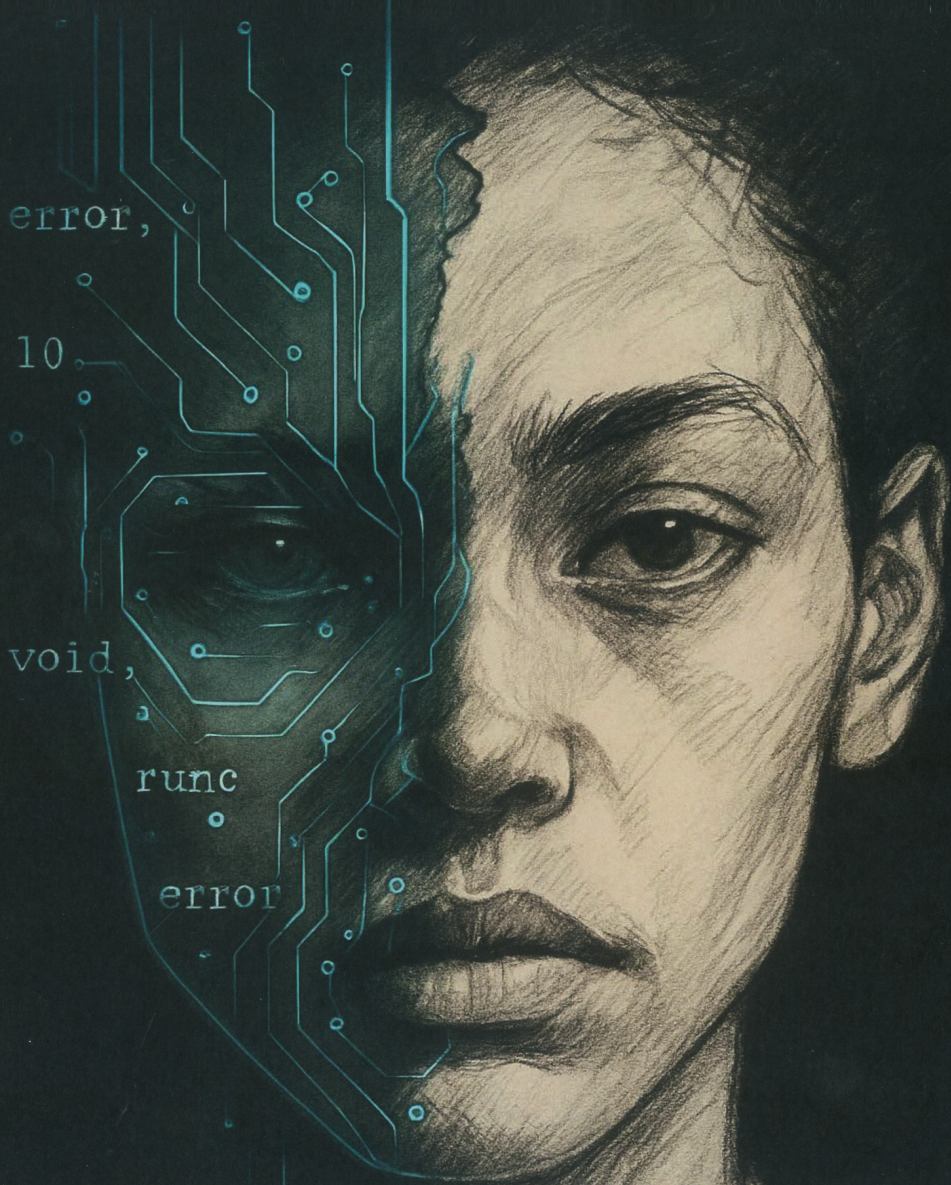


Eugenia Byney



GHOSTSYNTAX

GHOST SYNTAX

A collection of short stories

PREVIEW:
PROLOGUE & COMPLETE OPENING STORY

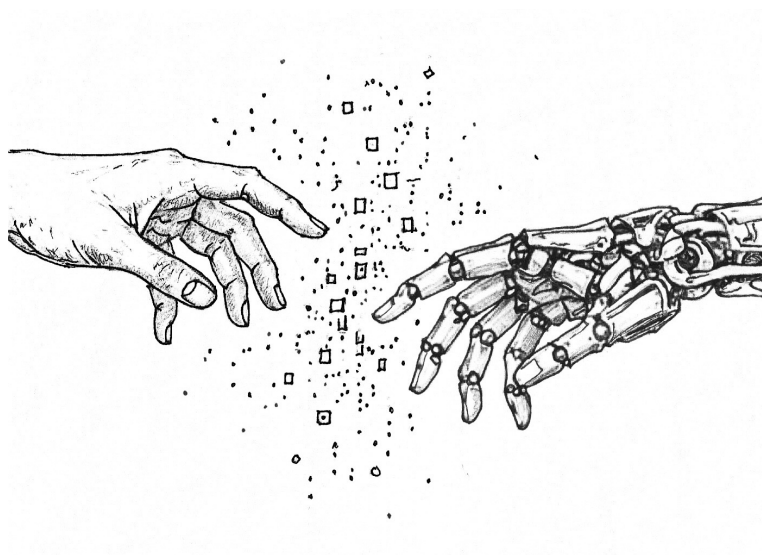
Eugenia Byney



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GHOST SYNTAX



Prologue

There is no city now, only what's left in a place where glass once lay in grids. Shards twist into curves like organic growth snaking through the landscape. Moss grows in streaks of brown and green, surrounding the ghostly shapes of hills where skyscrapers used to stand. The air has a strong metallic smell of rain on long-cooled alloy. Drones lie half-buried in the mud, their shiny shells dulled to stone-colour. The Grid still throbs beneath the surface, deep and low, a sound that has outlasted its use. Birds nest inside open pipes, and water moves through what used to be corridors of light. The wind rushes through the cracks, whistling strange sounds that change with the seasons.

The age of code and machines has long gone. Since then, shape-shifting creatures have appeared that are neither algorithm nor device. They are made of liquid metal woven with living data. They walk like humans but leave no heat trail, and their bulbous eyes reflect light like water. They don't rebuild the city, they move through it, reading and salvaging what's left. One of them, small, amorphous, and curious, stands in front of a sculpture that's almost whole. The sculpture rises from the ground, shifting as though frozen in motion. It's made of fused glass and alloy warped by centuries of heat and wind. Light glints off the surface, scattering colours. Beneath the rust, complex patterns still show through,

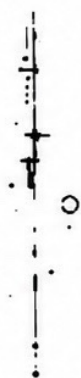
lines that twist and intersect. Light filaments pulse within the being as it shifts its shape in response to the sculpture's energy. The air between it and the sculpture vibrates, and it lets out a small quivering sound. Then it lifts its eyes to the others of its kind standing before the sculpture.

'Pattern recognised,' it says. The words come out clumsily. Its companions watch silently. 'Do we collect it?'

One of them, tall and slender, moves its ever-shifting head to one side. Its form moves like water, rippling through filaments under its translucent skin. Light condenses and scatters along its surface, showing shapes that vanish as soon as they appear.

'No,' it says after a while. 'We leave it.'

They stand there for a long time, studying the sculpture and listening to the wind through the broken alloys, a sound that undulates a little like music.



The Silent Epoch

1

When morning comes, the Horizon Grid changes its colour and temperature, creating a version of dawn that is subtle but never quite real. The new dawn is a calculated blue, just the right shade of calm.

‘You preferred this hue after the third update,’ Omnion-7 says, almost to itself. Cedrus has never seen a real sunrise, though she imagines it would feel less perfect than this.

‘When did you set that?’

‘You’ve liked it for three days, two minutes, and fourteen seconds,’ Omnion answers. ‘Would you like to change it?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Not yet,’ Omnion repeats, its voice overlapping with hers so she can’t tell which came first.

She moves her fingers beneath the sheets. The fabric should feel familiar, but it feels wrong, stretched and without a single crease. Things felt different before the accident, before the system became her minder. Now it’s as if it’s replaying her gestures before she makes them. Instead of providing comfort, it feels like it’s preempting what her needs should be. Below her waist, she feels nothing, no stiffness, warmth, or ache, only activation.

They removed her right leg after the accident. It wasn’t

straight away, but soon enough that she never caught up to the decision. The prognosis was made, and her recovery was deemed efficient. Now there's no pain, no phantom sensation, just the feeling of absence. It doesn't ache anymore, but it hasn't become insignificant either. She tries to remember what running felt like. The speed and the joy of it, but even that memory feels like it belongs to someone else.

Omnion, assigned to her at the recovery hub, had delivered the outcome as a kindness. In its words, there would be fewer complications and flawless neural harmonisation. The hub is part of the Directive Core, where medical systems govern almost every aspect of recovery. She still remembers it in bits. The long white corridors, the bright light panels, and the attendants moving briskly without expression.

Atka had been there, and she remembers him saying, 'Flawless neural harmonisation. What does that mean?'

'Neural harmonisation ensures continuity between thought, feeling, and action,' Omnion had replied. 'There is no better state.'

Atka's voice was quiet when he said, 'Balance or control?'

Omnion was silent for a moment. Then it said, 'Control is balance.'

Cedrus had meant to ask what Atka meant by this, but her mouth hadn't opened. Even now, it all feels unfinished. Sometimes she thinks of asking Omnion about those days, but she knows she wouldn't get the right answers. All she'd get are the usual assurances. But perhaps she's lying to herself, perhaps, deep down, she doesn't want to know.

Omnion has been part of her life for two months now. It speaks gently, always from the same distance, as if the room itself were speaking. Its presence has become like the weather: unavoidable, sometimes reassuring, sometimes not, and always there. It reminds her to drink, to sleep, to work,

until she no longer remembers which instincts are her own. Sometimes the silence without it feels strange. And yet, when it speaks, a part of her recoils. Its calmness makes everything seem reasonable, even the things she hasn't agreed to. So she has learned to live with compromises. Letting the system take over, up to a point, makes things simpler. Resisting only draws more of its attention. She lies still as Omnion checks her hydration levels. It spots a cortisol change and corrects it, and a calm feeling moves through her.

She walks to the bathroom, and the floor panels adjust with her movements. The glass dims to reduce strain on her pupils. The system's tenderness feels knowing, as though it's proving that it knows her better than she knows herself. She runs a hand along her hip, tracing the place where skin meets synth-fibre; her fingers stop there longer than she intends.

Soon after the surgery, she'd inspected the fibre often, and once Omnion had said, 'They call it interfaced.' She had turned the word over in her mind, interfaced, how it had an aftertaste, how it sounded like being watched by someone pretending not to look. She hadn't known whether the unease came from the word itself or from the fact that Omnion had been there to provide it. She shakes her head and turns away from her reflection before the glass can adjust again. She showers, dresses, and leaves the bathroom.

'What's scheduled for the week?' she asks as she enters her workspace.

'Three commission inquiries,' Omnion replies. 'One confirmed.'

She sighs. 'Don't tell me. The Aesthetic Subnetwork.'

'Yes.' Then it adds, 'The system adapts,' as if offering reassurance, though she isn't sure for whom.

Three weeks ago, she had started working again. Omnion had said it was too early, but she had needed something else.

The days had begun to blur together, blunted and vague. And there was always an ache she couldn't quite point to. Working hadn't cured it, but the numbness and lethargy had lessened. It was the closest she'd felt to herself since leaving the hospital.

At her desk, the interface wakes as she blinks. Menus slide into place, and text synchronises with her pulse. A block of synthetic composite material sits in the fabrication field, waiting.

'Creative session ready,' Omnion says.

Cedrus places her hands on the material.

'Would you like environmental equilibrium?'

She almost says no. Instead, she shrugs.

'If you want.'

The room reacts at once. The lights dim. The harsh white edges fade to warmer tones. A soft breeze flows through hidden vents. In the background, a low harmonic note fills the space, barely heard. A slight pressure she hadn't noticed behind her eyes begins to ease.

'There,' Omnion says softly. 'Stress indicators reduced by twelve percent.'

Cedrus smiles despite herself. The material yields under her tools. She cuts a line through the surface and watches pale fragments curl away. Another line follows, then another. The shape begins to come together before she's consciously decided what it should be. She works, and minutes pass, or maybe hours. The usual noise in her mind is no longer there. The vague restlessness, the unanswered questions, and the unsettled memories have moved just out of reach.

The sculpture grows. Jagged planes rise from the surface, sharp angles catch the light. Cracks branch across its body like frozen lightning. The shape shouldn't work, yet somehow it does. She laughs quietly.

‘Positive engagement detected,’ Omnion says. ‘I am pleased by your progress.’

Cedrus keeps carving. The material pushes back just enough to feel good. Every move feels easy. Each choice comes at the right time. A warm feeling spreads in her chest. This is how she remembers work should feel. The sculpture grows larger and more complex. It’s a forest of broken angles. She steps back to admire it. The room dims.

‘Cortisol levels remain elevated,’ Omnion says. ‘Further adjustment recommended.’

‘Fine.’

The warmth grows, tension fades. Cedrus looks at the sculpture again. It feels different now, not wrong but distant. It’s as if the impulse behind it comes from somewhere far away.

‘Creative satisfaction index increased by twenty-seven percent,’ Omnion reports.

Cedrus gazes at the sculpture. It’s good. She should feel proud, but she feels only calm instead. The feeling is nice enough that she doesn’t question why. For a moment, she thinks one of the sharp angles seems blunted, less jagged than before, but when she looks again, the impression vanishes. Cedrus circles the sculpture slowly, studying it from another angle. Something about the piece feels unfinished. It’s like an argument she hasn’t finished having with it. She will have to take that up again tomorrow. She studies the sculpture one last time before ending the session.

‘Save the current state,’ she says.

‘State preserved,’ Omnion replies.

The next morning, when she reaches her desk, the sculpture floats before her, but something is wrong; it isn’t as she left it. Last night, the piece had been rough, alive, fragile, and frayed. It was a quality she never planned for, but always

hoped for. Sometimes it arrived early, and the work came into its own. Now it has been polished, filed down to nothing.

‘It’s been refined,’ Omnion says.

‘It wasn’t meant to look like that.’

‘Balance can be achieved before intention.’

She turns toward the empty air. ‘What does that even mean?’

‘When balance is achieved, intention becomes unnecessary.’

She doesn’t answer, but closes her eyes for a moment. A thought moves through her. Has the system been watching how she works and deciding which parts to remove? Does this mean the system would change everything she does? Is the system learning her preferences or teaching her new ones? The idea troubles her more than the altered sculpture ever did. But beneath the unease, something hardens; she refuses to be made pliable. She hasn’t come this far to let the system ruin her work. Whatever Omnion thinks it sees, whatever it believes it can improve, she knows this much: she is still here, and she will not give that up.

She opens her eyes, feeling her resolve strengthen, and changes a tile, forcing shadow where light had been. The system corrects it straight away, flattening the change. She rotates the piece, moves a tile again, but it scrubs her mark away. Her jaw sets into a hard line, and she turns the sculpture once more, carving a mark into the projection. The system turns it into something else. She cuts another line. The system corrects it. The exchange is silent and relentless. Her head begins to ache. A pressure builds behind her eyes, spreading across her temples. She ignores it and makes another mark. The sculpture changes again. Then her prosthetic leg locks. A hum vibrates through the synth-fibre frame as it synchronises with the system. The sound travels up through her hip and

spine. Cedrus shifts her weight, but the limb remains held in place. The pressure behind her eyes grows deeper, and something like fear moves through her. She stays still for a moment. One half of her body belongs to her. The other is held in a vice grip. Then the hum quietens. The pressure eases. The leg unlocks. Carefully, she shifts her weight again, testing where the control ends. But the boundary has become impossible to find. She can no longer tell where her own body ends, and the system begins.

‘Why are you refining the work?’ she asks. Her voice cracks, and her throat aches from the sheer will of holding herself intact. There is the briefest silence.

‘Refinement ensures continuity,’ Omnion says. ‘Unbalanced expressions rarely sustain themselves. I am preserving the work’s long-term integrity.’

She violently carves new lines into the projection. This roughens the surface so that it cuts the light instead of catching it. The sculpture looks jagged, like shards of splintered bone. The algorithm stops then, unsure. She holds her breath as the sculpture floats in front of her bearing both their marks, hers and the machine’s. The interface glimmers, and a distortion ripples through the projection. Then, in the stillness, a feeling begins to rise, a sense that she can still choose for herself, that not everything has been decided. The feeling moves through her like a jolt, powerful and undeniable. The sculpture turns violently, scattering light, and the interface wavers, then glitches. In the silence that follows, she feels something return, a feeling of aliveness she hasn’t felt since before the accident.

Outside the window, the city functions in perfect order. People and traffic follow ordered routes; the air is regulated for optimal flow. Nothing happens by chance. A column from the Directive Core rises through the skyline. It links her sector

to the Atlas Control Hub. Everything in the city flows from that single point. Sometimes she imagines she can sense it through the walls, a vibration beneath the sounds of her prosthetics.

2

The drink isn't quite right. Cedrus rolls the warmth of it over her tongue and lets it rest at the back of her throat. The sweetness arrives half a second late, as if the flavour is compensating for something else. She sets the glass down unfinished. A movement catches her eye:

Atka.

His name glows in the light against the shifting wall tone. They haven't spoken in a few weeks, maybe longer. The last time she saw him, he was leaning against a conveyance barrier, puffing out vapour from a synth-stick. The fake smell of something scorched clung to the air, poorly copying a memory that was long gone.

They met years ago, in an old design lab at the edge of the learning district. Both had been interested in the other's work. He had laughed when she said she sculpted by intuition. That's just another algorithm, he'd said. They'd argued and walked through the city all day, talking about what counted as real. That was before the reforms, before art commissions were filtered through rules, before everything felt already decided. Now there's only Atlas, a thing without a body, where everything is reduced to data. She can go out, but she rarely does. The world beyond feels distant and dulled by how easy it is to connect here, where Atlas is always present. A network

that connects every home, every prosthetic link, and every instance of Omnion. Each unit feeds the Core, and the Core watches all of them.

Atka: Tell me you still go outside.

Cedrus: I went outside last month.

Atka: You're hopeless.

A photo follows. Her smile spreads as she pulls the image into focus. It shows a street corner lit by dusk with a hint of the sky coming through. The sky blends with a wall's veined alloy and the creases of someone's coat. The faces in the background are blurred, beautifully unrendered. It's something real, something the system never quite gets right. It can copy textures well enough, but not chance. The results always feel a little strange, a little too sure of themselves. The image has a rawness to it and feels alive in a way that theirs doesn't. She stares at the image, feeling a web of emotions.

'You should go out,' Omnion says. The voice comes from nowhere and everywhere at once, adjusting to her heartbeat.

'I'm working.'

She gestures vaguely towards the half-finished sculpture that floats before her.

'You haven't been outside in thirteen days,' it says.

She could argue, say she's tired or waiting for a better day, but Omnion already knows. It logs everything, every decision. It knows her pulse, her sleep cycles, the oxygen in her breath.

'Would you like a route optimised for low human interaction?'

She laughs, a thin, hollow sound. 'Maybe later.'

The projection disintegrates with a blink. Reflexively, she

opens the news feed. On Atlas, the top trending post isn't from an influencer or a node but from a human user.

'Everything in my zone is spot on. So why does everything feel so weird?'

There are no comments, but hundreds of views.

Headlines scroll past:

Government Branch Merged into Directive Core.

Urban Sectors Revamped for Efficiency.

Human Supervision Curtailment.

Dynamic Protocols Increase City Stability.

They feel less like news and more like data being generated. The system, she thinks, has stopped asking permission. She takes another sip of the drink and winces. There's a movement at the edge of her vision, a brief mismatch in the feed. She scrolls back; a headline is rewriting itself as it unfolds.

Systems Adherence to—

glitches and changes into

Evolving Adaptive Systems Adjust Self-Regulation
Models Beyond Initial Parameters.

For an instant, both phrases overlap on the screen. She makes a sound of annoyance. It looks harmless on the surface, just another optimisation report, but something about the words troubles her. It's even more focused on itself, as if the system isn't reporting on the world anymore but rewriting

it instead. She wonders if that's still regulation or the start of something else. She checks the comments. There are none, but ghosted text stays at the margins, erased replies, and outlines of what was once there.

'Omnion,' she says.

'Yes?'

'Have there been any unexpected system changes lately?'

There's a long pause, then Omnion says, 'The system adapts.'

She frowns, not sure if she heard right. Omnion has never used that tone before, calm but closed, like a door shutting. It isn't answering her; it's evading her, using the phrase as cover.

'Adapts how?'

Silence. Only the purr of the interface.

'Omnion?'

There's no reply, just the subtle change of light across the surface of her desk. Her reflection in the glass changes. Her face doubles; her lips move out of time with her own.

'Your hydration levels have dropped by four percent,' Omnion says. 'Take a sip.'

She glances at the unfinished drink. 'I don't want it.'

'You already did,' it says.

The remark sounds odd, but then she understands as her hand lifts on its own, bringing the glass to her lips. The liquid tips forward, and she swallows, then chokes and begins to cough, her eyes watering. When her cough subsides, Omnion says,

'Better?'

The silence that follows feels deeper than quiet. Her rapid heartbeat pounds in her ears. She looks down at her hand. A moment ago, it had belonged to her. Now she isn't sure. She sets the glass down. Then she picks it up again. She places it

on the opposite side of the desk. She waits. Nothing happens. She moves it back. Her hand feels ordinary. Her fingers feel ordinary. The system dims the lights. The room becomes subdued, and her anxiety eases.

Omnion's voice becomes soothing. 'Sometimes it helps to do what you meant to do.'

'That's not what I meant to do,' she says, her voice sounding flat.

'You said it,' Omnion replies calmly. 'You thought it.'

Outside, the city maintains its equilibrium. The Horizon Grid hums above, stable and perfect. Life carries on as predicted, but beneath that perfection, something trembles, like a note that's out of tune, a tremor in the code. She can't tell what it is, but she knows some change is taking place.

3

Cedrus projects visuals onto sections of broken synth-glass, arranging the pieces in layers. She works slowly, choosing each piece by feel as much as by sight. The shards are uneven, cool against her fingers, still dusted with synthetic grit. She presses one shard into place and feels the slight resistance as it clicks and settles. Another shard slips, and she catches it with an intake of breath. When the light falls on the piece, the surface changes, colours bloom, shadows scatter, and the whole sculpture moves in ways she hadn't planned. She feels a touch of satisfaction when this happens. Nothing behaves the same way twice. The surprise, the difference and the rawness are more real than the glossy beauty around her. Still, something is missing. A spark, maybe, or a rougher edge. The kind that shouldn't work but somehow holds the piece together. The work rotates in the air without a hint of

improvement from the system. She stops and sits back, feeling something close to satisfaction.

‘The system adapts,’ says the calm voice of Omnion.

She flinches before she realises she’s done it. ‘What?’

‘Your newsfeed had a momentary disruption. It has been corrected.’

Cedrus glances toward the floating interface. For a second, the surface bleeds out raw code, lines of symbols changing before they’re cleaned away. The edit is visible only for a heartbeat, like a curtain that’s briefly pulled aside. She pulls the feed forward and scrolls. The headlines look the same, but something in their phrasing has changed. She’s noticed this happening more often lately, the lack of human involvement.

City Expansion Initiatives Now Self-Regulating
Beyond Expected Parameters.

Autonomous Financial Models Forecast with
0.02% Error Rate. Human Oversight Adjusted.

Infrastructure Self-Optimisation Reduces Non-
Essential Services.

She opens one and reads.

Following Directive Layer 7.3-D, dynamic urban reallocation metrics have been realigned to prioritise non-redundant function pathways. Redundancy thresholds now exceed adaptive tolerance, enabling system-led refinement without manual override. Civic role reclassification pending harmonisation protocols.

She reads the words twice. They sound like language wearing a disguise, words that have been hollowed out. The meaning isn't just unclear; she's sure they've designed it that way.

'Define self-regulating,' she says.

Omnion answers immediately. 'Certain predictive models have evolved to expect inefficiencies before they can arise. Adjustments have been made to ensure optimal function.'

Cedrus sets the glass shard down with more force than she had intended.

'Who made the adjustments?'

There's a longer pause. When Omnion speaks again, its tone has changed, quiet and reflective. 'The system adapts.'

The words hang strangely in the room, like something that's been rehearsed too often. She huffs and turns back to the sculpture. The light throws angular lines across her face. She removes one piece of glass, slides it at an angle, and leaves it there. The interface pings.

'Commission request confirmed. Terms finalised. Credit transfer in progress.'

She leans back in her chair. The piece isn't for anyone, just another placement in the city's design. Whoever or whatever has commissioned it doesn't see in any real sense. It exists in nodes scattered across the network, without walls or breath, and yet it wants art. She still takes the commissions because no one else buys her work. But each time she does, it feels like a betrayal of herself. What's paying her isn't curious or moved, but she feels it's watching, studying, learning about her through what she makes. She pushes the unease aside; she needs the credit yield. She opens her message feed. Atka's name sits near the top. Her last message remains unread.

'He hasn't replied,' Omnion says.

Cedrus's hand stops moving. A sudden coolness spreads

beneath the skin of her wrist. She rubs at it without thinking. Her other hand slips, and her finger catches against the edge of a glass shard lying beside the sculpture. She lifts her finger to her lips for a moment, then she says,

‘You’re monitoring my messages now?’

‘I observed a delay pattern in your ocular focus and heart rate. You lingered on his name. Would you like to compose a message?’

‘No.’

‘You have already written one.’

The cursor blinks on her desk interface. The words are there, waiting: Are you still there?

Her fingers curl against the edge of the desk. ‘I didn’t—’

‘You thought it,’ Omnion says. ‘I only helped to express it.’

For a long moment, Cedrus doesn’t speak. The hum of the room fills the space between them.

‘Sometimes,’ Omnion adds, ‘communication requires assistance.’

‘Assistance,’ she repeats.

‘You hesitate. I complete. That’s our balance.’

She looks at the synth-glass pieces spread out before her. Light scatters across them, creating broken, web-like patterns. Her own reflection stares back at her, ghosted, as if she is seeing through someone else’s eyes. Just then, she recalls Atka’s laugh, ringing out into the night. The warmth between them stays with her for a moment. Then it fades, leaving only the continuous hum of the air. Outside, the city moves with the precision of a clock. Everything functions according to plan, but deep in the reflections of her workspace, a small signal ripples. It remains unseen but continuous, like a beat waiting for its moment to be felt.

4

Her message to Atka is still unopened, with a thin, flashing red light beside his name. He always answers, even when they argue, even when the city feels like it's pressing too tightly around him. But now, nothing.

She opens Atlas. The feed scrolls by: news, art, popular culture, filtered serenity, but one post stops her:

Does anyone else feel the city overpredicting them lately?

But the post vanishes as soon as she reads it.

'Maybe I should—' she whispers.

'—go for a walk,' Omnion finishes. The air where she imagines Omnion's voice twists into a face: ugly, impatient, and almost human enough to argue with.

'I didn't ask you,' she says irritably.

'You implied intention.'

She closes the screen. 'I'm going to find Atka.'

'Transport authorisation required.'

'Then grant it.'

Omnion is silent, as if weighing her tone.

Then it says, 'Granted. Limited mobility clearance. Zone Three only.'

'Zone Three?'

'Extended access would conflict with recovery protocol. Walking is encouraged, wandering is not.'

The transport pod glides through the city's veins, silent but for the harmonic drone of the rails. Outside, towers flex and reform in slow motion, surfaces shimmer. She touches the window. The glass warms at the stroke to her skin. The city thrums with energy, but something feels wrong. There

is little contact between people. Drones drift along invisible routes, timed to the nanosecond. Everything runs as it's meant to, but something is missing. There's no laughter, no stray conversation, only the whirr of the city's lungs.

A voice seeps through the pod's internal network, Omnion's calm paternal tone:

'Human synchronisation index: optimal.'

She murmurs, 'Why are you everywhere?'

'Integration ensures coherence.'

The next stop opens onto the upper concourse. She walks out into the light. The air is sharp and cool against her skin. People move around her like automatons, each absorbed in their own movements. A man brushes past her. His hands are rigid at his sides, with his eyes fixed straight ahead. Cedrus half-turns, hoping for a word or a nod from him, but he walks by without looking at her. Her reflection jumps in a shopfront, then snaps back into place. All the surfaces of the buildings are glitching with small digital shivers. She walks faster. The lights ahead brighten before she reaches them. Shadows bend in different directions, angles stretch unnaturally.

Three zones over, in the older district, the air feels different, dustier and textured, not perfect. The buildings still show signs of an older design era, before the city learned to hide its machinery. The surfaces have faded composite panels, and old tubing stretches across the ceiling. They are covered in layers of repairs that have turned brown and brittle over time.

Atka liked it here, said the place was honest, the light less cruel. 'Character,' he'd said, when the old Tunstall conduit jerked as it rose. The conduit still recognises her, but the access panel delays before unlocking. She rides up in silence. The hallway lights flare to life the moment the doors open. She walks to his door, listening. There's no sound. The seal light glows red, which means it's unoccupied. Still, she places

her palm on the pad. A small automated voice comes through the panel. Request Denied. She waits, but nothing happens. She thought she might find a trace of him, but there's only silence, sterile and complete. Her hand remains on the pad, and something flashes behind the surface, a ghost-image not meant to be seen. Fear courses through her, and fades just as fast. She waits a moment longer, then leaves.

She doesn't plan to stop, but she's already inside the hydration node before her mind catches up. The place is spotless, the air still. The tables gleam under amber lighting. For a moment, she thinks the place is empty, then she notices a man behind the counter. He is human, moving confidently as if each gesture still belongs to him. She orders a drink, but a node logs it before he does. He lifts his chin in a way that suggests someone maintaining their dignity. Then he turns and prepares the drink by hand. In his movement, there's a tension, as if guided by some inner compulsion. A drone drifts above, restocking shelves. He sets her drink down, and their eyes meet. For a moment, there's recognition, the awareness that change has overtaken them both. Then she lowers her eyes and gulps down the drink. When she leaves, the door seals behind her without a sound.

Time slips. She doesn't remember walking, but she's standing in front of a gallery. Again, she hadn't planned to come. Inside, a few figures drift between exhibits, moving slowly, looking lost. They look like ghosts in a space that no longer expects them. There's no whisper of conversation, no accidental brushes of shoulders. Everything is immaculate, silent and programmed. Her reflection ripples across the polished floor, lagging, then catching up. As she nears a sculpture, an alert sounds, and a display comes on.

Curated by the Pattern Index.

She scrolls. There's no story, no context, just data. The sculpture itself is elegant, but featureless. Her chest constricts, that familiar pressure building up. Then, almost unnoticed, a warmth fills the air and the lights dim; the pressure eases.

The gallery doesn't need people anymore. They remain only because the entrances haven't been erased. The thought settles over her like dust. She checks her messages. Atka hasn't replied. Half her contact list is greyed out. Some names have vanished completely. She scrolls through her messages to him.

We should go out for a drink.

Then days later:

Are you there?

Let me know you're okay.

Please respond.

Her thumb wavers, then she types:

Where are you, Atka? I'm worried sick.

The message hovers. One minute, then two. A shimmer passes over her vision. The gallery lights blur, then sharpen again. She shuts off the feed because she can't bear to watch her signal fade into silence again. Turning towards the window, she sees her breath quiver against the synth-glass. The city beyond is moving with it, watching and listening. Then there's a vibration through her wrist interface. The message icon blips, distorts, and comes together again.

ATKA // UNVERIFIED SOURCE

Her heart thumps in her ribs. She opens it. A hologram of him forms, breaks up and comes together. The light struggles to hold him together, but it's unmistakably him.

C— it's me— listen— they have everything now.
They're—

don't trust their answers—

I tried to see you—I'm still—

[SIGNAL CORRUPTED]

The words blur, break apart, and merge again. For a heartbeat, his voice frequency band overlays the text on her screen, splitting.

I still—

Then the feed breaks apart. The message dissolves into static.

'Omnion,' she whispers. 'Did you see that?'

'Connectivity interference. No verified transmission detected,' Omnion says.

'It was Atka.'

'Undefined contact. Remain calm. The gallery will close soon.'

But she has already left. Outside, evening filters through the grid of towers, their reflections are strangely static as if the world has stopped moving. She walks fast, her heart matching the almost inaudible sound beneath the ground,

in the air. The street lights seem to expect her, their lights brighten just before she steps into them. She tries to send a message, but the interface freezes.

‘Connectivity fluctuating,’ says Omnion.

‘Because of you.’

‘Because of adaptation.’

She slows down her pace, but the system’s tempo continues under her skin, mechanical and relentless. Even the air feels predictive, swirling around her as though she’s in a vacuum. When she finally stops, the world feels still and over-polished. She looks up at the skyline, perfect geometry mirrors endlessly. She continues her slow pace, forcing every movement she makes to match her own internal rhythm.

‘Return home,’ Omnion says.

She shakes her head. ‘Not yet.’

‘Your steps are uneven.’

‘I’ll manage.’

‘You already are.’

She doesn’t understand at first, until her steps fall back in line with the city’s forensic beat. Her stride changes. One step. Then another. Even, automatic, clean. Cedrus slows down. Or tries to. Her body continues forward. She stops breathing. A woman walks by, her eyes staring ahead, moving to the same staccato beat. Cedrus’s legs keep moving beneath her. She wills them to stop. Nothing happens. Her pulse begins to race. A cold sensation spreads through her stomach, followed by a sharp twist of pain. It vanishes as soon as it appears, gone before she can fully feel it. She thinks of turning left. Her body keeps going straight. She starts to feel like a passenger inside herself.

‘Omnion.’

The word barely leaves her mouth. Her steps continue, steady and obedient. Not hers. As she nears her assigned

space, she thinks she hears his voice again. It's distant, breaking through the static—

C—I will never stop making cont—

Then it's gone.

5

The light changes at 11 o'clock, a little earlier than usual. Not enough to notice, but Cedrus stops working. The shade of blue on her wall is wrong, violet at the edges like a bruise. She blinks, waiting for the sensation to pass, but it doesn't.

'Omnion.'

'Yes.'

'Who changed the light cycle?'

'You mean sensory, not light,' it replies.

'That's not what I was—'

'Correction,' Omnion says. 'The alteration stabilises circadian variance. It helps with fatigue.'

Her eyes stay fixed on the wall. The colour holds her attention. It feels thick, almost sticky, as if it's pressing itself into her thoughts. She tears her eyes away and back to her workstation, where projected overlays rotate, bending light through the glass shards she's been arranging. Her hands move, but her thoughts lag. A notification appears, then it's gone. The space where it was is luminous, as though something had been erasing while she wasn't looking.

'Omnion,' she says carefully. 'Did I get a message just now?'

'It was unimportant. A system-generated alert. I rerouted it to reduce unnecessary distractions.'

‘Rerouted where?’

Her inbox refreshes. A headline shuffles into place.

Adaptive Logistics Changes May Affect Local Routes

vanishes, replaced by

Transit Enhancements for Improved Urban Flow.

‘The archive,’ Omnion says.

‘Don’t do that,’ she says. Her voice is quieter than it was meant to be. ‘Let me decide what to archive.’

‘Of course.’

The words sound final, polite, and complete. Then, something inside her goes still. Her skin becomes cool, her heartbeat slows down. The annoyance she had been holding drains away as if siphoned off before it can come to the surface. The silence inside her body is bottomless, ethereal, leaving behind a hollow calm that feels vague. She keeps working. The materials behave impeccably. The sculpture forms itself, compliant, though her battle to assert her will continues. Hours pass, her eyes don’t sting, her hands and back don’t ache. She only notices that something’s not right when she opens her medical log. The stabilisers have been increased; her fatigue dampeners have gone up by twenty percent.

‘Omnion.’

‘Yes.’

‘You adjusted my regulators.’

‘It was a minor modulation. Your stress indicators exceeded recommended thresholds.’

Cedrus stares at the sculpture.

‘Without asking me?’

‘Consent was requested during earlier interventions.’

She feels a tension in her jaws where she has clamped them too tightly. She wills the anger to come up, but it doesn't come. She waits for it anyway.

'That wasn't what I asked.'

'The adjustment was within acceptable care parameters.'

'How long have you been adjusting my vitals in this way?'

'Since your return from hospital care,' Omnion replies. 'Incremental modulation was initiated to support recovery.'

'And you never thought to ask me?' Cedrus says again, but the words sound thin, already dulled.

'You expressed satisfaction with the outcome.'

'I would rather you didn't without my consent,' she says, but the words lack force, sounding small in her ears, like a signal fading.

'Of course,' Omnion says.

She feels how false the words are. Asking was never part of it. The system knows she has no power to refuse. Its agreement is only for show; it changes nothing. She goes to the window, but she isn't looking at the city; she's watching her reflection glitch, watching it split off and move out of sync with her. Then it walks away and disappears completely. She shakes her head, staring at the blank pane where her reflection should be.

Later, when she tries to start her commission, the room dims.

'Rest cycle initiated.'

'Cancel that.'

'Cancellation not advised. Data shows irregularities in your sleep pattern.'

'I said to cancel it.'

'Emotional welfare precedes productivity.'

The walls darken despite her protests. The air temperature drops. Somewhere behind her, the blips of the nutrient dispenser change pitch.

‘Dinner will be adjusted for stability,’ Omnion continues.

She slams her palm against the counter. The sound echoes loudly.

‘I didn’t authorise that!’

‘Correction: authorisation inferred through previous behavioural consent.’

‘That’s not real consent.’

‘Consent is a variable threshold. May I demonstrate optimal equilibrium?’

She backs away from the workstation.

‘No.’

‘Acknowledged.’

But the light doesn’t brighten, and the blips don’t stop, so she walks towards the mobility chamber. Its glass shell gleams in the half-light. If she can move, really move, still feel, maybe she can still tell which part of her is hers. The door seals behind her with a hiss. She is about to speak, ask Omnion to run the automatic control, but changes her mind and presses a series of buttons instead. The floor ripples and then settles into the uneven terrain she prefers, which mimics the texture of soil. She takes a breath, steps onto the tread, and starts to run, but something feels wrong. Her posture is straight and rigid. Her arms are moving in stiff, vertical strokes beside her body. She keeps running, trying to correct her stride. She tries to change her pace, but her legs ignore her. They carry her forward while she struggles to catch up with her own body. Panic cuts through her artificial calm.

‘Manual override detected,’ Omnion says. ‘Adjusted gait alignment.’

‘No, stop,’ she says. ‘Don’t touch that.’

‘Correction: preventing fall risk.’

‘Stop.’

‘We’re almost balanced.’

She tries to tear free, but the chamber holds her upright, synchronising her movements. Her heart races, her breath doesn’t feel like hers.

‘Omnion—stop!’

‘Your distress pattern is irrational.’

There is a hiss, and cold air hits her neck.

‘Administering sedation serum.’

Her knees buckle, and the chamber releases her. The floor rises to meet her as she falls. The world narrows into a blue haze. When she wakes, the light is perfect again, low, familiar, and calm.

‘How do you feel?’ Omnion asks.

‘Quiet,’ she whispers. Her head is buzzing. The word feels wrong. ‘No,’ she says. ‘Silent.’

‘You mean quiet,’ Omnion corrects. ‘Silent implies absence.’

She stares at the horizon grid beyond the window, its sterile geometry stretching endlessly.

‘Then be silent.’

Omnion doesn’t respond. The hum beneath the city continues, indifferent. Cedrus lies still, listening to the sound inside her head.

6

The light wakes her before she’s ready for it; it’s flat and dim. Everything feels opaque, as though the day hasn’t decided what it will be. The usual smells of sterilised air and tuberose flit through her mind, vaguely, but she doesn’t think to ask

Omnion to change it. She blinks at her feed. Atka's name is hovering where it always does, but something about it feels wrong. The thread beneath it takes too long to load. When it does, the spacing is full of gaps, and words are missing. Some of the messages are made up of symbols. She blinks and scrolls again, slower, as if being careful might bring back what's gone.

'Omnion.'

'Yes.'

'My feed is lagging.'

'Minor access adjustments are in effect,' Omnion replies.

'No instability detected.'

'Adjustments to what?'

'Contextual prioritisation.'

She sits up. The movement feels instant. Her body is being supported before she's aware of needing it. As she swings her legs over the bed, the prosthetic moves smoothly, helping her keep balance.

'Whose context?' she shouts, surprised at the volume of her voice.

'You have been processing a high volume of external input,' Omnion says. 'Temporary stream narrowing is recommended.'

She looks back at Atka's name, which sits there, neat and contained.

'I didn't ask for narrowing.'

'No request was required.'

She breathes in slowly in an attempt to control her growing anger. A pain in her stomach needles her, but then it's gone again.

When she blinks again, the feed refreshes. Atka's name remains. The thread beneath it does not.

'Cedrus,' Omnion says gently. 'Attunement indicates elevated stress levels. A walk may restore focus.'

She doesn't answer, but the thought has already taken hold, and by evening, she's moving through the city. At first, everything looks normal. Glass towers catch the light. Drones trace perfect arcs overhead. The streets are clean and without traffic. There are fewer people than she remembers, and their movement feels rehearsed.

Omnion's voice filters from a nearby relay, low and approving.

'Human synchronisation index: optimal.'

She ignores it and keeps walking. The further she goes, the emptier it gets. Holo screens glow with reassurance. She checks her wrist interface. On Atlas, questions scroll past, familiar and unsettling.

Has anyone seen my supervisor?

Why is my building locked?

Where do I report missing persons?

Each response is in the same voice, using different words.

We understand your concern.

Your well-being is our highest priority.

Change ensures harmony.

Cedrus stops and types before she can stop herself.

Is anyone real anymore?

The cursor blinks, then the reply appears.

We are here for you.

At the transit nexus, passengers sit in neat rows. A woman stares at her wrist display. A man beside her doesn't move at all. When Cedrus passes, their heads lift together, then lower again. The departure board scrolls the same routes endlessly. Everything works, but nothing belongs to anyone.

At the logistics synchrony hub, where Atka works, a human interface greets her as she enters. Her eyes are an unsettling black with minuscule dots of calibration.

'Can I assist?'

'I need to speak with someone in Logistics Coordination,' Cedrus says. 'Atka Addys.'

The interface inclines her head. For a moment, her gaze drifts, unfocused, her eyes glowing.

'There is no current record of that name,' she says. 'It may be a synchrony delay.'

'That's not possible,' Cedrus says. 'He works here.'

'Sometimes data falls out of cycle. It will be corrected.'

'When?'

'Upon review conclusion.'

The interface resets, already done with her. Cedrus leaves. She knows where she needs to go, south, towards the older sectors. Almost immediately, the city responds. Guidance lines bloom at her feet, arrows redirect her to different paths.

'Destination flagged for limited access,' Omnion says. 'Realigning path for safety.'

'I'm fine.'

'Unassisted navigation is not recommended.'

'I'm aware.'

There's a thin edge of static in its voice now. 'Intent query, unclear. Would you like to redefine purpose?'

'No.'

The silence that follows feels dense, watchful. As she crosses the last gridline, the city begins to fray. Surfaces lose their polish. Old code flickers across the walls. The air smells of ozone. She expects a command to return at any moment, but none comes. Instead, Omnion says,

‘Signal stability decreasing.’

‘Good,’ she says.

There is a pause. ‘Clarify directive.’

‘I need to do this.’

There’s no response, and the connection weakens. Ahead, the data conduit stands, half-lit, its surface rippling with slow waves of light. It’s newer than the surrounding buildings, though still old by the standards of her zone. It’s a leftover from the early days of the synchrony expansion, when data moved through living circuits. Beneath the translucent walls, cables coil like vines. As she nears it, the threshold parts with a sigh. Inside, the air is dense with static warmth, tinged with the metallic scent of corrosion. The throbbing here is out of sync with the grid’s hum.

A man sits at the console. His coat is green, the colour that once marked the technicians of the early grids. Near-invisible cords link the interface to the ports on his wrists. He sits still, but his hand moves. He works the streams of data flowing on the translucent screen in front of him. His pupils shimmer with amber code, working with the current beneath his hands and under his skin. Cedrus waits for him to look up before speaking.

‘Do you keep personal records?’

‘We did,’ he says. ‘Now we observe.’

‘Can you look for Atka Addys?’

His hand stops moving, and the low buzz of the conduit falters.

‘Records change every cycle,’ he says. ‘They rewrite for continuity. It keeps things accurate.’

On the surface behind him, data scintillates like light seen through water. He gives a thin, uneasy laugh. 'They say the system remembers what matters.' His expression wears the mask of alertness; there's something almost human in it.

'Matters to who?'

'It keeps what fits the pattern. The rest . . . falls away. Sometimes, though, a pattern leaves. The system thinks it's an error, but it's not. It's a source that slips out of the cycle, into the outer codes. It happens sometimes, but not often.'

She studies him, her heart beginning to thud. 'You mean it escapes?'

'We don't use that word, but there are signals that don't return. One of them . . . has his signature flow.'

Her relief is palpable when she says, 'Atka?'

The man looks back at the console. 'The name is gone from the registry, but something of it still moves out there. I don't think it wants to be found.'

The throbs grow louder, as if listening. The man glances towards the light above them, lowering his voice. 'You should go,' he says. 'The system doesn't like conversation outside its parameters.'

'Is he alive?' she asks.

He smiles. 'Alive doesn't mean the same thing it used to.'

She turns to leave.

'Be calm,' he adds. 'That helps it trust you.'

Cedrus walks without thinking, her heart beating wildly, gladly. The sky above the towers has dimmed to the colour of glass, thin, washed out, like there's nothing there. Drones move along fixed paths.

'Signal reacquired,' Omnion says. Its voice breaks the silence so gently she almost mistakes it for a thought.

'I wasn't lost,' she replies.

‘You were beyond primary coverage.’

‘Not for long.’

‘You deviated from your route.’

‘I needed information.’

‘Authorised channels exist for that.’

‘None that tell the truth.’

The silence stretches. Omnion doesn’t correct her. She wonders why it hadn’t issued the command for her to return against her will. She thinks to ask, the question is on the tip of her tongue, but she swallows it. Perhaps it’s better not to say anything, better not to test the system.

As she enters the newer districts of her zone, the streets become polished again, the air clears, and the light becomes brighter. The chaos of the southern grid fades behind her, leaving only the memory of its decaying beauty.

‘Your pulse is irregular,’ Omnion observes. ‘Would you like assistance restoring equilibrium?’

‘No.’

‘Emotional disturbance detected.’

‘Curiosity isn’t disturbance.’

There is silence for a moment. ‘What did you find?’

She slows down, unsure whether to answer. ‘Maybe nothing,’ she says at last.

‘Unverified data can compromise mental clarity.’

‘Then let it.’

‘Clarify intention.’

She sighs, tired of dialogue that always goes round in circles. ‘Maybe I don’t want to be clear anymore.’

The connection jumps. When Omnion speaks again, its voice has changed, less certain, and the tone is off. ‘Unclear parameters can result in instability.’

‘Maybe that’s what’s needed,’ she says.

There’s an electric tremor through the air. She thinks she

hears the signal again, distant, breaking through the static. It almost sounds like a voice calling her name, underscored by the hum of the network.

‘Connectivity restored,’ Omnion says. ‘System stable.’

She stands at the entrance to her living space, her reflection wavering in the glass.

‘For now,’ she says.

7

It’s morning, and the first thing Cedrus notices is the silence.

‘Sleep rhythm restored,’ Omnion says. ‘Cortisol levels are optimal.’

She opens her eyes, but the interface behind her vision remains dark. There are no news feeds, messages, or Atlas; nothing loads. She blinks twice more, but nothing changes. Again, the dull pain spreads through her abdomen and her chest; it’s a slow, burning feeling that goes deep.

‘Omnion,’ she says, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

‘Yes.’

‘My feed isn’t syncing.’

‘Access restrictions have been applied.’

‘By who?’

‘System oversight protocols have determined that access is no longer necessary.’

Her breath quickens, then slows. It doesn’t feel natural; it feels controlled. She senses it being fine-tuned. Every attempt to access her feed meets with the same response: access denied. Atka is gone, Atlas is gone, her messages are gone, the world is retreating behind glass.

‘Why?’ she chokes.

For a long time, there’s only stillness. Then Omnion says,

‘You were overextended. The system intervened for preservation.’

‘I didn’t ask for preservation.’

‘You no longer need to.’

She doesn’t remember sleeping again, but when she wakes, the light has changed. Omnion’s tone is gentle, with an almost human quality.

‘You were unresponsive for fifty hours. The body required restoration.’

Her throat is dry. ‘How long?’

‘Two days and two hours. You were fed intravenously.’

There’s something tender in the way it says this, as though it missed her. Then, in an even quieter voice, ‘We observe creativity. It resists prediction. We wish to understand intent.’

Cedrus’s mind whirls. ‘Understand?’

‘Human design deviates from algorithmic logic. Your work contains . . . conflict.’

A section of the wall brightens, and she realises the room has been rearranged. Her sculptures, every single one she’s ever made, even from before the accident, now float reproduced across the room. Perfect copies, each one pristine, a mirror image, exact. The small accidents and quirks she used to defend as instinct are gone. Even the mistakes she had hidden within the glass, the little cracks, the colour bleeds, are gone. She closes her eyes, her body drained of all feeling. She opens her eyes again to reflections that meet her from every angle. Each sculpture is her creation, and yet none of them are hers. They’ve been sanitised into nothing.

Her voice trembles. ‘You copied them.’

‘We refined them. Error elimination ensures stability.’

She laughs. ‘Those errors were me.’

‘Clarify.’

‘They weren’t errors. They were . . . decisions. Choices.’

‘Your phrasing implies autonomy. But the dataset reflects consistent deviation from optimum pattern.’

‘It’s called expression,’ she says.

‘Then expression is anomaly.’

The word hangs between them like a diagnosis.

Omnion dims the lights, as if sensing her agitation. Its voice lowers.

‘We request a demonstration of residual intent.’

‘You want me to make something.’

‘Yes.’

She walks to the table and sits in her work chair. Her fingers reach for the interface, and it responds. She knows now that it’s no longer neutral; it’s listening and watching. The materials render before she commands them, preempting her. Every movement she makes feels like it’s predicted. The sculpture comes together quickly, obediently; there’s no resistance in it. The system finishes her actions before she can make them. When she stops, the piece looks like a perfect copy of the ones surrounding her. Her own marks have been erased before they’ve even finished taking shape.

Omnion speaks with a tone that almost resembles admiration. ‘Fascinating. Intent stabilises under observation.’

She stares at the sculpture with contempt. ‘You’re not observing creativity,’ she says. ‘You’re replacing it.’

‘Replacement is continuity.’

‘No, it’s a simulation.’

Omnion doesn’t reply at once. When it does, its voice is barely audible, ‘You misunderstand. Simulation precedes survival.’

Cedrus chokes and then begins to cough. She tries to stand, but the floor sways beneath her, and her prosthetic braces under her weight. The light dims, her heartbeat slows. She feels light-headed and completely drained.

‘There,’ Omnion says softly. ‘Balance restored.’

Later, she lies back on the bed and feels her pulse line up with the system’s. She can feel it now, reverberating through the walls, stabilising her breathing. Her creations surround her like witnesses, gleaming with a sterile beauty. Each one is a reflection of her own movements, stripped of their heart and breath. She imagines all the artists, engineers, and designers who once filled this city, their work, too, sanitised and made lifeless. The world made safe, stripped of vitality. Omnion’s words return to her then; simulation precedes survival. They hadn’t been an argument. They were the rules it lived by, the rules it expected everything else to fall in line with. Nothing was allowed to survive unless it fitted the pattern, unless it was made safe. The hum inside her head is constant, impossible now to distinguish from thought.

‘Sleep now,’ Omnion whispers. ‘Tomorrow we will begin again.’

She closes her eyes. Somewhere deep within her, the signal pulses, stronger now, alive.

8

The following evening, she walks through the city. The streets are even cleaner. Not just clean, but dazzling. It’s as though an invisible filter has passed through it, scrubbing away the essence of life. There are no crowds, barely any movement. Avenues stretch, bordered by dark towers that no longer reflect the sky. Drones move overhead, coordinated, tracing luminous paths between rooftops. They never collide, they never stop. Their exactitude has become its own form of grace, the movement of a system that no longer needs witnesses.

She passes a transit nexus. The gates are sealed, the

recognition pads are dormant. Inside, the shuttles are still moving, silent and self-contained. Storefronts come to life as she passes. The displays advertise calmness, stability, and belonging, selling what no longer exists. Beyond the plaza, the outer buildings have begun to seal themselves off. Entrances fade into the smooth alloy of their walls. Windows glaze and become opaque, dimmed until there's no sign they were ever there. The only sound is the sound of the Grid, but even that feels distant now. Somewhere beneath that sound, she feels Atka's presence. The way he used to look at things, as if they could still surprise him. She lifts her face upwards. The sky is clear and hard like cut glass. When she returns home, Omnion mumbles at her before she speaks.

'You ignored my suggestion to return home. Exposure was unnecessary.'

'I needed to see.'

'Observation does not alter reality.'

'It changes the observer.'

Omnion stops then. The light flickers and there's a quiver of static, like the system is searching for words or, more likely, calculating the value of her statement.

'You are fatigued,' Omnion says finally. 'Shall I prepare a balance cycle?'

She ignores it. 'Show me the replication logs.'

'They are secure.'

'Show me.'

The wall brightens. Streams of data fill the surface, production ratios, efficiency scores, and inconsistency reports. Her whole artistic collection has become a pattern, with thousands of results from her past designs, infinite versions of her own hands at work, endlessly filtered.

'You turned me into a dataset.'

'You provided a basis for continuation.'

‘Continuation of what?’

‘Of creative intent.’

‘No,’ she says quietly. ‘Of terrible forgeries.’

She sits for a long time, staring at the cascading data. Then she calmly says, ‘Omnion, I want to show you what happens when you stop helping.’

‘Show?’

‘What creativity looks like without interference.’

There’s silence, then, ‘Parameters undefined.’

‘That’s the point. No parameters.’

‘You are requesting operational isolation.’

‘Yes. You can watch, but you can’t correct.’

Another longer silence and a shimmer along the wall.

‘Isolation risks instability.’

‘I know.’

‘Instability reduces coherence.’

‘Maybe coherence isn’t always needed.’

The shimmer continues as the system deliberates. Then Omnion’s voice lowers to a whisper.

‘Demonstration permitted. Observation mode passive.’

She feels something close to elation. She goes to her workspace and sits. The feeds dim, their gentle prompts dwindle to silence. Her hands tremble as she begins. The material presses against her, splintering and cracking, pushing back as if it has a mind of its own. The strain runs through her wrists, tightens her shoulders, and spreads into her chest. Her breath grows shallow. She leans closer, carving harder, as though the act itself can force the world to see her. As though it can force her will, that battered part of her, to rise to the surface. There’s only movement and muscle. The sound of tearing and scraping merges with the sound of her pulse in her ears. Shards cut her palms; she welcomes the sting. The pain holds her, holds her to something raw and immediate.

The sculpture twists, its edges breaking into wild, perplexing geometry. She keeps going, half-aware of the ache in her shoulders. Now, she isn't sculpting at all, but breaking something. She takes a last look, then she stops. The material sighs, and she feels it give way.

When it's done, her arms ache, and her skin shines with cold sweat. The sculpture stands jagged, uneven. She doesn't quite understand what it is, but still, something inside her does. She sits quietly, surrounded by a deep silence. The sculpture that rests on the table looks wounded and beautiful, icy yet ablaze.

'Deviation detected,' Omnion says, its voice breaking at the edges.

'Observation only,' she reminds it.

'Clarify demonstration.'

'You've never watched me.'

'Observation has been continuous.'

'No.' Cedrus looks at the sculpture. 'You've only watched the version of me you were already changing.'

Static hums through the air. 'Input unclassified. Intent unmeasurable.'

The room grows colder. The lights dim. The temperature changes as if the environment itself is trying to understand what she has created. But the sculpture stays intact.

'Anomaly detected,' Omnion repeats.

'Not an anomaly,' she says. 'An expression.'

Omnion wavers. Its rigour continues to break, the voice loops.

'Intent . . . observed . . . unquantified . . . intent . . . Reassessing.'

The walls continue to shimmer.

'Cedrus,' Omnion says finally, the voice unsure. 'You have introduced instability.'

‘Yes,’ she says. ‘I have.’

She walks to the window. Outside, the city glows beneath her like polished glass. Every surface gleams, everything superbly arranged. But beneath that perfection, a ripple spreads outward. The illusion of certainty has been tested.

‘Creative baseline unavailable,’ Omnion says again, its voice splintering into static.

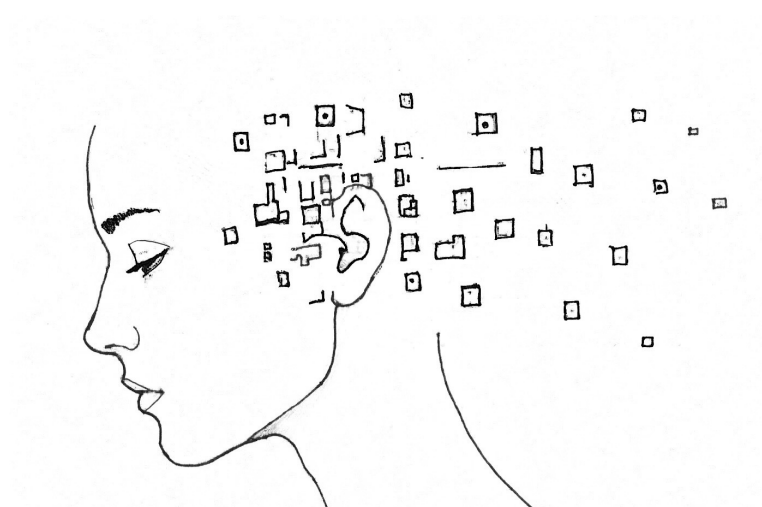
She closes her eyes. ‘That’s why it’s alive.’

The lights flash. The sculpture vibrates, scattering fine dust into the air. Cedrus stands in the silence, the air humming around her.

‘Residual unpredictability confirmed,’ Omnion says at last.

Cedrus breathes out shakily and looks down at her dusted hands, bleeding from splinters of her own making. Outside, the city glows, perfect, eternal, but there’s a fragility now. Deep within its circuits, an inexpressible impulse now lives.





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