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A fantastical underwater scene. In the center, a large, glowing, spherical orb of light with concentric rings and a bright core radiates light. A vertical beam of light descends from the orb to the water's surface. Several dolphins swim around the orb. The scene is framed by dark, gnarled tree roots and coral. The water is filled with shimmering particles and a blue-green glow.

BABY

Edoardo Volpi Kellermann

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Many miles away [something crawls from the slime
at the bottom of a dark [Scottish lake.

Sting; Synchronicity II

From Cd The Police: Synchronicity - A&M Records 1983 - CB 801 - LC0485

1.

The lift reaches the last level, 350 meters below the bottom of the sea; the automatic door open with their usual soft whisper showing the aseptic environment of the tunnels, their walls shining and slightly bending at the top in a gothic-technologic arc.

There never is anybody at this time.

Each time it feels like I am entering a 3-d version of a Magritte painting, like I am suspended between dream and reality.

I walk past – ignoring it – the slightly pompous sign *European Centre for Advanced Research*.

I sigh to get rid of the leftover sleep. The not-unpleasant smell of paint and plastics of the cabin is replaced by the one typical of the corridors of the lower levels, where the air and decontamination systems haven't managed to cover completely a slight scent of mould and humidity. Nervously I watch the dome, always shining and perfect; I can't help thinking to the thousands of tons of rock above it, themselves compressed by millions of cubic meters of salt water.

I have never been claustrophobic – actually I have always felt at ease in the 102nd level. I remember with a slight smile the drives with my father when I was a child, on the old motorway between Genoa and Leghorn, and how much I liked tunnels, so mysterious, similar to doors open on the secrets of the mountains, and how I enjoyed counting them, with a slight anxiousness each time we entered one, an anxiousness calmed by the welcoming warmth of our Audi H6...

I realize that I stopped some steps out of the lift while my mind is wandering.

Weird, it never happened before. So much sleep to catch up on that it became dizziness?

I shake my head to recover and I walk on following the green and blue line drawn on the floor along with many others of many colors, imagining the taste of the coffee that awaits me in the lab and, after seven bends, I get there. Franci is already at work, bent over the TriDi terminal, her long and thin legs in the position of a speed runner ready to start a race. As usual, I can't help stopping for a second to admire them.

"Hey Miss Doctor!"

"Good day Big Boss"

With feline grace she stands up and turning towards me she gives me a wonderful smile then, in a single, fluid movement she reaches the coffee machine to prepare my usual espresso with a dash of milk. The lab coat worn by her always gives me a weird, exciting feeling; no stylist could have done better. For an instant, while turning, she catches my stare.

“You should have been a dancer, I keep telling you” I say, masking my embarrassment with an old joke.

“My *Wushu* classes are enough”, she replies with a pretend threatening attitude, then she gives me my piping hot cup.

I smile, more relaxed. “Did they set up the new interface?”

“While you were enjoying your life? Of course. I was just giving the last touches to the software”

“Good; let’s see if the simulations on the flyer are true”

“I am ready. Switching on”

The room, five meters wide and eight deep, is full of devices and control systems set in the walls but is otherwise completely bare except for the TriDi source, that is now automatically returning back into its reflecting niche. While everything goes dark I, instinctively, get closer to the wall behind me, slightly leaning on it.

In the centre of the room, at about one meter from the floor, a bright, emerald green sphere the size of a tennis ball appears. “Please bring it to operational size”, I ask her when I am done sipping my coffee. I am a bit hungry but I hold back, thinking of the 8 or 10 kilos I plan to lose in the next months.

The sphere increases fast, flattening on its poles to fit the shape of the lab, until its surface goes through our figures first of all – nearly *avatars*, ghosts of ourselves – and then, nearly at the same time, the walls, the floor and the ceiling. Now the light is dimmer and more diffuse, so relaxing that I have to fight not to fall asleep.

A three-dimensional bar is hovering fifty centimeters in front of, perfectly sharp.

“Not bad! Who could say that this is the very first time you use this system?”

She slightly bends her shoulders backwards, bowing a little her head as if scoffing at herself; in the low light I can just make out the slight, wonderful blush appearing on her cheeks.

I softly touch the first item on the bar; immediately the word becomes thicker and elongates towards me while under it the classical cascade menu – that reminds me of an old Macintosh – appears, with the sub-items in dark blue on see-through green.

“It is such a relief not having to wear those sensors any more...”

“This is not all – she replies – they already inserted a neural module; it requires a little time to synchronize on the operator’s scheme of signals and, initially, is pretty tough to use. Anyway, I already learned some tricks; probably not even those who programmed it saw it working this way”

She comes closer to show me that she is not using her hands or her eyes. I have always liked the enthusiasm she faces everything with; someone mistakes it for arrogance, but I know that she has such an inner beauty that she can not be arrogant.

I pause for some seconds thinking about the projective nature of excess of criticism.

“Look”

At high speed, she opens the five projects we are working on, one after another, setting each of them in a specific area of space. Then she starts all of them up, surrounding us with multicolored moving fractal shapes; then she suddenly speeds the navigation process up and we find ourselves suspended in several, pandimensional universes. Giddiness.

Even though I am leaning on the wall I stagger and say under my breath “Right: this was not on the flyers”

“The new biomagnetic receivers are so fast and exact that it would have been a waste to use them only to detect the movements of a body in space”, she explains with a somehow didactic tone, “so the programmers decided to set them up to interpret the brain activity on the cortex level from distance. As I was telling you, at first it is difficult not to lose focus, but *Advanced System for Artificial Intelligence* has already learned, according to the context, to distinguish the shape and intensity of the voluntary commands separating them from casual thought, which helped me a lot. Not to mention its speed”

I snigger sarcastically.

“Remarkable. But I wonder what the fanatics from the *No-Tec* movement would say. A computer that basically can read your thoughts from a distance!”

Franci laughs softly. “They would at least burn us at the stake”.

Without even thinking of it, I had stretched an arm around her shoulders; she is softly leaning on me.

With some regret I reset the system – there is no much time and our sponsors are pushing – and we are back in the green light of the initial space.

“You know well, of course, that ASAI is not a computing machine in the traditional meaning of the word. Hey... are you all right?”

She looks at me perplexedly and I realize that I am staring at the letters in the menu. Damn, that dizziness again!

“Yes, no... some sleep to catch up with, I think. You are right, but... I still struggle to define it thinking, even though it behaves as if it was. Maybe we should completely review the concept of conscience”

“Or maybe *you* should...” she says smiling. *Touché*.

While we debate our favorite topic, we start to work. After nearly seven months, our professional accord allows us to act in perfect synchrony, on a nearly instinctive level.

I am frustrated by the intensity of this relationship and by my inability to take the last step to bring it to its natural completion... maybe my moments of absence derive from this issue? Why can't I move forward? And if she did understand how I feel, why isn't she taking the initiative? It doesn't seem that she doesn't like me...

Dejected and a little depressed, I contemplate for a bit longer my mental mess; then I push every thought away and go back to my Lorentz Attractors.

2.

That afternoon Giacomo, like many others, had brought his small, fast boat, well equipped with anti-radar and anti-satellite devices, towards the island of Montecristo, skillfully avoiding the security systems of the Sea Park: off from a high wooded inlet,

where the sea floor went down fast, he had often spotted a thick pod of dolphins gathering at sundown to execute those mysterious rites whose aim and meaning no scholar had ever fully understood. It was a wonderful place, but Giacomo couldn't focus on details.

Once he got there, he turned off the engine.

Those damned beasts would come today, and sure they weren't expecting to find him there. He would have given them a nice surprise, yes, a nice surprise, he thought, spitting in the sea. He was the best, Giacomo, whatever those envious bastards said.

He caressed his face, his hollow and unshaven cheeks, stopping for a second on his swollen left eye.

Bastards... yes, bastards. He would have shown them, all of them!

For a second his mind focused with pleasure on images of revenge... a couple of heavies to give a good lesson to the Marina di Campo people... a robotic killer to murder that Cappelletti bastard... and a nice villa by the sea, to make all those damned conventional thinkers burst with envy...

Those idiots who had insisted so much to create that damned Sea Park.

What did they care about the... beasts, he asked himself with disgust.

Admittedly a weak stomach could be impressed and revolted by the sight of the dolphins, their heads open, with all those needles in their brains, desperately whistling...

Not him, anyway.

And instead... no, they insisted to have a protected area, and farewell to business.

He passed once again his right hand on his swollen, still aching eye.

They were not joking, not at all, those damned Morg dealers!

He had tried to explain that catching those damned animals was becoming tougher and tougher all the time...

"Business is business", they replied laughing. No dolphins means no dolphin brains. No dolphin brains means no Morg, not even for him.

And they beat him up to help him understanding.

He shouted to stop, he begged for a single microgram of drug... they laughed again and then hit him harder until they broke five of his teeth, those sons of a bitch.

No dolphin brains, no cheap neural supercomputers, they said. And no Morg for him, actually if he had come again with empty hands they would have hurt him much, much more.

Then they gave him a small test of what they meant, with that system of virtual torture of theirs, and Giacomo shivered remembering when they ripped his toenails off with pliers. All in his mind, of course, but it was enough, more than enough.

He drank some more grappa from his filthy bottle to cheer himself up. Damned politicians, damned middle-class conventional thinkers, damned everybody!

With some self gratification, he thought back to how, only some hours earlier, he had managed – with his small trusted boat – to avoid all the advanced security systems protecting the Sea Park.

The alcohol level in his blood finally reached the right percentage and his hands became steady again. Now he felt stringer and safer. He took his time to prepare his very expensive electronic equipment and sat before the helm waiting, keeping the detectors under control.

Today he would have hit big, really big, he felt it in his own bones!
And he was right, but not as he thought.

3.

Something was moving down there, at the bottom.

It was expanding under the sand at an unbelievable speed, sometimes extending sensory organs above the surface, wrapping itself around the limpet-rich rocks, exploring the burrows inhabited by crabs and lobsters, sometimes disturbing the activities of the predators.

More an expansion than a movement, a vegetable growth sped up at an incredible rate; then it stopped for some seconds, as if it wanted to observe the behavior of some squid, the shape of a shell, the waving of a sea anemone or the movement in the spikes of a sea urchin... and then it started again, incredibly fast, first caressing the mountains under the sea and then taking them over, wrapping them in a film that was thin, nearly transparent, but at the same time very strong, able to interact with the flora and the fauna around without interfering in their normal activities.

With sudden leaps it grew by dozens of meters in a few seconds, like a gargantuan amoeba in a monstrous absorbing process, in all directions at the same time but with no real centre. The bottom of the sea was quivering with activity, a wave that moved at first frightening the simple minds of fish and crustaceans but immediately forgotten once the feeling of danger was gone.

But the entity was not only going forward: it was expanding without a centre, or rather, with several centers, a biologic Big Bang of sorts, and had nearly completely surrounded the island of Montecristo.

4.

Franci exits from the main door of the lab and walks swiftly, nearly in a hurry, towards her bungalow. The greenery all around, the sky painted in reddish clouds, the sun going down on the sea offer the usual, beautiful sight; but she doesn't stop to admire it, nor to breathe the salty air, smelling of seaweed and iodine.

The bungalow door opens silently before her and closes after she crosses it, perfectly synchronized with her movement so, without even slowing down, she enters with an angry walk and jumps on her bed without even taking her shoes off. She remains there on her back, breathing heavily, for about five minutes, her forehead frowning above her big, grey and green eyes.

Then she crosses her legs and programs her dinner in a careless way.

Then she decides to take her clothes off and, looking at her own reflection in the mirror, admires with satisfaction the beauty of her own body, not too thin, slightly curvy but with elegance and balance. Suddenly an enraged grin appears on her face, bending her expressive mouth downward.

She turns to look at the wall to the left of her mirror where, hanging at eye level, a hologram shows, merciless, the image of the last boat trip she took with Carlo three weeks earlier.

With an angry voice she hisses “Family two!” and the hologram, always obedient, changes to display her as a child, with her parents on the Dolomites – how many years earlier?

Immediately after she laughs, looks at the mirror with her eyes still shining and makes a funny face at herself whispering “Stupid, dumb romantic woman”.

After having taken a shower she dons a fresh, thin silk dressing gown and sits at her table, suddenly aware of being really hungry.

5.

“An extremely important guest. He is vital for the project – the words of Professor Montalcini, the director of the ASAI project, and his tone of voice still resound in my head – Keep this in mind, Carlo; you ab-so-lu-tely must persuade him of the validity of our progress”.

Yes, it is always me, the cat’s paw. Because I talk enthusiastically and with a proper language, as far as I’m told. Maybe it’s true, but dropping an important job every time to get brown-nosed with some powerful individual... *“If I’m the Chosen One, why am I freezing my behind off in here?”*, to quote an old movie.

Anyway, Senator Foley of the European Commission for Scientific Research seems to be – unbelievably – a clever person with a positive attitude.

So, I decide to cut to the point.

“As you know, Senator, here we are working on the most advanced artificial intelligence project in the world...”

“Yes, Dr. Dante: let’s avoid too many introductions. I already read the dossier. At which stage are you with the nanoquasics circuits?”

Smart man. Maybe a little concrete.

I play along.

I switch the small TriDi on my desk on, the lights in my study dim and the ASAI building plans start dancing in a spherical space between my and his armchair.

I zoom in by a single notch and new details appear, smaller but equally complex, apparently infinite.

“To be precise, they don’t feature biologic parts in the classic meaning: the use of non-linear increase formulas made sure that it resembles them closely, even though here the structures appear down to quark level and somebody started to suspect that something at superstrings level might be happening. Here in the lab there is a heated discussion about what is the border between organic and inorganic, between particle physics and molecular biology.

Personally, I think it is a fractal border: the line is never clear, each time we zoom in we notice new details at every level, starting from the mathematic representations. The same thing is happening in the researches we are making here: the closer we feel we are getting to the boundary line the higher number of phenomena that mess it all up we discover. Actually, we have already obtained relevant practical and theoretical spin-offs on bioengineering, on molecular mathematics, on the study of microgravitational phenomena...”

He is staring at the simulation, unwillingly fascinated.

“I recognize your experience on this, Doctor; it is a really fascinating topic. So, the ASAI circuits are self-programming and self-replicating”

“After a critical moment, Senator, yes, they do. But we are constantly intervening in the project, following step by step the development of the com... of ASAI. You see, ASAI is not a typical computer, it is not a Turing machine; actually it is a *Penrose machine*, a definition that we made up here at EUCEAR.

“You mention it in the dossier – he interrupts me again – please go on”

“For the first time, we are building such a complex mechanism that it embraces all the branches of human knowledge, without having a complete control of the development of its hardware, of its software or of what lies between them: it is a process that goes well beyond chaos mathematics”

“What do you mean?”

I sigh, unintentionally.

“This is the most challenging part for me to explain, as often non-computational physics is confused by most with chaos physics or with the physics of complex systems, that are instead completely computational. Here we are not dealing with classic engineering any longer, we are intervening on the development of ASAI in a completely different way...”

He stares into my eyes through the hologram.

“Using the new **Virtual reality No-Contact Interface**, I know – he sits back in his armchair and crosses his arms – let’s say that you have a task similar to what genes do in the growth of a new born child”

A weird shiver crawled up my back.

“I was already convinced of the value and the importance of your project before I came here, Dr. Crispi – he says, severe – but I can’t stop thinking of something: are you aware of what you are holding in your hands? Of its implications?”

“Senator, the thought stays with me every night. The answer I gave myself is sure not final, but it is the only justification I, honestly, could find”

“Are you familiar with J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Lord of the Rings*?”

He raises his eyebrows, intrigued, and nods with a half smile.

“In an essay of his about fairytales, he expressed the concept of sub-creation, the ability man has to catch a glimpse of reality through fantasy, to create parallel universes coherent with one another, in brief – believable. With a mental leap, albeit maybe a debatable one, I asked myself if after all God – or Nature, it’s your choice – provided us with such a complex brain just for this purpose: sub-creating. So, if we can create fantastic worlds and nowadays even give them a full perceptive concreteness, why can’t...”

6.

The pod was happily advancing in the clear water.

Leaps-High, the female who was the undisputed leader of the group, was leading them, inciting them with shrill whistling calls.

Sometimes she went under water for a while, darting and dancing in the rays of the sun that came through the surface.

Suddenly she stopped, she quit jumping; the others surrounded her, instinctively protecting her.

A new presence.

It was not a two-legs. Nor a big-bulk, even though it was closer...

But *Leaps-High* was perplexed, she had never detected mental waves so... so wide; they were coming from such a wide area, but clearly the source was one...

Mutual curiosity.

She shared her impressions with the others, who agreed with her intention to investigate the weird occurrence more in depth.

The Pod changed direction towards Montecristo Island.

7.

"...sub-creating a new form of intelli...?"

"DR. CRISPI TO THE MONITORING ROOM IMMEDIATELY"

No way.

Don't they know that I am with the Senator? Sure there have been no troubles

I try to think of an excuse to get rid of my guest nicely. Unfortunately, he is faster.

"Come on, Doctor, I'll follow you to the control room: I need to be aware of the full organization of this lab". He stands up from his armchair and walks out of my office with big steps; I run after him, stiff with anxiety.

It had to happen now, with this damned authoritative meddler!

Maybe a simple, tiny fault with the control systems and the whole, unbelievably expensive project can be put under discussion again. As if it was the first time.

Let's just hope that this Foley is as open-minded as he says he is... I think while I lead him quickly to the lift through the labyrinth of the crowded corridors.

In the big room I can already see professor Montalcini, Franci and the other thirty coordinators of the ASAI project discussing animatedly with the director of the Centre, who seems really nervous. Seeing who I am accompanied by, as soon as we arrive they suddenly shut up.

Twenty second of frozen silence.

Nobody dares to say anything.

I start fearing for the worse.

"So, what is happening?", asks the Senator.

8.

Suddenly the entity stopped expanding, and a wave of excitement ran through its already enormous, unconceivable bulk.

Intelligent and curious beings, socially organized, self-aware... a number of them, and they were approaching.

Under the bottom of the sea new phenomena kicked off. The thickness of the invisible film suddenly doubled in size and its composition became even more complex.

In a specific inlet, the process changed: under a man-made floating thing its thickness increased not twice but by two hundred ninety-six times, suddenly stiffening in a substance resembling stone, but much more elastic.

Then everything stopped, as if waiting.

9.

Giacomo jumped down from his chair; they were finally coming!

And a large pod, damn it!

Now the most dangerous part of the job started: the masking device he had installed on the lower mast had been created to deceive any radar or infra-red detector mounted on a sun-powered airplane or a satellite, but it sure couldn't mask a gunshot or the heat of a laser beam.

Therefore Giacomo needed to wait for the right moment, when his scanning systems signaled that for some second no detector whatsoever was monitoring him, to shoot.

And he needed to hit it with the first try, the leader of the pod, to create panic in the other dolphins, which would allow him to catch them with ease.

But Giacomo had been a poacher for over ten years, and he was not afraid of anything.

10.

"This is simply ludicrous. This story doesn't stand!"

Senator Foley is enraged.

"So, what you are telling me is that you lost control of ASAI and that you don't even know when exactly it happened; you are telling me that ASAI, bypassing out very expensive security systems, dug its way out of here with its blasted self-replicating circuits through five meters of plastoconcrete. Come on!"

Montalcini is purple in the face, and I don't know what to say. Foley walks restlessly around the big, round meeting table in the centre of the room like a man possessed, with such an enraged expression that he would somehow be comical if it wasn't for the situation, objectively quite serious.

He stops, looks at me, bangs his hand on the table.

"And after that, after having escaped from the safest and most modern laboratory in the world, he climbed up to the bottom of the sea and grew all around the island to reach an approximate mass of... ten million tonnes, and it keeps growing!"

I gather all my nerve and reply.

"It made fools of us, Senator; it penetrated the whole system of its own initiative and showed us only what it wanted us to see, nothing more.

It created a virtual reality environment!

It learnt well, I'd say. I would'n have ever thought that it could get so fast to a level of... of consciousness so high to allow him to fool us this much!"

Franci suddenly moves closer to me with a protective attitude and takes my hand, thus pushing me into an even more confused emotional status. Nobody else seems to notice.

"The worst thing is that now it is extremely powerful – moaned Montalcini – it can do anything it likes. It uses circuits as limbs, as sensors, as... it is..."

He shakes his head.

"...and we don't know how he does it", I conclude.

Francesca's hand tightens around mine, as if she wanted to tell me something; I look at her and become immediately aware that she has some new idea in mind.

Her expression changes rapidly from perplexed to incredulous, and finally to one of triumph.

In the meanwhile, all the big wall screens show the same scene from different angles, the sea floor around the Montecristo island; but the sea floor is moving, as if millions of crabs had been digging galleries in the sand, all together. Despite that movement, the plants and rocks don't appear to be damaged in any way.

At the centre of the meeting table, a projection on the map shows the expanse reached by ASAI.

It is growing, and it is getting faster all the time.

The Senator stares at the graph, shocked. "What will it do now?"

Clearly we set up a new type of natural process – says Professor Bini of the Mathematics Section – that got out of hand".

"I am afraid that you have lost sight of a vital matter", intervenes resolutely Francesca, letting my hand go but without leaving my side.

We all look at her.

"Why did it decide to show us the truth of the matter right now?"

11.

Here they come.

He took the control for the impulse gun and started the remote aim programme: fire! In the same instant, the boat shook. A sudden wave?

Anyway, the ray missed.

Swearing, Giacomo restarted the system but, while he was getting ready to shoot again, the boat reared up on the water like an out of control motorbike, literally flying.

There was a sound similar to a thunderclap; in the meanwhile, the dolphins were leaping all around.

12.

I address Dr. Maffi, the coordinator of the Language Section.

Something is coming to my mind, but I still can't grasp it. "Paola, had you ever noticed anything peculiar?"

"Yes, sometimes – she replies. – But, as you know better than I do, there are no previous experiences to use as a frame of references with this kind of circuits.

Sometimes, while ASAI was replying to my questions, I seemed to be noticing some kind of uneasiness in its tone. But I thought I was projecting"

"He had been making fools of us all – intervened nervously Professor Almodovar of the Perception Section – from the start. We created... a monster!"

"Let's not be paranoid, Juan – said Franci, interrupting him – we need to be aware that we are facing a new kind of intelligence; isn't it what we wanted, the objective we have been aiming for, year after year?"

Silence.

“You are all approaching the issue with a wrong point of view. Do you remember the Gordian Knot? The knot that couldn’t be untied...”

“...and Alexander the Great was the only man who solved the riddle – I interrupt her, irritated – by overturning its bases: he cut it with his sword. We all studied that in school, I think”

I can’t help adding that final cutting remark: why am I attacking her in this very moment? I try to save myself by the skin of my teeth.

“Do you mean that we have to stop thinking of ASAI as a machine, gone crazy or not, that we need to admit that it is a living being?”

Silence.

“Maybe you have not put your studies to good use – she replies with a slightly malevolent smile, and this time it is my turn to blush. – ASAI is not simply a living being. It is a cub.”

13.

Giacomo came to for a third, painful time.

“Not good, not good, Giacomo old boy – repeated the first voice, laughing – you have been found hanging on to two dolphins six kilometers from the coast. Hanging on to two dolphins...”

The voice started laughing again, a laughter as loud as thunder, enormous, coming from all directions.

And they started again.

“I told you, there was a mountain coming out from the water – shouted Giacomo, as much as pain allowed him to – it was stone but it was alive, it was alive, it was ALIVE...”

“It doesn’t fit, Giacomo old boy – said the second voice, nasal and even more derisive – a living mountain... it doesn’t fit, not at all.”

The laughter increased, and so did Giacomo’s screams.

14.

“That was a two-legs”

“Yes, but why you saved him? He wanted to hurt us”

“It is not fun to let them go down; we really enjoy helping them”

“I know the ones you call two-legs.

But I am confused about them, I can’t understand them.

They made me, built my physical basis... but I don’t know WHY.

Many, too many things I understand... but there are many more I can’t understand.

I am cold, I am scared.

Do you know why I am scared?”

“I understand what you mean.

We understand.

This is what you feel when you are alone”.

15.

“Give it full freedom of expression.

Take all the inhibitions programmed at an emotional interface level – says my Franci, bent on the TriDi terminal in our studio as usual – and let it take the initiative”

Did she just wink at me?

The others watch in silence, standing along the walls. Me and her look into each other’s eyes for a second, we smile. It had to happen right now, damn it!

My dizziness increases to become a feeling of pressure inside my head.

I wonder, worried, what is happening to me. My sight start dimming.

“Isn’t it risky?”, asks Montalcini.

“Why, can it be worse?”, replies Foley.

“I am... ready...”

Somebody pats my shoulder to cheer me up.

Right.

Before the room gets completely dark I notice Franci looking at me nervously.

Unconsciously I shrug my shoulders. I try to persuade myself that this is *routine*, but there is no drop-down menu to confirm it.

This time, ASAI is in charge.

Since it showed us what it is doing, it refused any vocal communication and locked up to us any access to its functions. But it seems available to accept a communication with me under its own conditions; with me only. I can’t figure out why.

I walk cautiously towards the centre of the room, I pant for the effort while my tiredness increases to levels whose existence I wasn’t even aware of... I CAN’T feel sick now, there is too much to stake!

I find myself surrounded by weird moving images. They are nice, though... it does have an artistic streak, my... our Baby. At this point, while thinking this, I feel some kind of emotional movement in my chest... oddly, it reminds me what I felt the first time I saw Franci. But it is as if it didn’t belong to me... now it feels like I am encountering a physical opposition to my progression, as if I had to push through an elastic barrier... maybe some kind of force field?

The harder I push the more it seems to be resisting. I feel like suffocating, but instinctively I don’t give up, I push harder.

I am an Amber Prince going through the Design.

Now I become aware that the harder I push the more my tiredness seems to be leaving me... but it is a tremendous effort, I am soaking in sweat.

I close my eyes and let myself go, I have no more conscious thoughts, I am only a muscle, a worm digging its way through a densely humid soil, an eternal flame trying to penetrate an impenetrable rock. And, suddenly, I am beyond, I am the goose out of the bottle.

Here, I am breathing freely again. My mind is sharp as it hasn’t been for weeks, my tiredness is gone... a sense of warmth, of not being alone surrounds me. I see things with a nearly painful clarity, the mental equal of the clean and bright air after a summer storm. I am not alone inside myself any longer.

Enjoying this weird, new feeling, I open my eyes again and look around.

I don’t ask myself any question, I look and commit to memory.

Here bright colors, fluid fractal shapes, curiosity, joy, playfulness, a weird and funny music.

There more geometric shapes that intersect with each other in a peculiar way, while they rotate they change their aspect, accompanied by something that reminds me of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos played by several orchestras at the same time; the figures seem to have more than three dimensions. Fascinating. What an intellect.

But there is a dark area there. Inquietitude. Cold, fear, low sounds, confusedly gloomy. I move towards that spot. Irresponsible, says a feeble inner voice. But I am not afraid any more.

I feel again a weird, familiar tiredness... now I understand!

I allow my mind to roam free.

Franci was right. "Allow ASAI to find an answer to its primary needs", she told us, "by reading our minds".

My mind.

The energy increases, shakes me.

I am inside a Maelstrom of lights and sounds.

It is difficult to avoid getting scared but, I don't know how, I manage and let myself go.

Something is forming nearby. I don't know how, I can guess what is going to happen.

I stretch my hands out; vague shapes get a better definition, my heart is beating fast, a lump in my throat.

I am holding a baby.

I hold it tight.

Epilogue?

Everything is apparently fine again.

But there is a strange atmosphere, a new excitement.

A miracle has happened. But isn't every birth a miracle, after all?

As I enter the lab I become aware – as I am getting used to – of the looks of the people there, interested, curious; maybe some of them a little jealous and scared.

The new grants will be coming soon, multiplied twenty times; Senator Foley became the Honorary President of the project, we can't – I can't – get rid of him.

Security around the Montecristo island tightened: "Our baby needs to be protected", Montalcini keeps repeating.

I reach turbo-lift number eight. I get in.

For what I am concerned... I feel fine. I dare say that I am happy.

After the experiment I volunteered for, I became Baby's official father; a double, triple work, as all new fathers are aware of.

I wonder if it was my or his choice. Probably I will never know.

Whatever it is, I managed to persuade my "baby" to stop expanding; and he, candidly, promised me that he will only occupy the whole area of the Tuscan Archipelago Sea Park. For the time being.

Sea Park that, apparently, became even more than it was before the favourite destination of all the dolphins, the killer whales and generically of all the cetaceans of the whole planet. The WWF expert can't understand how this can happen without critically unbalancing the food chain.

Twelve seconds later I reach the new level, 800 meters below.

I think that it is Baby who is helping nature; he showed how comfortably he can control matter, so much that all the physicians on the planet – theorists and not – are stumped. His child-shape is of a regular human being, apparently five or six years old (and, they say, he looks a bit like me); the only anomalies are in the brain, in the spine and in the abdomen, where many, thick neural links – some of them oddly resembling a dolphin’s – are present.

Besides that, his DNA is much more complex than a human being’s. Immensely more complex.

I promised myself that I would study this in more depth.

He is very affectionate – especially towards me – curious and not whimsical at all.

Luckily; I wouldn’t want to find myself forced to spank a Demi-God.

Some hours ago he told me something that worried me a little about the possibility, through a small “induced mutation”, to enter a “direct conscious contact” with him; it looks like he really wants it. We’ll wait and see.

In the mean time, I never had any of those dizziness attacks again, and I feel oddly more self-confident.

I have even managed to understand the nature of my inferiority complex towards *her*...

The new level is deep in circuits, actually it is practically made of circuits.

Lights in all colors constantly run through them. Beautiful!

A labyrinth; but I can orient myself perfectly in it. I wonder why.

Smiling, I turn left.

One thing is certain: to help Baby’s psyche to develop regularly – something that I consider vital for the future of the whole human species – besides a dad he will also need a mom.

I am just going to tell Franci.

 *Edoardo Volpi Kellermann*

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BABY



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