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**The Trials and Tribulations
of Juan Zinniker**

Translated from the German by
Alex Gabriel

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1

The fiery mountain sprawled languidly along the edge of the island in the midday sun, a colossus scorched by its own embers, immovable and eternal, seemingly calm and indifferent, but actually unpredictable with a menacing fury that could flare up at any time. It immediately cast a spell over Juan when he saw it, penetrating deep inside him to join with other such images that had permanently struck chords within the depths of his soul.

After landing, Juan had a couple of hours free. He strode purposefully through the tourist market in Catania's musty old town until he reached the artists' stalls. His eyes were drawn to the colorful paintings that featured the mountain in the different lighting of every time of day and every season of the year, below dramatic skies, embedded within dazzling landscapes. He collected volcano-related art. His collection was growing more and more extensive, and he had already thought of opening up a museum in his hometown. But none of the paintings that he saw here today even came close to capturing the experience that had branded itself in his mind when he had looked out the airplane window. *Capturing that would require more than just some superficial brushstrokes*, he thought. The museum visitors would react to such paintings with just a slight smile at best.

Juan rarely felt respect, yet he approached volcanoes with reverence. And at the same time, he was driven by a desire to completely understand them and to render their behavior predictable. In a thoughtless moment, he had confided this to Danielle. She had immediately criticized him for trying to subjugate the

forces of nature – this had struck her as being sacrilegious. He had quickly and loudly made excuses for himself, noting that he only intended to conquer the volcano for the sake of offering some security to the people who were at the mercy of its destructive wrath. Danielle had not replied. It was clear that she had not accepted his explanation, but also had not wanted to get involved in a whole debate about it.

Her reproach had angered him. It had reminded him of all the outrageously distorted ways in which his critics portrayed him. Everything he undertook was construed to his detriment. He decided to take countermeasures to let the public know about his humanitarian intentions. It should be documented in those records that were available to everyone over the internet nowadays – as a counterbalance on the scale upon which his critics had diligently stacked up everything spoken against him. He would never be able to impress these critics, whose image of him was already set in stone. The public, however, could be swayed; it would be complicated, but doable. He decided to put his publicity department to the task.

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It was the increasing evidence of turmoil underneath the ground that had lured Juan here. The Volcanological Institute of the University of Catania warily observed the ominous entity that stood over the city, tracking even its slightest twitches, and had spread the warning that an eruption could be expected within the next few weeks. Juan did not have to hear about this from the press. The director had personally brought him into the picture – an unusual occurrence, as the institute generally kept all of its investigations

of the volcano to itself. But Juan had studied Mount Etna in Catania years ago; its name derived from the Indo-European *aidhna*, “that which burns”, and a fire had been ignited within him as well. Inflamed by a desire to make a difference in the world of volcanoes, he had impressed his professors at the institute. Since that time, they had had high hopes for him.

The city was also in turmoil. Juan took notice of the bold, black, passionately crafted headlines hanging in the newspaper kiosks. They flung the bad news in the faces of the people who lived on this hot, unstable land, provoking numbness, frustration, and hate directed at the ruthlessness of nature. It could not be said with certainty when and where the eruption would take place, nor how powerful it would be. The authorities, with a shrug of resignation, thus advised local residents to immediately protect themselves as best they could. This yielded only swearing in response. The people refused to abandon their everyday existence for the time being. They were completely wrapped up in it, stuck, powerless to detach themselves from it. They turned to religious rituals instead, holding processions, sprinkling the earth with holy water, and burning incense.

Juan stood with Claudio Dorata at a window in his hotel suite, watching people pass by behind a priest and his acolytes on the street below, observing their classically devoted expressions, and smiling at the children who disturbed the solemn event, receiving light slaps on the face in return. Claudio said that he felt a tiny bit of guilt when he saw the hunched-over old ladies dressed in black, hopeless figures scuttling along with the procession. Their sorrowful expressions silently accused him of using the impending catastrophe for his own interests. The world was going under, yet he was thinking only of his research.

Juan replied that that the world moves as it wishes, and noted that indifference to such fateful processes would be justified given that they had no power over them – however, he countered, they were nevertheless taking action. This expedition could decisively bring forward their lengthy research that had so often gone astray; with a bit of luck, this time it would bring about a good result.

“You’ll be the real beneficiaries of all this, or at least your offspring will be,” he called out to the people taking part in the procession.

He told himself that nothing could go wrong this time. They had gathered all available knowledge about the volcano and assembled a group of seasoned researchers – they were ambitious, combative, and touchy personalities, but also brilliant scientists who were all inspired by the same goal. This is what Juan had repeatedly assured his reflection in the mirror while shaving, during the last few days before the trip. And, there in the isolation of his bathroom, he had then loudly sworn that if he couldn’t accomplish his goal under such favorable circumstances, he would quit the field of volcanology.

On the plane he had realized that this had just been an inappropriate attempt at getting rid of the tension that was tearing away at him.

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For years, his scientists had devoted themselves to putting together a formula for the precise prediction of volcanic eruptions. Under his critical guidance, they had defined the measurement variables by means of which such a formula was to be developed. They had repeatedly tested their methods on volcanoes that

were on the verge of eruption. If the formula – which was to bear his name – were now to be proven accurate, then it would represent the achievement of his life goal. And then? Does life go on after such a crowning achievement? Well, in any case, it would be with great satisfaction that he would reap the people's gratitude, admiration, and accompanying devotion.

The prediction of volcanic eruptions had started off as an academic challenge for him. As a rich student, he had been spared the usual plagues of everyday life, and to the extent that his body was not otherwise occupied with its visceral functions, he had been able to devote himself completely to the breezy world of academic thought. That would have been enough for him in life, but his professor had sent him to Catania as soon as he had finished his studies, and thus he had entered the real world.

That was when Juan had lost the lightheartedness of his youth. A fundamental sense of compassion had flowed through him. He had felt sorry for people who carried heavy burdens to the point of exhaustion, or who sat around on park benches, bitter and unloved – he had always asked himself how he could help. While walking through the impoverished districts of Catania each day on his way to the Volcanological Institute, he had discovered that the poor were the most vulnerable of all to a natural catastrophe and thus especially deserving of help.

Over the course of his continuing work, these impressions had taken a backseat, covered over by the many layers that were playing out in other spheres of his life. But the challenge remained, standing alone and turning into a sort of guiding star. Despite the rubble of experiences that was piling up in his life, an inner voice could still be heard, besieging him, whispering to him

that volcanoes could be predicted and that fate had put him in a position to discover the key to understanding them – and that this was now his task, whether it suited him or not.

2

Day broke and doused the earth in brightness. It looked as if someone had gently pulled away a blue-black curtain that had covered up the sky – a curtain studded with glittering stars – and let light pass over the volcano so slowly that no one would be frightened by it.

They had been walking for two hours already, taking advantage of the cool temperatures of the early summer morning. The Valle del Bove stretched out before them, and the trail meandered its way up through the wide depression towards the summit. Behind them, the Ionian Sea was fading away in the haze down below. The sun had languidly risen up from it, hanging briefly in the clouds as a slightly glowing deep-red disk, then freeing itself from its shroud as it climbed upwards to cast a golden shimmer over the black volcanic landscape. The mood up here was utterly calm and clear, and the fresh air bore a faint, sulfurous odor. The volcano lurked there, immobile, and a thin plume of steam, appearing yellowish in the sunlight, floated above its summit like the condensed breath of a dragon.

“Juan,” Claudio Dorata called out from where he was crouched on the ground. “Come see what I’ve found.”

“They probably had equipment set up here,” Juan remarked. He looked pensively at the weathered cement in between the chunks of lava, undoubtedly the base of an earlier measuring station, a hope-awakening testimony to the long-running, though thus far futile, human efforts to grapple with the volcano.

Juan contemplatively wiped his forehead dry. He

tended to sweat very easily. Just like everyone else taking part in the expedition, he was carrying a loaded backpack. There was no question that he could take certain privileges, yet he still never did so during the expeditions, making every effort not to rankle his colleagues.

“Ten-minute break,” declared Claudio. They took off their backpacks. The large letters that had been affixed to them stared Juan in the face once again. In fluorescent yellow on a blue background, they spelled out the name “Zinniker”. His name – and the name of his company. He was climbing the scorching, scorched mountain as a volcanologist, not as the heir and current president of the Zinniker Group – however, it was the company that had financed the expedition.

The time-consuming climb annoyed him. He was constantly in a hurry and always traveled using time-effective modes of transportation, which had basically been invented for people like him. However, it had been impossible for him to speak out against the decision to take the slow path. The rest of the expedition participants had gathered together in Naples, expressed their regret that he was unable to be there due to scheduling reasons, and then unanimously decided to make the hike.

He had been in Washington at the time, engaged in negotiations to supply diesel engines to the United States Navy. While his engineers had been quarreling over technical details with the rear admiral in charge of the matter, Juan had boredly immersed himself in the sight of the pink, blossoming cherry trees outside the window of the spartan conference room. When he had learned of the vote in Naples, he had resigned himself to accepting it. He had told himself that those who truly had power only rarely exerted it, and had drawn

comfort from his enjoyment in seeing the cherry blossoms. They had reminded him of delicate lingerie that would look great on soft, creamy skin.

The director of the Volcanological Institute in Catania had made sure that the entire area would be closed off by the military, and had obligingly offered to help out his former student. "The cable car is all yours, Juan," he had said. "Ride it as much as you want." But when Juan tried to get out of the hike on this basis, he was met with only a contemptuous smile.

"No way the guys in Catania are doing that just for us," Claudio had said, waving him off. "They'll need to get to the summit themselves as soon as the fireworks begin. If we use the cable cars too, they'll be able to spy on us better. We'll stick to the plan and hike it."

Juan had brushed the matter aside. He had mentioned the issue during a lunch with some members of the company's management team; someone had then used his connections, and the Italian Army had announced that it would provide them with a couple of all-terrain vehicles for the expedition. "For once, a pleasant surprise," Juan had said delightedly. At the next meeting of the expedition members in Naples, he had urged them, "Listen, courtesy forbids us from turning down such an offer." But the pacifistic researchers had howled that under no circumstances would they use any such war machines for their scientific work.

Juan had realized that his colleagues simply would not change their minds. He could sense that they were needling him a bit, but please – these were respected scientists, he was dependent on them, and he was limited in his capacity to impose his will upon them. So he had just loudly and repeatedly cursed them out in the quiet of his executive office. He had then sent a letter on his ostentatious corporate stationery, drafted

by an Italian lawyer from the company's legal department, to the concerned Sicilian general, as well as to the Ministry of Defense. Using lots of nice-sounding buzzwords, the letter thanked them for their offer and expressed regret that he would be unable to take them up on it.

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Juan stopped and looked at his six researchers on the rocky terrain. The climb was giving them no trouble, as they moved with the nimbleness and agility of mountain goats. They were boisterous, tossing witty remarks back and forth. Everyone laughed along, and everyone had their turn; only he was left out. It always took some time before they started treating him as an equal.

His gaze rested on Susan Lee, the geomagnetism expert hired by Claudio specifically for this expedition; she was the first woman in the group, and a young and desirable one at that. "Well, let's hope that works out," Juan had chided. Susan had initially acted aloof, refusing to make eye contact, answering questions in monosyllables, and always sitting off to the side in the cafeteria at the University of Naples. The men had kept on grinning, which had embarrassed Juan. However, when they had begun to set out the plan for the expedition, Susan had gained their respect by virtue of her expertise. And when the young woman saw that this allowed her to keep her colleagues in check, she had thawed out a bit.

She noticed his gaze now and beamed at him uninhibitedly with her pretty little face. It was like lotion drizzled onto a fresh wound. Last night he had tried to woo her for the first time and had had to swallow a painful failure.

They had all been sitting in front of a dockside bar in Catania. The air had smelled of fish being fried in olive oil. The stars had been twinkling, reflected in the table lanterns. The volcanologists had been systematically picking clean an overflowing plate of seafood. Juan had been trying to get the girl. He had wanted to get her to talk about herself. He listened to women and gave them the feeling that they were being taken seriously, his female doctor had once noted. But on this day he had lacked the power of conviction. And not being able to handle how Susan kept scrutinizing him out of the corner of her eye, he had vented his anger with a sharp remark directed at Garond, the French geochemist. Susan had then directed her full attention at Garond, who had shined as he desecrated the picturesque graveyard of lobster shells and clam shells and squeezed-out lemon wedges with a dull monologue about volcanism in the south Pacific. The others had sat around the table, satiated and serene, while Juan had to force himself to overcome his violent emotions.

There was no doubt that Susan had set something in motion inside of him. When they had set out on the hike at four o'clock this morning, his desire had been stimulated once again. She had stood there in the glow of the headlights of the bus that had brought them to the village of Fornazzo, looking extremely attractive in her sporty, casual clothing. Juan had found her especially lovely with her still-somewhat-sleepy face, and he had caught a glimpse of her breasts when she had bent down to pick up her backpack. Right then, from the darkness, he had been deviously attacked by a wild desire to grab the girl and pull her into the bushes with him. However, there had been no bushes in the spot where they had been standing – and besides, Claudio had then called for them to start hiking.

An inexorable process had been set in motion and it would only end once Juan had slept with her. Once again he recalled Aaron's question: "Why do you always need to conquer new women? You already have a number of steady relationships. I'm not criticizing you – I just want to know why."

Juan had casually replied, "It's hormones. That's the nature of man." And he had seen the doubt spread across Aaron's face. Aaron had been happily married for forty years. Well, that was his life. "I can't do anything about the fact that I am who I am," Juan had added, knowing full well that he *could* do something about it, and that he was exactly who he wanted to be. No one should expect compunction or even self-control from him – he considered self-control to be an antiquated virtue, unsuitable for modern times.

As he would be departing again the following morning, he didn't have much time left to persuade Susan that they needed to play the rhythmic old game.

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The expedition reached its destination in the early afternoon, a dead black lava field below the main crater, the "Voragine Grande". Further up, the mountain was covered in slushy snow that surrounded the summit like a sort of dirty collar. Juan smiled contentedly to himself at the idea of the volcano as a sort of creature with a big belly but no head sticking out from its collar.

At ten thousand feet up, the air was thin and prickly cold. Claudio Dorata – thin, sharp-featured, and twitchy – stood in their midst and barked orders. Juan had left him in charge of the Zinniker expeditions from the start. Claudio was domineering and short-tempered, but he was second to none when it came to

organizational matters. He looked around and already knew how the camp had to be set up. "Put the tents and the sleeping bags in that sheltered hollow over there," he ordered. "This here is where we'll do the cooking. Make sure you check carefully where you're going to set up the equipment. Garond, you make some coffee, and someone needs to set out a chair for our Don Juan so that he can finally study his stock market reports."

"Stop ordering us around in such a bossy tone," shouted Garond, "or else I'll just sit down right here and do nothing at all."

"Fucking hell, you don't seem to have realized who's in charge here," Claudio yelled back. "Well, just so you know, I'm the one leading this expedition, and you'll either do as I say or you can just scam right now."

A typically Neapolitan volcanic eruption. Whenever the topic of Naples came up, the Doratas' faces just lit up with pride in the fact that they came from that violent city – even if Luciana claimed that she could never show her face there again since she had posed nude for a men's magazine. Juan doubted this, just as he had discounted the rumors that the Doratas were mixed up in organized crime.

Garond turned pale, as everyone first stared speechless at Claudio and then looked towards Juan. He turned away as if he hadn't heard anything. *Serves Garond right*, thought Juan delightedly. *That's what he deserves for shoving in between me and my future lover yesterday.*

They set up the campsite and marked a landing spot for the helicopter that would be bringing the scientific equipment from Catania that afternoon.

Claudio had recently started openly referring to him as Don Juan. It irritated Juan that even his friend was now annoying him with this hackneyed sobriquet. The whole world already did it; he was in the spotlight, and the public thus considered themselves welcome to raise the flag of morality and criticize him. The press regularly published covertly snapped photographs of him with striking women by his side, ravishingly beautiful or mysteriously exotic or otherwise eye-catching. They credited him with many love affairs, more than he had actually had. Perhaps it bothered Claudio that one of these involved his sister. Juan didn't know. As soon as he would mention Luciana, Claudio would go silent.

Many love affairs? Well, he had checked the relevant statistics, and they showed that he had hardly had any more than a typical fit, single man of his age. Still, they denounced him. Just jealousy and hypocrisy, he had said when he had found a reference to his personal life in one of the scribblings in the press kit that the company's publicity department had put together. He could easily have come back at his moral critics in a calm, and even aggrieved, manner, saying, "Look here, my relationship with Italian supermodel Luciana Dorata may not be legalized, and may be anything but monogamous, but it's downright stable in comparison to most modern marriages, which start out with a trusting declaration of lifelong commitment and then later just crumble apart."

They had met exactly five years ago, also on a volcano in Italy during the summertime. The girl was completely spontaneous and didn't believe in planning

things out. Beautiful, naïve, and bold, she would constantly get herself into predicaments from which someone had to extricate her – originally Claudio, and later Juan. At the time, he had recently hired Claudio to lead his group of volcanologists. The objective of their first expedition had been to take measurements relating to Stromboli's continuous eruption activity. They had undertaken the expedition in the hopes of confirming a new volcanological hypothesis. It had turned out to be completely wrong; their ideas had not yet been fully developed.

They had set up camp at a safe distance from the crater, with tents for sleeping and a campfire hearth for cooking. It would have looked like any other campsite, if not for the regal canopy under which their brand new equipment stood. The volcano rumbled threateningly and hurled glowing cinders out into the azure sky at its own rhythm. This had been happening since time immemorial and the two young volcanologists had found it sublime. The afternoon sun had been blazing down on them, as timeless as the volcano, its rays parching everything around – but they had only been interested in the volcano's blazing embers, and had been all abuzz as they worked on the equipment. Then Luciana had suddenly burst onto the scene, all sweaty and covered in dust. The jeep that she had rented lay in a ditch a couple of miles away; apparently she had swerved to avoid hitting some sort of animal.

Claudio had stared at her aghast. She had been wearing a rumpled safari suit and a broad-brimmed hat, below which her face seemed happy despite the strain of her exertion. *What a vivacious beauty*, Juan had thought, hissing through his teeth enviously as she had run up to the stony Claudio and flung her arms around his neck. Claudio had not yet told Juan about his sister;

he seemed uneasy now and hesitated to introduce Juan to her. Juan, having no desire to wait, had taken care of this himself. She had smiled shyly and blinked her dark eyes intensely. It had been clear to him that each of them was already snared in the other's web.

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And now he set out to make a conquest of the young volcanologist. He could assume that he would succeed, and admitted that this success was not due solely to himself, but was rather due to the widespread sexual permissiveness in today's society. Two people get to know each other and like one another, they get along even better than they would have thought, so the desire for penetration germinates, the dullness of everyday life suddenly shines with bright colors, a fresh wind blows away the stale air, the zigzagging path of life finds a clear direction once again, and then they sleep together. Juan welcomed this development.

"If it's something that just happens naturally, then I can't see anything wrong in it," he had contended to Aaron, who had just shaken his old head. "The only thing I find objectionable is that, in my case, it all happens in the public's eye."

A colorful tabloid had recently gabbled that, "Thirty-nine-year-old Juan Zinniker is wealthy, successful in business, active in scientific research, extremely attractive" – these were the words of the magazine's female editor – "and seems to be made of the stuff that magnetically attracts women." His distinctively chiseled face was plastered on the cover. Inside, there was a two-page spread dedicated to him, with a variety of pictures: CEO Zinniker with his General Counsel Südfeld and CFO Gessner at the annual results press

conference; Dr. Juan Zinniker and Dr. Claudio Dorata in tropical suits at the edge of the Nyiragongo crater with serious expressions on their faces; a tanned Juan Zinniker in swimming trunks, slim and strong, standing with a surfboard on Waikiki Beach and flanked by two heartily laughing Hawaiian women; Juan Zinniker skiing with an Asian woman in Aspen; Juan Zinniker accompanying the cool, up-and-coming actress Danielle Schur to a movie premiere; and in the middle, Juan as a small boy between his young, beautiful, wealthy parents, who are smiling in the sort of restrained manner that seems befitting of those who end up dying before their time.

Someone who had certainly meant Juan well had placed the article on Aaron Südfeld's desk. The old moralist had then called Juan in to speak; he had been saying for some time that, at thirty-nine years old, Juan should finally be starting to think about getting married. The company needed an heir.

"I don't have any women who would be suitable for marriage," Juan had replied. He had rejected the very thought of marrying ever since his bride-to-be had called off their engagement when he had become president of the company.

"Nonsense. Ask for the hand of any of your lovers. Any of the ones you've told me about would be suitable."

"Granted – and so it would be impossible for me to choose."

The matter was shelved for the time being. But Juan knew that his old mentor would not give up. This time, Aaron was very upset.

"And what happens when your girlfriends read all this? They'll ditch you, and marriage will be delayed even longer for you."

“Everyone who gets involved with me knows the deal,” Juan countered, proclaiming with conviction that “the only ones who get seduced are those who want to be seduced.” It was useless; Aaron was no longer listening.

The idea to put the insignias on the backpacks had not been his; he would never have thought up such a thing. When the management team had discussed the matter – as they discussed all expeditions undertaken by their young CEO – he had emphatically come out against the idea. But his fatherly friend and mentor, Dr. Aaron Südfeld, had insisted. The company’s hard-working publicity department had bombarded Aaron with persuasive memoranda for weeks. They had sent copies to Juan as well, for decorum’s sake. He had let them know that their petitions were going straight into his wastebasket and that they were blowing whatever goodwill they had with him. As for the management team, he had remarked to them testily, “You can do what you want, but I’m not prepared to be a walking billboard, regardless of my position in this company.”

They had nodded their grey heads, and he had thought, *Fine, the matter’s closed*, wanting to move on to the next point on the agenda, but Gessner, the company’s CFO, had then declared with a grin that there was no way around it, that the expedition had to be accounted for as an advertising expense or else it would not be tax-deductible at all.

As the CEO and majority shareholder, Juan could have said no. Nevertheless, he hesitated to antagonize the members of the management team. He had never tested just how much power they actually granted him. The men around the table were always just a little bit ahead of him, and he was dependent upon them. Every time they amicably opposed him, they were right. And Gessner had been right in this case too, because even though Juan would fritter away money for

every possible sort of benevolent purpose, he still took advantage of any chance to avoid paying taxes.

He had eventually agreed to go along with it. Ultimately, the company was financing his research. Years ago, when the management team had decided to do so, everyone except Stieber, the company's managing director, had been in favor. Stieber had argued that, while he had nothing against taking reasonable risks, the success of these undertakings was so uncertain that it was basically like throwing money out the window. Juan had answered that this was the case with any serious research, and that was the very challenge of it. He had been unable to convince Stieber. The seasoned businessman was simply dead-set in his hostile attitude towards scientific pursuits.

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Juan had had the costly scientific equipment manufactured at his factory in Milan, with which he maintained an especially close relationship – perhaps because Italy was home to famous volcanoes, or perhaps because of his connections to the Doratas.

He had stopped off in Milan for a few hours on his way to Sicily. The city had been simmering under a stifling blanket of smog, and the air had smelled like it was poisoned, but none of that had concerned him. He had convened a meeting of the senior Milan management. Everyone had barely sat down when he had asked the crucial question. "Would you be prepared to undertake the manufacture of a nanotechnological sensor? We're dealing with a shockingly tiny thing, yet with an enormous range of applications. Its manufacture would require an investment of thirteen million francs – listen, I'll make you an offer, you come

in with seven million, and the group will chip in the rest.”

They had been sitting in a stylish air-conditioned room with a design typical of the Lombard region. Two stone ashtrays rested permanently on the oval table. Juan had brought back two nice-sized chunks of lava from the Stromboli expedition and had thought of just setting them out as they were, thus bringing a sort of natural accent to the otherwise artistic design of the room. However, the gruff factory supervisor in Milan smoked Brissagos, and Juan Havanas, and the two had bonded as smokers in a scene that was increasingly dominated by non-smokers; thus, rather than simply letting the two chunks of lava remain as showpieces, the factory supervisor had arranged for them to be made into ashtrays, figuring that this would please Juan.

The men in the room had declared that they were intrigued by this amazing sensor, but seven million, well, that was a lot. They had put on lugubrious expressions that matched their grey suits. Juan could imagine what was gnawing at them. They were successful men who spoke English well, knew the fickle principles of management, and had taken courses which indicated that they were members of a certain elite. They believed that they had everything under control. But something was always on the verge of turning the whole world upside down, and they had to anticipate that the company the powerful and impatient stockholders had entrusted to them could be destroyed overnight by unforeseeable factors against which they could not insure themselves.

Juan knew the feeling. There were all sorts of intricate threads running together beneath the surface of the global economy like magma flowing beneath the

surface of the Earth – events happening thousands of miles away could trigger an earthquake right here. It was constantly getting more and more difficult to ascertain the precise path between cause and effect – a factory fire in Singapore could bring down his plant in Milan, a three-month automotive industry strike could spell the end of his foundries in Spain, and an increase in the cost of raw materials, completely unexpected by industry pundits, could marginalize a traditional Swiss product.

He recalled the managers from his father's time as corpulent, contented men. Here in Milan, he was sitting with athletic men, carbon copies of one another – he might even have once addressed Dottore Binelli as Ingegnere Germinio, or Germinio as Signore Ratti. None smoked, of course; they drank in moderation, were careful about what they ate, played golf in their spare time, and had little time left over for cultural activities, at most perhaps attending a performance of the opera at the urging of their wives.

The men had played it coy, ultimately bailing themselves out with the idea that they would leave the decision to Juan. He sighed inaudibly, thinking, "Why the hell do I always have to take every risky decision?" He recalled how his father used to say, "All important decisions depend on the CEO anyway, and the job of his managers is just to pat him on the back when things go well and to have his back when things get tough."

How strange that Juan still lived by such precepts. On his eighteenth birthday, his father and Aaron Südfeld had started to inculcate him with the commandments that they had carved in stone; it was right after he had devoured his first books on geology and had unsuccessfully begun accosting his parents about the subject. The training of the future CEO had taken

place on Sunday afternoons in the family's opulent dining room. Juan could still see the scene before him – the old Spanish oak furniture, two Flemish still-life oil paintings, a starched damask tablecloth, precious china, his great-grandparents' patinated silverware, sparkling crystal glasses, and – as was by no means standard among wealthy Swiss – delicately prepared, abundant meals accompanied by fine wines.

After three glasses of Grand Cru Classé had put his father in an existential mood, he would look at Juan with his large, smooth face and his calm blue eyes, and say, "Remember, Juan. Firstly, we always obtain the latest production technology, to the extent that we can pay for it by ourselves. Because we should never depend on those petty bankers – you have to be aware that those guys relish playing with money like a baby plays with his feces. And secondly, we do everything we can to accumulate reserves, especially hidden reserves – the ace up the businessman's sleeve."

Juan grinned, knowing from where his father had pulled the analogy of the baby playing with feces – his mother had recently started spending gloomy afternoons in bed reading the essays of Sigmund Freud and his colleagues out of boredom.

Aaron Südfeld, invited for Sunday lunches together with his gentle, amiable wife, contributed the rest of the training. "One more thing, Juan," he would say. "We don't pay top wages, but we grant our employees tangible social benefits. So the unions hardly have any influence on our operations. We still talk with them out of courtesy, of course – over a good meal whenever possible – but neither side really expects much from it."

Old hat? Juan Zinniker, fourth-generation entrepreneur, had leaned back and decided to go ahead

with the manufacture of the new sensors. He had then moved on to a tedious yet obligatory task – but with the tough decision over, he had been in an unusually good mood and had actually looked forward to it without even knowing why.

In the private dining room of the company restaurant, away from the clattering din of the dishes outside, the yearly meeting with a delegation from the labor unions, led by Pietro Grigio, had awaited him. Grigio was a pinko senator from the Lombard region, once a young, red-headed electrician, now an older, grizzled labor leader, but still as defiant as ever. He had arrived with two lawyers, pale and delicate young men who had scuttled around him and steadied his chair as he had laboriously sat down with a slight groan.

Juan had observed Grigio's grey, furrowed visage and thought of his own still-mostly-smooth thirty-nine-year-old face, still not marked by life, although he too labored away valiantly. Grigio had put on a pair of half-moon reading glasses, whipped a sheet of paper out of his jacket pocket, and unfolded it. The paper had fluttered in his hand as he read from it.

"Dottore," he had begun, looking at Juan sternly from above his glasses, "I'm old enough to be your father, so please take to heart what I'm about to say. We've noticed that your management team has lost all credibility with the employees. Instead of long-overdue wage increases, you're putting the company's money into adventurous developments that are highly questionable from a social point of view. In addition to this, we've been informed by reliable witnesses that you are having the Milan factory produce equipment for your own personal hobby of volcanology. We insist that you give us complete information about this, as such activities do not generate profits for the company."

Juan had decided to remain calm. He knew – as did Grigio – that the employees in the Milan factory did not care at all about Grigio’s charges. He had filled both their glasses with semi-sweet Soave wine, as a gesture to show Grigio that he took no offense, and had then relaxedly given his usual answers. Neither of them really took this debate seriously, but both had to do justice to their prescribed roles.

And his scientific equipment? He would have liked to reply to the senator that he was following in the tradition of those immensely wealthy philanthropists who live far enough removed from the people to be able to love them unconditionally, but why provoke the old man? So, with feigned indignation, he had told the skeptical-looking Grigio, “Mr. Senator, all I’m trying to do is help people who are threatened by volcanic eruptions, and you come and accuse me of lacking business sense. Of course, as our exclusive information, we could try to capitalize on our formula if it is proven accurate – there’s no question about it. But we won’t do that – our results belong to science, and thus to mankind.”

Grigio had further furrowed his already furrowed brow, shaken his big grey head, cast a meaningful glance at his lawyers, and said, “But how do you expect to help the people who are threatened? You can’t stop eruptions.”

“We’re well aware of this. But with timely warnings, we can avoid fatalities and take all possible measures to mitigate damages.”

“Well, okay then, I’ll accept your justification. I’ll submit it to my committee.”

The company restaurant’s head chef was rightly regarded as being highly talented, but he was a communist disenchanted by the collapse of the East and

had thus no longer been at the top of his game for quite some time already. But today he had given his best, and his voice had resonated with a conciliatory tone upon Juan's departure. The senator had afforded Juan a paternal smile. Juan had not smiled back, afraid of letting the old man get too sentimental – they were suddenly all sitting as brothers in the same boat, at least until they had digested the meal they had just shared. Juan had also felt sorry for him; many years ago, when Grigio had caused the company serious problems, Juan had had him investigated, and had come to know that life had already punished Grigio enough, with a cantankerous wife, a drug-addicted son, and a bad hip.

Whatever else the senator had mentioned, with his finger wagging, as they had shaken hands, it had all gone straight over Juan's head. In his mind, he had already departed on the expedition.