

DIEGOMINEN

SOLI COMUNICANTI

© All Rights Reserved  
The content of this book cannot be reproduced  
or transmitted in any form nor in any electronic, mechanical or other ways  
without the written permission of the author  
Centro Full Service srl - Udine

*...to Carla*

1.

Kipasa was looking at the sky still clear at the setting of the second sun at the horizon. He knew he wouldn't have much time and he would need the TeDRA to scan the infinite, right above his head. His greatest passion after school at night in the darkening season was looking upwards, waiting for shining comets to part from the Great Fountain and form new designs in the dim-light sky of Amantera. During the nights and in the phase of lining up, the cosmic material became visible and created wonderful night designs, which little by little disappeared when the planet was in the most central area of the elliptic trajectory. At that time it was almost always daylight, and it was impossible to see any other shining object.

Kipasa loved light, but for a great part of the year, corresponding to a whole period of revolution of the planet around the two suns, he wanted above him a dark background to be able to set off his imagination, and only for less than a half of the one thousand four hundred and sixty days of the Amanterean year he could make his nose up passion come true, when Amantera was in one of the extreme points of its trajectory, with one of the suns at the maximum distance: luckily, the planet's speed decreased a lot near those two positions, and this prolonged the chances of observation. He wondered how far it was and how long it would take to reach the Great Fountain, if ever he could go there. That morning at school he had gone through the measure units, the distances in "M", or a twenty-millionth of their planet's circumference, at the equator; the time in "S" or more than nine billion cycles of the radiation corresponding to the transition between two energy levels of the cesium atom. Kipasa was a curious boy, he asked himself many whys. "Wonder why a twenty-millionth, wonder why cesium, why can't light travel faster than three hundred million M per S?" While thinking about this and the great complications he understood life would offer him, he had aimed the TeDRA towards the Great Fountain; in stand-by the instrument was very compact, diameter and length were little less than a twentieth of M. He pressed a small button on a side and that small object became as long as his forearm, a sort of very powerful telescope able to detect even weak signals from the universe, identifying the source's distance. He had dreamed a lot that night, the first true Amanterean winter night. But the Great Fountain seemed almost idle. He checked a time counter on the display of the instrument any Amanterean was provided with, and thought he would have only ten thousand S to see the new figures. "Less than a third of my day" he thought. He further increased the amplification, and it was then he seemed to pick up something original: not light flashes, neither the usual emissions of quasars or neutron stars. A very shy but sudden impulse, intense, with a wide spectrum, very well directed. The TeDRA recognition program contained instructions to distinguish star radiations from the ones coming from impacts or matter explosions. Hunting objects hidden in the universe was a fascinating game for anyone, in Amantera. Kipasa started the signal storing procedure, as he had already done many times, and activated the graphic program for the analysis of what he was recording. The intensity peak lasted some tenths of S. He wondered which corner of the universe it might come from. He launched the identification program, which could recognize the probable elements of matter involved. He recognized the emission frequencies of the atoms of silicon, aluminum, iron, nickel, carbon, uranium and radium. Using the shift towards red and the slowing-down due to hydrogen atoms

scattered in the space, he calculated the approximate distance of the source: one hundred ninety six light years, moving away speed about eighty-thousand M per S. Kipasa was starting to recognize a casual or intentional phenomenon, which had taken place over one hundred ninety six years before, right in the portion of sky he was aiming at.

At the beginning he thought of one of the many sequences he had already memorized, and resolved to store it in the school computer. He had in fact recorded for six hundred S, at a very high acquisition frequency, and had saturated twelve Tbyte of the TeDRA's memory. The *phenomenon* seemed interesting to him, but obviously, as many others, it had to be followed in its temporal trend, to understand if its spectrometric characteristics had changed, and if it would be possible to deduce whether in its birth place there might have been the presence of water, which the Amantereans were convinced was a necessary element for life. It was fashionable on the planet to make hypothesis on the thousands of frequencies meaning *possible extramenterean life* coming from anywhere. He switched off the TeDRA, happy for his mini-discovery. He decided to lie down, relaxing for a while and waiting. His eight fingers behind his nape, his legs crossed, he converted the mini-telescope into a sound player and shot balls of music into his headphones, connecting to his favorite radio station, Armonitera. Thinking the dim light season was always too short, he meditated on the just made acquisition of waves, which only partially could compensate him of the disillusionment of the Great Fountain. After a couple of thousands S of further useless waiting he got up and started homewards.

2.

For a long time he hadn't felt the surfboard speed on the waves as that morning. The wind was perfect, exactly from northeast, it got into the gulf from the harbor side, flat sea, late summer colors and intense blue reflexes: far, the Istrian coast, closer, rough with fine sprinkles, the choppy sheet of the gulf, and thousands of icy needles on his bare feet. He had hoisted a four and two, the tone of the wind was full, promising pressure; the board had been the same for years, eighty liters, start from water, almost immediate gliding, success breath, life challenge. Away crosswind, the Miramare castle as the scenery of his evolutions, maybe less extreme than once, maybe not so easy, but always athletic, tense muscles, reactive ear, concentration on the gesture, perception of direction changes, be ready with the boom, hold better, mind the trapeze, where the next jibe? On that crest, no, wait for the next, go powerjibe, rain, go back change side, ready, move flat on the board, wait till it turns, exploit the inertia, pass the mast, don't lose speed start again, Istria is always there watching your come back. Good!

The last board towards Barcola was always the recovery one and the end of the isolation from the world. It was nice to rest after fifty minutes exposed to the thirty knots of the late September bora, a very beautiful September. Then back to the office, the mailbox full of messages. And the program for the recalculation of interstellar distances, considering also the time-space bend, will it be blocked again? Those rigid doublecheckers of Mount Palomar observatory, who still didn't allow him the access to their data, after months since they had received his credentials, and those of ARPA, the local weather station, once more with their absurd requests. A glance to the digital watch he wore on his right arm, a sign of diversity, as many others he used to have. To explain better? Why, who understands me follows me. Sometimes, recently, his indecision surprised him though, what was wrong? Maybe the latest jibe was flabby? More tired than usual? A set of things, simply a set of things. Maybe the signals from the space and those coming from inside had to be related. After a month he would have the medical checkup for the All-Japan Wave Classic, at the beginning of January, Omaezaki, Japan, the country of yellow waves, in the middle of nowhere, fifteen hours from Tokyo, impossible sea, sand in the air, scent of seaweed, samurai kindness and strength, full of life.

He loved combining work travels and windsurf outings. Japan, then, what a country. A kind land and nice people, regular movements, extreme planning, controlled chaos. Bewildering for some aspects but unbelievably welcoming. If they didn't live on Earth, certainly the Japanese might belong to a species of another Planet. There was always something to learn for the lucky westerners that watched with curious eyes, a surprise the way life can be interpreted in such an original way. The ekiben sold at the stalls of the subway stations drove him crazy, the wax made foods in the restaurant windows were small works of art, arriving at Shinjouku and trying to catch the subway to go to Yokohama by oneself was an exciting experience, hearing the chanting and obliging *ohayo gozaimasu* from hotel concierges or from the "sentinels" in the huge business buildings of the Ginza for each single person who passed in front of them, was for him a signal of deep diversity. Sometimes, when he had just got there, he loved to let his mind free of comparing those places and those behaviors with their western equivalents: The subway station at Central Park, Rome Fiumicino Airport, Heathrow, Charles de Gaulle Airport, the Subway of Detroit

or of San Francisco, the Civic Center in Chicago. At times he thought that if Tokyo hadn't been peopled by Japanese, it would have collapsed long before under its own immense complexity, and he thought it could work only for the great awareness of its people, small calculation units of a parallel megacluster.

Traveling with the Japanese was different: discreet people, careful not to go out of the volume of space they were entrusted to, careful to their neighbors' movements, extremely reactive in case of problems, absolutely non-intrusive: they don't use their cell phone in closed and crowded places, don't make noise, don't park where it comes, don't try to overtake you, don't react if you overtake them, they study you, try to understand you, if you are slow when you have to be quick their rule is merciless. They smile, you think they may forgive you, actually that smile is the final sentence. When he had been away from that country for a long time, he looked forward to going back again, to be surrounded by the persuasive kind wisdom of that millenary civilization. He deeply enjoyed tasting their food, plunging into those combinations of fragrances sometimes delicate, sometimes extreme, so different for a westerner: the breaking out of taste and smell imagination drove him crazy, the smell of raw fish, so sharp, extremely hot ginger roots, and soy sauces, the smell of incense in tea rooms. It came spontaneous and it was a great pleasure to multiply sensory connections: at times Japanese food inspired him a flute melody, a far off Debussy in the dim light of a damp dawn on the Adriatic, sometimes it suggested him the notes of a song by Elisa from the stage, live, in Monfalcone, harbor smell, people from the east, smell of the Carso. His brain deeply enjoyed interweaving those synaptic signals. He had never taken special drugs, some joints at the university, but he thought that sometimes sushi, sashimi and grilled unagi on a rice layer, not to speak of the forbidden charm of fugu, could be real drugs for the *primitive* brain of an astronomer from Trieste grown in western scientific schools, and before that in the goliardic atmosphere of Italian fantasy, in the total absence of planning, and in *extreme* amusement. Maybe it was the Italians' predisposition to *trying*, their innate free spirit that made them perfect guinea pigs for a full immersion into the Japanese planet, if not because of their absolute uncommonness.

The Japanese were, in their whole, a *group*, maybe more than any other population on Earth. They knew their past, they were aware and proud of the strength of their civilization, they had clear how important for the *group* were words like *collaboration* and *contribution*. The Japanese didn't try to find happiness in fleeting western models, but developed their skills of individuals as members of a community. Maybe as a contrast, they strangely felt a great admiration for the Italians, so unpredictable and blundering. Especially for the Italians that could resist the temptation of mocking them for their originality.

His friend Shunichi Nakamura was forty-seven, and as many of his fellow countrymen, he looked ten years younger. He had been working at the NRO for twenty years, over there it was normal to get a working place and stay there forever. He lived in the nearby Kofu with his wife and two sons, in a seventy square meter apartment, two hours from Tokyo, one from the observatory. Everyday, for twenty years, he had been traveling two hours by train. He was considered one of the best Japanese astrophysicists, and had devoted the latest ten years of his life to the research of signs of extraterrestrial life as a contract researcher of the SETI, a group of resolute visionaries looking for intelligent life in the

space. Dario had met him by chance during a trip to the observatory of Arecibo. Nakamura-san was an unbelievable man: one meter sixty tall, as thin as a nail, black belt both of judo and karate, a former semi-professional triathlete, he was the personification of the true samurai. He had immediately liked him, Shunichi always thought positively, they had agreed on many aspects of the recent data collected by the telescope at the NRO about the strangeness of the signal coming from the Scorpio sky area, from a cluster of globular stars. It was quite weak, from a distance of four hundred light years, there were hypothesis it might come from a pulsating neutron star with, in a far orbit, some highly reflecting material, dry ice mixed with various isotopes. Its non-random repetitiveness had made them curious. They had picked it up for the first time at the end of June the same year, and actually they were the only ones that believed in its complete non randomness; the majority didn't think at all it could be an intentional phenomenon, and considered it too weak and not confirmed enough to pay it any attention. Dario and Shun had called it *babyS*, the way who is going to face a new life is called, partly for fun partly nor to reveal too much of news that might eventually astonish the world. Dario had finally been allowed to travel to Japan, and he had carried with him all the windsurf rig, a little extra on the ticket, board, sails, boom, by courtesy of JAL.

Kipasa lived in Jarvatera, eighty thousand people, ten degrees north of the Superior Tropic. The houses were all low, white, and the roof covered with a material obtained from heat insulating rocks. The *towns* in Amantera were well-organized, regularly planned villages, wide streets, large gardens, filled in cables, many ponds in the middle of clearings and woods. People walked or traveled by electric motor supplied bikes fed by rechargeable batteries, or solar energy powered four-wheel vehicles. When cars were parked, on their side a set of fabric solar panels was displayed, and once opened as umbrellas and correctly oriented, they could feed high capacity batteries, designed to be countersunk into a mixture of high pressure sintered material. The whole body of the vehicle was actually a great battery. The Amantereans did not have great needs, everywhere nature offered all they needed to live, and most of their work consisted in the continuous improvement of the exploitation of the planet's resources, taking care not to modify its bioclimatic conditions. The urge of *doing in a hurry* or *hurrying up* was unknown to them. The production organization was very localized, and there weren't particular needs that might justify traveling: the quality and completeness of their computer system were excellent. If it had been really necessary, flying to Amantera meant using two seat planes in silicon-carbon fiber, very light, with electric motors fed by batteries distributed on the structure, as for the cars.

Actually everything and everybody could be *reconstructed* on site by means of the tele-digitalization of the original in real time, and this was by far the favorite technique to know and to know oneself, before paying visits and meeting.

The average life on the planet was thirty-five years, usually there were problems coming from the penetration in the body of UV rays, destructive especially for the retina and the eye structure in general. Many Amantereans became blind at the age of twenty-five and were hit by depression, losing any interest for life. In spite of the high technological level available on the planet, a remedy for blindness had not been found yet. For them, who had

lived almost always in daylight, on a planet that had light as its main source of life, losing sight was an unbearable handicap. There were appropriate centers for the hospitalization of *elderly* people, where they led a secluded life, compulsorily and lovingly assisted by young people between seven and nine years of age, who contributed to their assistance. Kipasa had been assigned to Ruwansa, a thirty-one year old blind man who had worked in the biggest radio observatory in Amantera. Ruwansa had been in charge of the development of space signal acknowledgement programs, and had done the same job for over fifteen years.

“How are you, Ruwansa?” Kipasa asked.

“So” the old man answered.

“Shall we go for a drive? I have the car outside, or do you want to walk?”

“Better walk”

“You know, I have been recording a sequence that is making me curious, for over two hundred and fifty days, first with the TeDRA and then with the mini-telescope of the school.”

“Which sequence?”

“I haven’t told anyone yet, but I’d like to tell you”

“Tell me”

“It all started when I was out, at the beginning of the darkening season, to enjoy the comet showers of the Great Fountain. That night, however, there wasn’t much activity, at all. Suddenly, a radio signal: adjusting the sensibility towards the frequencies that seemed more interesting, between ...”

“Which ones?” Ruwansa asked anxiously.

“From 0.5 to 5 giga-oscillations per S”

“Have you started the substance acknowledgement program?”

“Yes”

“And then?”

“The usual elements we know”

“Well, one of the many explosions around, distance?”

“One hundred ninety six light years”

“Any stars on that side?”

“Yes, with possible planets, one classified H-He, small size, destination red giant in two billion years”

“Alignment with us?”

“We are unbelievably in phase every two of our days”

“Have you monitored the signal decay?”

“Yes, it’s what I did, predictable decadence, but after the first fifty-six days something strange happened”

“Ok, you have recorded an intense explosive event in a remote planetary system, and one of the planets involved revolves with a period of two of our days. Well, do you know how many signals like the one you have recorded there are around the space? I must have found and studied more than one hundred a year, more than three thousand in my career”

“Yes, but after the first acquisition with the TeDRA I aimed the mini-telescope everyday for many days, as I was saying. I continued to receive the signal, weakened, and for fifty-six days nothing special happened. Then a variable length disappearance cycle started”

“Of disappearance? Of what?”

“The water frequency disappears”

“What? The water frequency disappears for some days?”

“Yes, Ruwansa, there is a water *hole*, though less and less perceptible, which I have recorded lasting for an increasing time. Then the frequency appears again, and before disappearing once more always fifty-six days pass”

“Therefore you have recorded almost five complete cycles so far,” Ruwansa observed.

“Yes. Two days left to the end of cycle fifty-six”

“And the disappearance of the water frequency lasts longer and longer, doesn’t it?”

“Correct. In the first cycle, that’s to say after the first fifty-six days, it had lasted thirty-four days. In the second thirty-eight. In the third forty-four. In this fourth cycle the disappearance has lasted fifty-two days”

“Any other big explosions?”

“No, signal constantly weakening”

“When the beginning of the next cycle?”

“Now it’s two hundred seventy nine days since I aimed the TeDRA for the first time. The cycle should finish tomorrow, this is the reason why I told you”

“Turn on the TeDRA and call Supreme Wariruna Wasi”

Traveling with his rig was like carrying pieces of himself: the scratch on the board reminded him the departure from the ramp of the Europa hotel, and the missing neoprene on the boom, as if it had been bitten by a pitbull, represented an unlucky arrival among the rocks, near Rovigno. The labels on the mast, from the most faded to the newest, reminded him the outings on the Garda at Torbole. NE Wind Challenge, *wow what a wind, wow what a flat lake*, maybe he had taken part in seven, won a couple. Traveling with the *stuff* gave him confidence, as when a child he brought his teddy bear with him. Sometimes he was as superstitious as an astrologist from San Giorgio a Cremano, sometimes as logic and sound as Carlo Rubbia. He liked his extremes: he enjoyed comparing the opinions the various characters inside himself alternatively suggested him. Sometimes he took unconsidered decisions, sometimes he didn’t decide at all, this was his problem. Basically he felt good in that Carrol like world of teddy bears, windsurf, and mountain bike he loved to be surrounded by. He liked being an astronomer, he didn’t get too much money but it didn’t matter much, he didn’t have a family to support, only his nineteen eighty-one VW van, the surf and the MTB *stuff*, the motorcycle, and the villa in Prosecco. He would not exchange those freedom guarantees with anything else in the world, as he wouldn’t change the Gulf and the Carso with any other place on Earth.

Strangely during the winter before and even now, late March, he had suffered for throat-ache many times. It was annoying, after a couple of days it turned into a cold, his nose dripped and he couldn’t breath well. Besides, he felt a little weak and this annoyed him a lot. The indisposition reminded him the time of the college, when he smoked as much as a packet of MS cigarettes a day, to control the stress. But he had given up many years

before, and so he was not able to associate that throat-ache with anything else. In his office the air was very dry and being near the computers didn't make the situation better. Having to sit for hours in front of the monitor to program new algorithms for the identification of radio signals, continuously checking the long recordings from telescopes all over the world, aroused in him to an unbelievable desire of movement.

It was a wonderful day, one of those days the desire of going out had seized him since early in the morning, as soon as he had raised his bedroom blinds, looking onto the gulf. The rush of leaving by bicycle straight away, crossing the Carso riding on the paths he had run thousands of times, hearing the buzz of the city far away, was very strong. He had done it a couple of times, but that day he would have a lot to do. So he took his VW van, and loaded the bike and the spare parts. He hoped not to receive e-mails that required immediate answers, and tried to disappear as fast as he could. One of the disadvantages of having to deal at the same time with the West and the East of the world was the temporal endlessness of messages from everywhere. Sometimes this had made him lose some breaks, reluctantly.

He went down to the parking, and left towards Opicina. Taking the usual dirt road, inevitably he thought how many times he had already done it. Once a week, for ten years and two months, more than five hundred. Taking the strain over and over again gave him confidence: the expectation and the physical-emotional gratification converged in an almost mystic rite. The adversities of life didn't frighten him, quite the opposite: he absolutely needed to have confirmations about his conditions, and that hour and a half pedaling was sometimes the required test. A light slope, the frequency goes up, how is the quadriceps today? A stabbing pain at the knee? Come on, the synovial fluid is coming. Start slow, go, you've got throat-ache. Come on, it passes. I haven't enclosed the attachment in the latest mail. To hell even the new browser, pedal or you distract your mind ... have you pumped the front wheel at three and five? It looks a bit down. You aren't easy, you don't have to get to the crossroads too weary. Push and that's all, away your thoughts, shut up, look ahead.

Normally after about ten minutes the isolation from the world was almost total. He could hear his breath, the dull and delicate gripping of the clawed tires on the rocks, and the rustling of the derailleur, when he decided to ease for a while, at the right moment, taking advantage of a bump. The bike and the windsurf were musical instruments that enchanted melodically Dario's inner world. He felt his diaphragm widen, and the pedal resist, and then surrender a little later under the extensors' push. He felt in his hands all the harshness of that inhospitable and wild ground, while his forearms softened the shakes, and allowed him to control his position on the saddle. He loved pedaling uphill, fighting the gravity resistance. He imagined how any kilocalorie consumed recalled a small cloud of eighty parts of nitrogen and twenty of oxygen in his blood, purifying it. He loved it, thinking about it, and his heartbeat at one hundred and sixty was his conscience's paradise, taken to the limit of a reversible dissolution of awareness.

If the slope was a test for his cardio-circulatory system, the descent was a reactivity test for the psychomotor system. He knew he had to give the best of himself to reach that curve without pedaling, get a little higher, jump the small rock, land exactly in the small

channel and then down the overpass as fast as he could, hoping it wasn't muddy. Once he had flown out, landing on the thorns and rocks of the dolina wasn't nice. The uncertainty of the ground was part of the amusement, and gave him the necessary stimulation to keep his concentration. When he had fallen it had happened out of confidence excess, it had been dry for many days, and he didn't expect any problems on that hold. He had thought about that afternoon's working schedule, and the conference call, he had projected himself into the after-bike, he had skipped the "sequence of tenses", instead of enjoying it, and he had fallen. So he couldn't put his feet on the table in the office, dislocated shoulder and swollen knee, waiting room at the orthopedic ward of Cattinara hospital, one of the worst places to spend an afternoon, moreover after skipping lunch.

That day concentration was focused on himself and his body. The trouble at his throat, dilated for the ascent effort, was almost pain. Any jerk increased it, and he felt his Adam's apple as heavy as a stone. He touched it, it seemed normal, if there was one thing he hated was being conditioned by physical problems during exercise. He should have it checked by Paolo, an otorhinolaryngologist and his former schoolmate at high school. Back to the office, he called him and booked a visit.

"Listen" he said "do you still smoke?"

"No, I gave up twenty years ago"

"Do you drink?"

"Come on! Some beer sometimes" Taking out the laryngoscope, Paolo frowned.

"It isn't that good" he uttered those words seriously.

"What can it be?"

"I don't know exactly, but ... I don't want to scare you, but ..."

"Don't tell me more".

Dario underwent biopsy one week later. After one more week the response was ready, but Paolo's face when he meet him for the explanation was enough.

"So, young man, you should have some treatment. You have a malignant tumor at the sub-glottis. Maybe some lymph nodes have been hit. Not too big, it shouldn't grow too much. You have to start right away, though: radio and chemotherapy. You know what I mean, don't you?"

We are going to start on Monday, two sessions a week for five weeks.

The chemotherapy has to be done every fifteen days, OK?"

Was it really his throat? What the hell is the sub-glottis, this thing that aches? Tumor what? What cell mess up had happened to him? No, no, it wasn't possible. Paolo had to be crazy. He looked at the response, lymphocytes, cholesterol, blood cells, and so on. It didn't seem too far from normal. Radio and chemotherapy? He knew what they meant very well. To him? He wouldn't make it, they would remove everything. He was scared. A thousand thoughts flashed through his mind going out of Cattinara hospital. "I'll go away". "I'll leave everything and enjoy the short time left to live". "I'll open a windsurf school". "I'll go to Mammoth Mountain in Utah, climb and go down by bike till the end". He got home with a wrenched face, his throat was aching badly. He went to bed.

He was running in the yard, after school, his scarf had just fallen. He was smiling, he was all red, panting, he was haunted, in his opinion.

"I told you to wear the scarf, donkey!" It was his mother, from the balcony. He raised his eyes, saw her, turned round, he was breathing perfectly, with his heart in his mouth, he didn't even have Adam's apple. "Coming" he shouted. An almost circular-section cave, with reddish light reflections, a mobile vault, almost elastic, a damp and wrinkled surface, transuding a viscous liquid. The noise of a far off thunder on one end, the thunder increases at regular intervals, making it all shiver, slowly at first, then more intensely, shaking, thinning, swelling it a little and almost deflating it, vaporizing the semi-transparent liquid layer at its passage; then the whirling of a stormy wind, warm and sticky, crosses it all, then stops and reverts its motion, giving it the feature of a giant whale mouth. Nothing wrong, nothing strange, whitish scales, in a deep point, atypical, grown without a particular order, swollen, overlapping, apparently out of the structural and functional scheme of the covering epithelium left, which favors-supports-resists the tumultuous dynamics of multiphase fluids. What were those *aliens* doing in his throat? How did they dare parasitize his sound tissue, perfectly functional to the task it was entrusted to? And more, why hadn't those *things* been signaled before to his antibodies, when the first anomaly had appeared, at the first sign of diversity, at the first reproductive disobedience?

He woke up. He was completely sweat, in his winter pajamas, sheets and bedcover piled up on a side, the pillow sideways. His throat ached. In his dream he had traveled into his throat. And now he was awake he thought it was unbearable to take with him and feed the alien, inexplicable wrong modification of a process that not long before was perfect. But how, couldn't he control everything by himself? The fact that the *thing* was inside him, in an inner duct of his body, an evil encrustation in a crucial point, made him furious, it made him doubt of the meaning of life he had found, after searching it persistently for years, projected from the deepest of himself to the most unknown cosmic infinite. He had never thought he might be the object of nature's *great error*. This changed everything. Now he didn't have only to "understand" but also to "cohabit". To understand and not to depend, to be strong though feeling weak. He had often thrown himself into difficult situations, with the strength of his imagination, but his rational disposition had always managed to control the difficulties and find a way out. Now the rules changed: the worst was that he didn't have the slightest idea of what they might be. The sequence of the events was anyway clear, and he knew that refusing the reality he would deny himself the experience that might allow him to accept his condition. At the same time, he was assailed by the need of scanning himself, up to the control center of his conscience, provided it existed, and *the ego* wasn't instead a network of connections distributed in each organ; and simultaneously look outside, into the infinite space, looking for the why at the source, a sign of life or a confirmation of its existence. He was sure that from that analysis a new Dario would come out, but he wasn't sure at all how he could be, neither had he the slightest idea of what to do to dominate the events. The anguish of not having the courage of letting himself evolve tormented him, but this time indecision didn't scare him, as he had to start from nothing, formatted disk, operating system to be loaded again.

He got out of the hospital. The air was chilly. He walked to the parking, he tried hard to remember where he had left the two-colored VW. An unmistakable car, of the sixties, North-European freaks, Lennon style spectacles, great ideas, great sharing, rock and joints. He didn't know exactly why he still had that car, it wasn't comfortable, its top speed was 120 kmph, difficult to park, it consumed terribly, often it didn't start in winter, and its windows often misted up. It was a way to react to easiness and status symbols. He had a BMW1200GS, three mtbs, four sails, two masts, and five windsurf boards. The van started tossing, and he got out of the parking of the hospital, he didn't know what to do. He would have liked to go home in Prosecco, but nobody was waiting for him. So he headed towards the Fair, he went along all the avenues towards the docks, Piazza Unità on the right, Hapsburg lights and shadows synthesized and projected on the Adriatic, he drove by the station. He was traveling slowly, it was one of those cold March evenings, a dry bora rippled the gulf and cured Barcola's maritime pine trees. His destination was Sistiana, he wanted to take a walk, to feel the noise of the wind and the smell of the seashore, to watch the fishermen's floats wave. The moon was full in the sky, and shone white, lighting the small battlements of Miramare. He went down the narrow and winding road, overcrowded and full of cars during the summer, and now deserted. He arrived down, there were maybe ten cars. The moored boats swashed, the breeze made them wave and chatter among them, with the creaking of tight shrouds and splashes of hulls at the sides of the wharf. Sometimes he wondered if will power alone could give him the relief he was looking for, saturated as he was with the poisons that had to cure him. He looked for his youth's places, the places that had seen him grow up, and still gave him the same identical emotions, any time he went back there.

Nineteen-eighty, he had gone out with his father's green vespa scooter, long hair, without helmet, hot June. He was going to a beach party and to dance on the platform, besides some Sangria and light joints. Dark blonde, she was a wonder, she danced fondly "You make me feel", moving sinuously. Tall, sun tanned, hundred per cent Trieste born, snowy smile, light blue shirt, nothing under, round breasts, buttons that appeared and disappeared, flat belly, jeans micro skirt, brawny prominent butt, athletic thighs, slender knees, harmonious feet, a touch of light blue varnish on her nails, little colored cameos on proportionate toes. That was the first time he understood how much he liked feet. He watched over and over again the ten turquoise pearls tense and relax at the rhythm of the eighties in cork and red-cloth sandals. He was a bully, at the age of eighteen. He took part in mountain bike and windsurf competitions, he was placed and won, he was often on the local newspaper, *Il Piccolo*, good at school, good looking and bold. He was a real *mulo* (chap), culture and sports, sea life and life to be lived. He expected to be looked at and admired, and perceived the whisper of the *mule* (girls), as soon as he looked somewhere else, and enjoyed being their matter. But that girl didn't care about him. He got near, started to dance close to her, to smile flat, a bully doesn't show his teeth, and above all dances controlled, aseptic, dancing is for girls, men must be hardly touched by the rhythm, and don't have to let emotions out. This was the way he thought, when he was eighteen. She went on, concentrated. Half an hour, one hour. Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet, and the Genesis. She didn't sit down, only some smiles with her friends, then she went wild again. She looked at the starry sky, at times, to take inspiration. Dario got near her:

“There is one that shines more than the others,” he said to her, just to buttonhole her.

“What are you saying” she was surprised.

“I’m saying there is a star I’d like to show you”.

“Can’t we see it from here?”

“No, not very well, it isn’t dark enough. I have the vespa scooter, want to come for a ride?”

When the bully’s charm failed, Dario knew that his passion for the stars was irresistible for any girl. She introduced herself:

“I’m Giada”

“Dario Baldan”

“The guy of the windsurf?”

“Correct”. He thought his popularity might finally turn to his advantage.

“I’ve been told surfers are all boasters”

“Wrong, there are shy ones as well”

“You don’t look shy”

“Not when I look at stars like you”. She smiled. That witty remark surprised her, it was the first time somebody paid her a compliment like that.

“Let’s go, I want to take a rest”.

They walked along the street, and took the vespa scooter. Dario started it, usually it was difficult, but his excitement made him kick the pedal so hard that the engine started at once, with the crackling of the vespa scooters of the eighties. She got on as a cowboy, and he saw her white panties peep out of those thighs, shining in the middle of the darkness of the jeans mini skirt, waiting to be unbuttoned. They left, he felt her grip his hips, he decided to go a little faster, he went along the heavy traffic road, warm and dry air against his face. He reached the crossroads, he dashed down the hairpin turns, the engine roared, the shift gear was slow and noisy. She gripped him tighter, he felt her breasts press clearly, they were just as he expected, he already felt his face inside them. They reached the wharf and parked under the trees. She took his hand:

“It’s a mess down here. Let’s go that way”. They set off rightwards, left the wharf behind them, crossed a grove, got as far as the cliffs.

“I’ve got the sandals, what shall I do?”

“Take them off”. She did it, and he cast a glance at her turquoise pearls, a touch of class on her smart feet. They walked about five minutes, risking to slip and get stuck with their ankles at each step.

The moon shone on the bay, down on the right; far away, the lights of the shipyards, on the left Sistiana, a little farther Trieste.

“That is comfortable” Dario showed a rock, ahead, which offered a natural back for two, a little sloping, a not too narrow seat. He thought how many people from Trieste had already appreciated it. Hand in hand, he said to her: “usually they can be seen better in winter, but now it’s only June. It’s there”.

“What is there?”

“Arcturus, the most brilliant star in the sky you can see now, in summer, it is thirty seven light years far, it’s a red, or better orange, giant. It’s easy: the most brilliant of the big bear. Can you see it?”

“No”. Dario took her hand, held it in his and guided her forefinger.

“Actually the most brilliant star is Sirio, twice more that the others, like you, but I can show it to you only in winter, and in winter it’s hard here”

“Forget to take me down the cliffs in winter”

“We can come by boat, what do you think?”

“Come on, show me others, but point them well” she took his hand. The lesson went on, Alpha Centauri, A and B, Vega, in the Lyra Constellation, which with Altair and Deneb make the Summer triangle, then Capella in the Auriga Constellation and Procyon, in the Lesser Dog, then Achemar, in the Eridano Constellation.

From the slow flowing of her fingers in his hand he understood that she didn’t want to give up, it was time to observe Giada, the living star that was sitting next to him, enchanted by his description of the sky, stunned by the sidereal explanations, attracted by that man from Trieste as sparkling as the waves he could surf. He turned towards her, but she was faster, she laid a hand behind his nape, drew her lips close and kissed him fondly.

She tasted almonds. He wrapped her up with his arms, felt her brawny back, the clear profile of her backbone, went down with his hand, reached the groove of her buttocks still wet for the sweat of the wild dancing.

She took his t-shirt off, and started to kiss him and lick his chest, then reached his Bermuda shorts. She took them off skillfully and started to kiss his lower belly, through his pants.

“It’s salty,” she said smiling.

“I went out with my windsurf”. He hurried to free her from the T-shirt, out of which two wonderful breasts emerged, little lacked they turned up by themselves. The moonlight gave perfection to their form. He didn’t resist a while before touching and pressing them a little, passing his fingers on her nipples making them turgid. He licked and sucked them with pleasure, he felt she was letting herself go. He delicately unbuttoned her jeans skirt, which opened without resistance. Then his fingers flew down. He felt the hair. A hand grasped his wrist:

“I’ve got my problems. Sorry”.

The lights are turned on in the cinema hall. The audience mutters. The entanglement of the bodies, the blushing of the faces, the pathos of the starry night, the astronomic preparation, everything disappears in no time.

Like that night, Dario woke up from the illusion.

And like that night, when they had gone back to the vespa scooter and he hadn’t said a word, and the engine hadn’t started but at the nth thrust, and she was cold, and her feet ached, and she was nervous, like that night he felt weak and angry with the world, against that set of little misfortunes that had turned the bully chap Dario Baldan into a scientist filled with poisons, infested by bastard scaled cells that prevented him from living as he liked.

3.

She went out of the office and headed home thinking about what had just happened to her. Going down Trinità del Monti, the heart weighed like a stone in her breast, she almost wanted to take it off to feel lighter. Everything bothered her, even the low sun that filled Via dei Condotti with an orange light and flew into the square crowded with people of summer Rome. She knew she had a sulky face and she felt it insolently amplified by the warm rays. Not even designer shop windows and the chic viewpoint of that spot of Rome could change her mood. At last she turned round the corner of via Belisana, and found a rest in the shadow of the buildings. She was walking fast, hoping to let those thoughts behind her. She remembered when, as a child, she was sure that, once grown up, she would deeply change and become a happy and self-confident woman. The flashes of Piazza di Spagna reminded her when, a child, she went to school with her friends, she saw Alma, a young girl again, hand in hand in the first evenings out of home. And even when she was twenty with young people of her age, wondering what she was doing in that exhibition of vain aesthetes and what she had in common with those boys, how little she liked those young people's rituals. Why couldn't she be thoughtless like them? She was patient, then, in the moments of doubt, sure that her doubts would clear up, growing older.

After that horrible day, she ended up thinking about herself, child-adolescent-girl-adult: self-confidence with age had been only a big illusion. She got home, went up the stairs quickly, and opened the door. She took a deep breath, realizing she had held it for a long time. She went to rinse her face, hoping to wash away her bitter thoughts. She would have liked to disassemble her brain and squeeze it as a sponge under fresh water. She mirrored herself, the mascara was a little blurred, she cleaned it away with a cotton disc; her face was pale, her curls ruffled. She kept on looking at herself. She found she was still beautiful, with that *china like face* her mother liked so much. Her lips were shut, her look serious and tense, her eyes a little more watery than usual, her glance slightly melancholic. She was thinking of the absurd proposal of the day. How could he ask her now to go to Bari on business for three months to try to motivate the students of the professional courses? Was it possible that after all that she had showed she could do, he always asked her to take up the worst cases, the ones that represented the typical upstart for newcomers? Was it possible that after four years of proven skills, and with all the activities of Human Resource assistance that her office had at hand, even high level ones in multinationals at the EUR, she was really the one who had to take care of desperate cases in places she didn't like? Once more she felt emptied of any dignity, underestimated and mistreated. She was really fed up. She tried to gather her ideas and think what to do. She had to put some order in her life, using logics and trying to make emotions evaporate. Coming back from the bathroom, the couch had an irresistible charm on her. She plunged on it backwards. She closed her eyes, screwing them tight, as if she was looking for something that might distract her, stimulating secluded corners of her memory.

She was fourteen years old, and the mystery of life was in front of her. She used to go to the mountains with her family in summer, on the Dolomites, in Val Badia. It was a long drive from Rome, her family had returned there every year, since she was eight. She loved those places, she had taken numberless walks along those paths, included, in legs, the

whole tour of Sella Ronda. She was a tireless walker, sometimes her mother was the first to complain. They usually lodged at La Villa, but that year her father had said they would change. "We will go to Colfosco". Alma was a lone child, and sometimes she was sorry not to have been born a boy. She knew her father would have liked it, he had never told her, but she felt it. On the way they had spoken a little about what she would have liked if she had been a boy. And dad hadn't disappointed her at all, on the contrary he had encouraged her. Her mother, instead, had made odd faces and had given her negative opinion about playing football, karate, and buying her a motorcycle. The simple fact that Alma hadn't wanted to take dancing had disappointed her a lot. She had been playing volleyball for four years, and she liked it. But now that wish of taking up violent sports bothered her very much.

"Alma, what do you think if this year we do something new for you? I'd like to teach you mountain climbing" her father said.

"Wonderful, let's do it. Where? This week? And when, when?" Alma thought it was fantastic.

"Not at all!" her mother objected seriously.

"Come on, mum, dad is an expert, what are you worrying about?"

"Listen, it isn't fit for a girl. It's dangerous, you need muscles, if you are like me you may have dizziness, you don't have to. Besides, this year, you've started to have your period and you might suddenly feel dizzy. Moreover, you know how many accidents your father has had, don't you? How many times he came back home without his nails and with bruises everywhere?". Alma and her father looked at each other secretly in the rear-view mirror. Alma mimicked her mother with highly expressive grimaces, but without saying a word. Her father winked.

"Come on Giovanna don't worry. I'll take her to an easy place, a short via ferrata for beginners. Besides we are tied, nothing can happen". Giovanna had met Walter Ternani in the mountains, during some summer excursions on the Terminillo. He had tried all he could to convince her to climb, but no chance. They had also fought, because he thought that before refusing something it was necessary to try it. But she was stubborn. And now she couldn't give up, certainly she couldn't allow her daughter to experience such a dangerous thing.

"Listen, Walter, you have already stressed me a thousand times with climbing. You know I've never liked it. Now you want my daughter to try it. I'm absolutely contrary", "Come on, mum, I'm not like you. You are a fearful, yellow, grumbler, one that doesn't feel safe even going up the stairs" Alma hadn't caught her father's wink.

"You would make me very sorry if you went climbing. Is it possible that with so many things in the world you would really like to go climbing?" Giovanna was getting nervous. Walter knew he would only make the situation worse insisting. He changed the subject.

That day Giovanna had planned a visit to Brunico, with one of her friends. She would leave early by bus. Alma and her father had secretly agreed. The evening before they had told her they would go to Gardena pass through the woods. Obviously her mother didn't know that half way from the pass there was the start of one of the most spectacular and famous vie ferrate of the Dolomites: the Tridentina.

“When shall we go?” Alma whispered in her father’s ear while he was still dozing.

“What time is it? Has mum already left?” He asked her stretching.

“Don’t you see she isn’t here, dad?” She answered. Walter stretched out a hand in bed, gropingly.

“True, she isn’t here”

“Come on, it’s eight already! Get up! Hurry! Alma said with a commanding air. Before convincing him to get out of bed she had to hug him long, pull him and tickle him under his beard. She caressed and combed it sometimes. He let her do, he loved being cuddled. It was one of the situations that didn’t make him regret not having a son.

After about one hour walk through the woods behind the Sella, they reached the starting point.

“What is the Pisciadù?” Alma asked after reading the notices.

“A wonderful fall, you’ll see”. She was very excited. She hoped she hadn’t taken anything from her mother in terms of fear.

“So today we are going to experience a via ferrata. To reach the Cavazza hut we have to climb three parts. The first is not very hard, but if you are afraid we can always go down”

“How long does it take to go up?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, not much. We don’t have a timetable to respect.

We have got plenty of time. Let’s take one step at a time. Do you trust me?”

“Yes, dad” she answered.

They moved along the path, which almost immediately started to go uphill. Walter knew Alma was a very good walker. But after the first steps amid the rocks he looked at her: she was very careful where she put her hands and feet, she never looked down, she moved with agility. After a few minutes he turned towards her.

“Alma, everything fine?” he asked her.

“Dad, don’t turn round, in the mountains you don’t have to look down!” She scolded him and added: “If you see me following you it’s obvious everything is OK. If it isn’t I’ll shout you something, good?” Walter didn’t answer, a shiver of pride ran through him, and he felt some creeps.

At each step she felt more confident and relaxed. As if that day was a life test. She was anxious to grow up, she didn’t want to be fearful, and neither to become as sorrowful as her mother. She didn’t even want to be a boy. She didn’t like the rude manners and the superficiality of her friends. She would have only liked to have a boy’s temper, to be hard, determined, not to let emotions out. And knowing she was doing something adult, difficult, and a little dangerous, made her feel responsible and important. Her father stopped at times, gave her a glance without saying anything. If it happened in one of the moments she was still, she left immediately, not to show she was tired. They got to the end of the first leg.

“I’m not asking you anything” dad said.

“It’s wonderful. Why didn’t you take me here before?” Look there, you can see our house in Colfosco! Then, come on, you’ve made it a little harder, it’s all easy”

“Don’t think you already know everything, girl. Now the hard part is coming, but also the beautiful one”.

She thought why something beautiful had always to be also difficult. A principle she hadn't totally understood yet. After crossing a flat part, her father shortened the length of the rope that joined them. They started the true via ferrata, among holds, pegs and steel ropes. In the most exposed points Walter used snap-hooks to fasten himself to the ropes, and he went on with great care. At times he stopped, and controlled her. Alma was concentrated, she listened to his advice in the critical points:

"Stretch your left hand, more ... hold your feet ... move them only when you feel safe with your hands ... remember you may slip at any time, at least two limbs must be on a safe hold"

"Come on, don't keep telling me everything, I got it". Alma didn't want to be operated with a remote control. She wanted to experience the emotion of making it, see a hold, study the move, reach it. In a passageway she saw her father still and turned to her: he had put his feet on two jutting out rocks, and, fastened to the ropes with snap-hooks, he was waiting for her.

"What's up?" she asked.

"Pass carefully. I had to extend myself a little, do you see that niche? You should reach it with your left foot, but there will be a moment when you will also have to let your hand go. The hold is that one, do you see it? As you are not too tall, I wish you didn't ..." while he was explaining the passage Alma left. Holding with her hands, she tried to extend her foot, but some ten centimeters were missing.

"Wait!" he shouted to her. But she didn't wait. She knew she would make it. She tried a jump, without thinking where she could put her hands. Below her there was a small cliff, maybe five meters, if she had missed the niche there wouldn't have been another chance. But she played volleyball, didn't she? And hadn't she made thousands of jumps? Come on, it was nothing, a tiny side spring. Now she would let Walter see how quick she was. She pushed herself with the right foot. The left foot hit the niche, but the push had been too violent towards the wall, and her hip hit an edge. Instinctively she raised her hands to find a hold, but as she had not planned the action, she moved them casually groping on the rock, missing the hold. It was an instant, She felt falling and screamed. A sharp and loud "Ahhh". She felt her heart in her mouth. The only time she had felt something like that had been on the roller coaster. She saw herself smashed at the bottom of the small cliff. After a while she felt a hard jerk at her thighs. She found herself hanging at one meter from the wall, four meters away from a small ledge. She looked on. Her father was tied himself, and he was leaning with his back on the wall, his legs wide apart and his heels safe in two holes, his hands stretched downwards to control the tight rope. With an assuring air he said to her: "How are you?". "I'm OK. I got a bruise on my hip, but I think it's nothing. Come on, pull me up"

"No, Alma, do the passage again. First: you have to wait till I've finished to explain and not to do it your way. Second: in the mountains you don't have to jump, at least not at your first experience. The mountains do not forgive, Alma". She still felt the surge of adrenalin through herself. She swallowed more than once, she almost couldn't breath. Her heart was pounding fast. For the first time she had felt that sensation of saved from danger she would recognize so many times in her life. Slowly Walter pulled the rope, as far as she could reach the starting point. She took the holds again. Before moving she fixed in her

memory the position and the form of the holds and of the niche. She imagined the sequence of the movements more times. At the end, she looked at her father with sadness.

"I can't make it, just can't make it" she told him tossing her head.

"Cool it, girl, cool it. You are still excited for the fall. Now I'll hold the rope tight, so that you can feel safer. Then move your limbs according to the sequence I told you. You can make it easily". The passage that earlier had seemed easy to her now looked unbearably hostile. Her muscles were still numbed for fear. She decided to depend totally on her father's advice, forgetting her emotions and imposing herself not to overdo. "Hand foot hand foot safe hold, move slowly you would keep your balance if you missed a hold hand foot hand foot be calm" she kept telling herself. She passed. She sighed looking back. She would have liked to hug her father, and shout how much she loved him.

"Good" he said, but soon he added: "Let's go on. When something like this happens it is better not to think about it too long".

The Pisciadù Falls accompanied her for the rest of the climbing. She would have liked to ask one hundred times how long there was to go but she resisted. The water's noise would cover her voice anyway. After another hour's climbing, following the advice in the critical passages, she saw the roof of the hut. "There's little to go. I've almost made it" she thought. After the last step her father stopped and she reached him. She didn't keep herself from hugging him tight. She silently cried. He caressed her head, sweetly, without saying a word.

"Dad I want to climb," she told him. Walter felt a deep satisfaction thrill inside. He swelled before answering, fearing she might perceive it.

"OK, dear, as far as I am concerned you know the way I think. If mum sees you happy, you'll see she will be convinced".

She thought how little, on the contrary, her mother had been convinced, during all those years. She had become an expert climber. She couldn't abandon the mountains, she was caught by the charm of testing herself to reach the top. She felt she was like her father, and she understood it well when he called her to tell her how unbearable Giovanna was getting, more and more everyday.

She kept on thinking about her day, trying to analyze the facts objectively: she thought over the whole dynamics through which they had developed, the before and the after, the cause and the effect, said and unsaid words. She recognized some of her errors, her impulsiveness and the desire of overcoming the obstacles sometimes jumping over them, as it had happened on the Tridentina. She was caught by the dilemma of the after, the strange phase when one goes through what has happened imagining to make a *rewind* and change some particulars, making the next scene evolve in a totally different way. Going through her life again gave her peace and, at the same time, destabilized her.

4.

The great Hawaii island maybe was the right place to detach himself from the world, a trip and a stay inside and outside himself in an inhospitable place, as his body was. Escaping would contribute to forget daily life, on a volcano's top at over four thousand meters, in the middle of the Pacific. He had tried to imagine himself staying in Trieste as if nothing had happened, as if his alien could be cured with a pill, the bothering remains of a humid winter. The proposal of carrying out his astronomer's profession in that far off and secluded place, in spite of the greatly different image that the islands had, was quite interesting for him. He knew hard times were expecting him, but it would be the same also at home. He hated being pitied and pitying himself. The Hawaii were the home of windsurfers and mountain-bikers, weren't they? A huge desire of doing something unordinary and extreme had assailed him. *BabyS* had disappeared during the December before, and he thought how much the depression due to that fact might have conditioned the appearance of the alien in his body. At a congress he had recently met a professor of the University of Hawaii, Greg Warner Wilford, who had been very interested in one of his publications and had offered him to go and work at the Mauna Kea Observatory for a whole year. Dario liked Americans for their capacity of making things happen, when they were attracted by the originality and validity of the preliminary work. They were among the best in the world for that, and they didn't suffer of the Italian fatalism, the German intellectualism, the French arrogance, the British formality and the Swede sad saunism. Greg was actually English, but he had been living in the great island since the observatory existed. He had been in California over nine years, working at the Caltech, before that in Kenya, soon after graduation at Cambridge. Very little had left of his English attitude, at least this was what Dario thought. The offer would give him the extraordinary chance of working with unmatched instruments at the project of identification of what he hoped could be the message of an alien intelligence, to acknowledge him definitively as the ambassador of the existence of other evolved forms of life in the Milky Way, or as the nth of the so many cosmic jokes. Close inner aliens and far outer ones. Right now, when the true *chance* of his professional life promised to come true, he felt weak and wasn't sure he could make it.

The minutes passed and the poison, drop after drop, got down the bowl into his arm, he was at the third chemotherapy. He knew what was expecting him later, he already felt empty and weak and tried not to think of the zombie that would inhabit in him for the next twenty-four hours and of the sense of weariness that would follow.

And he knew that his saliva would taste bitter, some locks would remain in his hands, his neck would be red and hot, and his nails would break. He had three months' time to take a decision whether to go to the MKO, but he didn't know in which conditions he would get there. Could he afford the four thousand meters of the Mauna Kea with liters of antiplastic in his blood and bastard scales in his throat? He felt slow and awkward, he didn't want anything, as if somebody had injected backwater in his veins. His only desire was not to see anybody. He hadn't played sports for at least a month, and he had reduced his office time a lot. He had lost three kilograms of muscles, he was swollen with cortisone and flabby. What he feared most was to lose his self-control because of the extreme suffering.

For years he had believed only in himself and fought against his weaknesses, turning the blind irresponsibility that had guided him when he was young into meditated strategy.

Dario had been an extreme downhill biker: second at the downhill world championship, Obertauern, Austria, nineteen eighty-seven: a dive downhill, exaggerated slopes, a lump at the plexus, total tension for two minutes. During the descent he had breathed maybe twenty times, the rest in breath-held, swollen lungs, extensors-flexors at the top to be reactive on the parts of harsh rock, more than seeing the path he had felt it on the handles and pedals, he had trusted his sense of balance, the memory of the walking survey and of his proprioceptors more than his eyes. He had arrived bike on the ground, fallen at the last curve, high edge, great slide, and had passed the finish line creeping with the bike on a side. The "muli" (chaps) of the team had run towards him, he had the second best time, very short behind the year before champion. How nice it was to stand on the ground, after risking the impossible, in the two kilometers among sharp rocks, stones, tracks, roots and bushes. How nice it was to see the world slow down and stop, after living two minutes at extreme speed, without any time for logic deductions, immersed in agonistic tension and sensorial spurs. And how nice it was to feel the heart beat at its regular rhythm, and be pervaded by the after race atmosphere, end of stress. Arriving down safe was by itself a reason of pride for a sprinter in nature. The *return* then was progressive and extremely relaxing, there was nothing that could be compared to the satisfaction of risking a lot and surviving without being hurt, or almost without. Bruises and abrasions were useful, sometimes, to remind the past danger and recall strong emotions.

Those thoughts helped him, while the level of liquid in the bowl decreased, slowly. The faded scars on his elbows brought back those past experiences to the present, extreme as well. To find comfort he compared the state of semi-lack of consciousness due to the chemotherapy to the temporary one felt during the two frenzy minutes of the race. And in his semi-conscious imagination he found that bit of energy to stand himself, which instead the full conscience of his reality of half dead denied him.

He would have short time to decide whether to leave, he had to understand if he could be cured better at the Hawaii. What else could he do? Stay? Would he have better treatment? Treatment was pretty much the same all over the world, there were procedures to follow, recurring visits, the adjustment of the dosage, the checks on the general conditions. His thoughts followed one another in a disordered whirl. He wanted to accept Greg's invitation, he hoped that, focusing on what he wanted to do, he might forget his real condition, however he was afraid that his present physical situation could make him lose the necessary clearness. Going out of the chemotherapy chamber, he met Paolo.

"I want to leave," he told him.

"When?" he asked.

"Late May".

"You have gone through only three cycles. What are you going to do? Take part of the hospital with you?"

"Paolo, I've got only one chance, a great chance". To underline his utmost determination he carried on:

"I don't care of this mess of scales, I tell you, the way they don't care about me".

Paolo thought for a long time. He knew Dario. He wouldn't give up, and he didn't feel like spoiling his dream, even if he knew the risks. He kept silent for at least one minute, walking back and forth, as he used to do when he was anxious.

"Ok, Dario. But let's make a plan. You go up to four thousand meters and you're weak. You have to take a lot of medicines and promise me to follow my directions. Besides I have to contact a doctor over there, I have to understand where you can be treated and how".

For all the following month Dario tried to get ready for the trip as well as he could. He took one more cycle of chemotherapy and two of radio. He felt really down. He convinced Paolo to anticipate a cycle of a week to have the chance of feeling better before leaving.

The Milan-S. Francisco flight had been hard, eleven hours locked in the shell of a quite old 747, in a tail seat. In case of turbulence that was the part of the plane that shook most, noisy and narrow. He liked aisle seats, but he couldn't always get them. He flew at row fifty-three window seat, next to him a Korean pianist who studied at the Milan conservatory and who had told him she would meet her future husband in Kona for a pre-wedding test period. Thanks to the closeness sensors of the pianist's elbows, which gave out the signal "draw back" as soon as the distance became less than a centimeter, he had traveled *comfortably*. He was going to stay in S. Francisco overnight, which Dario remembered well for the period spent at Stanford, when he had followed a course of mathematics applied to astronomy, immediately after graduation. What a place, S. Francisco! Maybe the most beautiful city in the world. Twin Peaks and Sausalito, the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate, the Pacific and Chinatown. A crossroads between east and west, a different American city, in the *bay* technology and culture merged harmonically. He had made great plans for that night, but, after going through immigration, he could only take a taxi to go to the hotel. He had chosen a place near the Fisherman's Wharf, and thought he could take a walk, but his body sent him worrying messages, he had never felt so weak, and had never had such headache after an intercontinental flight. He tried not to think about it, and to call sleep as his best recreation. The day after he had to take a seven hour flight to Honolulu, and then half an hour more to the Hawaii.

Hilo was the nearest town to the Mauna Kea observatory, in the large island. The visual impact getting there was impressing, the two volcanoes were the undisputed masters of the Pacific, the Mauna Loa was the highest mountain in the world, considering the bases resting on the crust. Few clouds hid the tops, and he managed to see the domes of the telescopes. He had read the climate on the island was unbelievable: the western side, exposed to the Pacific, was extremely dry, it rained maybe three times a year, whereas the eastern side was covered with tropical forest and it was likely to rain even everyday. The Hawaii were a unique place: very dry, very humid, very windy, very cold, very hot, great sky, great sea. In the end, he thought, it's the place I need. Greg had found him a small apartment near the shore. Dario got there at six p.m., bearing the true weariness that would make anybody sleep anywhere. He threw himself on the queen bed, as he was, without even taking off his clothes.

He woke up very early, and looked out of the window towards the bay. He saw a small island that could be reached with a pedestrian bridge, not longer than one hundred meters.

He went through a small clearing, tall palms overlooked it. Then the black lava beach, and the calm waves of the bay. The sky was cloudy, no wind was blowing. He walked barefoot as far as the sea, the sand wasn't very thin and there was a lot of seaweed. Hawaii colors were intense, the blue of the sky and the green of the vegetation were brilliant, that morning as well, in spite of the clouds. The smell of salt soon got to his nostrils, and the humidity of the air made his throat not so dry. The backwash was very long and had the dark hues of lava, seagulls, and pelicans skipped looking for some shellfish. The water wet his feet, it was warm. The air was humid-warm, and it was only seven in the morning. He remained as he was, standing, after rolling up his jeans a little, enjoying feeling his ankles sink little by little and sand slip through his toes. He half-closed his eyes and tried to distinguish the line between the sky and the sea at the horizon: the clouds mirrored on the water and merged in the distance. He closed his eyes completely, and explored his throat. He felt the iodized and humid air. He tried again to clear it. It ached, as if he had swollen tonsils.

"I do hope this change of environment bothers you, *alien monsters*. The short harmless travels Prosecco-Cattinara-Basovizza-Barcola are over. Now you catch intercontinental routes, bastards. I'll show you. Eighteen hours at ten thousand meters, equivalent altitude two thousand, humidity 30%, total lack of comfort. Now at sea level, twenty-eight degrees centigrade at seven a.m., humidity 90%, sodium, iodine and potassium content I don't know, but certainly higher than in Sistiana. Therefore be ready, beasts, I'm going up to four-thousand meters this afternoon, temperature five degrees centigrade. I'm going down the west side, forty degrees centigrade in the shadow, and terribly dry air. And mind: I'll make my blood circulate in my body to throw you away from your conspirators' den, you cowards. I'll go up to the volcano's top pedaling, get ready to nourishment shortage, everything will be used by my twin extensor quadriceps, diaphragm and pounding heart won't certainly be for you, intruders. You will suffer, scaled beasts, you will suffer hard, you'll try to proliferate but I'll send down to you concentrated sodium chloride, I'll gargle with sulphuric acid, if necessary, to scale you off forever. Don't think you're on holiday in an exotic place. You are here to die, faulty cells, broken screws that's all you are, aborted genetic programs, mistakes of the universe. You arrived and settled in my throat silently, trying to get hold of it, didn't you? You shall repent. Maybe you thought of spreading somewhere else, looking for a comfortable shelter in my lymphatic system, the most discreet and kind of my whole body, didn't you? Well, try it. Try only to spread somewhere else and I'll destroy you, I'll pulverize you with cyanide inhalations, I'll vaporize you with a flame-thrower, I'll make your core blast, mix your prokaryote filaments with that sort of cytoplasmic surrogate you have and dematerialize you with X rays, you unworthy things: not even a trace of you will be left over, and I'll make the molecules that you have awkwardly aggregated into useless cells return to their condition of primitive freedom. You'll be again nitrogen, hydrogen, oxygen and carbon, my dear. Mixed up among the billions and billions of similar atoms. I doubt at that stage you'll remember how to reproduce yourselves, I doubt from your mistaken genetic code any trace can be left over. The change of environment had evidently made him particularly euphoric and optimist, besides being aggressive with the *aliens*. Taking the decision of leaving in spite of all made him feel really strong, in that moment he was the omnipotent Dario who sees-

foresees-provides for himself and manages his survival, integrating and fitting to the world around, influenced but not conditioned by it. The sense of weakness after the news of the disease and the first therapies had demoralized him, his reaction, however, had made him proud. No matter how it might end up, now his main thought from deep black had become at least grayish, as that day.

He walked a while on the beach, then went back. Behind his house some other houses, on the left the perfectly kept Japanese garden. He realized there was a Land Rover parked by his house. He went down to have a look. The keys were on the dashboard, he opened the right door and the glove compartment, where he found the ragged logbook: registration nineteen seventy-eight. He wore a pair of flip flops he found on the floor, passenger side, started the engine and left: everything was quite rough, the clutch worked in jerks, the wheel groaned at each slight movement and had an impressive idle. It started to rain, normal for Hilo, eastern side of the great island, he operated the wipers and realized that the blades left traces on the windshield like the ones of a wide toothed comb. The Land didn't have a great visibility in front, but with the windshield in those conditions the road could be guessed more than seen. He drove along the Naniloa Country Club, and went downtown following the bay on his right, feeling the pangs of hunger. He took the Hawaii Belt Rd, then Kamehameha Av, Pauahi St, Popio, Apuni, Barenaba. As it often happened to him in a place he didn't know, in the names of the places he was looking for something that could inspire him. When he saw Hualalai St, and a sign "Espresso Coffee", he wondered if that name had been chosen by the first Italian on a visit to Hilo, desperately looking for a café.

"Hualalai a black coffee!" he shouted, parking the Land just in front. He was quite happy, he thought his spell exorcizing sermon was having some effect. He went into the café, it was seven thirty a.m., there was only a seemingly Pakistani boy behind the counter, who smiled to him. The place had some booths with opposing couches, Arnold's style in Happy Days, worn red skai. As everywhere in the States, it was impossible to have something standing, at the entrance there was the usual sign "wait to be seated". That was something Dario's practical spirit hated, even if there was nobody, he would have to wait for nobody knew how long to sit in an uncomfortable booth with the marks of syrup splashes and fallen cigarettes.

"Hi" he said to the boy.

"Can I have an espresso coffee and one of these things?" aiming at a not better identified heap of sprawled and vaguely sad puff pastry, certainly not a croissant, its caricature, if anything.

"What's inside there?" He asked.

"Melted cheese" the boy smiled. Cheese? He hated cheese in a croissant, the combination seemed to him as unsuitable as strawberry jam in tortellini. Anyway he was too hungry, and still standing, he asked if he could drink and eat without sitting. The boy nodded. He was going to take the croissant, and with the corner of his eye he had a glance of shining hair. He couldn't help turning round, forgetting the pseudo-croissant for a while, and saw something more, eyes-skin-lips-teeth-pearl earrings.

"Hi. Don't you sit down?" it was a wonderful Hawaiian girl, about twenty, one meter sixty-five tall, a menu in her hand, turquoise apron and white t-shirt, black jeans, two white

shining pearls on prominent plump lobes, flowing wavy hair, bright, exhaling a scent of vanilla shampoo.

“Well, maybe, ok, yes, sure, thank you, of course I will” he answered as who is picking out of the bag of ready words the first that come to his hand.

“I’ll take care of your order,” she said. The power of beauty. In front of so much, all Dario’s earthly needs suddenly disappeared. The desire of biting that dormant surrogate of croissant faded. The dull café became suddenly interesting, the presence of shining teeth made everything much more chic and gave color and warmth inside. Before sitting, he cast away the arithmetic thoughts on the three fateful measures, to focus on the Pakistani’s work, clearly at his first experience with a “LaSanMarco” coffee machine. The apprentice put a minimum quantity of ground coffee in the charge, a big paper cup under the nozzles, and pressed the button. What Dario had feared came true: The Asian boy filled the paper cup almost to its top with a brownish slop, watered tamarind style. Dario stood up and got near the counter.

“Where do you come from?” Dario asked.

“Karachi, Pakistan” the boy answered.

“Where did you learn how to make an espresso?”

“Actually I’m new here”. Dario introduced himself as an Italian, and told him he was a friend of the chairman of the “LaSanMarco”, who had taught him how to make espresso. He offered to explain him how, went on the other side of the counter, took the cup full of that indefinable liquid and put it aside. Then he asked him a pair of scissors, cut a paper glass to reach the height of a true espresso cup, filled the charger with ground coffee to the top, smoothed it with a coffee spoon, pressed it into the mould and tightened the filter. He put the pseudo-cup under the nozzle and pressed the button. For a while nothing happened, and the Pakistani boy stared at him puzzled.

“Wait” he told him. After a few seconds, a coffee-black right-thick right-color liquid started to gush out. The flow stopped as soon as the level reached half of the paper-cup, two, three centimeters from the bottom. The boy looked at him, smiling.

“This is espresso coffee”, Dario said. “And this other stuff is some sort of Hawaiian brown lava water” he said showing the previous slop.

“Thank you,” the boy said, smiling: Dario took the cup and went to sit.

Shining teeth arrived and brought him the croissant.

“Do you also know how to cook spaghetti?”, she asked him, and Dario recognized a slightly ironic tone in that persuasive voice.

“Of course” he answered, and cautiously broke a small piece of the croissant, hoping the wonder when melted cheese remained imprisoned in the heart of that stuff. It didn’t, and he had to quench his hunger with several corners of that heap of former puff pastry, now irreparably greased by the overflow of its stuffing. Chewing sadly he recalled the warm and fragrant croissants filled with apricot jam, at the bar in Piazza del Coroneo. No point trying to cheat the taste buds that sent a clear message: “Identified taste: cheese”. The coffee, however, was perfect, and he saw the Pakistani try to repeat the lesson, cutting the cup and fitting the filler with both hands, as long as he managed to obtain a very thick trickle of coffee.

Rain poured sideways on the windowpanes, he read reverse "True Italian Espresso!" written in red at mid window. He shook his head, suffering from the lack-of-espresso syndrome that Italians always carry with them, everywhere they go in the world, equal maybe only to the similarly depressing lack of overcooked spaghetti.

"Where are the best beaches here?" he asked shining teeth.

"Oh you can walk east from here, you'll find Reeds Bay, Keaukaha, and Richardson Beach, the best for snorkeling" she answered smiling widely.

"Thank You, what's your name?"

"Meli. It means honey in Hawaiian"

"Appropriate name, I'm Dario"

"And what does it mean?". Nobody had ever asked him if his name meant something. Once he had read that it came from Persia, actually he thought he had studied at school that there had been a Persian king with that name. As he didn't know what to say, he answered:

"Observer, it means observer"

"I noticed you were observing me," Meli said.

"Well, how can somebody not observe you, honey?" The girl smiled at him and lowered her eyes.

He thought of taking a walk from Hualalai St towards the seashore in front. It was humid warm and rain was heavy. He put on his oilskins and waterproof hat, captain Ahab's style in Moby Dick, which he found on the rear floor, and put on his boat shoes again. He walked eastwards along the promenade, there was nobody around that morning, Hilo wasn't a great tourist place, frequent rain certainly discouraged anyone. After going over his house, he passed in front of the beaches Meli had mentioned him, one after the other. The dark color of lava, joined to the leaden day, made vivid the contrast with the gaudy green of the palm vegetation. While walking along the road under the pouring rain he was thinking about the volcano that for half of its height was below his feet and for the other half above his head. He didn't know how long he would stay in that house as the work at the observatory looked quite hard.

He would have to synchronize the MKO telescope with the other nine of the world network of the National Radio Astronomy Observatory: adequately connected, it was able to develop a definition capacity in detail equal to the chance of reading a newspaper opened in Los Angeles, watching it from New York. Greg had offered him the contract for his publications on the techniques of data treatment and compression. One of the problems of the VLBA network was the impossibility of synchronizing in real time the signals received, given the huge distance of the recording sources: eight-thousand kilometers between the Mauna Kea telescope and the one in St. Croix, Virgin Islands. Each telescope sampled the space recording two billion real numbers per second, Dario was a true genius of signal analysis, he was able to reconstruct their content with good precision though only analyzing them partially. His indexed mapping compression techniques were protected by international copyright, he thought the idea wasn't that much, but Shun had insisted and the copyright had been accepted. The news had spread in the scientific community and had come to Greg. When they had met he had told him about the signal he was recording, but the eminent scientist hadn't seemed too convinced, showing great interest for the data

compression technique instead. As sometimes happens among human beings who meet for work, the one's interest is not exactly the other one's. Greg had understood that signal had to be a strong passion for Dario, at the moment it had very few chances of being scientifically confirmed, but he didn't want to be rude disappointing him. So as an Anglo-Saxon speaking with a Latin, he had thought of getting Dario's interest in his job proposal giving formal emphasis to his loved signal but in his heart thinking how important it would be for the National Radio Astronomy Observatory to use the Italian's compression algorithms. Dario was convinced that it was fundamental to have the chance of accessing the powerful network of the observatory to characterize *babyS*, and he had complied with Greg's requests: he had described his algorithm gesturing animatedly, even if no Terabyte of complex binary data had ever excited him much. He had programmed his algorithm with the logics of a mathematician and the *elegance* of an expert software writer, but he had never put his heart in it. He had let Greg believe he was fond of signal processing, and he had obtained the offer of a contract. Now he was under the rain in Hilo, to his left the bay, over his head tons of water under the form of clouds, to his right the foot of the highest mountain in the world. Thinking about it, it didn't seem real.

"Who is Wariruna Wasi?" Kipasa asked.

"The head of the research project in that area is a friend of mine, we have to go to Kuntatera, at the great radio-telescope"

"Have you told anybody else about it?"

"No"

"If the situation is as I think, there is water over there and there is a natural or artificial cycle that makes that water interfere with the radio-emissions caused by the explosion, now weakening"

"That's to say?"

"Boy, I don't usually fool myself, I'm blind and I have only few more years to live. But I'm not totally stupid, and I've studied the electromagnetic emissions of the universe for over fifteen years. Do as I say, and pass me Wariruna as soon as possible".

Kipasa composed the name "Supreme Wariruna Wasi" on the mini-keyboard of the TeDRA and after few S the serious face of Wariruna, who was repeating a recorded message, appeared on the display:

"I'm unavailable till tomorrow, then available from the first third to the end of the second. Leave a message. Good Light"

Ruwansa listened to the message, then said:

"Let's go, quick, there is a third of day travel, the plane is not convenient, let's take your car, have you parabolized it?"

"It has been in the parking for half a day"

"Then the charge is enough, let's go"

"But Ruwansa, I should go back to school tomorrow"

"I'll talk with the director here. I'll tell him we have a plan for your instruction as a radio astronomer, it is pressing for you to take advantage of a chance for your school career. He will understand".

“Short after, Ruwansa and Kipasa were in the parking. Packed the dish of light collectors, and helped Ruwansa to get on, Kipasa set himself to drive and they left. The car’s typical swish, joined with the whistle of the friction with the air and some unperceivable road roughness were the gentle background of their thoughts, which both liked to process by themselves.

Amantera highways were completely digitalized: everybody was automatically recognized and let into the traffic by a remote driving system, which took him at the highest speed allowed by the number of vehicles of that moment, respecting the prearranged travel plan. The tele-drive system reached safety levels twice as high as the non automatic one: most drivers who didn’t use it lost control because of the dazzling due to one or the other of the two suns.

After a day’s third they reached Kuntatera, a large town with low white houses. The radio-astronomic observatory was situated on a volcanic origin height at two thousand M above sea level. On the top there was an enormous radio telescope, built in a natural crater set in the circular basin on top of the great volcanic cone. The radio telescope wasn’t movable, its parabolic surface was coated with several regular hexagonal cells built with a reflecting alloy of iron-nickel-chrome-beryllium. They could be oriented by micro-motors driven by a central automatic system to maximize the absorption sensibility. The capacity of detecting signals, even weak ones, was extraordinary, and the radio telescope was able to distinguish very reduced emission powers, and trace back their cosmic origin with unbelievable precision.

After spending the night as guests of the observatory reception structure, Kipasa and Ruwansa went to the entrance at about the end of the first third of the following day. They were announced to Wariruna, who had already known about their visit through the guest planning system, connected to his palm computer.

“Good Light, Jarvaterians”

“Hi Wariruna, how are you?” Ruwansa said.

“Sorry for your sight, Ruwansa” Wariruna answered hugging him.

“What can we do? We know it, don’t we?”

“Sure” Wariruna nodded, lowering his eyes, as if he wanted to be forgiven for wishing him “Good Light”, and as if he was aware of his approaching destiny, as his age was close to thirty. Wariruna and Ruwansa had been student and teacher at Kuntatera observatory many years before, when Ruwansa was the head of signal research in one of the Sectors, and Wariruna joined as the exploration sequences programming administrator.

“Who is this boy?” Wariruna asked.

“I’m Kipasa, from Jarvatera, I’m eight. I’ve been studying radio astronomy for four, I have been Ruwansa’s periodical assistant for one hundred days. Nice to meet you, Supreme Wariruna. I’ve read many of your articles, and I’d like to write a thesis on your answer to the HK3127 sequence.

“Ah that one, sure, charming ... it might be the nth illusion though, the matter in the universe is bizarre. It aggregates in various forms, disappears, appears again, implodes, explodes, scatters, concentrates again, travels, transforms itself into energy. We have reached such a level of capacity of observation of the space surrounding us that virtually

any signal we receive, when we manage to decode it, could be taken back to random circumstances”

“He’s recording a non random signal,” Ruwansa said.

Dario was walking slowly as who doesn’t have a destination, in a landscape to be totally discovered. The new environment stimulated his thoughts, he liked to change his viewpoint and re-sort his priorities. He thought of *his* signal from the universe, he was looking for the logic thread that could connect terrestrials to maybe any remote civilization in the galaxy. He knew the distances were incompatible with the possibility of having confirmations in a human lifetime, but never as in that moment he had felt uncertain on the length of his own, and never as then he had found himself programming things at short. How much time would sub-glottis impostors leave him. He imagined being a *Jedi* fighting the Obscure Side of Strength. He figured *babyS* was a “ready to cooperate” signal coming from a friendly constellation, that *Yoda’s* hologram had appeared to announce him about it and that *Han Solo* and *Chewbacca* were ready to help him, miniaturizing themselves together with *C-3PO* and *R2-D2* and their space ship, ready to be micro-launched into the region of the scaled bastards that had invaded his throat. Target: attack and defeat them. He had gone beyond the dam of the bay as far as Lehia Beach; in front, the lava cliffs and the Pacific waves boiled with high splashes and produced foam with black and white glares. In some spots narrow fiords opened and fed small sheets of clear water surrounded by lawns, but the dreariness of the day didn’t give them the aesthetic honor they deserved. He had walked for an hour in the rain, his Ahab hat and Soldini oilskins had worked as they had to, but his boat shoes had kept his feet soaking wet. He went back to the Land parked in Hualalai St, as nothing allowed thinking rain would stop in a short time. When he arrived it was nearly eleven. The Mauna Kea Dining lights were on, he peeped through the quite dirty and dim windows and saw shining teeth very busy attending at the tables. Driving homewards, he realized that some water filtered through the left door washer, so that a little pool had formed under the pedals. Going back, he hurried upstairs, took off his clothes and dried himself. Besides the bedroom and the bathroom, the apartment had an American style kitchen and another room furnished with a chair and a desk. There was a TV in a corner, behind which there was a bunch of disordered power and network cables. The windows looked north on the bay and west on Liliuokalani Gardens. A corner terrace with a wood balcony could be reached from the western side, through the kitchen door. He opened the fridge: toast, peanut butter, a bottle of syrup, a cube of ham and one of cheddar cheese yet to be opened, mayonnaise, mustard, three sausages with precooked sauerkraut, a dish of bacon hardened by the long stay, a packet of pre-washed crinkled lettuce, three giant but pale tomatoes, a jar with biologically modified pickled gherkins as big as aubergines, a package of long-life milk and two one-gallon bottles of coke, one regular and one diet, six giant cans of Bud Light. Obviously temperature and humidity control, automatic defroster, mould signaler, and at least four compartments, each fit for a particular kind of food; outside the icemaker, with cube size regulator. Though in the middle of the Pacific, to mark the territory as “Property of the United States” it was enough to consider the inside equipment and the high technology of a refrigerator. He thought only true Americans loved eating that kind of food and wanted a

fridge as big as a closet. Only in America it was necessary to organize courses to use one's fridge, sometimes with the delivery of a diploma. More out of gluttony than hunger he made a triple sandwich with a mix of ingredients. Biting the multi-layer and looking out at the incessant rain in the bay, he was caught by a terrible desire of going beyond those clouds.

The road went up gently at the beginning from Hilo to the Mauna Kea: low clouds still covered the sides of the volcano, and the rain didn't let up. It was two p.m. and there was almost nobody on the road. Dario was driving in the progressively thinning tropical forest; here and there clearings with spots of grass and lava with some sparse bushes presaged the approaching end of the vegetation. From Saddle Rd he turned right along Keanakolu Rd, short after the junction the rain stopped, the volcano was on his left, huge, there was absolutely nothing around: he was going north, the sun now was at seven o'clock, he had passed two areas surrounded by very high hedges. The greenish surrounding landscape was taking darker and darker brown shades, giving depth to sight. The lava expanses gave the idea of an inhospitable desert: here and there truncated-cone-shaped craters seemed built for the set of science-fiction movies. Each of them might suddenly let out a bouncing Neil Armstrong, just got out of the LEM, or a white Mars Rover with six metal wheels, stars and stripes flag, the inscription "NASA" on the sides and great solar panels. The road, fully in the sun, went up definitely, and the limits of power and age of the Land asked him to insert the second gear, after fighting a lot with the hard gearshift lever and with the stiffness of the clutch pedal. It was like going up the external surface of a bell, the road climbed windingly with wide hairpin turns. Greg had advised him to stop at the Visitor's Center to adapt himself, before climbing to the observatory. The water temperature indicator had been dangerously in the red area for some minutes, and so he decided to stop.