorba, but always kept the litter box where Zorba relieved himself clean. And he talked to him and taught him important things.

They spent many hours together on the balcony, watching the bustling traffic in the port of Hamburg. Right then, for example, the boy was saying, “You see that ship, Zorba? You know where it’s from? It’s from Liberia, a very interesting African country founded by people who once were slaves. When I grow up I’m going
to be captain of a large sailing ship, and I will sail to Liberia. And you will come with me, Zorba. You will be a good ocean-going cat. I’m sure of it.”

Like all the boys around the port, this one too dreamt of voyages to distant countries. The big fat black cat listened, purring. He could see himself on board a sailing vessel, cutting through the waves.

Yes, Zorba had great affection for the boy and never forgot that he owed his life to him.

Zorba’s debt dated from the day he abandoned the basket that had been home for him and his seven brothers and sisters.

His mother’s milk was warm and sweet, but he wanted to try one of those fish heads that people in the market gave to big cats. And he wasn’t planning to eat the whole thing. No. His idea was to drag it back to the basket and tell his brothers and sisters, “Enough of this nursing from our poor mother! Don’t you see how thin she’s getting? Eat this fish – that’s what the port cats all eat.”

A few days before he left the basket, Zorba’s mother had been very serious as she told him, “You are quick on your feet and alert. That’s all to the good, but you must
be cautious about where you go. I don’t want you to get out of the basket. Tomorrow or the next day, humans will come and decide your fate, and your brothers’ and sisters’ as well. I’m sure they will give all of you nice names and you will have all the food you want. You are very lucky to have been born in a port, because in ports humans love and protect cats. The only thing they expect of us is to keep the rats away. Oh, yes, my son. You are very lucky to be a port cat – but you must be careful. There is one thing about you that may mean trouble. Look at your brothers and sisters, son. You see how all of them are grey? And how their fur is striped, like the hide of a tiger? You, on the other hand, were born entirely black, except for that little white tuft under your chin. Some humans believe that black cats bring bad luck. That’s why, son, I don’t want you to leave the basket.”

But Zorba, who at that time was a little coal-black ball of fur, did crawl out of the basket. He wanted to try one of those fish heads. And he also wanted to see a little of the world.

He didn’t get very far. As he was trotting towards a fish stall with his tail straight up and quivering, he
passed in front of a large bird dozing with its head tilted to one side. It was a very ugly bird with a huge pouch beneath its beak. Suddenly, the little black kitten could not feel the ground beneath his feet and, without any idea of what was happening, he found himself somersaulting through the air. Remembering one of his mother’s first teachings, he looked for a place where he could land on all four paws. Instead, what he saw beneath him was the bird, waiting with an open beak.
He fell right into its pouch, which was very dark and smelt terrible.

“Let me out! Let me out!” the kitten bawled desperately. “My... it can talk,” the bird squawked without opening its beak. “What kind of creature are you?”

“Let me out or I’ll scratch,” the kitten yowled threateningly.

“I suspect that you’re a frog. Are you a frog?” the bird asked, keeping its long bill clamped tightly shut. “I’m drowning in here, you stupid bird,” the little cat cried.

“Yes. You are a frog. A black frog. Curious indeed.”

“I am a cat, and am I mad! Let me out or you’ll be sorry!” warned little Zorba, looking for somewhere in that dark pouch to sink his claws.

“Do you think I can’t tell the difference between a cat and a frog? Cats are furry, quick, and they smell of house slippers. You are a frog. I ate several frogs once, and they weren’t bad. But they were green. Say, you wouldn’t be a poisonous frog, would you?” the bird croaked, a little worried.

“Yes! Yes, I’m a poisonous frog – and besides, I bring bad luck!”
“What a dilemma! Once I swallowed a poisonous sea urchin and nothing happened to me. What a dilemma! Shall I swallow you or spit you out?” the bird pondered. Suddenly it stopped squawking and started jumping up and down and flapping its wings. Finally it opened its beak.

Little Zorba, wet with slobber, stuck his head out and jumped to the ground. Then he saw the boy, who had the bird by the neck, shaking it.

“You must be blind, you numbskull pelican! Come on, kitten. You almost ended up in the belly of that ugly old bird,” the boy said, and took Zorba up in his arms.

And so had begun the friendship that had lasted five years.

The boy’s kiss on his head scattered the cat’s memories. He watched his friend settle the rucksack on his back, walk to the door and from there say goodbye one more time.

“We won’t see each other for four weeks. I’ll be thinking of you every day, Zorba. I promise.”

“Bye, Zorba!” “Bye!” The boy’s two younger brothers shouted and waved their goodbyes.
He listened as the two locks turned in the door, then ran to the window that overlooked the street to watch his adoptive family as they drove away.

The big fat black cat drew a deep, contented breath. For four whole weeks he would be lord and master of the flat. A friend of the family would come every day to open a can of cat food and clean Zorba’s litter box. Four weeks to laze about in the armchairs, on the beds – or to go out on the balcony, climb to the tile roof, jump from there to the branches of the old chestnut tree and slide down the trunk to the inner patio, where he liked to meet the other neighbourhood cats. He wouldn’t be bored. No way.

At least that’s what Zorba, the big fat black cat, thought, because he had no idea what was to come.
Kengah unfolded her wings to take off, but the approaching wave was too quick. Its force swept her beneath the surface, and when she came back up, the daylight had disappeared. She shook her head again and again, realizing that she had surfaced through the black wave of an oil slick that had nearly blinded her.

Kengah, the gull with feathers once the colour of silver, kept dipping her head deep into the water until a few sparks of light penetrated the thick oil covering her eyes. Sticky blobs the gulls called the black plague glued her wings to her body. She began to kick her feet with the hope that she could swim fast enough to escape from the black tide.

Every muscle cramped with the effort, but at last she came to the edge of the oil slick
and paddled into clean water. She blinked and dipped her head until she was able to clear her eyes, but when she looked up all she saw were a few clouds floating between the sea and the enormous dome of the skies. Her friends from the flock of the Red Sand Lighthouse were already far away, very far away.

That was the rule. She herself had seen other seagulls surprised by the deadly black tides, and though everyone wanted to go back and offer help, they knew that help would be impossible. There was nothing they could do. And so her flock had flown on, respecting the rule that forbids witnessing the death of one’s fellow gulls.

With their wings immobilized, stuck fast to their bodies, gulls are easy prey for large fish. Or they may die more slowly, suffocated by the oil that sinks through their feathers and clogs their pores.

That was the fate that awaited Kengah. She hoped it would be the jaws of a giant fish that would quickly snap her up.

The black stain. As she awaited the end, Kengah cursed all humans. “But not all of them. I should be fair,” she squawked weakly.
Often from high above she had watched as large oil tankers took advantage of foggy days along the coast to steam away from land to wash out their tanks. They spilled thousands of gallons of a thick, stinking substance into the sea, which then was carried along by the waves. But she also saw how sometimes smaller vessels kept close to the tankers and prevented them from emptying their tanks. Unfortunately, those boats, draped in the colours of the rainbow, didn’t always arrive in time to prevent the poisoning of the seas.

Kengah spent the longest hours of her life resting on the waves, wondering with terror whether she was awaiting the most horrible of all deaths. Worse than being eaten by a fish, worse than suffering the torture of suffocation, was dying of hunger.
Desperate at the idea of a slow death, she shook herself, and with amazement found that the oil had not glued her wings to her body. Her wings were coated with thick black sludge, but at least she could unfold them.

“I may still have a chance to get out of this, and who knows, maybe if I can fly high, very high, the sun will melt the oil,” Kengah croaked.

She was remembering a story she had heard an old gull from the Frisian Islands tell about a human named Icarus, who, in order to accomplish his dream of flying, had made himself wings of eagle feathers. He had in fact flown... high, almost up to the sun, so high that the sun melted the wax he’d used to stick the feathers together, and he fell back to Earth.

Kengah flapped her wings hard, tucked back her feet, lifted about a foot above the waves, and plopped right back down, face first. Before trying again, she dived beneath the waves and moved her wings back and forth. This time, when she tried, she rose more than three feet before she fell.

The accursed oil had stuck her tail feathers together so tight that she wasn’t able to steer on her ascent. She
dived again and pecked at the black gummy substance stuck to her tail. She bore the pain of the feathers she accidentally ripped out until finally she was satisfied that her steering gear was a little less fouled.

On the fifth attempt, Kengah succeeded: she was flying.

She flapped her wings desperately, but the weight of the layer of oil would not let her glide. The minute she rested, she plunged downward. Fortunately, she was a young seagull, and her muscles responded in fine fashion.

She flew higher. Winging, winging, she looked down and could barely make out the fine white line of the coast. She also saw a few ships moving like tiny objects on a blue cloth. She gained altitude, but the hoped-for effect of the sun did not come. Maybe the heat of its rays was too weak, or the layer of oil was too thick.

Kengah knew that her strength could not last much longer, and so, seeking a place to land, she flew inland, following the snaking green line of the Elbe.

The movement of her wings was becoming more leaden, and she was losing strength. Now she was flying lower and lower.
In a desperate attempt to regain some altitude, she closed her eyes and beat her wings with her last ounce of strength. She didn’t know how long she kept her eyes closed, but when she opened them she was flying above a tall tower crowned with a golden weather vane. “St Michael’s!” she shrieked when she recognized the tower of the Hamburg church.

Her wings refused to stroke another beat.
The big fat black cat was taking the sun on his balcony, purring and meditating on how good he felt lying there, belly up, luxuriating in the warm rays of the sun, his four paws folded and his tail straight out.

At the precise moment that he lazily rolled over so the sun could warm his back, he heard the hum of a flying object he couldn’t identify, something approaching at great speed. Alert, he leapt up, crouching on all four feet and ready to jump aside to avoid being hit by the seagull that dropped onto the balcony. It was a very dirty bird. Its whole body was coated with some dark, stinking substance.

Zorba walked towards the gull as she tried to stand up, dragging her wings. “That was not a very elegant landing,” he said.
“I’m very sorry. I couldn’t help it,” the gull admitted.

“Eeyow! You look awful. What is that all over you? And you stink something awful!” the cat hissed.

“I was caught in an oil slick. The curse of the seas. I’m going to die,” the gull croaked plaintively.

“Die? Don’t say that. You’re tired and dirty. That’s all. Why don’t you fly over to the zoo? It isn’t too far from here, and there are veterinarians there who can help you,” Zorba said.

“I can’t. That was my last flight,” the gull croaked in an almost inaudible voice, and closed her eyes.

“Don’t die on me. Rest a little and you’ll see, you’ll feel better. Are you hungry? I’ll bring you a little of my
food – just don’t die,” Zorba begged, approaching the swooning gull.

Overcoming his disgust, the cat licked the gull’s head. The black stuff that covered her tasted as bad as it smelled. As he passed his tongue along her throat, the cat noticed that the bird’s breathing was growing weaker and weaker.

“Look, my little friend. I want to help you, but I don’t know how. Try to rest while I go find out what you do with a sick gull,” Zorba called back, ready to jump to the roof.

As he started off in the direction of the chestnut tree, he heard the gull calling him back. “Do you want me to leave you a little of my food?” Zorba asked, slightly relieved.

“I am going to lay an egg. With the last strength in my body, I am going to lay an egg. My good cat, anyone can see that you are a fine animal, one with noble sentiments. And for that reason, I am going to ask you to make me three promises. Will you do that for me?” Kengah croaked, slowly paddling her feet in a futile attempt to stand.
Zorba thought the poor gull was delirious, and because she was in such a sorry state, he had no choice but to be generous. “I promise I will do what you ask. But for now, just rest,” he mewed with compassion.

“I don’t have time to rest. Promise me you won’t eat the egg,” Kengah croaked, opening her eyes.

“I promise I will not eat the egg,” Zorba repeated.

“Promise me that you will look after it until the chick is born,” she squawked, holding her neck a little higher.

“I promise I will look after the egg until the chick is born.”

“And promise me that you will teach it to fly,” Kengah gasped, staring directly into the cat’s eyes.

Then Zorba knew that the poor gull was not just delirious: she was totally mad.
“I promise to teach it to fly. And now you rest, I’m going to look for help,” Zorba told her, with one leap reaching the tile roof.

Kengah looked towards the sky, thanking all the good winds that had carried her through life, and as she breathed her last sigh, a little blue-speckled white egg rolled free of her oil-soaked body.
In Search of Advice

Zorba quickly fire-poled down the trunk of the chestnut tree, raced across the interior patio to avoid a few roving dogs, went outside, made sure there was no car coming down the street, crossed and ran in the direction of Cuneo, an Italian restaurant in the port.

Two alley cats sniffing around a rubbish bin saw him go hurrying by.

“Hey, pal! Do you see what I see? Get an eyeful of that good-looking hunk,” one yowled.

“Right-o, pal. And so black. Remind you of a lard ball? Nah, more like a ball of tar. Where you going there, tar ball?” the first asked.

Although he was very worried about the seagull, Zorba wasn’t about to let the remarks of those two derelicts go by. So he stopped in his tracks and, as the
hair rose stiff along his spine, he jumped up on top of the bin.

Slowly he stuck out his front paw, shot out a claw as long and curved as an upholstery needle and shoved it into the face of one of his tormentors. “You like this? Well, I have nine more. How would you like to have them rake your yellow spine?” he said in a conversational tone.

With that claw right in front of his eyes, the cat swallowed hard before he answered. “I wouldn’t, boss. Great day, isn’t it? Don’t you agree?” The alley cat’s eyes never left the claw.

“And you? What do you have to say?” Zorba spit at the second cat.

“Hey, I think it’s a nice day too. Great day for a walk, but maybe a little cool.”

Having taken care of that matter, Zorba hurried on to the restaurant, where the waiters were setting the tables for the noontime customers. He stopped at the door, miaowed three times and sat down to wait. Within a couple of minutes Segretario, the resident skinny Italian cat, came out. He was nearly
whiskerless, with only one long hair on each side of his nose.

“Scusi, we ver’ sorry, but if you haven’ made a reserve, we’re not gonna be able serve you. We gotta the full house,” Segretario said in his Roman accent. He started to add something more, but Zorba interrupted him.

“I need to have a little chat with the Colonel. It’s urgent.”

“Urgent! It’s always someone with somma last-minute ’mergency. I’ll see what can I do, but only because itsa so urgent,” Segretario moaned, and went back inside the restaurant.

The Colonel’s age was a bit of a mystery. Some said he was as old as the restaurant he called home; others maintained that he was even older. But his age didn’t matter, because everyone remembered that as a youth he’d been known as the Nocturnal
Colonel, and that he possessed a strange talent for giving advice to cats who had problems. Although the Colonel never actually solved any conflict, his counsel alone was comforting. Both for his age and for his talents, the Colonel was the main authority among the port cats.

Segretario came back at a trot. “Follow me. Il Colonnello’s gonna see you. Notta the norm…” he meowed.

Zorba followed him. Threading through table and chair legs, they headed towards the door of the wine cellar. They bounded down the steps of the narrow stairway and at the bottom found the Colonel, tail like a flagpole, checking the corks of some bottles of champagne. “Porca miseria! The rats have chewed the corks of the best champagne in the house. Zorba! Caro amico!” the Colonel greeted his dear friend. Just like Segretario, the Colonel liked to show off a little in Italian himself.

“Please forgive me for bothering you just when you’re busy at work, but I have a serious problem and I need your advice,” Zorba apologized.
“I’m at your service, caro amico. Segretario! Serve al mio amico here a little of that lasagna al forno they gave us this morning,” ordered the Colonel.

“But itsa gone! I didn’ get so much as a sniff,” Segretario complained.

Zorba thanked him, but said he wasn’t hungry anyway. Quickly, he told the Colonel about the dramatic arrival of the gull, her pitiful condition and the promises he’d been obliged to make to her. The old cat listened in silence, then mulled over the matter as he swiped his long whiskers. Finally he yowled, “Porca miseria! We must help that poor seagull get in shape to fly again.”

“Yes,” Zorba said, nodding. “But how?” “Why don’ we go see il professore, that Einstein. He’sa know eve-rything,” Segretario proposed.
“That is exactly what I was going to suggest. Why did this cat take the very words out of my mouth?” the Colonel protested.

“Yes. Good idea. I will go and see Einstein,” Zorba agreed.

“We will all go. The problems of one cat of this port are the problems of all the cats of this port,” the Colonel declared solemnly.

The three cats left the cellar and, cutting through the labyrinth of interior patios of the row of houses facing the port, hurried towards the temple of the cat called Einstein.
Einstein lived in a place rather difficult to describe, because at first view you might think it was a cluttered shop of curious odds and ends, a museum of exotic whatchamacallits, a storehouse of mechanical thingumajigs, the most chaotic library in the world, or the laboratory of some brainy inventor of screwball contraptions. But it was none of these things — or rather, it was much more than all these things combined.
The place was called Harry’s Port Bazaar, and its owner, Harry, was an old sea dog who, during his fifty years of roaming the seven seas, had devoted himself to collecting every kind of object he could find in the hundreds of ports he had visited.

When old age settled into his bones, Harry had decided to trade his sailor’s life for that of a landlubber, and he opened the bazaar that housed the jumble of his collections. He had rented a three-storey house on one of the streets in the port, but soon it was too small to exhibit the objects in his bizarre bazaar. Then he rented the house next door – it had two storeys and it, too, wasn’t big enough. After renting a third house, he was able to exhibit the entire conglomeration – arranged, it is true, with a very odd sense of order.

In the three houses, joined by narrow stairways, there were nearly a million objects – among them, some worthy of special note: 7,200 hats with floppy brims that wouldn’t be blown away by the wind; 160 wheels from ships dizzy from sailing round and round the world; 245 ships’ lights that penetrated the thickest pea-soup fogs; 12 engine-order telegraphs battered by the ham hands
of irate captains; 256 compasses that never veered from North; 6 wooden life-size elephants; 2 stuffed giraffes posed as if surveying the savannah; 1 stuffed polar bear in whose belly lay the right hand of a Norwegian explorer; 700 fans whose blades, when they whirled, recalled the fresh breezes of dusk in the tropics; 1,200 jute hammocks that guaranteed a perfect night’s sleep; 1,300 marionettes from Sumatra that had performed nothing but love stories; 129 slide projectors that showed landscapes in which you could always be happy; 54,000 novels in 47 languages; 2 reproductions of the Eiffel Tower, the first constructed from half a million pins, the second from 300,000 toothpicks; 3 cannons from English corsairs; 17 anchors from the bottom of the North Sea; 2,000 paintings of sunsets; 17 typewriters that had belonged to famous authors; 128 flannel long johns for men taller than 6 feet; 7 dinner jackets for dwarves; 500 pipes filled with sea foam; 1 astrolabe that stubbornly pointed to the Southern Cross; 7 huge seashells in which you could hear the distant echoes of legendary shipwrecks; 12 kilometres of red silk; 2 submarine hatchways; and other odds and ends too numerous to list.
To visit Harry’s bazaar, you had to pay an entrance fee, and once inside you needed a well-developed sense of direction if you didn’t want to get lost in the labyrinth of windowless rooms, long corridors and narrow stairways.

Harry had two pets: Matthew, a chimpanzee who acted as ticket taker and security guard for the old seaman, played checkers with him – of course very badly – drank his beer and tried to short-change his customers. The other mascot was Einstein, a small, slim, grey cat that devoted most of his time to studying the thousands of books in Harry’s collection.

The Colonel, Segretario and Zorba trotted into the bazaar with tails raised high. They were sorry not to see Harry behind the ticket desk, because the old man always had affectionate words and a piece of sausage for them.

“Just one minute, you fleabags! You’re forgetting you have to pay,” Matthew yowled.

“Since when does a gatto have to pay?” Segretario protested.
“The sign over the door says, ‘Entry fee: two marks’. Nowhere does it say that cats get in free. Eight marks or yer out of here,” the chimp screeched emphatically.

“Scusi, Signor Monkey, but I fear the numbers is not your strong point,” Segretario rejoined.

“That’s exactly what I was going to say. Once again, you had to rush in ahead of me!” the Colonel complained.

“Blah, blah, blah. Either pay up or get out,” Matthew threatened.

Zorba sprang up on the ticket desk and stared into the eyes of the chimp. He stared until Matthew blinked and his eyes began to water. “All right then – let’s say six marks. Any chimp can make a mistake,” he squeaked.

Zorba, still staring him down, shot out one claw in his right front paw. “You like this, Matthew? Well,
I have nine more. Can you imagine all ten dug into that red rump you always have stuck up in the air?” he threatened quietly.

“Well, this time I’ll look the other way,” the chimp agreed, pretending to be calm. “You can go in.”

The three cats, tails proudly aloft, disappeared into the maze of corridors.
“Dreadful! Dreadful! Something dreadful has happened,” said Einstein, who, like his namesake, knew about everything there is to know.

He was nervously pacing back and forth before an enormous book that lay open on the floor, from time to time holding his head between his front paws. He seemed truly devastated.

“Something… it’s wrong?” asked Segretario.

“That is precisely what I was going to ask,” the Colonel said, and humphed.

“Come on. It can’t be that bad,” Zorba suggested.

“Not that bad? It’s dreadful. Dreadful! Those accursed rats have chewed one entire page out
of the atlas. The map of Madagascar has disappeared. It’s dreadful,” Einstein insisted, tugging at his whiskers.

“Segretario, remind me that I must organize a foray against those devourers of Masacar… Masgacar… well, you know what I mean,” the Colonel miaowed.

“Madagascar,” Segretario pronounced precisely.

“We’ll lend you a hand, Einstein, but right now we’re here because we have a big problem, and since you know everything, maybe you can help us,” Zorba explained, and immediately told the sad story of the gull to him.

Einstein listened attentively. He nodded as he took in the details, and every time the nervous twitches of his tail expressed too eloquently the emotions Zorba’s miaows were awakening, he tried to tuck it beneath his hind legs.

“And so I left her there, in bad shape, just a while ago…” Zorba concluded.

“Dreadful story! Dreadful! Hmm, let me think… seagull… gull… oil… oil… sick gull… that’s it! We must consult the encyclopedia!” Einstein exclaimed jubilantly.
“The whaat?” all three cats meowed.

“The en-cy-clo-pe-dia. The book of knowledge. We must look in volumes seven and fifteen, which correspond to the letters G for ‘gull’ and O for ‘oil,’” Einstein stated decisively.

“So show us this enplyco… enclididia… the thing,” the Colonel humphed.


“Which is just what I was going to say!” the Colonel fumed.

Einstein climbed up on an enormous piece of furniture where thick, imposing-looking books sat in a row. When he found the letters G and O on the spines, he clawed those books off the shelf. He jumped down himself and, with a stubby claw worn down from pawing through so many books, he flipped through the pages. The cats watched and kept a respectful silence as they listened to his nearly inaudible mewings.

“Yes, I believe we’re on the right path. Very interesting. We’re getting close. Here’s ‘guillotine’. Mercy, very interesting. Listen to this, my friends: ‘A device consisting of a heavy blade held aloft between upright
guides and dropped to behead the victim below.’ Oh, my. Dreadful,” Einstein exclaimed with fascination.

“We’re notta interest in what you say about the guillotina. We here about a gull,” Segretario interrupted.

“Forgive me. It’s just that, for me, the encyclopedia is irresistible. Every time I look in its pages I learn something new,” Einstein apologized, and leafed forward.

“Ah, Gulf Stream, Gulf War, gulfweed… gull!”

But what the encyclopedia said about gulls was not very helpful. About the most they learnt was that the gull in question belonged to the *Argentatus* species, so called because of the silver colour of their feathers.
And what they found out about oil was similarly useless in telling them how to help the gull. Worse, they had to put up with a long lecture from Einstein, who insisted on telling them all about the Gulf War of the 1990s.

“Well this is a fine kettle of fish! We’re right back where we began,” Zorba exclaimed.

“It’s dreadful. Dreadful! For the first time ever the encyclopedia has failed me,” a disconsolate Einstein admitted.

“And in that enplicosee… ecmipodelphia… well, you know what I want to say, isn’t there any practical advice about how to take out oil stains?” the Colonel wanted to know.

“Inspired! Purely inspired! That’s where we should have begun. I’ll get volume nineteen right this minute, letter S for ‘stain remover’,” Einstein announced giddily as he leapt back onto the bookshelves.

“You see? If you would just stop that odious habit of taking the miaows out of my mouth, we would know what to do by now,” the Colonel scolded the silent Segretario.
On the page where he found the words “stain remover”, besides directions on how to remove stains from marmalade, China ink, blood and raspberry syrup, they found the instructions for removing oil stains.

“‘Clean the affected area with a cloth moistened in benzene.’ We’ve got it!” yowled Einstein.

“We don’t have anything,” Zorba hissed, obviously in a bad mood. “Where the devil are we going to get benzene?”

“Well, if I’m not mistaken, in our cellar we have a large can filled with paintbrushes soaking in benzene. Segretario, you know what you have to do,” the Colonel yowled.

“Scusi, Signor, but I don’t catch,” Segretario apologized.

“Very simple: it’s easy. You will dip your tail in benzene, and then we will go and take care of that poor gull,” the Colonel clarified, gazing off in a different direction.

“Ah, no! Notta that! Notta me!” Segretario protested.

“I recall that the menu this afternoon features a double portion of liver and pan gravy,” mused the Colonel.
“Dip my tail in benzina… Mamma mia! Did you say liver and pan gravy?”

Einstein decided to go with them, so all four cats trotted towards the exit. As he watched them go by, the chimpanzee, who had just polished off a beer, favoured them with a rumbling belch.