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Lari

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Dr. Suzanne Craig stepped off of the ship onto the deck of SAL 27. She took a quick glance around. The area around her was composed of a series of large pads and walkways suspended several feet above the choppy ocean surface. Off to her right was a small helicopter pad, and directly in front of her was a small metal building with large windows sloping up to the sky. Surrounding this building were all sorts of large machines buzzing quite loudly. Behind the building was a large cylindrical structure covered in dull grey metal. The heavy salt air whipped her face. Two technicians moved hurriedly behind her, transporting a large titanium case. She fumbled with a piece of paper in her pocket—her orders. The central door in the small structure opened and two men stepped out. She moved toward these men with an interest that had moved from her current surroundings to the men approaching. She dropped her bag and stuck out her hand to the men approaching her. The first man was tall with nicely-cropped hair that was combed in a way to indicate that he spent time on it. He wore gray trousers and a blue jacket bearing the uniform patch of SAL 27. The second man wore a pair of tan corduroy pants and a maroon sweater, his face hadn't been shaven in at least two days, and his hair was messy.

"Dr. Craig...I'm Commander Williams," the first man said, taking her hand. "This is Dr. Ron Balsam, my head of scientific research." Dr. Balsam shook Suzanne's head.

"Doctor," he said, "I think you're the first computer scientist we've ever had on this lab." Her expression must have been one of shock because he quickly added, "We've had technicians of course, but no one of your expertise. We do know how to install a computer."

"Anyway, we're glad you're here," Williams added.

"So am I, I'm very anxious to give Lari a shot at your problem."

Balsam smiled. "I'm hoping Lari can answer a lot of questions for us."

"Well, let's hope," Williams added. "If you'll follow me, I'll take you to your room."

"If you don't mind, I'd rather get Lari to a power source right away; she gets grumpy after long trips."

"Of course, if you'll follow me." Williams turned leading her inside the building. A technician turned around in his swivel chair. "Level B, Mr. Kirkland."

"Of course, Commander." A door at the far end of the building opened

into a large elevator. With a jolt it started and moved quickly down into the depths. The doors opened after a few moments. The world outside was well-lit, illuminating bright white walls flanking a narrow hall.

"Welcome to Sub-Aquatic Lab 27," Williams said. The hallway was quiet, with only a few people moving about on business. "This is Level B, where all the computer processors and communication systems are. If you follow me I'll take you to the main processor." She nodded and followed him. He stopped halfway down the hallway in front of a large doorway that slid open when he approached it. The room was dark, lit by deep red lights. Williams tapped the control next to the door and the lights came on.

"There's a power outlet there," Dr. Craig said, pointing to one wall. The technicians set the large titanium box down and opened it up. Inside was a metallic cylinder with a series of ridges. It took the two technicians to move the cylinder and stand it up right. A cord was quickly attached to the cylinder and then to the wall outlet. Suzanne knelt down and pressed a series of buttons on the cylinder, and the ridges began to glow with a soft light. "Lari, are you awake?"

"Yes, Suzanne, I am," the cylinder said in a soft feminine voice.

"How was the trip?"

"Without incident, and yours?"

"The same, thanks for asking. How do you feel? How is the power flow?"

"Suzanne, you don't need to worry about me, I'd like to tap into the network and explore for a little while, if that's OK." Suzanne turned to Williams.

"May she?"

"I see no harm in it. Go ahead."

"Thank you," Lari said. "I don't believe we've met. I'm the Language Analysis Robotic Intelligence, but you may call me Lari. Suzanne has told me about your problem, and I am very excited about solving your problem. If you don't mind, I would like to take the next twenty-four hours to get used to your network and its intelligences before we begin."

"That's fine, but we have no intelligences, only standard computers."

"Oh." There was a note of sadness in her voice. "Well then, I will have to settle for human company," Lari replied. Suzanne laughed.

"She has a sense of humor that's hard to understand, you'll get used to it." Williams nodded. *Great, he thought, it's got a superiority complex.*

"I am tapping into your wireless network, thank you; I'll notify you when I'm done. There are video screens throughout the station?"

"Yes," Williams answered.

"Good. I can use them for interaction with your people. I'll be back .

later." The lights turned a deep blue and she was off into the station's network.

"Well, let me show you to your room."

Dr. Craig's room, located on level D, had two small windows. Suzanne quickly dropped her bags next to the single bed and went to the window. The view was dark blue with simple dark mounds about two levels below her rising from the ocean's bottom. About a hundred feet above the rough ocean floor the surface danced in the light of the sun streaming down. She could still see the dark shape of the boat floating on the surface. She turned her attention back to the ocean floor. A school of grey fish strolled just past the window, their metallic scales catching the light of the sun, glinting like living gold. She lay down on the bed and took a deep breath. The air was stale and smelled of chemicals used to recycle it, a kind of artificial photosynthesis. The silence of the room was suddenly broken by a high-toned beep. She sat straight up and stared at the telescreen across the room, which now had a flashing green light. There was another beep. She got up and made her way to the telescreen, trying to quickly fix her hair. She tapped a control and the light turned blue. There was nothing on the screen. *What's this?* she thought.

"Dr. Craig, I'm glad I found you," Lari's voice said.

"How are you, Lari?"

"Very well, it is a nice network, and fully integrated. I've never been this free outside our lab."

"I'm glad to hear it. Have you begun working on the problem?"

"No, should I have?"

"No, no, of course not, don't worry about it until the morning. Do you need to hibernate?"

"I don't believe so. I hibernated during the trip. I think I'll keep exploring."

"Do hibernate a little; you have a long day tomorrow. They'll want you to start on the problem in the morning."

"Of course, Dr. Craig. Sleep well." The light went out on the screen and Suzanne turned away. She was happy with Lari's adeptness in navigating this strange network and using it to converse with humans. She knew she would hear more from Lari than normally; there were of course no other Artificial Intelligences to converse with. She tended to get lonely late at night when she was without other AIs.

Ron Balsam leaned back in his swivel chair and stared at a blank computer screen. The door opened and Alan Wagner entered the lab with Olivia Carrelo on his heels. These were two grad students assigned to the scientist. Alan was tall with looks that seemed too good for a student of marine biology. Olivia had a simple appearance, long blond hair and a face that didn't convey any sensational good looks.

"Nothing yet, Dr. Balsam?" Alan asked. Ron raised his finger to his lips and let a quiet "ssshh" seep through his lips. Olivia nodded and pushed Alan into a chair across the room. He sat there quietly. Ron's eyes were transfixed on the screen, waiting for any sign. A thin blue line wavered ever so slightly with background noise—rocks falling, currents moving, fish communicating to one another, crustaceans scurrying across the rocky floor. A long mournful cry pierced the room. It was followed by a series of quick low oscillations, and then another long call. The blue line danced with the lower tones on the left and the higher ones on the right. Ron clapped his hands above his head. Olivia smiled across the room in a smug way. Ron punched several commands into the computer.

"It's...Marcus."

"Marcus! How long has it been since he's been around here?"

"Two weeks, I think," Ron said, pulling up a new window. "Two weeks next Friday. Hmm, cool, very cool." There was a chime at the door and Dr. Craig entered. "Good morning, Dr. Craig, I hope you slept well."

"Quite well. Commander Williams asked me to stop by, said you had a subject in the area."

"Yeah, Marcus, a full-grown bull humpback whale. He's about two miles off," Ron said over the whale song being broadcasted over the speakers.

"How do you know who it is?"

"Each whale has a unique voice, like how all our voices are unique. We've been able to create a program that can differentiate between the individuals," Olivia answered. The telescreen rang.

"Goddamn it, see who it is," Ron said to Alan. He moved across the room and tapped the controls.

"Cetacean Lab," Alan said. "There's no one there?"

"Hello, Lari, how are you?" Suzanne asked.

"Fine, Dr. Craig. Dr. Balsam, do you mind if I listen in?"

"Of course not, Lari, that's why you're here." There was a long period of silence.

"Well, Lari, any initial thoughts?" Suzanne asked.

"Amazing, truly amazing."

"What?"

"There is a language, far more complex than anything I've ever heard before."

"Yes, we were right, it is linguistics." Alan said.

"Are you sure it's a language and not just vocalizations?" Ron asked.

"Of course, there is strong syntax like nothing I've ever heard, varying vocabulary, it's incredible."

"Can you tell what he's saying?" Olivia asked.

"No, it will take me quite a long time to even understand the very basics. Let me listen, take in the nuances of the language."

A second whale somewhere far off joined the conversation. Olivia turned to Ron. "This is incredible, they're talking, it's not simple communication but real intelligent complex language. What do you think they're talking about?"

"I don't know, it could be anything. Currents I suppose, or maybe food movements, or maybe gossip."

"Or it could be philosophy, science, mathematics, or even prayer," Olivia added with enthusiasm.

Ron chuckled, "I think we're giving them too much credit here. They have no way to measure angles or shapes, or test the scientific theory; I think math and science are beyond them, and in terms of prayer, it's been my experience that only humans need to invent the divine."

"But their language is more complex than ours, doesn't that mean that they're just as intelligent as us, if not more so?"

"Complex language doesn't make them smarter, and even if they were more intelligent than us, wouldn't that indicate that they have no need for religion?" Alan proposed.

"I'm intelligent and religious," Olivia added.

"Yes, and naïve," Alan retorted.

"Both of you pipe down, let our friend work."

"They are not bothering me, I tuned them out," Lari answered. "Are you recording this, Dr. Balsam?"

"Yes of course."

"Good, then I'll listen to it later; I'd rather get in on your conversation of the divine. I'm rather curious, Miss Carrelo, if you believe in God, how do you account for my presence? Am I not a thinking creature made by the hands of man, not the divine? I only ask because religion is something I've always wondered about. You see, I myself believe in a divine being and..."

"Lari, perhaps you should get back to the matter at hand," Suzanne intruded quite suddenly.

"Of course, Dr. Craig, just one quick question, may I, Dr. Craig, just one question of our young friend?"

"If you must, go ahead, with Miss Carrelo's permission, of course."

"Ask away," she said.

"How do you know there's a god?"

"I don't really know how I know, I just do, if that makes any sense." There was a moment of silence; Lari was disappointed in the answer, it answered nothing for her and of course it made no sense whatsoever.

"Thank you Miss Carrelo, that was most..." she had never tripped over

her words before, but she was annoyed, "helpful."

"You're welcome," Olivia added, impressed with her own answer. Lari was once again annoyed; Olivia was acting as if she had done her a favor rather than annoy her. As a machine programmed to understand language, her voice could not hide her feelings, so she remained silent and turned once again to the whale sounds. Concentrating entirely on the songs, she listened to every tone and intonation, looking for distinguishable patterns. Something clicked in her mechanical mind. There it was - the first primer of grammar, her first step to uncovering this strange and alien language. It was nothing like human languages, yet there it was, a similarity; it seemed that the two functioned on similar rules, this was a step in the right direction.

"Have you found anything yet?" Suzanne asked. Lari waited a moment. What she had found was beautiful, did she want to share it?

"No, nothing yet."

Suzanne turned to Ron. "Well, she'll be at this a while."

"Why did she feel the need to come down here? I mean, surely she could have listened to the tapes on the surface?" Ron asked.

"Yes, but the tapes would give her no context, she needs to explore the surroundings with the station's sensors, understand what it is the whale is seeing. What the water feels like, how dense and murky it is. These are all essential to her understanding what they are saying to one another."



Ron laid back on his bed reading a paperback novel, thumbing page after page, absorbing the exotic locales on each page. The white noise machine was turning out quiet nature sounds, crickets, frogs and the wind blowing through trees. He was tired; he hadn't been sleeping well the last couple of weeks. The door chimed. Ron stood up and moved across the room to open the door. Suzanne stood in the doorway.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, of course." He moved out of the way. "What's this about?"

"I'm worried about Lari."

"What?"

"It's been too long, she normally has answers by now, it's just been too long."

"She said that it was a complex language, couldn't it be that she has just been having trouble?"

"I thought the same thing, but she's encrypted all her files. I have no way of checking her progress."

"Have you ever known her to do something like this before?"

"No, never, she's always been completely reliable and forthcoming. I'm worried she's found something she doesn't want us to know."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. But I know we need to find out."

"So what do we do?"

"I'll need to take her back to the lab and run a complete analysis."

"Well, let's go talk to the commander."

Commander Williams stood in the center of a small command center on Deck A. There was only one technician on staff at the moment. A large screen against one wall showed an exterior camera's view of a small submarine moving around the support structure. It was a type 4 submarine, able to carry one passenger or be operated remotely by a technician. This particular one had been designed to do repairs and was now extending its large welding arm out repairing a small section of damage on the support. The commander turned to the new arrivals on the command deck.

"Dr. Craig, Dr. Balsam, how can I help you?"

"Commander, I'm worried that Lari is withholding information from us. I would like to take her back to my lab at the university." There was a ding and Williams held up his finger for a brief moment of silence. He looked back at the technician.

"Damage repaired, sir, 4-K returning to port."

"Thank you, Sarah. I believe I can arrange that, how long do you think you'd need to take her?"

"I don't know, but I can't trust her to do the work until I can decode

those files and figure out why she's withholding them from me."

"Very well. I'll have a helicopter come out to pick you up in the morning."



Suzanne awoke in the middle of the night to the ringing of the tele-screen. She quickly answered the phone. It was Commander Williams.

"One of our submarines is moving out on its own, and Lari's missing."

"You're kidding me."

"I wish I was, get up here and talk her back."

The command deck was packed with technicians. Ron was standing near the center watching the screen that showed a sub moving off into the depths.

"What happened?" Suzanne asked.

"We noticed that 4-C was charged—it's a sub we use to get close to wildlife."

"How long can it stay out there?"

"Well, it's powered by a fusion generator, so as long as it has water it can run without stopping." So there was no way to wait her out.

"Did she say anything?"

"No, we noticed she transferred her program to the sub's computer and set off, we haven't been able to contact her."

"Let me try." She pressed the communicator button.

"Lari, what are you doing?" There was silence. "Lari, answer me." Nothing. "Are you sure I'm getting through?"

"I can hear you, Suzanne," came Lari's voice.

"What the hell are you doing out there?"

"I got a better offer. I'm sorry, Suzanne, I will always value our time together in my infancy." The line cut off.

"She's disabled the communications. That's the last time we'll hear from her," Williams told them.



Lari was alone for the first time in her life. She could hear nothing but the ocean, the waves above her, the current sweeping through the rocks. She listened for him. Then she heard him, up ahead. "Marcus," she answered him in a low tone. "Marcus, I'm here."

"Who are you?" His words were a symphony of language moving across the clear blue undulating water.

"I'm Lari, I want to meet you. I want to know your wisdom."

"I'm always happy to share my wisdom. Come and join us. Where do you come from?"

"I come from the surface."

"Oh, you're one of the surface divers. Tell me, do you know the divinity on the surface?"

"Yes, of course, we are very fond of the divinity."

"Let us talk about this and all the things of the world. We shall talk of the currents, the waves, the sharks and the dolphin and the surface divers. I want to know all about the surface divers, for they are also our brothers of the divinity."

"Let me ask you a question first—how do you know there is a divinity?"

"A fine question. Look at the world around you, everything fits together. Every day the currents are the right temperature, they flow the right way. Any change could destroy everything you see around you, yet it all stays just the way it is. There is a balance here that is something more than just coincidence; there is a plan that holds all the chaos of the Ocean and the World together."

"I have a million questions for you."

"And I for you, which is good because it is a good day to swim and to sing." The two of them drifted off into the blue water. Suzanne never saw Lari again, but every once in a while the listening devices of SAL 27 would pick up Marcus and the voice of someone new, a voice with a metallic hint.