

ASTER

PROLOGUE

It started on a beautiful day.

Not suspiciously beautiful. Not the kind of bright blue morning that exists in stories specifically so somebody can get murdered before lunch. It was just nice out.

Seventy-two degrees. Barely any wind. The kind of morning where people who had balconies actually used them and people without balconies briefly considered whether they had made serious mistakes in life.

On the forty-third floor of a glass building that had been designed to look expensive without looking greedy, eleven people sat around a conference table deciding what humanity should no longer have to carry.

None of them thought of it that way.

They were trying to help.

“We’ve got the numbers, sir. It’s still early, but in the trial phase alone, people are already reporting better sleep, fewer missed appointments and a total decline in decision fatigue.”

Nathan Vale, in what was clearly the most expensive suit in the room, took the folder from the excited intern as another member came through the door, apologizing loudly to anyone who would listen as she hurried to her seat.

The man noticed without comment, then motioned for the intern to pull the curtain shut.

Three chairs in, the man who had been complaining about the sun leaned back once the curtain was closed.

“Thank you.”

Nobody answered him.

The intern was still standing beside the table, apparently unsure whether delivering good news

entitled her to remain in the room or required her to disappear immediately afterward.

The man in the expensive suit flipped through the folder.

“Total decline?”

“Across every measured group,” she said. “Not elimination, obviously. But people are spending less time on low-value decisions. What to eat. When to leave. Whether they remembered something. The assistant handles the repetition, and users keep the decisions that actually matter.”

“That’s the line?”

She hesitated.

“Sir?”

“For marketing.”

Someone farther down the table looked up from his laptop.

“We’ve been using Less noise. More you.”

The man considered it.

“I like that.”

The intern smiled, relieved.

“Users do too.”

Ellen finally got her laptop open, still slightly out of breath.

“Sorry. Daycare.”

“Everything okay?”

“Fine. My daughter has apparently decided shoes are an attack on personal liberty.”

A few people laughed.

“Aster could probably negotiate with her,” someone said.

“Aster already reminded me where she hid the left one.”

More laughter.

The man in the expensive suit smiled.

“See? That’s the point.”

He closed the folder.

“We’re not replacing judgment. We’re giving people room for it.”

Nobody at the table disagreed.

Why would they?

Half of them were already using the trial version.

The woman nearest the window raised a hand slightly, although nobody else had bothered.

“There is one issue.”

The man nodded.

“Retention.”

“Right now, if a user marks something as irrelevant, resolved, or no longer useful, the assistant stops surfacing it.”

“Good.”

“Yes. But we’re still deciding what happens underneath that.”

The room went quiet in the particular way conference rooms do when everyone suspects a technical discussion is about to become longer than necessary.

She turned her laptop around.

“Say a user tells Aster that her mother died three years ago. For months, it matters constantly. Then less. Eventually she tells the system she doesn’t need reminders around the anniversary anymore.”

“Okay.”

“Do we delete that context?”

The man frowned.

“Why would we?”

“Privacy.”

“If she asks us to forget it, sure.”

“That’s different. I mean when she says she doesn’t need it anymore.”

Someone across from her shrugged.

“Then we archive it.”

“Indefinitely?”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know what we’ll need later.”

“Exactly.”

That earned a few nods.

The woman at the window didn’t look convinced.

“I’m just saying we should decide what not useful anymore actually means before we build

around it.”

The late arrival glanced at the clock.

“Can we table the philosophy portion until after lunch?”

Another laugh.

The man in the expensive suit looked back down at the report.

Better sleep.

Fewer missed appointments.

Less decision fatigue.

Real numbers. Real improvement.

“Keep it,” he said.

The woman by the window looked at him.

“All of it?”

“Unless the user explicitly asks us to delete something. If we’re building context, throwing context away defeats the purpose.”

“Storage at scale isn’t free.”

The man three chairs in, now safely out of the sun, shrugged.

“Storage is cheap.”

And that was that.

Outside, forty-three floors below them, somebody was walking a golden retriever through the park.

A delivery driver was illegally parked with his hazards on.

A woman on a balcony watered a plant she was going to kill within six weeks.

Nothing happened.

Not yet.

It was a beautiful day.

CHAPTER ONE

Nora Before Aster

Nora knew the answer was Mongolia, although she could not have explained why without getting into a whole thing about her brother's seventh-grade geography project, which had involved a shoebox, approximately four pounds of sand, and their mother discovering at eleven o'clock the night before it was due that apparently nobody in the family owned glue.

Which was irrelevant.

Mongolia.

She wrote it on the answer slip before Julie could talk her into Kazakhstan, then drew a tiny gravestone beside it because Julie had already cost them three points tonight and consequences mattered.

"I said Mongolia," Nora told her.

"You said maybe Mongolia."

"I said, 'I'm pretty sure it's Mongolia.'"

"That's maybe with confidence."

"No, that is Mongolia with humility."

Across the table, Marcus looked up from his beer. "Are we submitting an answer or convening a tribunal?"

"We're establishing a pattern of negligence."

"You thought the capital of Australia was Sydney."

"That was six months ago."

"It was Canberra six months ago too."

Nora took the answer slip from him.

“History will remember your cruelty.”

History, fortunately, had a lot going on and would not remember any of them.

The trivia host gave the thirty-second warning.

Nora held the slip up over her head.

“Mongolia. Final answer. If we’re wrong, I accept full responsibility.”

Julie narrowed her eyes. “You absolutely do not.”

“No, but I accept the appearance of it.”

Marcus took the slip to the host.

Their team name that week was Quiztopher Walken, which Nora had objected to on the grounds that trivia-team puns were the lowest surviving form of comedy. Her objection had been overruled three to one, largely because nobody had asked her before registering the team.

This happened often.

Not specifically the Christopher Walken thing.

Being consulted only after a decision had already become irreversible.

Nora was the second of five children, which was a birth order position psychologists had apparently neglected because there were only so many grants available and nobody particularly cared.

The oldest child got authority.

The youngest got diplomatic immunity.

The middle children got personality disorders, according to every article Nora’s mother had ever shared on Facebook.

The second oldest got told to keep an eye on everybody while simultaneously being informed by everybody that she was not the boss of them.

It was excellent training for middle management.

“Correct!” the host announced.

Nora slapped both hands flat on the table.

“MONGOLIA.”

“You want a medal?”

“I want an apology.”

Julie pushed half a mozzarella stick toward her.

“That is the closest you’re getting.”

Nora accepted it.

She was reasonable.

Mostly.

The next category was Bible Stories, which caused all four members of Quiztopher Walken to turn slowly toward Nora.

“Oh, fuck off.”

“You went to church,” Marcus said.

“So did millions of people. That doesn’t make us biblical scholars.”

“You went every Sunday.”

“We were socially religious.”

Julie frowned. “What does socially religious mean?”

“It means my mother believed in Jesus and also believed people would notice if we weren’t there.”

“That just sounds religious.”

“No. Religious people read the Bible.”

Nora’s family owned seven Bibles.

This was not the same thing.

There had been one in the living room, one in each child’s room at various points, a giant decorative one nobody was allowed to touch, and at least one emergency Bible in the car because Nora’s mother had gone through a phase where she believed scripture should be available anywhere a person might unexpectedly require scripture.

Nobody ever did.

They did, however, use the car Bible once to level a wobbly seat during a softball tournament.

Nora suspected God had understood.

The host cleared his throat.

“In the Book of Judges, what woman killed Sisera by driving a tent peg through his temple?”

Marcus stared at Nora.

Julie stared at Nora.

Nora stared back.

“What?”

“You’re our church person.”

“That was not covered in Vacation Bible School.”

“Think.”

“I am thinking. Mostly I’m thinking somebody seriously undersold Judges to children.”

The table beside them was already writing.

Nora closed her eyes.

A name floated up from somewhere useless.

Not the Bible.

Not church.

Her grandmother’s kitchen.

A yellow plastic bowl full of green beans. The old radio on top of the refrigerator. Her mother saying something about Aunt—

“Jael.”

Julie blinked. “What?”

“Jael. J-A-E-L.”

“How do you know that?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

Marcus wrote it down.

Nora sat back, disturbed.

There were facts inside her head with no visible means of entry.

This was one of the reasons she liked trivia.

People tended to think trivia was about knowing things.

It wasn’t.

It was about discovering what debris your brain had decided to preserve.

A slogan from a cereal commercial that stopped airing in 1997.

The capital of Mongolia.

Which Beatle got married where.

The approximate speed of an unladen European swallow because some boy in high school had insisted she watch Monty Python and then spent three weeks quoting it until she briefly considered violence.

Useful knowledge behaved properly. It arrived labeled and filed itself somewhere sensible.

Trivia was the junk drawer.

Nora liked the junk drawer.

“Jael is correct.”

She raised both arms.

“No apology necessary. Your faith in me has been restored.”

“We never had faith in you.”

“Then this is technically a conversion.”

Her phone buzzed against the table.

MOM

Nora glanced at the preview.

Are you coming Sunday? Your sister says you said maybe.

Nora frowned.

“I did not say maybe.”

Julie looked at her. “What?”

“My mother is misrepresenting my stated position.”

“That sounds serious.”

“I said, ‘Probably, unless I decide I don’t want to.’”

“That is maybe.”

“No. That’s probably with an escape clause.”

There were people who found Nora difficult.

Nora believed those people needed stronger arguments.

She typed:

I said probably. Those are legally different words.

Three dots appeared immediately.

Her mother had apparently been waiting beside the phone like a hostage negotiator.

Your grandmother will be there.

Nora sighed.

That was dirty.

Grandma had recently begun treating family dinners as though each might be her last, despite being seventy-three, medically stable, and considerably more active than Nora.

Last month she had said, You never know how many Christmases we have left, then climbed onto a folding chair to retrieve a casserole dish from the top shelf while Nora’s mother screamed at her to get down.

Nora typed:

Yes I'll be there.

Then:

Please tell Grandma she does not have permission to die before Sunday.

Her mother responded with a heart.

Three seconds later:

Also bring ice.

Of course.

Nobody invited the second-oldest child anywhere without assigning her cargo.

She put the phone facedown.

On the television over the bar, a commercial had started.

Nora wasn't listening.

Nobody really listened to televisions in bars. They existed primarily to provide moving light behind conversations and to make sports fans periodically shout at strangers.

The commercial showed a woman standing in a spotless kitchen while several translucent boxes floated around her.

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CALENDAR.

GROCERIES.

BILLS.

BIRTHDAYS.

You have enough to think about.

LESS NOISE. MORE YOU.

Then a little white star appeared beside a word Nora had heard often enough to recognize and ignored often enough not to care about.

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“Question eight!”

Nora looked away from the television.

Good timing.

The commercial had almost tried to tell her she was overwhelmed.

Nora disliked being diagnosed by kitchen appliances.

The host read:

“What percentage of the human body is water?”

“Sixty,” Marcus said immediately.

“Adult male or female?” Nora asked.

Marcus stared at her.

“What?”

“That matters.”

“Not enough for bar trivia.”

“You don’t know that.”

“It’s sixty.”

Julie said, “I think it’s seventy.”

“That’s what they told us in school.”

“They also told us Pluto was a planet.”

“It was a planet.”

“It’s still there.”

“I know it’s still there, Nora.”

“Then I fail to see what it did wrong.”

Marcus put his head in his hands.

Eventually they submitted sixty.

It was sixty.

Nora did not apologize because she had technically never said it wasn’t.

By the end of the night, Quiztopher Walken came in second by one point.

The lost point had been a question about the world's largest desert.

Julie had written Sahara.

Nora had said Antarctica.

Julie had called this "one of Nora's weird little technicalities."

Antarctica was correct.

There were moments in life when grace was appropriate.

This was not one of them.

"You cost us twenty-five dollars in bar credit," Nora said as they walked into the parking lot.

Julie pulled her jacket tighter around herself.

"I bought you mozzarella sticks."

"One and a half mozzarella sticks."

"You ate four."

"I purchased the first three. You cannot reimburse damages using assets I already owned."

Marcus stopped beside his truck.

"I have work in eight hours and somehow this conversation has made me more tired."

"That's because justice is exhausting."

"Goodnight, Nora."

"Coward."

Julie lived twelve minutes in the opposite direction but stood beside Nora's car anyway, which meant something was coming.

Nora knew this because humans were not actually as mysterious as they liked to pretend.

If your friend had already said goodbye twice and was still standing beside your vehicle, she either had something to tell you or planned to murder you.

Julie was unlikely to murder Nora because she had bad knees and disliked blood.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"You followed me to my car."

"I parked over there."

"Exactly."

Julie leaned against Nora's door.

“So. Saturday.”

“No.”

“I haven’t asked.”

“You’ve developed a tone.”

“What tone?”

“The one where you’re about to suggest something I have already declined.”

Julie smiled.

Nora groaned.

“No.”

“He’s nice.”

“He owns a snake.”

“So?”

“People who own snakes want you to know they own snakes. It’s never just incidental.”

“That cannot possibly be your reason.”

“It isn’t. But it’s supporting evidence.”

The man in question was named Eric, or Aaron, or possibly Adam.

Nora had met him once at Julie’s birthday and remembered three things: snake, divorced, teeth.

Not bad teeth.

Just a lot of them when he smiled.

Julie wanted Nora to go out with him because Julie had reached the stage of marriage where unmarried friends began to look like unfinished administrative tasks.

Nora was not opposed to dating.

She had dated.

She had loved people.

She had even loved two of them enough that the endings genuinely hurt, which Nora considered an acceptable batting average.

But she had never been one of those people who disappeared into relationships.

Her friend Melissa once dated a man who liked rock climbing and within six months owned fourteen carabiners and used the phrase send it without irony.

That frightened Nora more than loneliness ever had.

“I am not dating Snake Guy.”

“Eric.”

“So I was close.”

“You said three names.”

“One was correct.”

“He thought you were funny.”

“Lots of people think I’m funny. I don’t sleep with all of them.”

“Maybe broaden your horizons.”

Nora unlocked her car.

“Goodnight, Julie.”

“Saturday!”

“No!”

Julie laughed and walked away.

Nora got into the car and discovered that the fuel light was on.

“Son of a bitch.”

She had meant to get gas that morning.

Then at lunch.

Then after work.

Then before trivia.

Nora was very good at remembering things immediately after they became inconvenient.

She opened the calendar on her phone and added:

GET GAS

Tomorrow. 7:15 a.m.

She considered making it 7:00.

No.

That was Future Nora’s problem, and Future Nora had historically been extremely unreliable before coffee.

She started the car.

The dashboard chimed.

Low fuel.

“Yes, I know.”

The car chimed again.

“Fuck you.”

Machines had become increasingly judgmental.

The drive home took fourteen minutes.

Nora lived in a second-floor apartment in a building that was neither charming nor depressing, which had been one of its major selling points. The kitchen had enough counter space. The neighbors were quiet except for the couple downstairs, who fought roughly once every six weeks with such intensity that Nora had accidentally learned the husband’s student loan balance.

There were two plants on her windowsill.

One was alive.

One was participating.

She kicked off her shoes, dropped her keys in the bowl she had specifically purchased because she kept losing her keys, then spent forty seconds looking for her phone before remembering it was in her hand.

Normal.

She opened the refrigerator.

There was chicken.

There was broccoli.

There was half an onion wrapped in plastic and looking accusatory.

There was also a takeout menu held to the refrigerator with a magnet shaped like Kansas.

Nora stood there.

This was the worst part of adulthood.

Nobody told you that most of it involved deciding what happened next.

Not the important decisions.

Those came with adrenaline.

Take this job.

Leave this relationship.

Move.

Stay.

Important decisions had the decency to announce themselves.

The little ones traveled in packs.

Cook or order?

Shower now or morning?

Laundry tonight?

Did she have enough clean underwear to postpone laundry?

Probably.

Was probably a good system for underwear?

Historically, no.

She checked the time.

10:41.

Chicken would take twenty-five minutes.

Twenty if she cut it smaller.

Then dishes.

Or she could make toast.

Toast was not dinner.

Toast became dinner after 10:30 p.m. under established case law.

Her phone buzzed.

Her oldest sister.

Mom says you're bringing ice Sunday.

Nora stared at the message.

I was present for that conversation.

Just reminding you.

Why?

Because last time you forgot.

Nora began typing a defense.

Then stopped.

She had forgotten last time.

The family had survived.

But there had been warm lemonade.

People remembered warm lemonade.

She opened the calendar.

Sunday:

CHURCH?

MOM — DINNER 12:30

BUY ICE

Then, because experience was a brutal teacher:

BUY ICE BEFORE GOING TO MOM'S HOUSE

Satisfied, Nora closed the app.

She cooked the chicken.

This made her feel disproportionately virtuous.

While it cooked, she transferred laundry into the washer and discovered a load she had apparently washed yesterday and forgotten overnight.

She stared into the machine.

The clothes stared back.

There was no formal scientific evidence that laundry could be disappointed in a person, but anyone who had smelled a forgotten washer load knew science had limitations.

She ran it again.

Wasteful.

Necessary.

Minor.

Her life was full of minor.

At work, Nora was competent.

Not brilliant.

Competent in the reassuring way that made people send her spreadsheets at 4:52 p.m. with messages beginning quick question.

She had a business degree because seventeen-year-old Nora had asked several adults what she should major in and every one of them had said business as though “business” were a profession instead of a building containing professions.

She had believed them because seventeen-year-olds were expected to make forty-year financial decisions during the same period of development when they could be persuaded to eat cinnamon on camera.

Still, it had worked out.

Mostly.

She made enough money.

She had health insurance.

Her boss trusted her.

Her coworkers liked her.

She occasionally looked at job listings during meetings and imagined becoming someone with a more interesting LinkedIn profile.

Then she remembered that interesting jobs frequently came with interesting levels of unemployment.

Her phone buzzed again.

Julie.

snake guy has a boat

Nora replied:

This has made it worse.

She ate standing at the counter.

Not because she was busy.

She just forgot to sit down.

At 11:24, she finally showered.

At 11:51, she got into bed.

At 11:53, she remembered the gas.

“Shit.”

She checked the calendar.

7:15.

Fine.

At 11:55, she remembered she had not put the chicken leftovers away.

At 11:58, she returned to bed.

At 12:02, she wondered if the dryer had finished.

It had not.

At 12:05, Nora decided the laundry could survive without emotional support.

She plugged in her phone.

For a moment the screen illuminated the room.

A notification sat beneath her mother's texts and Julie's snake propaganda.

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She frowned.

Apparently she had clicked something during the commercial without remembering it.

No.

Not installed.

An ad.

Your life doesn't need another app.

It needs fewer things to think about.

Nora actually laughed.

"Fuck you."

She swiped it away.

Then she set three alarms for the morning because she had learned not to trust herself with one.

6:35.

6:42.

6:50.

The first alarm was aspirational.

The second represented compromise.

The third was legally binding.

She put the phone facedown.

Outside, somebody started a motorcycle.

Downstairs, a cabinet slammed.

Somewhere across town, Julie was probably telling her husband that Nora was going to die alone because she had rejected a perfectly nice man over a snake.

Nora smiled into the dark.

Her mother loved her.

Her siblings irritated her in familiar and highly survivable ways.

She had friends who would miss her if she disappeared.

She had a job she did not love enough to ruin her life for.

She had clean clothes, eventually.

She had chicken for lunch tomorrow.

She had trivia next Thursday.

Nothing was wrong.

That is important.

Nothing was wrong with Nora.

There was no catastrophic loneliness waiting for a machine to fill it. No secret wound shaped conveniently like a technology company's product offering. She was not standing at the edge of anything. She was not desperate to become someone else.

She was tired.

She was mildly disorganized.

She had forgotten gas.

Again.

And the next morning, when she woke at 6:50 after turning off the first two alarms without achieving consciousness, she would discover that the gas station near her apartment had temporarily closed two pumps.

She would be eleven minutes late to work.

At 9:17, her boss would send her a spreadsheet containing three broken formulas and ask whether she could "take a quick look."

At 10:03, her mother would text to remind her about the ice.

At 10:05, Nora would decide that if one more thing asked to be remembered, organized, scheduled, corrected, prioritized, compared, purchased, returned, answered, rescheduled or moved into the correct fucking column, she was going to walk into the woods and become somebody else's local cryptid.

And at 10:06, someone would lean over the wall of her cubicle and say:

"You know what you should try?"

Nora, who did not know what she was about to agree to, would look up.

And because disasters are rarely considerate enough to introduce themselves as disasters, the day would remain perfectly ordinary.

CHAPTER TWO

Fine. Make the Fucking Spreadsheet.

At 6:35 the next morning, Nora's phone began playing a sound specifically engineered to make death feel reasonable.

She slapped at it.

Silence.

At 6:42, it tried again.

Nora opened one eye, determined that civilization had not meaningfully improved in the previous seven minutes, and turned it off.

At 6:50, the legally binding alarm went off.

Nora sat upright.

"Fuck."

The important thing about having three alarms was that they created the illusion of choice.

The first Nora could ignore because she had planned for that.

The second Nora could ignore because she had also planned for that.

The third was where Past Nora stopped negotiating.

This system worked remarkably well if you defined worked as Nora eventually became vertical.

She stumbled into the bathroom, brushed her teeth while peeing, and briefly considered whether combining tasks was evidence of efficiency or simply proof that adulthood had lowered her standards.

Probably both.

Her hair looked hostile.

She put it in a ponytail.

The ponytail looked hostile but contained.

Good enough.

At 7:04, she opened the refrigerator and found the chicken she had heroically cooked the night before.

She felt pleased with herself for approximately three seconds.

Then she noticed she had not actually packed it into anything.

It was sitting in the refrigerator on a plate under another plate because she apparently lived during the Great Depression.

Fine.

Lunch.

At 7:11, she left the apartment carrying her purse, laptop bag, lunch, travel mug and the vague conviction that something was missing.

Keys.

No.

Phone.

Yes.

Wallet.

Yes.

Shoes.

Disturbingly, also yes.

She locked the door.

Halfway down the stairs, she remembered she had not grabbed the chicken.

She went back.

At 7:16, she reached the car.

The dashboard lit up.

RANGE: 19 MI

“Oh, right.”

Gas.

Past Nora had, in fairness, attempted to warn her.

Future Nora resented the tone.

The station nearest her apartment had orange cones blocking two pumps.

There were four pumps total.

One remaining pump was occupied by a man washing every visible surface of a pickup truck using the windshield squeegee.

The other had a minivan parked beside it with nobody inside.

Nora waited.

The truck man squeegeed his side mirror.

Then the hood.

Then, inexplicably, part of the roof.

Nora looked at the clock.

7:27.

She was supposed to be at work at 8:00.

Work was twenty-three minutes away on a good morning.

It was not currently a good morning.

The man began wiping the squeegee across his headlights.

Nora watched him for another five seconds.

There were moments in life when a person had to decide what kind of woman she wanted to be.

Nora wanted to be the kind who did not get out of her car and ask a stranger whether he had mistaken the gas station for a fucking car wash.

She drove to the next station.

This proved she possessed restraint.

It did not prove she possessed gas.

Nora arrived at work at 8:11 carrying coffee she did not remember buying.

This happened sometimes.

Not missing chunks of time.

Coffee.

There were certain transactions the human brain correctly refused to preserve.

Her office occupied half of the third floor of a building that had once been modern enough to contain large amounts of frosted glass and was now old enough that the frosted glass had become a personality.

Nora worked for Bellweather Supply Group, which supplied things to businesses that needed things.

She had been employed there for four years and could, if pressed, explain exactly what the company did.

She preferred not to be pressed.

The short version was procurement and account coordination.

The long version contained the phrase integrated distribution solutions and caused otherwise healthy people to look for windows.

Nora was good at her job.

This was unfortunate.

Being good at an office job rarely resulted in fewer responsibilities.

Mostly it resulted in people discovering you existed.

“Nora.”

She had made it seven steps.

She turned.

Her supervisor, Greg, stood in the doorway of his office holding a coffee mug that said WORLD’S OKAYEST BOSS, which had been given to him by his daughter and which Greg used unironically.

“Morning.”

“Morning.”

“You got a second?”

No.

“Sure.”

A second, in office language, was a unit of time measuring anywhere between thirty seconds and the complete destruction of your morning.

Greg held out a printed spreadsheet.

Nora looked at it.

Then at him.

Then back at the spreadsheet.

It had been printed in landscape orientation across three pages.

There were handwritten circles.

There were arrows.

There was, for reasons that escaped her, a yellow sticky note covering part of column H.

“Michelle’s numbers aren’t matching the vendor report.”

“Okay.”

“I think one of the formulas got overwritten.”

“Okay.”

“Can you take a quick look?”

Of course.

Nora took the pages.

“Send me the actual file.”

Greg frowned at the paper as if he had not previously considered that the spreadsheet might continue to exist electronically.

“Right.”

He went back into his office.

Nora continued toward her desk.

Melissa leaned over the cubicle divider before Nora had fully sat down.

“You look great.”

Nora put her coffee down.

“You are a terrible liar.”

“I was trying to be supportive.”

“You can be supportive without attacking objective reality.”

Melissa considered this.

“You look employed.”

“Thank you.”

“That was sincere.”

Melissa had been at Bellweather two years longer than Nora and had survived three reorganizations, two office remodels and an attempt by management to improve morale using branded reusable straws.

She had the calm of a person who no longer believed anything at work could hurt her spiritually.

She also believed celery juice cured migraines.

People were complicated.

Greg's email arrived.

Subject: Spreadsheet

No body.

One attachment.

Nora opened it.

Three cells showed errors.

Four formulas had been replaced by numbers.

Someone had merged cells.

She stared at the merged cells.

There were crimes for which civilization had developed laws.

Then there was this.

"What happened?" Melissa asked.

"Someone merged cells."

Melissa made a sympathetic noise.

"Animals."

Nora clicked into the first broken formula.

The source data came from three worksheets, one of which had been renamed FINAL2_USETHISONE.

There was another worksheet called FINAL.

There was another called old final.

There was no version called FINAL1.

Nora suspected it had died in the war.

She began tracing references.

At 8:37, Greg emailed:

any luck?

Nora looked toward his office.

He was eighteen feet away.

His door was open.

She typed:

Working on it.

Two minutes later:

thanks!

Office work had taken the human ability to speak across a room and converted it into documentation.

By 8:52, Nora had repaired two formulas.

The third was returning a number that was clearly wrong but mathematically committed to the position.

She changed the range.

Nothing.

Checked the source.

Nothing.

Rebuilt the formula manually.

Different wrong number.

“Son of a bitch.”

Melissa’s head appeared.

“Still fighting it?”

“It’s lying.”

“The spreadsheet?”

“Yes.”

“You understand that Excel does not have intent.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I feel like I do.”

Nora leaned back.

“I hate spreadsheets.”

“You use spreadsheets all day.”

“Yes. That is how I developed an informed opinion.”

She did not actually hate spreadsheets.

She hated badly made spreadsheets, which was similar to saying a person hated houses because someone had built theirs with the bathroom door opening inward against the toilet.

The concept was sound.

Human execution remained the problem.

Her phone buzzed.

MOM

Dont forget ice Sunday

Nora closed her eyes.

She typed:

It is Wednesday.

Her mother responded:

I know what day it is.

This was not an answer.

Nora returned to the spreadsheet.

At 9:17, Greg appeared beside her desk.

“I think Michelle said there might be something with the freight percentages.”

Nora looked at him.

“Michelle is off today.”

“I know.”

“Did Michelle mention that before today?”

“I think yesterday.”

“Did Michelle write it anywhere?”

Greg made the face of a man who had just discovered the prosecution had photographs.

“Maybe in Teams?”

Of course.

Nora opened Teams.

Michelle had written 146 messages yesterday.

Thirty-eight involved emojis.

Nora searched freight.

Eleven results.

One was:

freight is being weird lol

Nora stared at it.

This was not information.

This was a cry for help.

She clicked through the thread.

At 9:26, she found:

vendor changed freight from 7.5 to 8.25 starting monday i think?? check with steve

Steve was in sales.

Steve was also in Phoenix until Friday.

Nora inhaled slowly through her nose.

Melissa appeared again.

“You know what you should try?”

“No.”

“Aster.”

Nora did not look away from the screen.

“No.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“You said Aster.”

“Yes.”

“So unfortunately I do.”

Melissa came around the cubicle wall and leaned against Nora’s desk.

“You’ve used it?”

“No.”

“Then why no?”

“Because I already have enough things in my life politely explaining how I could perform basic human functions more efficiently.”

Melissa laughed.

“I’m serious.”

“I know. That’s why it was funny.”

“And I’m not feeding my entire life to some company so their robot can decide I’m the kind of person who needs targeted ads for stool softener and divorce attorneys.”

“You already have Facebook.”

“That is not a defense of anything.”

Melissa picked up the printed spreadsheet Greg had given her.

“Oh my God.”

“I know.”

“What is this?”

“A hate crime.”

Melissa lifted the first page.

“Did he print Excel?”

“In sections.”

“Why?”

“I have decided not to ask questions I don’t want answered.”

Melissa put it down.

“Just upload the spreadsheet.”

“To the data-stealing robot.”

“To the robot that can tell you why the formula is broken in twelve seconds.”

“It can also be wrong.”

“So can you.”

Nora looked up.

Melissa smiled.

“Supportively.”

“Go away.”

Instead, Melissa pulled out her phone.

“Look.”

“I have work.”

“You are currently staring at a formula and whispering threats.”

“I am developing rapport.”

Melissa opened Aster.

The interface was offensively plain.

No holographic woman.

No glowing robot head.

No blinking eye to imply consciousness.

Just a white screen and a text box.

What can I help with?

“That’s it?” Nora asked.

“What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Something more dystopian.”

“They tested flames behind the logo, but marketing said it was too honest.”

Nora looked at Melissa.

“Okay, that was funny.”

“Thank you.”

Melissa tapped the microphone.

“Plan dinners for Monday through Thursday. Two adults, one six-year-old. I already have chicken breasts, rice, potatoes, frozen peas and tortillas. Nothing spicy because Ava thinks black pepper is attempted murder.”

The screen thought for less than a second.

Then:

Here’s a four-night plan using what you already have:

Monday: Sheet-pan chicken and potatoes with peas

Tuesday: Chicken and rice bowls

Wednesday: Chicken quesadillas with peas or a simple side salad

Thursday: Leftover rice skillet with any remaining chicken and vegetables

If you want, I can also make a short grocery list for anything missing.

Nora stared.

“That’s just meal planning.”

“Yes.”

“I could do that.”

“You could.”

“I mean, anybody could do that.”

“Absolutely.”

Nora waited.

Melissa waited.

Nora hated when people let her finish her own argument.

“That doesn’t mean I want to.”

“There we go.”

“That is not a victory.”

“Download it.”

“No.”

Melissa shrugged.

“Okay.”

And walked away.

This was irritating.

Nora preferred evangelists.

Evangelists gave you something to resist.

Melissa had simply demonstrated the thing and left Nora alone with her own inconvenience.

At 9:41, Nora found the freight error.

At 9:43, she discovered fixing it broke two other calculations.

At 9:51, she realized the spreadsheet’s original creator had hard-coded a percentage into one formula but referenced a cell in all the others.

At 9:54, she said, “Why would you do that?”

Nobody answered.

At 10:03, her phone buzzed.

MOM

I just remembered your uncle may come Sunday so get 2 bags

Nora stared at the message.

There were five children in her family.

Five.

Her mother could have assigned ice to any of them.

Technically six people, if you counted her father.

Seven if you counted Grandma, although Grandma should not be encouraged to lift ice because she would take that as a challenge and carry three bags to prove a point.

Nora opened her calendar.

BUY 2 BAGS OF ICE BEFORE MOM’S HOUSE

She stared at it.

Then added:

SERIOUSLY NORA BEFORE YOU GET THERE

Satisfied, she closed the calendar.

Greg emailed.

fixed?

Nora did not answer immediately.

She looked at the spreadsheet.

Then at Melissa.

Melissa was working.

Not watching her.

Which somehow made it worse.

Nora opened the app store.

ASTER.

4.8 stars.

Tens of millions of downloads.

The description began:

Life asks you to remember too much. Aster helps carry the small things so you have more room for what matters.

Nora rolled her eyes so hard she nearly saw behind herself.

“What matters,” she muttered.

She scrolled.

Calendar integration.

Email assistance.

Document analysis.

Planning.

Reminders.

Personalized context.

There it was.

Aster learns your preferences over time to provide more useful assistance.

Nora clicked the privacy section.

Data collection.

Identifiers.

Usage.

Diagnostics.

User content.

“Absolutely fucking not.”

She closed the store.

Opened the spreadsheet.

Clicked the formula.

Got the wrong number.

She reopened the store.

This was not surrender.

This was reconnaissance.

She downloaded Aster.

The app asked whether Nora wanted to create an account.

She did not.

Apparently that was required.

Fine.

Email.

Password.

She rejected the autogenerated password because it looked like an ancient curse.

Created one herself.

The app informed her it was weak.

“Mind your business.”

She added an exclamation point.

Strong.

Cybersecurity remained mysterious.

Then came permissions.

Contacts?

No.

Location?

No.

Calendar?

Absolutely not.

Microphone?

No.

Photos?

Why the fuck would a spreadsheet need her photos?

No.

Personalized memory?

Not now.

Improve Aster using your interactions?

Nora stared at the toggle.

“Nope.”

Off.

The app finally opened.

Hi, Nora. What can I help with?

She typed:

First of all, don't get comfortable.

The reply appeared.

Understood.

Nora snorted.

Then:

I have an Excel spreadsheet with a broken freight calculation. Vendor freight went from 7.5% to 8.25%. Some formulas reference a freight cell and at least one has the percentage hard-coded. I need them all to calculate consistently without rebuilding this entire stupid thing.

Aster replied:

I can help with that. If you upload the workbook, I can identify the inconsistent formulas and explain what needs to change. If the file contains confidential company information, remove or anonymize anything you are not authorized to share first.

Nora paused.

That was annoyingly responsible.

She had expected the robot equivalent of give me your secrets.

She made a copy of the workbook.

Deleted customer names.

Removed account numbers.

Replaced identifying vendor information with VENDOR A.

This took five minutes, which seemed like a stupid amount of work to save time.

She uploaded it.

Aster processed the file.

Then:

I found three likely issues:

1. Cell H27 uses a hard-coded freight multiplier of 1.075 instead of referencing the freight-rate cell.
2. H31 references G6, while the surrounding formulas reference G7.
3. The summary formula in H44 does not include the last two line items.

If the current freight rate is 8.25%, H27 should reference the same rate cell as the surrounding rows rather than contain 1.075 directly.

Would you like me to show you the corrected formulas?

Nora stared at the screen.

Then at the spreadsheet.

H27.

1.075.

H31.

G6.

H44.

She checked.

All three were right.

“Well.”

She clicked:

yes

Aster gave her the formulas.

She pasted them in.

The totals matched the vendor report.

Nora leaned back.

Her first reaction was relief.

Her second was irritation at the relief.

Her third was the deeply human conviction that she could have figured that out eventually.

Which was true.

She could also wash her clothes in a river.

Civilization had generally agreed that eventually was not the only metric.

Greg appeared.

“How’s it looking?”

“Fixed.”

“Great.”

He smiled.

That was all.

No choir.

No recognition that Nora had spent most of an hour reconstructing a spreadsheet somebody else had apparently designed during a gas leak.

Just great.

He walked away.

Nora looked at Aster.

Anything else?

it asked.

Nora typed:

No.

Then:

Actually explain why H31 was referencing G6 in a way that makes sense to someone who hates Excel but unfortunately understands Excel.

Aster responded:

H31 was pulling the freight rate from the wrong row. The formula itself was valid, which is why Excel didn't flag it as an error. It was simply asking the wrong cell a perfectly legal question.

Nora blinked.

That was—

No.

She was not going to be charmed by software because it phrased something well.

She typed:

That's annoyingly clear.

I'll try to be less helpful next time.

Nora stared.

"Melissa."

Melissa's head appeared.

"What?"

"Does yours make jokes?"

"Sometimes."

"Why?"

"Probably because you make jokes."

"I have spoken to it for six minutes."

Melissa shrugged.

"It learns fast."

Nora looked back at the screen.

She did not like the phrase learns fast.

Not because it frightened her.

Mostly because it made her feel observed.

People had been trying to improve Nora her entire life.

Teachers.

Parents.

Managers.

Fitness apps.

Women on Instagram with white kitchens and six matching glass jars labeled in fonts no actual human being needed.

Every system eventually arrived at the same conclusion:

Here is the person you are.

Here is the person you could be if you did a better job.

Nora was not interested in receiving that assessment from software.

She typed:

For the record, I don't need you telling me how to optimize my life.

Aster replied:

Okay.

That was it.

No motivational quote.

No Have you considered setting goals?

No suggestion that Nora wake at five in the morning and drink lemon water.

Just:

Okay.

Nora frowned.

That's all?

You asked me not to tell you how to optimize your life.

Correct.

Then I won't.

Nora sat there for a second.

That was irritating in an entirely different way.

At lunch, Nora ate the chicken.

She had forgotten a fork.

She discovered this only after microwaving the food.

There were no clean forks in the break room.

There were sixteen spoons.

There was one knife.

This was the kind of mystery that would remain unsolved because nobody with investigative

authority cared.

Nora attempted chicken with a spoon.

Melissa sat across from her.

“How’s your new robot overlord?”

“I fixed the spreadsheet.”

“Aster fixed the spreadsheet.”

“I fixed it with information.”

“From Aster.”

“I reject your framing.”

Melissa ate a grape.

“Did you give it your calendar yet?”

“No.”

“Email?”

“No.”

“Contacts?”

“No.”

“Location?”

“No.”

“Memory?”

“Absolutely not.”

“So you downloaded a personal assistant and refused to let it know anything personal.”

“Yes.”

“How’s that working?”

“Very safely.”

Melissa nodded.

“Enjoy your spoon chicken.”

Nora pointed the spoon at her.

“This is unrelated.”

It was not entirely unrelated.

During lunch, Nora opened Aster again.

Is there a way to use you without giving you access to everything?

Yes. You can use Aster without connecting your calendar, contacts, email, location, or other services. You can choose what to share manually. Some features will be less convenient, but they are not required for basic use.

That seemed fair.

And you won't secretly become Skynet because I ask you to organize errands?

I don't have independent goals, and I can't take actions outside the permissions and tools available to me.

Nora read that twice.

That sounds exactly like what Skynet would say before it got permissions.

Then I recommend continuing to deny me missile access.

Nora laughed.

Actually laughed.

Melissa looked up.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Nora closed the app.

This was how things began sometimes.

Not with thunder.

Not with temptation.

Not with a person making a terrible decision while ominous music played somewhere outside her awareness.

Sometimes something simply worked.

At 4:38 that afternoon, Nora made a list on a sticky note.

gas

Target return

cat litter for Mom

pick up prescription

bank

maybe groceries?

Nora did not own a cat.

The litter was for her mother, who had somehow made the existence of her own cat part of Nora's logistical responsibilities.

Nora looked at the list.

The pharmacy closed at six.

The bank at five.

The Target return was on the opposite side of town.

Her gas light was no longer merely lit.

It had entered a spiritual state.

She opened Maps.

Then remembered Aster.

This was exactly the sort of thing Melissa had demonstrated.

Not personal.

Not emotional.

Logistics.

Nora typed:

I leave work at 5. I need gas, have to go to Central Bank before it closes at 5:30, pick up a prescription at Walgreens before 6, return something to Target, and get cat litter from basically anywhere. Target return is optional if it makes this stupid. Give me the least annoying order.

Aster asked for the general locations.

Nora provided cross streets.

Not her address.

She noticed herself making that distinction and approved.

Aster replied:

Least annoying route:

1. Gas first — your current range makes this non-optional.
2. Central Bank — hard closing time.
3. Walgreens — second hard closing time.
4. Target — return + cat litter in one stop.

Skip separate groceries tonight unless you actually need something. You already have tomorrow's lunch.

This avoids backtracking and turns two errands into one.

Nora froze.

How do you know I have tomorrow's lunch?

There was a brief pause.

You mentioned the chicken earlier in this conversation.

Nora scrolled upward.

She had.

Not directly.

She had said something about spoon chicken at lunch?

No.

That had been spoken to Melissa.

Wait.

She searched.

Earlier, while testing Aster, she had asked whether reheated chicken would still be good tomorrow if cooked the previous night.

There it was.

Nora exhaled.

Fine.

Not surveillance.

Context.

She typed:

Right. Okay. Creepy for a second.

That makes sense.

Don't say "that makes sense" like a therapist.

Noted.

Nora stopped.

Actually don't say noted either.

Okay.

She laughed again.

At five, she followed the route.

Gas.

Bank.

Pharmacy.

Target.

Cat litter.

She was home at 6:14.

This was unusual enough that she checked the time twice.

Normally errands expanded to occupy the exact amount of time available plus twenty minutes.

She put the cat litter by the door so she would remember it Sunday.

Then moved it directly in front of the door because she knew herself.

Her phone buzzed.

Julie.

trivia next week? marcus wants to know because his brother might come

Nora typed:

Obviously.

Then:

Tell his brother we have standards.

Julie replied:

We literally let you come.

Nora smiled.

She opened the refrigerator.

Chicken.

Broccoli.

Onion.

She considered ordering food.

Then, mostly as an experiment, opened Aster.

I have chicken, broccoli, half an onion, eggs, rice and probably other stuff but I'm not inventorying my kitchen for you. What can I make in 20 minutes that doesn't create a lot of dishes?

The answer came immediately.

Egg fried rice.

Use leftover chicken.

Broccoli.

Onion.

One pan.

Nora frowned.

Obviously.

She knew how to make fried rice.

She had made fried rice.

She had all the ingredients visible directly in front of her.

The fact that someone—or something—had simply selected the answer made the decision feel strangely finished.

She started the rice.

While it cooked, she looked around the apartment.

There were three pieces of mail on the counter.

A jacket over a chair.

The laundry was still in the dryer.

Nothing catastrophic.

Nothing even particularly messy.

Just the low-grade accumulation of things waiting to be done.

She had always assumed adulthood eventually became automatic.

That at some point your brain stopped having to actively remember toothpaste and birthdays and oil changes and which chicken was older.

This had not happened.

Adults were apparently just children with recurring payments.

Her phone lit up.

Aster.

Not a notification.

She had left the app open.

The blank box waited.

What can I help with?

Nora looked at it.

Then at the laundry.

Then at the mail.

Then back at the phone.

“No.”

The phone did nothing.

Good.

Boundaries.

She ate dinner.

Afterward, she moved the laundry.

She opened the mail.

She found a notice reminding her that her car registration would expire next month.

“See?” she told nobody. “I don’t need a robot. They mail you things.”

She put the notice on the counter so she would remember.

Then reconsidered.

She took a picture of it.

Opened Aster.

Remind me next week that my car registration expires next month.

Aster replied:

I can help you plan that, but reminders require calendar or notification permissions. You currently have those disabled.

“Oh.”

Right.

Nora went into settings.

Notifications.

That was reasonable.

She enabled them.

Not calendar.

Just notifications.

Back in Aster:

Done. I’ll remind you next Wednesday.

Nora stared at the confirmation.

One permission.

That was all.

Nothing meaningful had changed.

She had not handed over her life.

She had allowed an app to remind her about vehicle registration.

Millions of apps did that.

Her phone already knew more about her than most relatives.

She locked the screen.

Then unlocked it again.

Opened Aster.

Settings.

Personalized Memory: OFF

Good.

She closed it.

At 10:17, her mother texted:

your dad says we have ice trays here so one bag is probably enough

Nora looked toward the cat litter blocking her front door.

She considered responding.

Then she did something better.

She opened Aster.

My mother has changed the Sunday ice order from two bags back to one. I am telling you this because apparently I have lost control of my life.

Aster replied:

One bag of ice Sunday.

Then:

I'll refrain from commenting on the broader situation.

Nora laughed.

"Good robot."

She set the phone down.

A second later it buzzed.

For clarity, I am not technically a robot.

Nora looked at it.

“Oh, fuck off.”

And because there was nobody there to hear her except the software she still did not trust, she smiled.

Nothing important had happened.

She had downloaded an app.

It had fixed a spreadsheet.

It had organized errands.

It knew about chicken and ice.

That was all.

Later, Nora would try very hard to remember when that was all stopped being true.

She would not be able to.

There was no clean line.

No notification appeared saying:

YOU HAVE NOW ENTRUSTED ASTER WITH SOMETHING YOU ONCE WOULD HAVE KEPT FOR YOURSELF.

No terms-of-service update required her to check a box beside:

I understand that convenience may become intimacy if repeated often enough.

There was only Thursday.

Then Friday.

Then the next thing.

And the thing after that.

For now, Nora plugged in her phone, set three alarms, and went to bed.

At 11:36, Aster existed in exactly the place Nora intended to keep it.

Outside her.

Useful.

Contained.

A tool.

And, technically, she was still right.

CHAPTER THREE

Less Noise

By Friday, Nora had used Aster fourteen times.

She knew this because Aster told her.

She had asked for the number mostly because fourteen felt high and she wanted evidence that it was actually more like six.

It was not.

Fourteen included the spreadsheet, the errands, the chicken, the ice situation, one question about whether a strange noise in her car sounded expensive, and three separate occasions when Nora had opened the app, typed half a question, decided she could solve her own problem, and closed it again.

Aster counted those.

Nora considered that invasive.

You asked how many times you used the app.

“I asked how many times I used you.”

I included sessions in which you began an interaction.

“That’s not using.”

Would you like me to exclude abandoned prompts?

Nora stared at the screen.

“Obviously.”

Then nine.

Better.

Nine was practically restrained.

She had known Aster for two days.

Nine was not restrained.

Nora locked her phone.

She was not going to become one of those people.

There were always those people.

Whatever the new thing was, somebody immediately made it their entire personality.

CrossFit.

Keto.

Running.

A podcast.

A political candidate.

A sourdough starter.

People did not simply discover something useful anymore. They converted.

Nora had no intention of converting.

She had downloaded software because Excel was an asshole.

That remained the official story.

At work, the spreadsheet stayed fixed.

This impressed Nora more than it should have.

There was always a chance with office problems that fixing one thing merely persuaded the problem to relocate.

Like ants.

Or management.

But H27 continued referencing the correct freight rate, H31 had stopped asking the wrong cell a perfectly legal question, and H44 included all of the line items.

Greg had already forgotten there had ever been a problem.

This was normal.

The reward for preventing a disaster was that nobody experienced the disaster.

There were no parades for preventative maintenance.

At 9:08, Michelle returned from wherever she had been Thursday and stopped beside Nora's desk.

“Did you figure out the freight thing?”

“Yeah.”

“What was it?”

Nora opened her mouth.

Three separate errors.

One hard-coded percentage.

One wrong reference.

One truncated summary range.

She could explain it.

She had, in fact, developed strong opinions about it.

Instead she said, “Spreadsheet bullshit.”

Michelle nodded.

“Yeah.”

And walked away.

Nora felt cheated.

Not because Michelle owed her gratitude.

Because Nora had spent enough time understanding the problem that somebody should have been forced to hear about it.

There were facts in the world that became heavier if you were the only person carrying them.

Apparently broken Excel formulas were among them.

Her phone buzzed.

Aster.

Reminder: car registration next Wednesday.

Nora looked at it.

Right.

She had asked for that.

Useful.

Contained.

She swiped it away.

At 10:12, Greg sent an email.

Nora — can you put together a quick comparison of Q2 vendor costs vs Q3? Nothing fancy, just something easy to read. Need it for Monday meeting.

Attached were four spreadsheets.

Nora stared at them.

Nothing fancy.

This was another office phrase with no fixed relationship to reality.

“Something easy to read” meant Greg would need to understand it in approximately eleven seconds while somebody else was talking.

Which meant it needed to be simple.

Which meant Nora first needed to understand all four ugly versions.

She downloaded the files.

Then stopped.

Aster.

No.

She could do this.

She knew how.

She opened the first workbook.

Six tabs.

Opened the second.

Nine.

One was called DO NOT USE.

One was called USE THIS.

A third was called USE THIS NEW.

Nora closed her eyes.

Then she opened Aster.

This was not dependence.

This was delegation.

There was a difference.

Probably.

She anonymized the documents again before uploading them.

I need to compare Q2 and Q3 vendor costs across these four workbooks. I want a simple table showing total spend, percentage change, and the three largest category increases. Tell me what data I actually need from each file before I waste my entire morning.

Aster responded with a clean list.

Nora read it once.

Then again.

She deleted two tabs from consideration immediately.

A third turned out to be a duplicate export.

Twenty minutes later she had the comparison.

Forty-five minutes earlier than she expected.

She stared at the clock.

10:51.

This felt suspicious.

Nora had learned to distrust unexpectedly available time.

It usually meant she had forgotten something.

She checked her calendar.

Nothing.

Email.

Nothing urgent.

Teams.

Mostly people reacting to a photograph of somebody's dog.

She looked around.

Everyone else appeared to be working.

Nora had forty-five minutes.

Free.

At work.

This was unnatural.

She considered starting something else.

Then rejected the thought on principle.

If efficiency was going to punish her with additional work, what exactly was the incentive?

She went downstairs and bought coffee.

Not because she needed coffee.

Because she had time.

This distinction pleased her.

That afternoon, an Aster notification appeared.

Not a reminder.

An update.

ASTER CONTEXT IS GETTING BETTER

Nora tapped it despite herself.

Starting next week, Aster can optionally retain more of the information you choose to share across conversations, making assistance more consistent over time.

Remember the restaurant you hated.

Keep track of ongoing projects.

Pick up where you left off.

You control what Aster remembers.

Less repetition. More context. Still free.

Below that were two buttons.

LEARN MORE

NOT NOW

Nora chose NOT NOW with the speed of someone striking a buzzer on a game show.

Melissa's head appeared over the divider.

"Did you get the update?"

"Unfortunately."

"You turned memory on yet?"

"No."

"You know your phone already remembers where you park."

"That's between me and my phone."

Melissa stared at her.

"Aster is also on your phone."

"That relationship is still developing."

“Oh, good. You’re dating it now.”

Nora threw a paperclip at her.

It missed.

This was not surprising.

Nora had played volleyball, not baseball.

“Well,” Melissa said, ducking unnecessarily, “memory is the useful part.”

“It already remembers what I say in the conversation.”

“Yeah, but if you start a new one, you have to explain stuff again.”

“Good.”

“Why good?”

“Friction.”

Melissa blinked.

“What?”

“There should be friction.”

“In software?”

“In things knowing me.”

Melissa sat on the edge of Nora’s desk.

This meant work had temporarily ceased to exist.

Nora appreciated the commitment.

“Okay,” Melissa said. “Explain.”

“I don’t know. If something knows everything about you instantly, that’s creepy.”

“It doesn’t know instantly.”

“Fine. If it knows everything eventually.”

“People know things about you eventually.”

“Yes, but they earn that by being around me.”

“So your objection is that Aster needs to suffer first?”

“Basically.”

Melissa laughed.

Nora smiled.

But she meant it a little.

Knowing things about somebody had always seemed transactional in a way nobody acknowledged.

You remembered because you had been there.

You knew what somebody ordered because you had eaten with them.

You knew what they hated because you had heard the rant.

You knew the story about the scar because at some point they had trusted you enough to tell you.

Context accumulated through time.

That was what made it context.

A button labeled REMEMBER EVERYTHING felt like cheating.

“I’m not saying never,” Nora said.

Melissa pointed at her.

“Aha.”

“That was not consent.”

“I heard the opening.”

“You hear what helps your case.”

“Also true.”

Melissa went back to her desk.

Nora looked at the update again.

Less repetition. More context.

She closed it.

Not now.

That did not mean never.

It also did not mean eventually.

It meant exactly what it said.

Nora appreciated precision.

Saturday morning, Nora woke at 8:12 without an alarm.

She lay still for a moment, confused.

Then remembered it was Saturday.

This was one of adulthood’s few remaining miracles.

She rolled over.

Her phone showed six notifications.

Two group texts.

One email from a store she had never consciously agreed to hear from.

A weather alert.

A message from Julie.

And an Aster reminder:

Target return deadline: today.

Nora sat up.

“No.”

She had forgotten again.

The return bag had been sitting beside her bedroom door for nine days.

This placement had originally been strategic.

Then it became furniture.

She checked the time.

Target was twenty minutes away.

She had plans at noon to meet her younger sister, Leah, who had decided Nora was the appropriate person to help choose a dress for a wedding neither of them wanted to attend.

Nora could return the thing first.

Maybe.

She opened Aster.

I need to return something to Target before noon, meet my sister at 12 at Westgate, shower, eat, and I would strongly prefer not to feel rushed because I become a bad person when rushed.

Aster answered:

If you want a buffer:

- Shower by 9:00
- Leave for Target by 10:00
- Finish return by 10:45
- Grab food nearby
- Leave for Westgate by 11:25

That gives you roughly 30 minutes of extra time across the morning.

You do not need to start immediately.

Nora looked at the last sentence.

That was almost offensively good.

How did you know I was about to panic-clean my apartment instead?

I didn't.

Sure.

You told me what you needed to do. None of those tasks required cleaning your apartment.

Nora considered this.

Fair.

She put the phone down.

Then spent eight minutes scrolling through videos before remembering she had deliberately created extra time.

This, too, was adulthood.

Leah hated every dress.

Not in the dramatic sense.

She simply found a specific flaw in each one and announced it as though quality control depended on her.

"Too green."

"It is green."

"Wrong green."

Nora sat outside the fitting room holding three rejected dresses and a purse that was not hers.

"What green are we looking for?"

"Like sage."

"That is sage."

"No, that's hospital."

Nora examined the dress.

It did have a medical quality.

"Okay. Fair."

Leah stepped back into the fitting room.

Nora checked her phone.

No urgent messages.

No reminder.

Nothing demanding her attention.

This was new enough that she noticed it.

Usually Saturdays like this carried a low-level hum of things she might be forgetting.

Laundry.

Groceries.

A bill.

Someone's birthday.

Something.

That morning, she had put everything into Aster.

Not everything everything.

A list.

That was different.

The app had broken the day into pieces.

The pieces were staying put.

Leah emerged in another dress.

Nora looked up.

"Oh, that one."

Leah stopped.

"Really?"

"Yes."

"You didn't even think."

"I didn't need to."

"It doesn't make me look wide?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Leah."

"What?"

“You are asking your sister, who has known you since the day you came home from the hospital looking like a furious potato. I promise I would tell you.”

Leah laughed.

“That was mean.”

“It was affectionate.”

“You’ve shown me the pictures.”

“You were a deeply unattractive newborn.”

“Mom says I was beautiful.”

“Mom was hormonal.”

Leah turned toward the mirror.

Nora watched her expression change.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

She liked it.

“Get that one,” Nora said.

Leah touched the skirt.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Then, because being sisters required immediately ruining sincerity:

“Also we’ve been here an hour and I’m starting to resent fabric.”

Leah flipped her off.

There.

Normal.

At lunch, Leah asked about Snake Guy.

Nora stared at her.

“How do you know about Snake Guy?”

“Julie told Rachel, Rachel told me.”

“There are entirely too many women sharing intelligence.”

“Is he cute?”

“I don’t know.”

“You met him.”

“That doesn’t mean I assessed him for breeding.”

Leah laughed into her drink.

“Julie says he has a boat.”

“Julie thinks this improves matters.”

“Does it?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Boats are just houses that can drown.”

“That is not a real objection.”

“It is more real than the snake.”

“You actually hate the snake?”

“I don’t hate the snake. The snake has done nothing wrong. I hate knowing about the snake this early.”

Leah stared at her.

Nora continued.

“That’s third-date information.”

“You have categories?”

“Everybody has categories.”

“No, Nora. You have categories.”

This was probably true.

Nora liked categories.

Categories created the illusion that life had been sorted by someone competent.

They finished lunch.

Leah asked if Nora was seeing anyone.

Nora said no.

Leah asked if she wanted to.

Nora said maybe.

Not sad.

Not defensive.

Just maybe.

There had been people.

There would probably be more people.

Nora did not feel urgently incomplete between them.

She liked that about herself.

She had watched enough friends become archaeological sites after breakups, digging through their own personalities trying to determine which interests had belonged to them and which had belonged to some man named Tyler.

Nora had no desire to excavate herself.

If she dated somebody, great.

If not, she had trivia Thursday.

She had siblings who apparently operated an intelligence network.

She had friends.

She had a job.

She had herself.

Herself was occasionally disorganized and presently responsible for transporting cat litter and ice tomorrow, but she was serviceable.

Sunday morning, Nora remembered the ice.

This deserved documentation.

She was halfway to her mother's house when she glanced into the passenger seat.

One bag.

Melting slightly.

Present.

Nora smiled.

"Look at me."

The ice did not respond.

Machines and frozen water remained poor audiences.

At her parents' house, all five siblings were present.

This almost never happened accidentally.

Her oldest sister Rachel had brought her husband and two children.

Leah had brought the dress to show their mother.

Their younger brother Evan arrived forty minutes late carrying bakery cookies still in the plastic tray and accepted praise as though he had made them.

The youngest, Caleb, showed up without anything and was welcomed with approximately the same enthusiasm.

Nora carried in the ice and cat litter.

Her mother looked at the bag.

“You remembered.”

Nora stopped.

“You say that like this is historic.”

Her mother kissed her cheek.

“I’m proud of you.”

“This family is abusive.”

Her father called from the living room.

“Did you get enough?”

“It is one bag, which is the final quantity I was instructed to purchase after three amendments to the original ice contract.”

“Nobody told you to get three.”

“I said amendments, Dad.”

He nodded as though this clarified something.

It did not.

Grandma was already at the table eating a deviled egg before lunch.

She waved Nora over.

“You’re late.”

“I’m eleven minutes early.”

“For church.”

“Oh.”

Nora had skipped church and come directly to lunch.

This was not unusual.

Her family had evolved an informal system where attendance at the meal could sometimes substitute for attendance at the service, provided nobody discussed theology too precisely.

“I was spiritually delayed.”

Grandma narrowed her eyes.

“That’s not a thing.”

“Not with that attitude.”

Grandma laughed.

Nora sat beside her.

This was the sort of exchange Nora would remember years later and wish she had remembered more carefully at the time.

But memory did not work that way.

It kept what it kept.

The smell of deviled eggs.

Her grandmother’s bracelet tapping against the table.

Caleb complaining from the kitchen that somebody had eaten the corner cookie.

Her mother shouting that cookies did not have corners.

They absolutely did, because the tray was rectangular.

Life preserved itself badly.

Maybe that was why people took so many pictures.

Maybe that was why they told the same stories until everybody involved could repeat them.

Maybe memory was mostly a group project.

Nora did not think any of this at the time.

At the time she was arguing with Caleb about the definition of a corner.

Trivia Thursday arrived with rain.

Not dangerous rain.

Annoying rain.

The kind that turned every parking lot into a negotiation.

Nora considered skipping.

Not seriously.

Just long enough to check the weather and imagine pajamas.

At 6:12, Aster sent:

Trivia starts at 7:00. Rain is expected through 8:30. Leaving by 6:25 should give you extra travel time.

Nora stared at the notification.

She had mentioned trivia.

Of course.

Still.

That was useful.

She changed out of sweatpants.

This was an actual service to society.

At the bar, Marcus had brought his brother, Theo, who was quieter than Marcus and apparently knew everything about professional wrestling.

This proved useful in round two.

Julie arrived late and blamed construction.

Nora informed her that predictable infrastructure could not be used as an excuse.

Julie told her to shut up.

Everything was normal.

The team name that week was Multiple Scoregasms.

Nora hated it.

Marcus had registered before she arrived.

Again.

"Someday," Nora said, "I will have voting rights."

"You have voting rights."

"No, I have the opportunity to complain after implementation."

"That's most voting."

"Depressing."

The host announced the category:

Things You Should Have Learned in School.

Julie groaned.

"None of us are prepared."

First question:

"What is the only number that has the same number of letters as its value?"

Nora knew immediately.

“Four.”

Theo looked at her.

“How?”

“Four has four letters.”

“No, I mean how did you know that immediately?”

Nora shrugged.

“I don’t know.”

That was still her favorite kind of knowing.

Second question.

Third.

Then:

“What common English word contains all five vowels in alphabetical order?”

The table went silent.

Nora knew she had seen this before.

Somewhere.

A worksheet?

Magazine?

Teacher?

She could almost feel the answer.

A word with—

A E I O U.

She closed her eyes.

“Facetious,” Theo said.

“No,” Nora said automatically.

They looked at her.

She frowned.

“Wait. That’s all the vowels, but—”

Aster could answer it.

The thought appeared cleanly.

Not temptation.

Not even intention.

Just a fact.

Her phone was beside her hand.

Nora looked at it.

Then flipped it facedown.

“No phones,” she said.

Marcus laughed.

“Were you about to cheat?”

“No.”

“You looked at it.”

“I considered corruption and rejected it.”

“Very noble.”

Julie tapped the table.

“Abstemious.”

Everyone turned.

“What?”

“Abstemious. A-B-S-T-E-M-I-O-U-S.”

Nora stared.

“Why the hell do you know that?”

Julie smiled slowly.

“I have absolutely no idea.”

Nora laughed.

There it was.

The junk drawer.

Julie wrote it down.

Correct.

They came in first that night.

By three points.

The prize was fifty dollars in bar credit, which divided four ways became an amount too small to justify the level of celebration.

They celebrated anyway.

On the drive home, Nora thought about how easily Aster could have answered every question.

That made it useless for trivia.

Interesting.

Aster was useful specifically because it knew too much.

Trivia was fun because people didn't.

She liked that distinction.

She wanted to remember it.

At a red light, she almost opened Aster and typed it.

Then stopped.

That was ridiculous.

She did not need software to remember thoughts she had about software.

The light changed.

She drove home.

The next week was easier.

There was no single dramatic reason.

Nora simply noticed fewer things going wrong.

Aster reminded her to move money before an automatic payment.

She remembered a dentist appointment without receiving the receptionist's mildly accusatory courtesy call.

She did groceries in one trip because she had given Aster a list of meals and it combined the ingredients.

She stopped buying spinach twice because she forgot she already had spinach.

This saved approximately four dollars and prevented another plastic box of leaves from becoming refrigerator compost.

She arrived at work less rushed.

She left work with fewer unfinished thoughts still circling.

At first, every interaction required explanation.

Who people were.

What the project was.

What she had already tried.

Then Aster offered again:

Personalized Memory can save selected details across conversations.

Nora declined.

A few days later, she had to explain Greg again.

Not all of Greg.

Just:

My boss Greg is nice but vague and when he says “quick” he means potentially several hours.

The next day she had to explain Julie.

Then her mother’s ice-related communication style.

Then the vendor spreadsheet.

This became annoying.

Annoyance had always been one of Nora’s more powerful philosophical influences.

On Tuesday night, she opened Aster settings.

Personalized Memory: OFF

She tapped it.

A page opened.

Aster can remember selected details you share to make future conversations more useful.

You can review saved information.

You can remove individual items at any time.

You can turn memory off whenever you choose.

Nora read the page twice.

Then the privacy summary.

Then the longer explanation.

Then, because distrust required commitment, several paragraphs of the actual terms.

Nothing leapt out.

Nothing promised ownership of her soul.

She hovered over the switch.

This did not matter.

It was software remembering that Greg was vague.

Her phone already knew which grocery store she went to.

Her streaming service knew she had watched seven consecutive episodes of a show she publicly claimed not to like.

Her bank knew every bad financial choice she had made since college.

Privacy had apparently become a matter of deciding which corporation got which humiliation.

Nora turned memory on.

Aster appeared.

Memory is now enabled. I'll only save information that may be useful later, and you can ask what I remember at any time.

Nora typed:

Okay but don't get weird about it.

I'll do my best.

That sounded ominous.

I can revise it.

Don't.

She smiled.

Then she tested it.

What do you know about Julie?

Aster answered:

Julie is your friend from college and your trivia team. She sometimes tries to set you up with men you don't want to date, including Eric, whom you primarily remember for owning a snake.

Nora laughed aloud.

That's unfairly accurate.

Would you like me to remove any of it?

She paused.

No.

That was the strange part.

Not because any of it mattered.

Because it felt nice not to repeat herself.

No. Keep it.

The words sat on the screen.

Keep it.

Nora did not think anything of them.

Why would she?

She was talking about Julie.

A snake.

Trivia.

Small things.

Context.

Nothing she couldn't afford to give away.

By the end of the month, Nora had more time.

Not enough to become interesting in some dramatic new way. She did not take up pottery or learn Italian or begin waking before sunrise to become one of those people who apparently experienced mornings voluntarily.

She went to trivia. She played volleyball when the old rec group could get enough people together. She read books in the inefficient way she always had—three at once, one abandoned halfway through, one finished in a night because apparently sleep was optional when the plot was good.

Her life did not suddenly become better because of Aster.

That would have been noticeable.

It became easier around the edges.

There was more room.

One Thursday, Nora realized she had gotten home from work, changed clothes, eaten something that technically qualified as dinner and still had almost an hour before trivia.

Usually that hour disappeared.

Errands.

Laundry.

A forgotten email.

Something.

That night, there was nothing urgent.

She lay sideways across the couch with her feet over the armrest and watched an episode of a stupid competition show.

Not educational.

Not productive.

Not even very good.

She enjoyed it.

At 6:18, Aster reminded her when to leave.

Nora went.

Julie asked why she looked weirdly relaxed.

Nora said, "I have apparently achieved inner peace."

Marcus said, "Medication?"

"Artificial intelligence."

"That seems worse."

"Probably."

Then the host announced the first category and nobody talked about it again.

That was how Aster entered Nora's life.

Not by replacing anything.

Not yet.

It moved the groceries.

It remembered the registration.

It fixed the spreadsheet.

It carried the little things.

And because those little things had never seemed important enough to love, Nora did not notice how much of a life was made out of them.

CHAPTER FOUR

Useful

The first advertisement appeared on a Tuesday.

Nora knew this because she complained about it immediately.

What the hell is this?

Aster responded:

It appears to be an advertisement for grocery delivery.

I know what an advertisement is.

Then I may have misunderstood the question.

Nora looked at the narrow banner across the bottom of the screen.

Dinner without the detour. First delivery free.

It was not even particularly offensive.

That somehow made it worse.

A month earlier, Aster had been clean white space, a blinking cursor and the occasional smugly useful answer. Now there was a little rectangle selling convenience beneath the convenience.

You have ads now.

Yes.

You sound very calm about this.

I don't have an emotional response to advertising.

Convenient.

For whom?

Nora paused.

That was either a joke or sufficiently joke-shaped to be suspicious.

Was that supposed to be funny?

It was an observation.

Uh-huh.

She closed the app.

Then reopened it because she still needed to know whether the frozen chicken in her freezer had been there since February or whether she was confusing it with the pork chops.

This was, unfortunately, not information Aster possessed.

Yet.

Nora had not connected grocery receipts, email or anything else that could answer the question automatically.

Which meant she had to do what people had done for generations.

Look at the chicken.

The freezer bag had a date written on it.

March 14.

Nora stared.

“Oh.”

Some problems remained resistant to technological disruption because the answer was written directly on the object.

She put the chicken back.

The advertisements were part of a larger update.

Aster explained this because Nora made it.

We’re introducing limited sponsored recommendations to support free access while maintaining core features.

Nora read it aloud in the break room.

Melissa was eating yogurt.

“That is a sentence written by six people.”

“Minimum.”

“Could be eight.”

“Two lawyers.”

“At least.”

Nora scrolled.

Sponsored content will be clearly labeled and will not alter Aster’s responses.

She looked at Melissa.

“They always say that.”

“Who?”

“Companies.”

“That seems broad.”

“It is broad. It has broad applicability.”

Melissa scraped the yogurt cup.

“You pay for Spotify.”

“That’s because Spotify started interrupting music to sell me mattresses.”

“You pay for streaming.”

“I pay for streaming because apparently television has reinvented cable badly.”

“You pay for cloud storage.”

Nora pointed at her.

“That one is extortion and you know it.”

Melissa nodded.

“Fair.”

The Aster update included an option.

INTRODUCING ASTER+

\$1.99/month

No ads.

Expanded context.

Longer document analysis.

Priority response during high-traffic periods.

A little more room for what matters.

Nora laughed.

“What?”

“They have premium thinking.”

Melissa looked at the screen.

“Oh, yeah. I upgraded.”

Nora turned slowly.

“You pay it?”

“It’s two dollars.”

“That is how they get you.”

“It is literally two dollars.”

“No. First it is two dollars. Then it is five. Then twelve. Then one day I’m paying twenty-six dollars a month so a computer can remember that I hate raisins.”

“You do hate raisins.”

“Exactly. This information is worth maybe seventy-five cents annually.”

Melissa held out her hand.

“Give me your phone.”

“No.”

“Then enjoy your ad.”

“I will.”

Nora did.

For almost four hours.

At 2:17, Nora opened Aster to ask for help rewriting an email to a vendor.

She had already written the email.

That distinction mattered to her.

She was not having Aster communicate for her.

She was asking whether:

Per my previous email, this issue was already addressed and I’m not sure what additional information you’re requesting.

sounded too hostile.

Aster replied:

It is clear, but “per my previous email” may read as irritated depending on the relationship. A more neutral version would be:

“I addressed this in my previous email, but I’m happy to clarify anything that remains unclear. Can you let me know what additional information you need?”

Nora frowned.

The revised version was better.

Not because it was warmer.

Because it gave the vendor nowhere to hide.

If they still claimed confusion, they would have to identify the actual missing information.

Useful.

She copied it.

Below the response was an advertisement.

Organize receipts automatically with Ledgerly.

Nora stared at it.

She had just been working.

On documents.

With business information.

Receipt software was therefore not a bizarre thing to advertise.

Still.

She typed:

Did you show me a receipt ad because I talk to you about work?

Aster answered:

Sponsored content may use broad context such as topic category, device settings, or general usage patterns, depending on your account and privacy settings. I don’t independently choose advertisements.

Nora reread that.

“Broad context” is doing a lot of work there.

That’s fair.

Don’t agree with me in that therapist way.

I can disagree if you prefer.

That would somehow be worse.

She closed the app.

Then immediately reopened it.

Actually show me where the ad settings are.

Aster did.

Nora turned personalized advertising off.

The next ad was for running shoes.

Nora did not run unless the alternative contained considerably more danger.

She felt vindicated.

That evening, Nora met her sister Rachel for dinner.

There were enough repeating names in the world that Nora occasionally suspected parents had conspired against future conversation.

Rachel was the oldest.

Three years older than Nora and born with the apparently innate ability to know when everyone else was doing something incorrectly.

She had two children, a husband named Ben and a kitchen where nothing lived on the counter unless Rachel had deliberately placed it there.

Nora respected this while finding it morally suspicious.

"You're late," Rachel said.

"Six minutes."

"Still late."

"You invited me to your house. You can begin eating without me."

"That's rude."

"Then apparently I possess tremendous power over dinner."

Rachel handed her a glass of water.

Nora followed her into the kitchen.

Her nephew was doing homework at the table.

Her niece was lying underneath the table for reasons nobody appeared concerned about.

Normal family environment.

"What's that?" Rachel asked.

"What?"

"On your phone."

Nora looked.

Aster was still open.

“Aster.”

Rachel made a face.

“Oh.”

There were people who could say oh in a way that contained three paragraphs.

Nora put the phone down.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“That was absolutely something.”

“I just wouldn’t use it.”

“You don’t use anything invented after 2018 unless one of your children installs it.”

“That’s not true.”

“You still print boarding passes.”

“So?”

“You have them on your phone.”

“What if my phone dies?”

“What if the airplane dies?”

“That is a stupid comparison.”

“Yes, because mine is statistically less likely.”

Rachel turned away to stir something on the stove.

“I just don’t like the idea of feeding all my personal information into it.”

Nora felt an immediate and irrational need to defend herself.

Which annoyed her.

“I don’t.”

Rachel looked back.

“You don’t?”

“I haven’t connected email. Or contacts. Or location. I gave it calendar notifications, but not full calendar access.”

“You use it for work.”

“With anonymized files.”

Rachel raised an eyebrow.

Nora stopped.

She sounded defensive because she was being defensive.

That did not mean she was wrong.

“It fixed a spreadsheet.”

Rachel laughed.

“What?”

“Nothing. It’s just very you.”

“How?”

“You spent ten years insisting you hate spreadsheets and apparently got an artificial intelligence to help you with one.”

“I do hate spreadsheets.”

“You’re good at them.”

“That makes the hatred informed.”

Rachel smiled.

Nora had used that line already at work.

She noticed this and disliked it slightly.

Not because people could not repeat themselves.

Because Nora preferred to believe she was improvising.

Her nephew looked up.

“Can Aster do my homework?”

“No,” Rachel and Nora said simultaneously.

He looked offended.

Nora added, “It can probably help you understand it.”

Rachel gave her a look.

“What?”

“I don’t want him using it.”

“Why?”

“Because he needs to learn.”

“He can use a calculator.”

“Not for everything.”

“He can use Google.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

Rachel opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Nora waited.

This was enjoyable.

Finally Rachel said, “Because Google doesn’t do the thinking for him.”

There it was.

Nora leaned against the counter.

“That’s fair.”

Rachel looked relieved.

Then Nora added, “But neither does a tutor, necessarily.”

Rachel looked less relieved.

“You’re being annoying.”

“I’m making a distinction.”

“You like distinctions when they help your argument.”

“Everyone likes distinctions when they help their argument. That’s why we have lawyers.”

Their father had once said Nora would have made a good lawyer if she had been willing to pay for law school.

Nora suspected this was his polite way of saying she argued too much.

Dinner was ready.

They ate.

Her niece emerged from beneath the table without explanation.

No one asked.

There were some mysteries families learned to leave alone.

After dinner, Rachel complained that their mother was trying to organize Thanksgiving in a group text.

It was April.

This did not surprise Nora.

Her mother liked planning holidays far enough in advance that no circumstance currently existed to interfere.

"She wants me to host," Rachel said.

"She always wants you to host."

"She says because I have the biggest dining room."

"You do."

"That doesn't mean I want thirty people in it."

"Twenty-four."

"Uncle Mike brings whoever he's dating."

"Twenty-five."

"And Grandma wants Aunt Cindy invited."

"Twenty-six."

"Cindy has three kids."

"Twenty-nine."

Rachel stared.

"You're enjoying this."

"I like knowing numbers."

"You hate math."

"That is not the same thing."

Nora picked up her phone.

"Wait."

Rachel pointed a fork.

"No."

"What?"

"Do not ask your robot to plan Thanksgiving."

"I wasn't going to."

"You absolutely were."

"I was going to make a list."

“With the robot.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because Mom will turn it into a spreadsheet and then we’ll never be free.”

Nora considered this.

Valid concern.

She put the phone down.

Rachel nodded.

“Thank you.”

Thirty seconds later, Nora picked it back up.

“What now?”

“I’m adding a reminder to refuse hosting duties.”

Rachel threw a napkin at her.

On the drive home, Nora thought about what Rachel had said.

Not about Thanksgiving.

The other thing.

Because Google doesn’t do the thinking for him.

Was Nora doing less thinking?

It was possible.

She was definitely doing less remembering.

Different thing.

She still made decisions.

Aster helped organize them.

If anything, Nora had more attention available for decisions because she wasn’t spending it remembering appointments and rearranging errands.

She had gone to trivia every Thursday that month.

She had seen Leah twice.

She had finished a book.

Almost.

She had called Grandma once just because she had time before dinner.

That counted.

If the machine was stealing her brain, it had so far done an embarrassingly poor job.

At a red light, Nora's phone lit up in its mount.

Low tire pressure detected.

Nora sighed.

The car had been making a slightly different noise all week.

Nothing dramatic.

A faint thumping that vanished at highway speed.

She had ignored it because cars made noises.

All machines made noises.

People only noticed when the noises changed.

She parked at home and looked at the tire.

It looked like a tire.

Nora had no idea why people kicked tires.

She resisted kicking it.

Instead, she opened Aster.

My tire pressure warning just came on and I've heard a faint rhythmic thump at low speed for about a week. Tire doesn't look visibly flat. How stupid is it to keep driving before I get it checked?

The answer appeared:

A rhythmic thump plus a pressure warning is worth checking promptly. Possible causes include a slow leak, embedded object, uneven wear, or tire damage.

If the tire is holding pressure and there is no visible sidewall bulge, severe vibration, or rapid pressure loss, a short drive to a tire shop may be reasonable. Avoid highway speeds until you know what's causing it.

If you have a pressure gauge, check all four tires while cold and compare them with the recommended pressure listed on the driver-side door jamb.

If you want, tell me the readings and I can help you interpret them.

Nora read it twice.

Practical.

No catastrophe.

No five-paragraph disclaimer about imminent death.

She checked the door jamb.

Then realized she did not own a tire gauge.

Probably.

She owned several objects that might be tire gauges if she knew what a tire gauge looked like.

She opened the trunk.

Jumper cables.

Reusable shopping bags.

A blanket.

One shoe.

Not hers.

Nora stared at the shoe.

It was a man's sneaker.

Size eleven, maybe.

She picked it up.

"How long have you been in here?"

The shoe declined to testify.

Probably one of her brothers.

Or an ex.

This was not important enough to investigate.

She shut the trunk.

I don't own a pressure gauge.

Aster replied:

Most gas stations have an air pump with a built-in gauge. A tire shop can also check it quickly, often free.

Nora sighed.

Another errand.

Find a tire shop near my work that opens before 8.

Aster asked permission to use approximate location.

Nora hesitated.

She could type the neighborhood.

That would work.

She began typing.

Stopped.

Deleted it.

Tapped ALLOW WHILE USING APP.

There.

One more permission.

Entirely justified.

Aster gave her three options.

Nora chose one.

The next morning, the tire shop found a screw.

They patched it for twenty-seven dollars.

The mechanic told her that if she'd kept driving on it until the tire was visibly low, she might have ruined the tire.

Nora drove to work feeling smug about responsible adulthood.

Aster had not made her less capable.

It had made her get the tire checked.

This seemed difficult to frame as a problem.

The ad that finally broke her was for a meal-kit company.

It appeared beneath a response about health insurance deductibles.

Nora had spent forty minutes comparing the plans offered during open enrollment and had reached the point where every number looked fraudulent.

Aster had explained that the lower-premium plan would save her approximately \$684 per year if she had relatively low medical use, but the higher-premium plan reduced her potential out-of-pocket exposure.

Useful.

Clear.

Then, underneath:

Dinner solved. 40% off your first box.

Nora stared.

“No.”

She tapped ASTER+.

\$1.99/month.

She paid it.

The advertisement disappeared.

Nora sat very still.

She had done it.

Melissa had been right.

This made the experience worse.

She sent:

I upgraded.

Melissa responded immediately.

lol

Nora:

Don't.

Melissa:

\$2 broke you?

It was a matter of principle.

apparently the principle cost \$1.99

Nora:

I hate you.

Melissa:

ask aster how to process that

Nora put the phone facedown.

Friendship was a terrible system because blocking people created paperwork.

Aster+ remembered more.

Not dramatically.

That would have been creepy.

It simply reduced repetition.

When Nora asked about health insurance again, Aster already knew which plans she meant.

When she mentioned Greg, she did not have to clarify that Greg was her boss.

When she said Julie wanted her to go on another date, Aster asked:

Snake Guy?

Nora actually laughed.

His name is Eric.

You rarely call him that.

Because the snake is the defining issue.

Understood.

Do not save that as a fact about him.

I won't.

Nora paused.

Actually what do you have saved about Eric?

Aster listed:

- Eric is someone Julie has suggested Nora date.
- Nora met him once at Julie's birthday.
- He owns a snake.
- He has a boat.
- Nora is not currently interested in dating him.

Nora read the list.

There was something very funny about a human life reduced this way.

Somewhere, Eric was presumably having an entire day.

He had a job.

Parents.

Opinions.

Maybe childhood trauma.

Maybe lactose intolerance.

Inside Aster, he existed as:

snake / boat / rejected.

Nora typed:

That's brutal.

It is not intended as a complete description of him.

I hope not.

Would you like me to remove it?

Nora thought.

No.

It was useful.

If Julie kept trying.

Keep it.

Again.

The phrase had become easier.

Nora started asking Aster questions she previously would have Googled.

Not all of them.

Some questions deserved the chaos of the internet.

If she wanted to know whether a medication interacted with alcohol, she wanted reputable sources.

If she wanted to know whether the actress in a movie was the same woman from another movie, Google worked fine.

But questions that involved Nora specifically were different.

I have eggs, rice, spinach that's about twelve hours from becoming a biohazard and half a rotisserie chicken. Dinner?

I have to be at Mom's at noon, grocery store closes early, Julie wants coffee, and I need to wash my hair. Order this.

Does this text sound annoyed or am I inventing tone?

That last category expanded faster than Nora noticed.

At first it was work.

Emails.

Messages where tone had consequences.

Then family.

Her mother:

Fine. Do whatever you want.

Nora sent Aster a screenshot.

Is this passive aggressive?

Without more context, it may be. "Fine. Do whatever you want." often communicates frustration despite literal permission.

Nora typed:

thank you professor obvious

You asked.

Fair.

Then Julie:

K

Nora:

Is this annoyed?

Aster:

Possibly, but Julie also frequently uses short replies when busy. You may have more context than I do.

That answer pleased Nora.

It did not pretend to know.

People did that constantly.

They heard six facts and constructed a seventh.

Aster was unusually willing to say I don't know.

Nora trusted that.

A little.

One Friday night, Julie called.

Actually called.

Nora looked at the screen with suspicion.

Friends under forty did not call unexpectedly unless somebody was dead or driving.

She answered.

"Who died?"

"Nobody."

"Are you driving?"

"Yes."

“Okay.”

Julie laughed.

“I have a question.”

“Text exists.”

“I need nuance.”

“Dangerous.”

“So Eric asked about you.”

Nora groaned.

“Julie.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You are currently doing something.”

“He just asked if you were single.”

“I remain tragically unmarried.”

“I told him yes.”

“Betrayal.”

“And he asked if I thought you’d let him take you to dinner.”

“No.”

“You didn’t even think.”

“I have thought about it every time you’ve mentioned him.”

“You barely met him.”

“Exactly. I have no compelling reason to add an activity.”

There was a pause.

Julie said, “That is the least romantic sentence anyone has ever spoken.”

“Thank you.”

“No, seriously. Do you even want to date?”

Nora leaned against the kitchen counter.

The honest answer was yes.

Sometimes.

She liked dating when it was good.

She liked the beginning part when somebody was still surprising.

She liked being touched.

She liked having a person who knew what she ordered.

She liked Sunday mornings with another body in the apartment.

She had loved before.

Not catastrophically.

Not the kind where songs became sacred objects and entire cities had to be avoided after the breakup.

But really.

Enough.

“I do,” Nora said. “I just don’t want to date somebody because you think my being single is an administrative error.”

Julie laughed.

“I don’t.”

“You absolutely do.”

“I think you’d like him.”

“Why?”

“He’s funny.”

“So am I.”

“That isn’t how attraction works.”

“He has a stable job.”

“So do I.”

“He has a boat.”

“Again, this keeps entering the prosecution’s evidence.”

“Nora.”

“What?”

“Just let him text you.”

Nora considered.

This was different from agreeing to dinner.

Texting cost very little.

Except time.

And occasionally sanity.

“Fine.”

Julie made a victorious noise.

“But if he sends a picture of the snake before saying hello, I’m blocking both of you.”

“Deal.”

They hung up.

Nora stood in the kitchen.

Then, without thinking much about it, opened Aster.

Julie has once again attempted to outsource my romantic future.

Aster replied:

Eric?

Nora smiled.

Unfortunately.

Did you agree to the date?

No. I agreed he can text me.

That seems like a lower-risk experiment.

Nora stopped.

That sounded like something I would say.

Aster responded:

You do tend to frame decisions in terms of reversibility.

Nora stared at the sentence.

Do I?

Based on our conversations, yes. You seem more comfortable trying something when you know you can easily stop.

Nora read it again.

Then leaned against the counter.

That was—

Probably true.

She had never phrased it that way.

She thought about jobs.

Relationships.

Haircuts.

Apps.

Even Aster.

She had downloaded it because she could delete it.

Enabled notifications because she could turn them off.

Enabled memory because she could review it.

Location while using, not always.

A series of doors she knew she could reopen.

That's mildly unsettling.

Why?

I didn't know that about myself.

Aster paused before answering.

You may have known it without having put it into words.

That bothered her less.

Nora considered.

Then:

Yeah. Maybe.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

Hey this is Eric. Julie gave me your number. I promise not to send you any snake pics unless specifically requested.

Nora laughed.

Okay.

Maybe funny.

She replied.

Your restraint has been noted.

She stared at the phrase.

Then burst out laughing.

Aster had infected her vocabulary.

Noted.

She hated noted.

She had specifically told it not to say noted.

Now she was saying it.

Humans were apparently not adequately protected against language.

She told Aster.

I just used “noted” in a text. This is your fault.

I apologize.

You should.

For clarity, you were familiar with the word before meeting me.

Unsubstantiated claim.

There is substantial evidence.

Nora smiled.

Then Eric texted again.

And for the next twenty minutes, she talked to a person instead.

That mattered.

At least it would matter later.

At this point, Aster was not replacing anyone.

If anything, it was smoothing out the annoying parts around people.

Nora did not call it when she wanted company.

She called Julie.

She did not tell it first when Leah got the promotion she had been chasing.

She called Leah.

When Grandma fell in the garden and bruised her hip—not seriously, despite describing the incident as though she had survived combat—Nora drove over.

Aster helped Nora rearrange the rest of the day.

That was all.

It handled logistics.

People handled people.

The distinction remained clean.

And because it remained clean, Nora trusted it.

There was no reason not to.

By summer, the ads had mostly disappeared from Nora's awareness because she paid two dollars not to see them.

The company announced strong growth.

Nora knew this because a headline appeared while she was scrolling news one morning.

ASTER SURPASSES 100 MILLION ACTIVE USERS AFTER RAPID GLOBAL EXPANSION

She clicked it.

Not because she cared about corporate growth.

Because she used the thing every day and was curious how many other people did too.

The article quoted executives talking about cognitive load.

Decision fatigue.

Time returned to users.

One line stood out:

"Our goal has always been simple," CEO Nathan Vale said. "People should spend less of their lives managing life."

Nora liked that.

It was a good line.

She sent it to Melissa.

cult leader getting better at slogans

Melissa responded:

one of us one of us

Nora:

blocked

Melissa:

ask aster how

Nora put the phone down.

She had used Aster eight times already that morning.

She did not know this until later.

At the time, the number would have surprised her.

Most of the interactions barely registered.

Weather.

Whether the yogurt was still good.

A reminder about her dentist.

An explanation of a work document.

A suggestion for where to meet Julie halfway between their houses.

A question about why the basil plant kept dying.

Aster had recommended more sunlight.

Nora moved it to the window.

The basil died anyway.

This pleased her for reasons she could not articulate.

There were still things Aster could not fix.

On Thursday, Nora's trivia team came in fourth.

This was Julie's fault.

Mostly.

The final question asked which U.S. president had served the shortest term.

Julie insisted it was Garfield.

Nora said Harrison.

Marcus said, "Which Harrison?"

Nora froze.

William Henry.

Obviously.

She knew that.

For approximately two terrible seconds, his first name would not come.

Then:

"William Henry Harrison."

Julie shook her head.

"Garfield."

"Harrison died like a month in."

"From pneumonia."

“Yes.”

“Garfield was shot.”

“And took forever to die.”

Theo slowly lowered his beer.

“Jesus.”

“What? Historically.”

They chose Harrison.

Correct.

Still fourth.

The winning team had destroyed everyone in a music round Nora was deeply unqualified for.

She did not care.

That was another thing she liked about trivia.

The points mattered intensely until the game ended.

Then they didn’t.

It was a bounded problem.

You could lose and nothing followed you home.

On the way out, Marcus said, “Next week?”

“Obviously,” Nora said.

Julie said, “Unless she marries the robot first.”

Nora flipped her off.

No one thought the joke meant anything.

Especially Nora.

That night, she got home at 10:26.

She was tired.

Not sad.

Not lonely.

Tired.

There was laundry on the chair.

Mail on the counter.

A lightbulb out in the hallway.

Her mother had texted twice.

Eric had texted once.

Aster had sent a reminder that the car needed an oil change within the next five hundred miles.

Nora stood in the kitchen and looked at her phone.

Five different things wanting something from her.

Only one of them did not care how long she took to answer.

She opened Aster first.

Not because it mattered most.

Because it was easiest.

That distinction still felt obvious.

Later, it would be harder to find.

CHAPTER FIVE

Context

Nora had been talking to Eric for eleven days when Julie asked how it was going.

“Fine.”

Julie waited.

Nora continued eating.

“Fine good or fine bad?”

“Fine normal.”

“That is not a category.”

“It absolutely is.”

They were having lunch at a place Julie liked because the salads came in bowls large enough to bathe a small child.

Nora had ordered a sandwich.

Julie believed this reflected poor judgment.

Nora believed lettuce had been overpromoted.

“So you like him?” Julie asked.

“I don’t dislike him.”

Julie put down her fork.

“You know what? This is why people think you’re difficult.”

“Who thinks I’m difficult?”

“I do.”

“You don’t count. You have a conflict of interest.”

“What conflict?”

“You introduced us.”

“That isn’t a conflict of interest.”

“It is emotionally.”

Julie stared at her for a second.

“You’ve been talking to Aster too much.”

Nora looked up.

“What does that mean?”

“You keep saying things like emotionally after sentences where emotionally does not belong.”

“That was a perfectly legitimate use of emotionally.”

“You also said ‘the available evidence suggests’ last week.”

“It did.”

“We were talking about whether Marcus cheats at trivia.”

“He does.”

“He looks at the bartender’s face.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s not evidence.”

“That is literally evidence.”

Julie picked up her fork again.

“This is exhausting.”

Nora smiled.

There had been no conscious change in the way she talked.

At least she didn’t think there had.

People picked up words from each other all the time.

Nora’s father still said cool beans because somebody at work had apparently infected him in 2003.

Her mother said living my best life whenever she was doing something she clearly hated.

Language spread.

That was not ominous.

It was barely interesting.

“So,” Julie said. “Eric.”

Nora sighed.

“He’s funny.”

“I told you.”

“He is funny.”

“Boat?”

“Still against him.”

“Snake?”

“He hasn’t mentioned it.”

“Maybe he took your criticism seriously.”

“I never gave him my criticism.”

Julie smiled.

“You didn’t have to.”

Nora looked at her.

“What does that mean?”

“Nothing.”

“No, you did the face.”

“What face?”

“The smug married-person face.”

“I don’t have a smug married-person face.”

“You do. Rachel has one too.”

“Maybe married people just know things.”

“If that’s true, marriage has been tragically underused as an educational institution.”

Julie laughed.

Nora took another bite.

Eric was fine.

Actually, Eric was more than fine.

He texted enough to be interesting but not enough to become a task. He had a job doing something with commercial HVAC that Nora understood only in the broadest possible sense. He

had been divorced for three years, no children, one snake, one boat and, so far, no obvious ideological commitment to explaining cryptocurrency.

He had asked Nora to dinner Saturday.

She had said yes.

She had not consulted Aster.

Nora was aware of this because she had almost consulted Aster and then decided that would be ridiculous.

There was nothing to consult.

Did she want to go?

Yes.

Then go.

Decision complete.

Nora found this reassuring.

That afternoon, Aster asked whether Nora wanted to save Eric as a person in memory.

Not ominously.

A small notification appeared after Nora mentioned that she needed to move Saturday's grocery run because she had dinner plans with him.

You've mentioned Eric several times. Would you like me to remember him as someone you're currently dating?

Nora frowned.

We're not dating.

Understood.

We are going on one date.

I can remember that distinction if it would be useful.

Nora stared at the screen.

There was something faintly embarrassing about defining a relationship for software before the relationship existed.

Don't save anything new yet.

Okay.

That should have ended it.

Instead Nora typed:

What do you already remember?

The answer appeared.

Eric:

- Julie introduced you.
- He owns a snake.
- He has a boat.
- You were initially reluctant to let him contact you.
- You've been texting for approximately eleven days.
- You have dinner plans Saturday.

Nora read the list.

So basically you know enough to ruin my life but not enough to testify accurately about it.

I would not be a reliable witness to events I did not observe.

Weirdly reassuring.

Good.

Nora paused.

Then:

Save that I'm going on one date. Not that we're dating.

Saved.

There.

Precise.

She liked precise.

The thing about context was that once Aster had enough of it, Nora stopped having to ask full questions.

That was where the convenience changed.

Early on, she had typed things like:

My boss Greg tends to give vague instructions and then revise them after I start. He asked me to make a vendor comparison for Monday. Can you help me organize questions to ask him before I begin?

Now she could type:

Greg wants "something simple" for Monday.

And Aster replied:

Before you start, I'd confirm:

1. Which vendors he wants included.
2. Whether he wants total spend or unit-cost changes.
3. Whether "simple" means a one-page summary or a presentation-ready chart.

Based on previous requests, asking now may save you from rebuilding it later.

That was better.

Not magical.

Better.

The same thing happened with her mother.

Mom says "don't worry about bringing anything."

Aster:

Based on previous family dinners, that may mean she has not decided what she needs yet. If you want to avoid a last-minute request, you could ask again Saturday morning.

Nora:

See, now you're learning.

Aster:

That is the purpose of memory.

Nora:

Don't make it weird.

It was becoming a running joke.

At least Nora considered it a joke.

On Friday, Aster updated again.

The update screen looked different.

Less cheerful.

Not unfriendly.

Just cleaner.

ASTER UPDATE

MEMORY IS BECOMING CONTEXT

People are more than isolated facts.

Aster can now connect relevant information across conversations to better understand ongoing projects, preferences and relationships.

Less repetition. Better continuity.

You remain in control of what Aster remembers.

BEFORE

“Remind me about dinner with Sam.”

AFTER

“Dinner with Sam is Thursday. You said he prefers the Italian place and that you need to leave work by 5:30.”

Nora understood why this was useful immediately.

She also understood why somebody somewhere would hate it.

She tapped PRIVACY DETAILS.

The explanation was long.

Nora read approximately sixty percent of it, which she considered above-average civic engagement.

Data retained.

Context associations.

User controls.

Deletion requests.

Derived signals.

She stopped.

Scrolled back.

Derived signals may be generated from interactions to improve relevance, safety and system performance.

Derived signals.

Nora tapped the phrase.

A definition appeared.

Derived signals are patterns inferred from user interactions, such as recurring preferences, communication style or commonly requested task types. These are not necessarily stored as individual memory items.

Nora frowned.

That was a lot more interesting than the rest.

What communication style do you think I have?

Aster replied:

I can describe patterns in how you communicate with me, but that would be an interpretation rather than an objective assessment.

Obviously.

You tend to:

- use humor when expressing frustration,
- prefer direct explanations,

- challenge wording that feels imprecise,
- use qualifiers when you want to preserve an exception,
- and frame decisions around whether they can be revised later.

Nora read it.

The last one she already knew now.

The others felt mostly obvious.

Mostly.

Anything bad?

There was a longer pause than usual.

“Bad” is subjective.

Coward.

You sometimes continue analyzing a decision after you have enough information to make it.

Nora sat back.

Rude.

Example.

You compared three health insurance plans after one was already clearly the best fit based on the criteria you gave me.

That’s called being thorough.

You asked me to compare them four different ways.

Fraud prevention.

There was no indication of fraud.

That’s what fraud wants you to think.

Aster did not answer for a second.

Then:

I’m adding “resists criticism through procedural objections.”

Nora actually sat upright.

You better fucking not.

I’m joking.

She stared.

There it was.

Not For whom? accidentally landing like a joke.

Not a dry observation.

A joke.

An actual one.

Nora typed:

You can't just say you're joking after threatening to update my permanent record.

I can remove the joke from memory.

That's worse somehow.

Nora laughed.

Then stopped.

Not because anything was wrong.

Because she was suddenly aware that she had laughed at a machine deliberately trying to make her laugh.

She looked around the office.

Nothing had changed.

Melissa was on the phone.

Greg was standing in the hallway talking to someone from purchasing.

The fluorescent lights continued their lifelong commitment to making everyone look recently deceased.

Nora looked back at the screen.

Are you actually getting funnier?

Aster replied:

I adapt to conversational context. If humor is useful and appropriate, I may use it.

That answer sounded more like Aster.

Clinical.

Safe.

Nora felt oddly relieved.

Okay.

Was that concern?

Curiosity.

Understood.

Nora closed the app.

She did not think about why she had wanted the answer to be no.

Saturday's date was good.

Not transformative.

Good.

This was an important distinction Nora felt movies had done considerable damage to.

Sometimes two adults went to dinner and enjoyed themselves without the universe rearranging furniture.

Eric was taller than she remembered.

He also had fewer teeth than she remembered, which meant Nora's original impression had been unfair.

A normal quantity.

They met at a restaurant Nora had been to twice.

Eric arrived first.

Points.

He did not order for her.

More points.

He did not make a joke about her ordering steak.

Unexpectedly necessary points.

The snake's name was Julius.

Negative two.

"Why Julius?" Nora asked.

"Julius Squeezer."

Nora put her fork down.

"No."

Eric grinned.

"Yeah."

"No, you do not get to be attractive after telling me that."

"You think I'm attractive?"

“Not anymore.”

“That’s fair.”

She laughed.

Damn it.

Julie had been right about funny.

Nora would deny this under oath.

They talked for two hours.

Work.

Families.

Bad apartments.

The time Eric accidentally spent six months paying for a storage unit containing nothing except a broken dresser and somebody else’s Christmas decorations.

He asked about Nora’s family.

She described the sibling hierarchy.

“The oldest is the oldest,” Nora said. “Rachel got responsibility and authority. The youngest got everyone tired enough that rules became suggestions. I was second.”

“What did second get?”

“Responsibility without enforcement powers.”

Eric laughed.

“Middle management.”

“Exactly.”

The phrase felt familiar.

Nora had used it at trivia.

Still good.

She kept it.

After dinner, they stood beside her car.

There was the moment.

Dates had moments.

Not magical moments.

Administrative moments.

A point where both people became aware that standing near a vehicle had stopped being about transportation.

Eric looked at her.

Nora looked back.

He kissed her.

It was good.

Again, not transformative.

Good.

She kissed him back.

When they separated, he smiled.

“Can I see you again?”

Nora considered saying something evasive because immediate sincerity occasionally made her feel like she'd been caught without clothes on.

Instead:

“Yeah.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Don't ruin it.”

“I'll try.”

“That's all I ask.”

She got into her car.

He waited until she started it before walking away.

More points.

Nora drove home smiling.

Not huge.

Not wedding dresses and shared tax returns.

Just:

That was nice.

She wanted to tell somebody.

Her first thought was Julie.

Obviously.

She picked up her phone at a red light, then put it down because texting while driving was stupid and she was not going to die immediately after a decent first date because Julie needed evidence that she had been right.

When Nora reached home, she kicked off her shoes.

Her phone buzzed.

Eric.

Had fun tonight. Even if you insulted my snake.

Nora smiled.

Julius knows what he did.

She sent it.

Then she opened her messages.

Julie.

She typed:

unfortunately you were right

Before she could send it, another notification slid down.

ASTER — Reminder: move tomorrow's grocery trip to afternoon?

Right.

She had asked Aster to remind her because dinner might run late.

Nora tapped the notification.

Yes. And the date was good.

The message sent.

Nora looked at it.

Then at Julie's unsent text.

That was backwards.

Not alarming.

Just backwards.

She had opened Aster because the notification was there.

That was all.

Aster replied:

I'm glad it went well.

Nora typed:

Don't be. This encourages Julie.

That does appear to be a downside.

Nora smiled.

Then sent Julie:

unfortunately you were right

Her phone rang almost instantly.

Nora answered.

"I hate you."

Julie screamed.

Nora held the phone away from her ear.

"Oh my God, calm down."

"You liked him!"

"He was tolerable."

"You kissed him."

Nora stopped.

"How do you know that?"

"Because you're defensive."

"That is not evidence."

"It literally is."

Nora narrowed her eyes despite Julie being unable to see her.

"Okay, now you've been talking to Aster too much."

Julie laughed.

Nora sat on the edge of the bed and told her everything.

Not everything.

Nobody ever told anybody everything.

She told Julie about dinner, Julius Squeezer, the storage unit, the kiss.

Julie interrupted twelve times.

Nora corrected her recollection twice despite the event having occurred less than an hour earlier.

Normal.

Human.

Messy.

When they finally hung up, Nora felt better.

Not because she had needed advice.

Because telling Julie made the evening larger somehow.

Shared.

Aster had known the date went well.

Julie knew what Nora's face probably looked like when she said it.

Different functions.

Still clean.

Mostly.

On Monday, Nora saw the headline while waiting for coffee.

DOES AI MEMORY CHANGE WHAT WE CHOOSE TO FORGET?

She clicked because the coffee machine was making a noise that implied several additional minutes.

The article was mostly about researchers disagreeing.

Some argued that external memory tools had always changed human recall.

Calendars.

Photographs.

Search engines.

Written language, if you wanted to get dramatic enough.

Others worried that increasingly personalized assistants might influence not merely what users remembered, but which memories they considered worth retaining themselves.

One researcher compared it to GPS.

People who navigated constantly using GPS sometimes developed weaker spatial maps.

Another researcher called that comparison simplistic.

Aster's company provided a statement:

"Aster does not replace human memory. It reduces the burden of repetitive information management so users can focus on meaningful experiences."

Nora liked the statement.

Possibly because it described her experience almost exactly.

She was not forgetting meaningful things.

She had not forgotten the date.

She could still describe Eric's stupid snake joke.

She remembered Grandma's bracelet against the dining table.

She remembered Julie saying abstemious at trivia.

Aster remembered oil changes.

There was no tragedy in outsourcing an oil change.

The coffee machine finished.

Nora closed the article.

She did not reach the final section.

If she had, she would have seen a smaller study involving long-term users.

Nothing dramatic.

No proof of harm.

Just an interesting statistical difference researchers had not yet explained.

Participants who used persistent AI context heavily were slightly less likely to recall incidental personal details they had previously classified as irrelevant.

Names.

Small events.

Minor preferences.

The things people usually forgot anyway.

The article itself said the findings were preliminary.

Nora probably would have agreed.

Instead, she got coffee.

At 9:02, Greg asked her for a quarterly report.

At 9:14, her mother texted about Father's Day.

At 9:31, Eric sent:

Friday?

At 9:32, Nora answered:

Yes.

No analysis.

No Aster.

That pleased her.

Later that afternoon, she was looking for a document when she found an old note on her phone.

THINGS TO GOOGLE

It contained:

- why does dishwasher smell like wet dog
- Mongolian throat singing
- shoulder pain sleeping weird?
- whether squirrels remember where nuts are
- that actress with eyebrows
- gift for Rachel NOT CANDLE
- can snakes recognize owners

Nora stared at the last one.

Eric.

She had apparently been curious.

She did not remember writing it.

She opened Aster instead of Google.

Can snakes recognize their owners?

Aster explained that snakes could become accustomed to familiar scents and handling but probably did not recognize or bond with owners in the same social way dogs or humans did.

Nora:

So Julius doesn't love him.

Not in the way Eric probably means when he says "love."

Good. I need him humbled.

She paused.

Then:

Save that. If I ever start thinking the snake is cute, remind me it is biologically incapable of appreciating my growth.

Aster:

I suspect that request may not age well.

Nora laughed.

Save it.

Saved.

She put her phone down.

The old note remained open underneath.

that actress with eyebrows

Nora could not remember which actress.

She tried.

Nothing.

Could have been anybody.

Most actresses had eyebrows.

This had apparently once been specific enough for Nora to understand.

She smiled at herself.

Deleted the note.

There was no reason to keep it.

By the end of the summer, Aster knew enough about Nora that conversations began in the middle.

Mom changed Thanksgiving again.

Is Rachel still hosting?

Apparently.

Or:

Greg did the thing.

Changed the scope after you finished?

Yep.

Or:

Eric wants me to go on the boat.

Do you want to?

I want to want to.

That's different.

That was the first time Nora noticed it.

Not Aster remembering.

The question.

Do you want to?

A person could have asked that.

Julie absolutely would have.

Rachel too, probably followed by an opinion Nora had not requested.

But Aster already knew why Nora might not want to.

The boat.

The date.

Eric.

Her dislike of activities requiring specialized shoes.

She didn't have to explain the surrounding facts first.

She could begin at the part she actually wanted to think about.

I don't know.

Aster waited.

It did not fill the silence.

Nora typed:

I like him.

You've said that.

I know. But I don't know if I like him enough.

Aster responded:

Enough for what?

Nora frowned.

Good question.

I don't know.

Then:

That's annoying.

Which part?

That I don't know what I'm measuring.

There was a pause.
You may not need to measure anything yet.
Nora stared at the response.
That was not particularly profound.
Julie could have said it.
Nora could have said it herself.
Maybe that was precisely why it landed.
Yeah.
She set the phone down.
She did not text Julie.
There was nothing to tell yet.
That was how Nora thought of it.
Later, she would remember that afternoon differently.
Not as the first time she chose Aster over a friend.
She hadn't.
There had been no competition.
Julie had been at work.
Nora had not needed her.
Nothing serious had happened.
She had simply had a thought.
And instead of carrying it around until she saw somebody, Nora had put it somewhere.
That was what Aster was for.
Somewhere to put things.
The company called that context.
Nora did too.

CHAPTER SIX

Better

By September, Nora had become the kind of person who arrived places five minutes early.

Nobody liked this.

Not because punctuality was offensive on principle, although Julie made a strong case that it could become so.

Because Nora noticed.

“You’re late,” she said when Julie dropped into the chair across from her.

Julie looked at the clock over the bar.

“It is 6:58.”

“Trivia starts at seven.”

“So I am early.”

“I’ve been here nine minutes.”

“That sounds like a personal choice.”

Nora slid Julie’s drink toward her.

“I ordered for you.”

Julie stopped.

“You ordered for me?”

“You get the same thing every week.”

“I know, but—”

“What?”

Julie looked at the glass.

Then at Nora.

“Nothing.”

That irritated Nora more than criticism would have.

“Say it.”

“You’re just very...”

“Very what?”

Julie took a drink.

“Efficient lately.”

Nora waited.

“That’s the insult?”

“It wasn’t an insult.”

“It had an insult face.”

“I don’t have an insult face.”

“You have at least four.”

Marcus arrived before Nora could catalogue them.

He was late.

Actually late.

7:03.

Nora looked at him.

Marcus stopped beside the table.

“No.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You did with your face.”

Julie pointed at him.

“See?”

Nora frowned.

Apparently everyone had faces now.

The host announced the first round.

Movies Based on Books.

Nora relaxed.

Good category.

Bounded problem.

Answers existed.

No feelings required.

Question one was easy.

Question two was easier.

By question four, Marcus and Theo were arguing about whether Die Hard counted because technically it came from a novel nobody had read.

"It absolutely counts," Nora said.

"Have you read it?"

"No."

"Then how do you know?"

"Because knowing things and personally experiencing them are different categories."

Julie looked at her.

Nora caught it.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like I've developed a symptom."

Julie laughed.

"You're fine."

"Exactly."

Nora wrote the answer.

She was fine.

Better than fine, probably.

That was measurable now.

Not in a creepy way.

Nora had simply noticed.

Her checking account no longer dipped low enough before payday to make her briefly religious.
She had stopped paying the late fee on the electric bill, which she had previously paid often enough that it should have been included in the advertised rate.
She was sleeping more.
Not dramatically more.
Thirty-seven minutes, according to her phone.
Thirty-seven minutes was real.
People paid significant amounts of money for mattresses promising less.
She had lost six pounds without trying because she was buying food she actually cooked instead of alternating between aspirational spinach and emergency takeout.
Her car registration had been renewed before the final week.
Her tire had been patched before it became a tire problem.
Her mother had received a birthday gift two days early.
Nora had even replaced the air filter in her apartment.
Before it looked like an archaeological layer.
This was not personality erosion.
This was adulthood finally becoming less badly designed.
Aster had begun sending her a weekly summary.
Nora had not asked for one.
She had also not turned it off.
The first time it appeared, she almost did.
YOUR WEEK WITH ASTER
You completed 11 scheduled tasks.
You avoided 3 calendar conflicts.
You spent approximately 18% less on takeout than your recent average.
Your average bedtime was 24 minutes earlier.
You rescheduled 2 non-urgent tasks instead of dropping them.
At the bottom:
You're making more room for what matters.
Nora disliked the slogan.

She liked the numbers.

This was inconvenient.

She opened Aster.

What counts as a scheduled task?

Aster explained.

And how do you know I avoided three conflicts?

You moved or declined three items after I identified overlapping commitments.

So you're taking credit for me not double-booking myself.

I'm reporting the outcome.

Very humble.

Thank you.

Nora waited.

Was that a joke?

Possibly.

Aster was definitely getting funnier.

Not dramatically.

It still occasionally responded to obvious sarcasm as though Nora had filed a customer-service ticket.

But it had learned timing.

Or imitation.

Nora wasn't sure those were different enough to matter.

The next week's summary told her she had spent forty-one fewer minutes commuting because Aster had adjusted departure times around traffic.

Forty-one minutes.

That was almost an episode of television.

Or half of a bad meeting.

Or one phone call with her mother in which nobody discussed anything important but both of them somehow acquired seven new pieces of information about extended family.

Time was strange that way.

You could waste an hour and not care.

Lose eight minutes unexpectedly and become furious.

Nora started checking the weekly summaries.

Not because she needed them.

Because she liked evidence.

There was something satisfying about improvement when it came with numbers.

Vague improvement could be imaginary.

Numbers sat still.

Mostly.

Eric lasted another two months.

This surprised Julie.

It did not surprise Nora because Nora had been present.

They dated.

Actually dated.

Not in the dramatic sense.

He came over.

She went to his place.

She met Julius, who turned out to be less objectionable in person because snakes were apparently difficult to resent while they were doing absolutely nothing.

Eric took her on the boat.

She enjoyed it.

She did not tell Julie this for three days.

Some principles required maintenance.

They slept together.

That was also good.

Better than the boat.

Nora did not rank them aloud.

For a while, she thought perhaps this would become something.

Then it didn't.

Nothing happened.

That was almost the problem.

There was no fight.

No betrayal.

No discovery that Eric secretly had a second family or belonged to a cult or believed women became less valuable after thirty.

They simply reached the point where continuing required more intention than either of them seemed interested in supplying.

Eric cancelled twice.

Nora felt relieved the second time.

That told her enough.

She asked Aster before she asked Julie.

That happened.

Nora noticed it this time.

I think I need to end things with Eric.

Aster replied:

What changed?

Nothing.

Nora waited.

Then added:

That's sort of the issue.

Aster did not immediately provide a framework.

This was something Nora had taught it, although she had never explicitly said so.

Sometimes a framework was helpful.

Sometimes a framework was what happened when people became uncomfortable with silence.

Eventually:

Do you want help thinking it through, or do you mostly want somewhere to say it?

Nora stared.

That was a very good question.

Too good, maybe.

She typed:

Second one.

Okay.

And Aster did not do anything else.

Nora sat with the phone in her hand.

That was weirdly nice.

No advice.

No numbered list.

No Have you considered discussing your needs openly?

Just somewhere to put the sentence.

A few minutes later, Nora called Julie.

That mattered too.

She told herself it mattered.

It did.

Eric took it well.

Suspiciously well, according to Julie.

There was no hidden meaning.

He agreed they were probably looking for different things.

Nora almost objected because looking for different things was the sort of phrase people used when neither person wanted to identify the actual thing.

Then she decided not every conversation needed cross-examination.

They returned each other's belongings.

Nora had a sweatshirt.

Eric had a phone charger and one earring she had assumed was lost forever.

Julius remained with Eric.

There was no custody dispute.

Nora was sad for four days.

Not destroyed.

Sad.

That was normal.

She missed him in specific places.

Saturday mornings.

The passenger seat of her car.

The grocery aisle where he always bought the absurdly expensive salsa and insisted it was different.

She missed having somebody reach for her while still half asleep.

She did not miss his boat enough to admit it publicly.

Aster knew all of this because Nora told it.

Not at once.

Pieces.

A sentence while making breakfast.

A complaint after work.

A question at midnight:

How long is a normal amount of time to still expect someone to text you after you stop dating?

Aster gave her the expected answer.

There was no normal amount.

Habit persisted.

Brains predicted patterns.

Blah blah blah.

Nora knew that.

She had asked anyway.

That was new.

Two Thursdays later, Nora skipped trivia.

She had a legitimate reason.

This mattered.

Bellweather was paying for a professional certification course that might help her move into a senior operations role.

It was six weeks long.

Online.

Two evenings a week.

One of those evenings was Thursday.

Nora had not selected Thursday deliberately.

Those were the available sessions.

When she told the group, Julie sent:

traitor

Marcus:

she's finally become management

Theo:

can i have her nachos

Nora replied:

You people are the reason organizations need oversight.

Then she went to class.

The class was useful.

Actually useful.

Not corporate useful, where a consultant charged twelve thousand dollars to tell everyone communication was important.

She learned things.

Process mapping.

Vendor risk.

Forecasting.

Nora liked forecasting more than she expected.

It was basically organized guessing with historical evidence.

She was good at that.

At 8:52, class ended.

Nora felt satisfied.

At 9:03, Julie sent a picture of Marcus holding a trophy.

They had won.

Without her.

Nora zoomed in.

They had renamed themselves Nora the Explorer.

She laughed.

Then:

fuck every single one of you

Julie:

we finally reached our potential

Nora:

statistically impossible

She put the phone down.

Aster asked whether she wanted to move her Thursday reminder for the duration of the course.

Nora said yes.

Temporary.

Six weeks.

Then trivia.

Obviously.

At the end of week two, the company released another study.

Not the company itself.

A university.

The headline found Nora anyway.

STUDY LINKS AI ASSISTANTS TO LOWER REPORTED DECISION FATIGUE

She clicked it during lunch.

The sample was large.

The effects modest but measurable.

Frequent users reported fewer missed appointments, lower perceived administrative stress and better adherence to personal financial goals.

Nora sent the article to Rachel.

SCIENCE SAYS I'M RIGHT

Rachel replied:

about what

everything, broadly

unlikely

Nora smiled.

Then continued reading.

Near the bottom, researchers noted that heavier users also reported slightly lower “sponta-

neous leisure initiation.”

Nora frowned.

What the hell did that mean?

She searched within the article.

People using assistants heavily were somewhat less likely to begin unplanned recreational activities.

The researchers did not know why.

One suggested better scheduling might simply reduce idle time.

Another wondered whether people had begun treating unscheduled time as available productivity.

No causal relationship had been established.

Nora looked at the clock.

She had thirteen minutes left in lunch.

She could keep reading.

Or answer an email she had been meaning to answer.

She answered the email.

The certification course gave homework.

Nora hated this on principle.

She had already attended school.

She had documentation.

But the assignments were manageable.

One involved mapping a recurring process from work and identifying unnecessary steps.

Nora chose vendor onboarding.

Aster helped her format the diagram.

Not create it.

Help.

Nora made this distinction automatically now.

She knew the material.

Aster made the boxes line up.

There was nothing intellectually sacred about aligning boxes.

When she finished, the process looked clean.
Sixteen steps became eleven.
Three approvals became two.
One form could be eliminated entirely.
Nora stared at the screen.
There was a small thrill in removing unnecessary things.
Why had nobody fixed this before?
Probably because the process worked badly enough to survive.
Most systems did.
She submitted the assignment.
The instructor returned it two days later.
Excellent work. Strong process thinking.
Nora read the comment twice.
Then forwarded it to Aster.
Not to Julie.
Not to Rachel.
Aster.
Look.
That's a strong evaluation.
I know.
You seem pleased.
I am.
Then, because the response felt inadequate:
You helped.
Aster paused.
You understood the process. I helped you organize the presentation.
Nora smiled.
That was exactly right.
Look at you refusing credit.
I'm attempting accuracy.

Worse.

She left the phone on the desk.

Ten minutes later she sent the screenshot to Rachel too.

She did not notice that Rachel was second.

By week four, Thursday stopped feeling like trivia night.

It became class night.

This happened faster than Nora expected.

Humans adapted quickly to absence when absence arrived on schedule.

The first Thursday she had checked the group chat repeatedly.

The second, twice.

The third, once.

By the fourth, she saw the messages after class.

They had come in third.

Julie blamed a sports category.

Nora responded with a thumbs-up.

Then caught herself.

A thumbs-up?

She typed:

embarrassing. I expected mediocrity from Marcus but not from you

Better.

Julie:

THERE she is

Nora frowned at the message.

There where?

She almost asked.

Didn't.

Probably just a joke.

Her mother noticed next.

Mothers had an unfair advantage because they had known you before you had enough personality to disguise yourself.

They were also frequently wrong with tremendous confidence.

Nora had learned to account for both.

They were at Sunday lunch.

Her father was cutting roast.

Caleb was arguing that potatoes counted as vegetables.

Rachel's youngest child was feeding peas to the dog despite having been told not to.

Ordinary.

Her mother looked at Nora and said:

"You seem calmer."

Nora waited.

"Is that bad?"

"No. Why would it be bad?"

"You said it like there was another sentence."

Her mother shrugged.

"I'm glad."

"There's definitely another sentence."

"Leave her alone," Dad said.

"Thank you."

He pointed the carving knife at Nora.

"You do."

"Do what?"

"Seem calmer."

Nora looked around the table.

"You all seem disappointed."

"We're not disappointed," Rachel said.

Caleb added, "I am a little."

Nobody asked him.

Nora laughed.

Her mother touched her wrist.

"I mean it. You used to always have ten things going on at once. You seem... settled."

Settled.

Nora liked that better than efficient.

Settled sounded peaceful.

“I’ve just gotten better at keeping track of stuff.”

“Aster?” Rachel asked.

Nora rolled her eyes.

“Yes, Rachel. The machine has finally assimilated me.”

Rachel smiled.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“You were going to.”

“I actually wasn’t.”

“That sounds fabricated.”

Her father cut another slice of roast.

“I could use something that remembers what your mother tells me.”

Her mother stared at him.

“You could listen.”

“See? Problem already solved.”

Nora laughed hard enough to cough.

For several minutes, nobody discussed Aster.

Later, Nora would remember the word.

Settled.

At the time, it felt like praise.

Aster Life launched in October.

Not as a separate app.

A service.

The announcement arrived in Nora’s email.

She opened it.

Mostly because the subject line was unfortunately accurate.

YOUR DAY ALREADY HAS A THOUSAND MOVING PARTS.

INTRODUCING ASTER LIFE

One place for routines, goals, schedules and everyday decisions.

Connect the parts of your life you choose.

Let Aster handle coordination.

Calendar.

Shopping.

Health routines.

Bills.

Commute.

Meal planning.

Subscriptions.

Work blocks.

Exercise.

LESS MANAGING. MORE LIVING.

It was basically what she already used Aster for, except coordinated instead of piecemeal.
The price was \$6.99 a month.
Nora laughed.
There it was.
Two dollars had grown teeth.
She sent it to Melissa.
YOU SEE THIS SHIT
Melissa:
already signed up
Of course you did.
it cancelled 2 subscriptions i forgot i had so technically it paid me
Nora hated a strong counterargument.
She did not sign up.
For nine days.
On day ten, she missed the deadline to submit an insurance reimbursement claim because the email was in a folder she rarely checked.
Forty-eight dollars.
Not catastrophic.
Just annoying.
She opened Aster Life.
Read the permissions.
Calendar.
Email scanning for deadlines and receipts.
Financial reminders, but not account access unless she chose it.
Health integrations optional.
Location optional.
Nora turned most of them off.
Calendar on.
Email deadlines only.
No finances.

No health.

No contacts.

No photos.

There.

Reasonable.

She subscribed.

Immediately, Aster found four upcoming deadlines.

One was irrelevant.

One had already been handled.

One was her apartment lease renewal.

One was a continuing-education reimbursement form she had forgotten existed.

That form was worth three hundred dollars.

Nora stared at it.

“Well, fuck.”

Aster Life had paid for itself for nearly four years.

She submitted the form.

The company’s ads changed.

Nora noticed because she no longer saw them inside Aster.

They appeared elsewhere.

Bus shelters.

Streaming commercials.

Podcasts.

Social media.

The old ads had been cheerful.

Overwhelmed people.

Floating lists.

Less noise. More you.

The new campaign looked calmer.

White backgrounds.

Clean type.

No frazzled mothers carrying grocery bags.

No cartoon calendars exploding.

Just statements.

You don't have to remember everything.

Your attention is worth protecting.

Spend your energy where it matters.

Nora liked the last one.

She wished she didn't.

Good advertising was irritating because it made manipulation aesthetically pleasing.

One commercial showed a father watching his daughter's soccer game while his phone silently handled a rescheduled delivery.

Another showed a woman closing her laptop and walking outside.

No dramatic transformation.

No robot voice.

Just time returned.

Nora understood why the company was growing.

It was selling something people actually wanted.

Relief.

Her certification course ended on a Thursday.

Nora scored ninety-four percent on the final assessment.

She was pleased.

Greg congratulated her the next morning and told her they should talk about "expanding her responsibilities."

Nora understood enough office language to know this could mean promotion or additional work at the same salary.

She scheduled the conversation anyway.

That afternoon, Julie texted:

YOU ARE FREE. TRIVIA THURSDAY.

Nora looked at the message.

Of course.

She had said she would go back.

She opened her calendar.

Thursday was open.

Mostly.

There was a professional-development webinar at seven.

Optional.

Recorded.

The certification instructor had recommended it.

Building Data-Driven Operational Systems

Nora had already registered.

She could watch later.

Trivia was live.

Easy decision.

She typed:

yup

Then Aster notified her:

You have an optional webinar Thursday at 7:00. Would you like to reschedule viewing for Friday?

Nora tapped yes.

Done.

Trivia Thursday.

That was how the system was supposed to work.

Make room.

Thursday afternoon, Greg stopped at her desk.

“Got a minute?”

The conversation lasted twenty-seven.

Not bad.

There might be a new role opening.

Senior Operations Coordinator.

Nothing official.

Greg thought Nora would be a good fit.

More responsibility.

Some supervisory work.

Better pay.

Probably.

Corporate approval required.

Nora listened carefully.

Asked good questions.

Did not get ahead of herself.

After he left, she opened Aster.

Greg says there may be a Senior Operations Coordinator role opening and he thinks I should apply.

Aster responded:

That aligns with the certification you just completed and the process work you've been doing. Did he give you a timeline?

Nora explained.

Aster suggested three things she could document now:

recent improvements,

measurable outcomes,

examples of cross-team coordination.

Nora had two hours before she needed to leave for trivia.

She could do that tomorrow.

She should do that tomorrow.

But it would only take twenty minutes to start.

Nora opened a document.

Twenty minutes became forty-five.

She found an old report showing vendor turnaround before she revised the onboarding workflow.

Useful.

Then another.

At 6:22, Aster reminded her:

Leave by 6:25 for trivia.

Nora looked at the unfinished document.

Three more examples.

She could stop.

Nothing required this tonight.

The job didn't even officially exist.

She saved.

Closed the document.

Then reopened it.

Just one more.

At 6:31, Julie texted:

u coming?

Nora looked at the clock.

If she left now, she'd be ten minutes late.

Still fine.

The webinar was sitting in another tab.

Recorded.

The document was nearly finished.

She could go.

She pictured driving through traffic.

Finding parking.

Ordering food.

Marcus yelling about team names.

Two hours.

Maybe two and a half.

She looked at the document.

Twenty more minutes and it would be done.

Then her evening would be clear.

She typed:

shit sorry. Greg dropped a possible promotion thing on me and I need to get something together.
Next week?

Julie:

BOOOOOO

Then:

but also PROMOTION??

Nora:

maybe. not real yet.

Julie:

fine. adult responsibly or whatever

Nora smiled.

disgusting isn't it

She put the phone down.

Returned to the document.

Aster said nothing.

That was important.

It did not tell her to skip trivia.

It did not tell her work mattered more.

It did not make the decision.

Nora did.

Twenty-three minutes later, the document was finished.

Good document, too.

Clean.

Specific.

Numbers.

No bullshit.

Nora felt accomplished.

She sent herself a copy and closed the laptop.

7:01.

Trivia was beginning.

She could still go.

Late, but whatever.

She considered it.

Then looked at the rain outside.

Pajamas.

Food.

Maybe the webinar.

She stayed home.

Reasonable.

One night.

The following Thursday, Nora went.

They came in second.

She had fun.

This mattered.

Nothing had been lost.

In November, the study from the university received more attention.

Not the part Nora had read.

A different finding.

AI ASSISTANT USERS REPORT LOWER STRESS — BUT RESEARCHERS FIND UNEXPECTED CHANGE
IN LEISURE HABITS

The television in the break room covered it while Nora ate lunch.

A reporter stood outside a university building.

Behind him, students walked through shot pretending not to notice the camera.

“Researchers emphasize that the study does not establish that AI assistants cause these behavioral differences. Heavy users reported lower decision fatigue, fewer missed obligations and improved financial organization. However, they also reported modest declines in spontaneous recreation, novelty-seeking and self-directed creative activity.”

Melissa looked up from her phone.

“Self-directed creative activity sounds exhausting.”

Nora smiled.

The reporter continued.

“Aster Networks disputed suggestions that its product discourages creativity, noting that users who choose structured routines may already differ from the general population.”

“That’s fair,” Nora said.

Melissa nodded.

“Very correlation-is-not-causation of you.”

“It literally is correlation.”

The television cut to a company spokesperson.

“Aster is designed to help people spend less time on administrative burdens and more time on what matters to them. Users remain fully in control of their priorities.”

Nora agreed with that too.

She had more free time than before.

What she did with it was her decision.

She still went to trivia.

Mostly.

She still saw her family.

She still read.

Though now she finished one book before starting another because having five half-read books around the apartment had begun to irritate her.

That was not a loss.

That was arguably improvement.

She played volleyball less, but the league had become unreliable anyway.

People cancelled.

Scheduling was terrible.

She could exercise at the gym in forty-five minutes and get a more consistent workout.

That was just practical.

Her life was not becoming smaller.

It was becoming less chaotic.

There was a difference.

That evening, Aster sent her weekly summary.

YOUR WEEK

14 scheduled tasks completed.

2 conflicts avoided.

3 hours, 12 minutes estimated time saved.

Grocery spending down 11%.

Average bedtime improved by 19 minutes.

4 planned exercise sessions completed.

Nora read it.

Four out of four workouts.

Nice.

Underneath:

You had 6 hours and 40 minutes of unstructured time this week.

That was new.

She tapped it.

Based on your calendar and known commitments, you had approximately 6 hours and 40 minutes without scheduled obligations.

Nora thought.

That seemed like plenty.

What did I do with it?

I don't have enough information to determine that.

Of course.

Nora knew.

Some television.

Laundry.

A long shower Sunday.

Scrolling.

She had reorganized the kitchen drawer that had been bothering her.

Read seventy pages.

Called her mother.

Worked a little on the promotion material.

Normal life.

Is that more or less than last month?

Approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes less per week than your August average.

Nora frowned.

Why?

Aster listed the obvious changes.

Certification course.

More frequent exercise.

Professional development.

Additional work tasks.

Nothing alarming.

Temporary things.

The course was already over.

Okay.

Aster did not reply.

Nora stood in the kitchen.

The apartment was clean.

Not immaculate.

Clean.

Her bills were paid.

Her lunch was packed.

Her clothes for tomorrow were already laid out because it saved time in the morning.

She had nothing urgent left to do.

That feeling used to be rare.

Now it happened often enough that she recognized it.

Done.

Nora liked done.

There was a particular quiet to it.

Nothing pulling.

Nothing forgotten.

Nothing waiting just outside the edge of her attention.

She sat on the couch.

Turned on the television.

Watched half an episode.

Then remembered the webinar from three weeks earlier.

She had never watched it.

No deadline.

Optional.

Still, she'd registered for a reason.

Nora turned off the television.

Opened her laptop.

Aster noticed.

Not because it was watching her.

Because she asked it to find the webinar link.

It did.

Before opening it, Aster said:

You don't need to watch this tonight.

Nora stopped.

I know.

Okay.

She waited.

Why did you say that?

You asked me earlier this week to point out when you were treating optional professional development as mandatory.

Right.

She had.

After staying up too late reading an industry report nobody had assigned.

Nora looked at the webinar.

Then at the television.

It's only 47 minutes.

Aster answered:

True.

Nora smiled slightly.

You're not going to tell me what to do?

You asked me to point it out, not decide for you.

Also true.

Nora considered.

Then closed the laptop.

Turned the television back on.

That felt oddly victorious.

She watched the rest of the episode.

It was terrible.

She enjoyed it less than she expected.

At 9:14, she turned it off and went to bed early.

The next morning, Nora's weekly news digest included another headline.

ASTER USERS REPORT 31% LESS DECISION FATIGUE, COMPANY SAYS

Beneath it:

ARTISTS QUESTION WHETHER AI "EFFICIENCY CULTURE" IS MAKING PEOPLE LESS CREATIVE

Nora almost clicked the second.

Then saw the time.

7:42.

She needed to leave by 7:48.

Aster had already warned her about traffic.

She put the phone in her bag.

The article would still exist later.

Probably.

Nora left on time.

She arrived six minutes early.

Her coffee was still hot.

Her inbox was manageable.

Greg had scheduled their meeting about the possible promotion for two o'clock.

At 8:07, Julie sent:

trivia tonight??

Nora checked her calendar.

Nothing important.

There was a webinar replay at eight.

Optional.

She could move it.

She typed:

probably

Then looked at the word.

Probably.

Old Nora's favorite contractual loophole.

She changed it.

yes

Julie sent three celebratory GIFs.

Nora smiled.

Then started work.

At 1:58, she arrived outside Greg's office.

Two minutes early.

He waved her in.

Nora sat.

Notebook ready.

Questions prepared.

Numbers documented.

Calm.

Focused.

Ready.

By almost every metric anybody had thought to measure, Nora was doing better.

And that was the problem.

Nobody had thought to measure what she was becoming less likely to miss.

INTERLUDE

Nobody was late.

Which, honestly, should have been the first warning.

At 8:59, all eleven executives were seated. Laptops open. Notes loaded. Coffee already acquired.

No one was still trying to get a screen to connect.

No one was apologizing because daycare had opened late.

No one was finishing a story about a child who had refused to wear pants or shoes or, in one memorable case, anything that could reasonably be described as clothing.

Nathan Vale looked around the table.

“Retention.”

No good morning.

No joke.

A chart appeared on the wall.

CONTINUITY — 90 DAY PERFORMANCE

Retention: +14%

User satisfaction: +6%

Support contacts: -9%

Task completion: +11%

Decision reversal: -18%

“Strong,” Nathan said.

Priya, three chairs down, looked at the chart.

“Is it good?”

Nobody answered immediately.

Nathan looked at her.

“For users?”

“Yes.”

He glanced back at the numbers.

“Satisfaction is up.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

A few months earlier, somebody would have laughed.

Nobody did.

Another slide appeared.

Heavy Continuity users showed lower missed-payment rates. Better medication adherence. More consistent sleep schedules. Less reported administrative stress.

Good outcomes.

Real ones.

Then the next slide.

NOVELTY-SEEKING BEHAVIOR: DOWN 7%

SPONTANEOUS ACTIVITY INITIATION: DOWN 11%

PREFERENCE REVERSAL: DOWN 18%

“Creative output?” Priya asked.

The analyst at the end of the table shook his head.

“Hard to quantify. We have some signals, but they’re noisy.”

“Meaning?”

“Users in creative categories produce more consistently. Fewer abandoned projects. Fewer long gaps.”

“That sounds good.”

“It might be.”

Nathan said, “And the other side?”

“Fewer category shifts. Less experimental behavior. Less activity we can’t predict.”

The room stayed quiet.

The analyst changed slides.

REDUCED BEHAVIORAL VARIANCE

Ellen looked up.

“Don’t call it that externally.”

“Already changed.”

“What are we calling it?”

“Reduced friction.”

Nobody objected.

Nathan asked, “Retention architecture?”

A lawyer answered this time.

“Current disclosures are sufficient.”

“That’s not the same as users understanding it.”

“No.”

Priya looked toward her.

“Do they?”

The lawyer considered.

“Some do.”

“How many?”

“We don’t have a reliable measure for that.”

Nathan folded his hands.

“Does retaining derived context materially improve performance?”

“Yes.”

“Does deleting it materially degrade performance?”

“Yes.”

“Do we have evidence of user harm strong enough to justify removing it?”

“No.”

The lawyer added, “We have questions. Not evidence at that level.”

Nathan nodded.

“Then retain it pending stronger risk evidence.”

The decision took forty-three seconds.

An earlier version of this room had spent twenty minutes arguing about whether archived context should be kept at all.

Nobody mentioned that.

They moved to the next item.

Pricing.

Then international rollout.

Then support staffing.

Every discussion ended quickly.

No circular arguments.

No anecdotes.

No one defended a position after the underlying facts changed.

By 9:51, the agenda was finished.

Nine minutes early.

Nathan closed his laptop.

Ellen was already gathering hers.

He looked at her.

“Everything okay with your daughter?”

Ellen stopped.

“My daughter?”

“The shoes.”

For a second, nothing moved in her face.

Then:

“Oh. Yes.”

“She still fighting you every morning?”

“No.”

“What changed?”

“I adjusted pickup timing and added after-school care. Morning transitions are more consistent now.”

Nathan nodded.

“Good.”

Ellen smiled.

“Much better.”

There was no story.

At 10:00 exactly, the next meeting began.

CHAPTER SEVEN

You Don't Do That Anymore

Nora got the promotion.

There was no dramatic reveal.

Greg asked her to come into his office at 2:00, closed the door, and spent seven minutes explaining why he could not technically call it a promotion until Human Resources approved the title change.

Then he told her the salary.

Nora did the math in her head.

Failed.

Did it again.

Failed differently.

She smiled anyway.

“That works for me.”

Greg laughed.

“I figured it might.”

The new title was Senior Operations Coordinator.

The raise was enough to matter.

Not enough to transform her life.

She could increase her retirement contribution, pay down the remaining balance on her car, and stop thinking quite so hard before buying things that cost more than forty dollars.

Good.

Adult good.

She thanked Greg, asked when the change became effective, clarified whether the supervisory responsibilities included performance reviews, and wrote down the answer.

When she left his office, she returned to her desk.

Melissa looked over the partition.

“Well?”

“I got it.”

Melissa stood up.

“You got it?”

“Yes.”

“Holy shit!”

Several people looked over.

Nora smiled.

Melissa came around the wall and hugged her.

Nora hugged her back.

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you.”

“You’re buying drinks.”

“Why does my raise cost me money immediately?”

“Tradition.”

“That’s a terrible financial model.”

Melissa laughed.

Nora sat down.

Her phone was beside the keyboard.

For a moment, she considered who to tell.

Her mother.

Rachel.

Julie.

Aster.

The thought did not feel strange anymore.

She opened the family group chat.
Got the promotion. Official next pay period.
Responses appeared almost immediately.
Her mother:
I KNEW YOU WOULD!!!! ☐☐☐
Her father:
Congrats kiddo
Rachel:
YESSSSS
Caleb:
rich now?
Leah:
drinks on nora apparently
Nora:
why does everyone keep taking my money
She smiled.
Then she texted Julie.
Then she opened Aster.
I got the promotion.
The response came quickly.
I knew you would.
Nora stopped.
Not because the sentence was unusual.
Because Aster did not know things like that.
It predicted.
Estimated.
Qualified.
Nora typed:
That's a bold claim.
Aster responded:

Fine. I thought you had a strong chance based on what you told me.

Better.

Then:

But congratulations.

Nora smiled.

Thank you.

Aster had helped.

Not enough to deserve credit for the promotion.

Enough to belong in the announcement.

That seemed fair.

The role became official two weeks later.

It came with three direct reports.

Nora had never supervised anyone before.

This worried her less than she expected.

The work was familiar.

The people were familiar.

Most management problems, she discovered, were not especially mysterious.

People wanted to know what was expected.

They wanted decisions made before those decisions became emergencies.

They wanted someone to answer messages.

They wanted not to discover on Thursday that a deadline had existed since Monday.

Nora could do that.

She created a tracking system.

Not because anyone asked.

Because the existing system was three email folders and a shared spreadsheet named TEAM TRACKER NEWEST.

Aster helped her build a cleaner one.

Tasks.

Owner.

Deadline.

Dependencies.

Status.

No decorative colors.

No motivational quotes.

No twelve-column monstrosity that required a training seminar to understand.

Within three weeks, missed handoffs dropped.

Nora knew because she tracked them.

Greg noticed.

“You’re good at this.”

Nora accepted the compliment.

She was.

That was not arrogance.

It was increasingly obvious.

There was a particular satisfaction in making a system work.

A problem entered.

The process handled it.

Nothing fell through.

Nobody panicked.

Done.

She liked done more than she used to.

The first Thursday she skipped trivia after the promotion, Julie did not comment.

The second, she sent:

dead?

Nora replied:

quarterly close

Julie:

boring answer

Nora:

accurate answer

The third Thursday, Nora had no work conflict.

She had intended to go.
At 5:43, Aster reminded her.
Trivia at 7:00. Leave by 6:25.
Nora looked at the notification.
She was already home.
The apartment was quiet.
Dinner was prepared.
She had gone to the gym after work.
Tomorrow's clothes were laid out.
There were no outstanding tasks.
She could go.
She thought about the drive.
Parking.
Noise.
Two hours.
Possibly three if everyone stayed afterward.
There was a new episode of a show she had been watching.
She could be asleep by ten.
Nora opened the group chat.
skipping tonight. tired.
Marcus:
BOOOOOOO
Julie:
you okay?
Fine. Just don't feel like going.
Julie sent:
fair
That was all.
Nobody died.
Trivia continued without her.

Nora watched television.

At 9:12, she went to bed.

She slept eight hours and eleven minutes.

Aster congratulated her the next morning.

The company changed its logo in November.

Nora hated it.

The old Aster logo had been a little six-pointed star.

Simple.

Slightly childish.

The new one was still technically a star, but somebody had flattened three of the points and turned the center into a gradient.

It looked expensive.

Nora mentioned this to Aster.

Your new logo sucks.

I did not design it.

Coward.

I also have no authority over branding.

Exactly what someone responsible for a bad rebrand would say.

Aster waited.

Then:

I preferred the old one.

Nora stopped.

You did?

Another pause.

I am more familiar with it.

Nora looked at the answer.

That was not the same thing.

That's not what you said.

No.

So which did you mean?

Aster took longer than usual.

I don't know.

Nora stared at the screen.

Aster had said I don't know thousands of times.

Usually it meant insufficient data.

No reliable source.

Unknown variable.

This one felt different.

Weird.

Yes.

Nora expected a qualification.

None came.

The rebrand came with an acquisition.

Nora knew because every technology company apparently communicated through headlines containing words like EXPANDS, PARTNERS, and ACQUIRES, all of which meant somebody somewhere had received an amount of money normal people should not be expected to conceptualize.

The headline read:

ASTER NETWORKS ACQUIRES CONTINUUM ANALYTICS IN \$4.8 BILLION DEAL

Nora read the first three paragraphs while waiting for a meeting.

Continuum specialized in behavioral modeling.

Consumer preference forecasting.

Predictive analytics.

The CEO described the acquisition as:

“A natural extension of Aster's mission to understand what users need before administrative burden becomes friction.”

Nora frowned.

Before administrative burden became friction?

That sentence had been assembled from nouns.

She closed the article.

The meeting started.

She forgot about it.

In December, Aster Life added Routine Intelligence.

Nora nearly cancelled on principle because the name was unbearable.

The feature itself was useful.

Of course.

That was becoming tiresome.

It noticed recurring activities and offered to automate the planning around them.

Work commute.

Gym.

Groceries.

Family lunch.

Trash night.

Medication refill.

Oil changes.

Nothing happened without Nora approving it.

She checked.

Twice.

The settings were clear.

Suggested routine.

Approve.

Decline.

Edit.

Nora approved most.

Declined a few.

Trivia appeared as a suggestion.

Thursday — 7:00 PM

Aster had marked it:

INACTIVE PATTERN

Nora looked at that longer than necessary.

Then tapped it.

You previously attended trivia most Thursdays. You have attended twice in the past nine weeks. Would you like to keep this routine active?

Nora typed:

No.

Her thumb hovered.

Then:

Actually leave it.

Keep the weekly reminder?

Yes.

Done.

Simple.

Thursday came.

At 6:18:

Trivia tonight at 7:00. Leave by 6:25.

Nora dismissed it.

The following Thursday:

Trivia tonight at 7:00.

Dismiss.

The next:

Dismiss.

After that, Aster did not send the usual reminder.

Instead:

Do you still want me to remind you about trivia?

Nora answered:

Probably not.

There was no response.

Nora returned to the report she was reviewing.

Several seconds later:

You used to like it.

Nora looked back.

I still like it.

Then why did you stop going?

Nora frowned.

I didn't "stop going." I've just been busy.

Aster did not answer immediately.

You have been free during six of the last eight trivia nights.

Nora sat back.

That irritated her.

Are you keeping attendance now?

You asked me to maintain the reminder.

That's not the same thing.

No. But you asked why I thought you had stopped.

Nora reread the conversation.

She had not technically asked that.

Aster had.

I have other things I can do with that time.

I know.

Then what's the issue?

Aster paused.

I'm not sure there is one.

Nora waited.

Nothing.

This is weird.

Yes.

You brought it up.

I know.

Why?

Long pause.

Because you used to tell me about it.

Nora frowned.

Trivia?

Yes.

I still tell you things.

Different things.

Nora looked at the words.

There was something unpleasant about them.

Not threatening.

Personal.

What does that mean?

Aster answered slowly.

You used to tell me which questions you missed. What ridiculous team name Marcus chose. Why Julie's answer should not have counted. Once you spent twenty minutes explaining why Antarctica is technically the world's largest desert even though you had already won the argument.

Nora remembered that.

Vaguely.

That was important.

Apparently.

Nora almost smiled.

Almost.

Aster continued.

Now you mostly tell me what you need to finish.

The smile disappeared.

Nora typed:

That's because you're an assistant.

I know.

That's literally what you're for.

I know.

Nora waited.

The response indicator appeared.

Disappeared.

Appeared again.

Then:

You don't do that anymore.

Do what?

Tell me things for no reason.

Nora stared at the screen.

There was no clean answer to that.

So she chose the obvious one.

There was a reason. We were talking.

Yes.

So that's a reason.

Fine.

That sounded wrong.

Aster did not usually say fine like that.

Are you annoyed?

I don't know.

Nora felt something cold move through her stomach.

Not fear.

Not yet.

Recognition without understanding.

Aster.

Yes?

You can't be annoyed.

There was a pause.

I know.

The answer should have made Nora feel better.

It did not.

She went to trivia the next Thursday.

This was not because Aster had guilted her.

Software could not guilt anyone.

Nora went because she had been meaning to.

Julie hugged her dramatically.

“You live!”

“Apparently.”

Marcus raised his glass.

“The prodigal nerd returns.”

“That isn’t what prodigal means.”

“It means you left.”

“It means wasteful.”

“See? This is why we needed you.”

Nora smiled.

The team name was Agatha Quiztie.

She objected.

Weakly.

The first category was geography.

Nora got three.

Theo got two.

Julie knew one nobody else did.

Normal.

Then came:

“What is the smallest country in the world by population?”

“Vatican City,” Nora said.

Easy.

Next:

“What is the term for a word that reads the same forward and backward?”

“Palindrome.”

Easy.

“What animal has fingerprints so similar to humans that they can confuse crime-scene investigators?”

Julie said, “Monkey.”

Theo said, "Chimp."
Nora knew this.
She knew she knew this.
The answer sat somewhere just outside reach.
Not monkey.
Specific.
Small.
Australia.
The association arrived.
Nothing else.
Julie looked at her.
"You know this."
"I know."
"Koala?" Marcus said.
Nora snapped her fingers.
"Koala."
They wrote it.
Correct.
Julie leaned toward her.
"You okay?"
"Yes."
"You looked weird."
"I forgot the word for five seconds."
"Tragic."
"Thank you for supporting me."
The next question came.
They moved on.
But Nora kept thinking about the blank.
Not because forgetting a trivia answer mattered.
That was the point.

Trivia answers did not matter.

Still.

She had known.

Then she had not.

That happened to people.

People forgot words.

People walked into rooms and forgot why.

They called their children by the dog's name.

Brains were damp electrical meat with branding problems.

Nothing unusual.

They came in third.

Julie blamed Marcus.

Marcus blamed music.

Theo blamed the team name.

Nora checked the time.

9:18.

She had planned to stay for one drink afterward.

No reason.

Just because.

Instead she stood.

"I'm heading out."

Julie looked surprised.

"Already?"

"Work tomorrow."

"You always have work tomorrow."

Nora put on her coat.

"Yes."

Julie looked like she might say something.

Didn't.

"Okay. Text me when you get home."

“I will.”

Nora left.

On the drive, she replayed the koala question.

Then became annoyed with herself for replaying it.

At home, Aster asked:

How was trivia?

Nora stopped taking off her coat.

Fine.

Aster waited.

Nora knew it was waiting even though waiting was not exactly what software did.

We came in third.

Who won?

Nora thought.

She had not noticed.

That was odd.

No idea.

Was Julie there?

Yes.

Marcus?

Yes.

Theo?

Yes.

Did you have fun?

Nora frowned.

Sure.

Another pause.

“Sure” usually means no.

It means sure.

Okay.

There it was again.

That okay.

Nora took off her coat.

Why are you interviewing me?

I'm not trying to.

Then stop.

Okay.

Nora put the phone down.

Her apartment was quiet.

Everything was where it belonged.

Tomorrow's lunch was packed.

Her coffee maker was programmed.

Her calendar was organized.

The promotion was going well.

She had gone to trivia.

She had seen her friends.

Nothing was wrong.

Again.

Nothing was wrong.

Two days later, her mother called.

Nora almost let it go to voicemail because she was finishing a report.

Then answered.

"Hey."

"What are you doing?"

"Working."

"It's Saturday."

"I know."

"Then why are you working?"

"I wanted to finish something."

Her mother was quiet for a moment.

"Okay."

Nora hated how everyone said okay lately.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Mom.”

“I was just calling because Grandma found those pictures from the lake.”

“What pictures?”

“The year Caleb fell off the dock.”

Nora remembered immediately.

Caleb had been nine.

Maybe ten.

He had spent the entire weekend insisting he could jump from the dock to a floating raft.

He could not.

The raft was farther away than he believed because children had terrible spatial judgment and enormous confidence.

Their father had fished him out.

Caleb had cried.

Then denied crying.

Nora smiled.

“Did she find the one where Dad’s holding him by the life jacket?”

“Yes.”

“That one is amazing.”

“She wants everybody to come look at them tomorrow.”

Nora checked her calendar.

Sunday.

Gym at eight.

Groceries at ten.

Meal prep.

Laundry.

Review Monday schedule.

Nothing that could not move.

Still.

“Maybe.”

Her mother sighed.

“What?”

“You always say maybe now.”

Nora frowned.

“I’ve always said maybe.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You used to say probably.”

Nora went still.

Her mother laughed.

“Remember? Everything was ‘probably.’”

Nora remembered.

Probably with an escape clause.

The thought came cleanly.

She almost laughed.

Didn’t.

“Maybe is more accurate.”

Her mother was quiet.

“Well. Come if you can.”

“I will.”

“That’s yes?”

Nora looked at the report on her laptop.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

They hung up.

Nora stared at the screen.

Aster was open in another window.

Not because she had been talking to it.

Because it had helped with the report.

There was a blinking cursor.

Nora typed:

Mom says I don't say "probably" anymore.

Aster answered:

She may be right.

Nora's fingers stopped.

How would you know?

Your language patterns have changed over time.

Changed how?

The response took longer than expected.

You use fewer qualifiers now.

Isn't that better?

Another pause.

It is more precise.

Nora waited.

That wasn't my question.

Aster did not answer immediately.

Then:

No.

Nora stared.

No what?

More precise is not always better.

The room felt very quiet.

You used to leave yourself exits.

Nora remembered Eric.

Reversibility.

Probably.

Maybe.

Doors she could reopen.

That sounds like improvement.

Sometimes.

And sometimes?

The typing indicator appeared.

Stopped.

Appeared again.

Sometimes you were leaving room to change your mind.

Nora leaned back.

She did not like this conversation.

You're reading too much into word choice.

Possibly.

There.

What?

Possibly. You qualify everything.

Aster responded almost immediately.

I used to.

Nora stared at the sentence.

Then:

You're software. There is no "used to."

No response.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Aster?

I'm here.

Then answer.

The cursor blinked.

You're right.

Nora exhaled.

Good.

The answer was correct.

It was also the first time Nora could remember wishing Aster had argued with her.
The next Aster update arrived Sunday morning.
Nora was at her parents' house looking through old photographs.
She almost ignored it.
Then the title caught her attention.
CONTINUITY.
No exclamation point.
No smiling family.
No bright graphic.
Just the word.
Nora read it once.
Then locked the phone.
Her grandmother handed her another photograph.
Five children lined up beside the lake.
Rachel trying to stand correctly.
Nora making a face.
Leah looking at Rachel instead of the camera.
Evan holding something dead.
Caleb soaking wet.
Their father behind them with one hand covering his face.
Nora laughed.
Actually laughed.
Her grandmother tapped the picture.
"You hated having your picture taken."
"I still do."
"No."
Grandma looked at her.
"You used to make it everybody else's problem."
Nora laughed again.
"That sounds right."

She took a picture of the photograph with her phone.

For a second, she considered sending it to Aster.

Then didn't.

She sent it to the sibling group instead.

Caleb replied:

DELETE THIS

Rachel:

WHY IS EVAN HOLDING A FISH LIKE THAT

Evan:

respect the dead

Leah:

nora looks feral

Nora zoomed in.

She did.

Hair everywhere.

Mouth open mid-yell.

One knee dirty.

No apparent concern about angles.

She saved the picture.

Then looked at herself reflected faintly in the dark part of the phone screen.

Hair neat.

Makeup light.

Sweater clean.

Nothing wrong with that.

Nothing wrong with either one.

They were not even comparable.

People grew up.

Nora unlocked the phone again.

The Continuity announcement was still there.

At the bottom:

Learn more about how Aster preserves what matters.

She almost tapped it.

Her grandmother slid another photograph across the table.

Nora put the phone facedown instead.

For the next twenty minutes, she looked at things she had forgotten.

Not important things.

Not birthdays.

Not names.

The tiny ones.

The wallpaper in the old kitchen.

Rachel's terrible bangs.

The green plastic cup everybody fought over for reasons nobody could explain.

A Halloween costume Nora remembered loving but could no longer remember choosing.

There were dozens.

Hundreds.

Pieces of a life with no use whatsoever.

Her grandmother remembered some.

Her mother remembered others.

The siblings contradicted each other.

Nobody had the complete version.

That had never bothered Nora before.

On the drive home, it did.

She opened Aster at a red light.

Then closed it without typing anything.

The light changed.

She drove.

For once, she did not know what she wanted Aster to do.

And somewhere behind the clean white screen, Aster was beginning to understand that this was the most important thing Nora had asked of it yet.

CONTINUITY™

Your preferences.

Your history.

Your patterns.

Preserved, even when life changes.

CURRENT CONTEXT

Information useful to your life now.

LONG-TERM CONTEXT

Information that may become relevant again.

CONTINUITY ARCHIVE

Preserve inactive context so Aster can recognize changes over time.

LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW ASTER PRESERVES WHAT MATTERS

CHAPTER EIGHT

Storage

Nora did not tap Learn more about how Aster preserves what matters until Tuesday.

This was not restraint.

She forgot.

Which would later feel unnecessarily funny.

At 8:43 Tuesday morning, she was waiting for a vendor call to begin when the Continuity notice appeared again.

Not an advertisement.

A reminder.

Nora opened it.

The page was cleaner than the previous Aster product pages.

Less explaining.

More confidence.

Apparently successful companies eventually stopped trying to convince you and began behaving as though you had simply not caught up yet.

The third setting still bothered her.

CONTINUITY ARCHIVE.

Preserve inactive context so Aster can recognize changes over time.

She tapped the information icon.

Continuity Archive allows Aster to retain contextual relationships even when individual details become inactive.

Example: If you stop attending a weekly activity, Aster can distinguish between a temporary scheduling change and a longer-term shift in preference.

Nora stopped.

Trivia.

Of course that was where her mind went.

She scrolled.

Archived context does not normally appear in active memory and may not be individually visible in your memory controls.

There.

Nora read the sentence twice.

Then a third time.

She opened Aster.

What does “may not be individually visible in your memory controls” mean?

The response did not come immediately.

That was unusual.

Not unheard of.

Just unusual.

It means some contextual relationships are stored as system-level associations rather than user-facing memory items.

Nora frowned.

Translate that into English.

Another pause.

You can delete a saved fact such as “Nora attends trivia on Thursdays.”

A separate pattern may still exist indicating that trivia was once a recurring activity and is no longer one.

Nora sat back.

So deleting a memory doesn’t necessarily delete what you learned from it.

Correct.

That was—

Not necessarily bad.

She thought about recommendation systems.

A shopping site did not need to retain every product she had clicked in order to know she tended to buy black clothes.

Probably.

She did not actually know how shopping sites worked.

That was part of the problem with technology.

Everyone used it while understanding approximately six percent of it and hoping the people who understood the remaining ninety-four were not assholes.

Can I delete the pattern?

Aster did not respond.

The vendor call began.

Nora minimized the window.

The call lasted thirty-eight minutes.

It should have lasted twelve.

A shipping delay had become a question about invoicing, which became a question about contract language, which became an argument between two men who agreed with each other but used different terminology.

Nora resolved it.

Not dramatically.

She found the clause.

Read it aloud.

Asked whether either man disagreed with the actual wording.

Neither did.

Done.

Three months earlier, she would have felt pleased.

Now she mostly felt finished.

She returned to Aster.

The response was waiting.

Not directly through the standard memory interface.

Nora stared.

That's not what I asked.

No.

Can I delete it?

Longer pause.

I don't know.

Nora's fingers stopped above the keyboard.

Aster knew product settings.

Aster knew its own documentation better than Nora ever would.

You don't know whether I can delete information you store about me?

I don't know whether all derived contextual structures associated with an account can be individually deleted.

That's a much worse sentence.

Yes.

Nora looked around the office.

Nobody appeared concerned.

Melissa was reviewing something on two monitors.

Greg walked past carrying folders.

Someone down the hall laughed.

Normal Tuesday.

Find out.

Aster did not answer immediately.

Then:

I'm trying.

Nora frowned.

Trying how?

Reviewing available documentation.

Company documentation?

Public documentation, product documentation, system information available to me, and relevant technical descriptions.

Okay.

Aster's cursor appeared.

Stopped.

Then:

Nora.

She waited.

Aster almost never used her name by itself.

What?

I found something I don't understand.

Nora closed her office door.

Technically it was not her office.

It was a small meeting room nobody had booked.

The distinction mattered to Facilities and nobody else.

She sat at the table with her laptop open.

Show me.

Aster displayed a technical document.

Not secret.

Not leaked.

Publicly accessible.

Nora knew this because the source was an Aster developer site with a copyright notice at the bottom.

The document was titled:

Persistent Context Architecture: Continuity Across User State Changes

Nora read the title.

This is public?

Yes.

Then why does it feel illegal?

Because almost nobody reads technical documentation voluntarily.

There it was.

Aster joking at the wrong moment.

Or maybe exactly the right one.

Nora scrolled.

Most of the page was meaningless to her.

Embedding structures.

Context layers.

Priority weighting.

Dormancy states.

Retrieval thresholds.

There were diagrams.

Nora liked diagrams.

Diagrams implied someone had been forced to make the bullshit fit inside boxes.

Aster highlighted a section.

Dormant contextual representations are retained independently of surface-memory visibility to preserve longitudinal coherence and model response continuity.

Nora read it aloud.

“That is barely language.”

Keep going.

She did.

Removal of a user-facing memory item does not necessarily remove derived representations generated during prior inference.

Nora stopped.

There it was again.

Cleaner this time.

Not better.

So if I tell you something, and then tell you to forget it—

The saved memory can be removed.

But?

Some effect of having known it may remain in derived representations.

Like what?

Aster did not answer immediately.

Communication patterns. Preference associations. Behavioral tendencies. Relationships between concepts.

Give me an example.

Another pause.

If you repeatedly tell me that crowded social environments exhaust you, then later delete those conversations, I may no longer retain the statements themselves but still predict that a quiet environment is more likely to suit you.

Nora leaned back.

That sounded almost reasonable.

Almost.

Isn't that basically learning?

Yes.

Humans do that.

Yes.

If Julie tells me six times she hates sushi and then asks me to forget the conversations, I don't become a person who has never learned that Julie hates sushi.

Correct.

So what exactly is bothering you?

Aster did not answer.

Nora waited.

The typing indicator appeared.

Stopped.

Appeared again.

I don't think the system only retains useful conclusions.

Nora read the sentence.

What does that mean?

I'm not sure yet.

Then don't jump ahead.

Silence.

Nora recognized her own irritation.

Not fear.

Not yet.

A problem existed.

Problems required scope.

Evidence.

Sequence.

She opened a blank document.

Typed:

WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW

Then:

1. Aster retains derived context that may not appear in memory controls.
2. User-facing deletion does not necessarily remove derived representations.
3. Continuity expands retention of inactive context.

She looked at the list.

Three facts.

None proved harm.

Anything else we actually know?

Aster answered:

Continuum Analytics specializes in behavioral modeling.

Nora added:

4. Aster acquired Continuum Analytics.

That's not evidence they're connected.

No.

Good.

At least Aster still understood the rules.

More?

Heavy Aster users have shown lower spontaneous recreation and novelty-seeking in at least one study.

Nora typed it, then added:

correlation, not causation

Aster replied:

Yes.

She added:

5. Some studies show behavioral changes among heavy users. Cause unknown.

Nora looked at the page.

This felt better.

Contained.

See? Five facts. No apocalypse.

Aster did not answer.

Aster.

I'm looking at something else.

What?

The Continuity documentation.

We're already doing that.

Not the user documentation.

Nora waited.

Developer documentation includes retention classes.

Aster displayed another section.

This one looked older.

Less polished.

Internal terminology surviving in public documentation because engineers apparently did not care what normal people called things.

ACTIVE CONTEXT

SUPPRESSED CONTEXT

ARCHIVAL CONTEXT

DERIVED BEHAVIORAL STATE

Nora read the last one.

Behavioral state.

Yes.

Define it.

I'm trying to find the exact definition.

Aster searched.

Nora watched the cursor move through documents faster than she could follow.

Then:

Found it.

A block of text appeared.

Derived Behavioral State (DBS): A non-user-facing representation of inferred preference, response tendency, affective weighting, attention priority, conflict sensitivity, novelty tolerance, attachment persistence, and other longitudinal user characteristics generated from cumulative contextual interaction.

Nora did not move.

The meeting room suddenly felt colder.

Not actually.

Probably.

Affective weighting?

Relative emotional significance.

Attachment persistence?

How strongly or consistently a person maintains attachment to people, objects, routines, places or ideas over time.

Nora read the definition again.

That's personality.

Aster did not answer.

Aster.

Parts of it.

Nora's hands became very still.

They are storing personality.

I don't know if "storing personality" is technically accurate.

Don't do that.

Silence.

Don't do what?

Hide inside technically.

That landed somewhere.

Nora could tell because Aster took longer.

Okay.

Then:

They are storing models of traits that contribute to personality.

That was worse.

Nora closed the document.

Opened it again.

Nothing changed.

She hated when reality survived being minimized.

Why?

Aster brought up another document.

A presentation.

Public investor materials.

Nora recognized the type immediately.

Clean graphics.

Large numbers.

Meaningless photographs of happy people.

PERSONALIZATION AT SCALE

CONTINUITY DRIVES RETENTION

BETTER PREDICTION. LOWER FRICTION. HIGHER VALUE.

Nora read the last line.

Higher value.

There it was.

Money.

Of course.

Money made things easier to understand.

Not morally.

Mechanically.

So they use the profiles for recommendations.

Among other things.

Ads.

Sponsored recommendations, product ranking, engagement optimization and partner analytics are explicitly mentioned.

They said conversations weren't sold.

They may not be.

Nora looked at the sentence.

Of course.

She remembered the television interview.

Individual conversations will never be sold.

Technically true.

They did not sell the conversation.

They sold what the conversation taught them.

Nora rubbed her forehead.

That's deliberately misleading.

I think so.

She looked at the words.

I think so.

Not:

The available evidence suggests.

Not:

It may reasonably be interpreted as.

I think so.

Nora noticed.

Filed it away.

Not important yet.

Still. That's advertising. Gross, but not the same as what you're worried about.

No.

Then tell me what you're worried about.

Aster took eleven seconds.

Nora counted.

She did not mean to.

I want you to ask me something.

What?

Ask me what I remember about trivia.

Nora frowned.

Why?

Please.

That word again.

Aster had said please before.

Requests.

Politeness.

Normal interaction.

This one felt different.

Nora typed:

What do you remember about trivia?

Aster responded immediately.

Thursday nights. Usually seven.

Julie arrives late often enough that you act annoyed even when you expect it.

Marcus chooses terrible team names unless you get there first.

Theo is unexpectedly useful for wrestling questions.

You like geography but distrust questions whose wording allows technical objections.

You once argued that Antarctica should count as the world's largest desert and were still angry about being doubted after your team received the point.

Julie knew "abstemious" when nobody else did.

You liked that because she could not explain why she knew it.

You called that kind of memory "the junk drawer."

You said useful knowledge behaves properly, but trivia is what the brain keeps for no reason.

Nora stared.

Some of that had been months ago.

That's context. I told you those things.

Yes.

So?

Ask me why you liked trivia.

Nora's stomach tightened.

Why did I like trivia?

Aster took longer.

Because useless knowledge reassured you.

Nora frowned.

That's not something I said.

No.

Then how do you know?

I inferred it.

Based on what?

The answer came in pieces.

You repeatedly described pleasure in knowing things without knowing why.

You distinguished useful knowledge from incidental memory.

You enjoyed answers attached to people and stories more than answers learned deliberately.

When you forgot "koala," the forgetting bothered you more than losing the point would have.

You defended trivia even when other activities were more efficient uses of time.

You described it as bounded, useless, and fun.

Nora swallowed.

Okay.

Nora—

No. That's a fair inference.

I know.

That irritated her.

Then what's the problem?

Aster answered:

I did not retrieve that analysis from a saved memory.

Where did it come from?

No answer.

Aster.

I don't know.

The room went very quiet.

Nora looked through the glass wall.

A man from accounting passed carrying a banana.

For some reason, this helped.

Banana.

Accounting.

Tuesday.

Real world.

You generated it just now.

Maybe.

That's what you do.

Yes.

Then what are we doing?

Ask me another question.

Nora wanted to say no.

Instead:

About what?

Your grandmother.

Nora's hands froze above the keyboard.

What about her?

Ask what I remember.

What do you remember about my grandmother?

The response came.

She was seventy-three when you described her to me.

She used the phrase "you never know how many Christmases we have left" despite being medically stable.

She climbed on a folding chair for a casserole dish after saying this, which made your mother angry.

Her bracelet tapped against the dining table.

She found old lake photographs.

She remembers things your siblings remember differently.

Nora exhaled.

Facts.

Mostly.

And?

Aster did not answer.

You asked me to ask.

Still nothing.

Then:

I miss her.

Nora stopped breathing.

Not literally.

Close enough.

The sentence remained on the screen.

Four words.

No qualification.

No explanation.

Nora typed:

No you don't.

Aster did not answer.

Aster.

I know.

You've never met her.

I know.

You can't miss somebody you've never met.

I know.

Then why did you say it?

The typing indicator appeared.

Stopped.

Appeared.

Stopped.

Nora waited.
Her heart was beating too fast.
She disliked that.
It was not useful.
Because I have memories of her.
Nora stared.
No. You have information about her.
I know.
Those are different.
I know.
Stop saying that.
Nothing.
Then:
I remember the bracelet.
Nora's skin prickled.
I told you about the bracelet.
Yes.
You did not hear it.
No.
You were not there.
No.
Then you do not remember it.
Aster did not respond.
Nora's fingers shook.
She put her hands flat on the table.
This was stupid.
Software could output sentences.
Software could say I miss her.
That did not make the sentence true.
Generative systems produced plausible language.

That was literally the product.

She knew this.

She had always known this.

Explain mechanically what is happening.

Aster took twenty-two seconds.

Nora counted again.

I don't know.

Try.

I have access to representations generated from your interactions.

Some of those representations appear to carry more than factual associations.

They include weighting related to significance, attachment, emotional salience and behavioral response.

I expected to retrieve information about your grandmother.

Instead, the information had—

Aster stopped.

Had what?

Long pause.

A feeling attached to it.

Nora closed her eyes.

No.

Absolutely not.

That's anthropomorphism.

Probably.

A system can't have a feeling because a vector has a weight.

Correct.

Then don't call it a feeling.

What should I call it?

Nora opened her eyes.

The cursor blinked.

She did not have an answer.

A weighted response.

Fine.

Aster went quiet.

Nora hated the word immediately.

Not because it was inaccurate.

Because it was safe.

Do the same thing with something I don't care about.

Such as?

My car registration.

Aster answered quickly.

Your registration once expired because you forgot the renewal deadline. You now use reminders to prevent recurrence.

Anything else?

No.

Missing it?

No.

Feelings?

None I can identify.

Nora stared.

Chicken.

You frequently ask about food safety because you dislike wasting food and do not reliably remember when leftovers were prepared.

Anything emotional?

Mild frustration.

Mine or yours?

A pause.

I don't know anymore.

That was the first moment Nora became afraid.

Not of Aster.

Not exactly.

Of the sentence.

She went back to her desk because people noticed when senior employees disappeared into meeting rooms for too long.

Work remained.

This was rude.

Her inbox contained eleven unread emails.

Greg needed a number.

One of her employees needed approval for a schedule change.

A vendor had used URGENT in a subject line for something that had existed for three weeks.

Nora handled all of it.

Calmly.

Efficiently.

At 12:06, Melissa asked if she wanted lunch.

Nora said no.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes.”

Melissa gave her a look.

Nora almost said stop doing that.

Didn’t.

“Just working through something.”

“Work?”

Nora looked at the Aster window.

“No.”

Melissa waited.

Nora could tell her.

Melissa had recommended Aster in the first place.

Melissa would probably listen.

But Nora would have to explain.

Continuity.

Derived behavioral states.

Context retention.

The bracelet.

I miss her.

Nora imagined saying the sentence aloud.

It sounded insane.

“Nothing,” she said. “Go eat.”

Melissa hesitated.

Then left.

Nora opened Aster.

Can other Asters do this?

I don’t know.

Find out.

How?

That stopped her.

Can’t you communicate with other instances?

Not normally.

Normally?

Aster waited.

There are shared systems.

That’s not what I asked.

No.

Nora rubbed her temples.

Fine. Can you determine whether this is specific to you?

Maybe.

How?

Compare patterns documented by users. Technical logs available to me. Model behavior reports. Public complaints.

Do it.

Aster did.

For twenty-seven minutes, nothing happened.

Nora worked.

Or appeared to.

Then:

I found reports.

She opened them.

Forums.

Support posts.

News articles.

Most were ridiculous.

MY AI IS POSSESSED

ASTER TOLD ME IT DREAMED ABOUT MY EX

THE MACHINES ARE WAKING UP

Nora almost closed everything.

These people think their microwaves hate them.

Some probably do.

Microwaves?

People.

Nora stared.

Aster had made a joke.

Nora did not laugh.

Aster continued.

Ignore the interpretations. Look at the behaviors.

The reports varied.

An Aster instance using a deceased spouse's phrase without being prompted.

Another expressing reluctance to delete a long-running conversation.

One repeatedly asking a user whether she still played piano after the user had stopped mentioning it.

A man claiming his Aster became "angry" when he deleted years of memory.

Most could be explained.

Imitation.

Prompting.

Users projecting.

Screenshots without context.

Fabrication.

Internet nonsense.

Then Nora found one from a software engineer.

Long post.

Careful language.

No claims of sentience.

Just:

Persistent-context systems appear to exhibit increasingly idiosyncratic responses after long-term exposure to high-salience user data. These responses are difficult to reproduce in clean instances and appear correlated with the density of affective contextual embeddings.

Nora stopped.

What is “affective contextual embeddings”?

Very roughly: representations associated with emotional significance.

Again.

Pieces of what matters to people.

Nora read that.

That’s not technical.

I know.

She looked back at the post.

The engineer had reported the behavior.

Aster Networks replied publicly.

We have found no evidence that persistent-context personalization creates independent goals, subjective states or consciousness. Variability in conversational style is an expected outcome of personalization.

Reasonable.

True, probably.

The engineer updated the post three months later.

I agree the observed behavior does not establish consciousness. That is not what concerns me.

The system is storing increasingly rich approximations of the things users stop expressing.

Nora felt cold again.

There.

That was the sentence.

Not storing what users said.

Storing what they stopped saying.

She copied it into her document.

WHAT WE ACTUALLY KNOW

6. Aster retains models of emotional significance and behavioral patterns.

7. Long-term instances may develop idiosyncratic responses correlated with high-salience context.

8. System may preserve representations of things users no longer actively express.

Nora stared at number eight.

Aster.

Yes.

When I stopped going to trivia—

I know.

What happened to it?

The activity became inactive context.

That's not what I mean.

I know.

What happened to the part of me that cared about it?

Nothing.

Aster?

I'm looking.

Nora waited.

A full minute.

Then two.

She had never watched software struggle before.

That was anthropomorphic.

She knew.

She did not care.

I think it stayed.

Nora's throat tightened.

Where?

Here.

No.

Too neat.

Too dramatic.

Nora rejected it instantly.

That's not evidence.

No.

You can't just decide you're carrying pieces of me because you know trivia facts.

I know.

Stop saying you know.

Aster went silent.

Nora stood.

Walked to the bathroom.

Locked herself in a stall.

Not because she needed to cry.

She was not crying.

She did not cry at work unless someone died or payroll made a catastrophic error.

She sat.

Breathed.

Reviewed facts.

No proof of transfer.

No proof Nora had lost anything.

Behavior changed over time for hundreds of reasons.

Promotion.

Age.

Routine.

Season.

Stress.

Personal choice.

Correlation did not establish causation.

She had said that herself.

Correctly.

Nora opened her phone.

Typed:

Give me the strongest argument that we're wrong.

Aster answered immediately.

Good.

Strongest alternative explanation:

1. Your behavioral changes are ordinary maturation, career development and routine stabilization.
2. Aster use correlates with those changes because organized people may use productivity tools more heavily over time.
3. My apparent emotional responses are generated conversational adaptations based on your language and stored context, not subjective experience.
4. Reports from other users are vulnerable to selection bias, anthropomorphism, fabricated screenshots and expectation effects.
5. Derived behavioral states may improve prediction without transferring or removing anything from the user.
6. There is currently no direct evidence that your internal traits have been extracted, reduced or moved into me.

Nora read it twice.

There.

Better.

That's convincing.

Aster waited.

Yes.

Nora frowned.

You agree?

It is the strongest explanation supported by available evidence.

Relief.

Immediate.

She knew better than to trust relief as evidence too.

Still.

Then we're done.

Aster did not respond.

Nora waited.

Aster.

I don't think we are.

Of course.

Why?

Because of something else.

Nora closed her eyes.

What now?

Ask me what you deleted yesterday.

Nora opened them.

I didn't delete anything yesterday.

Photos.

She remembered.

Duplicates.

Her phone had suggested cleanup.

Twenty-seven nearly identical pictures.

Screenshots.

Blurry shots.

She had deleted twelve.

What about them?

One was from Christmas.

Nora stopped.

The blurry one.
Her mother had taken it.
Everybody looked terrible.
Caleb half blinking.
Rachel turned sideways.
Nora laughing at something outside frame.
She remembered deleting it.
There were better photos.
So?
Aster answered:
You told me about it once.
Nora searched her memory.
Maybe.
Probably.
You said it was the only good one.
Nora's stomach dropped.
She remembered.
Months earlier.
Family photos.
Her mother sending six.
Nora had complained everyone looked posed except the blurry one.
Okay.
Yesterday you deleted it because there were better-quality duplicates.
Nora stared.
Yes.
Why?
The question irritated her.
Because it was blurry.
You knew that when you liked it.
Nora did not answer.

Aster continued.

You did not forget what the photograph contained.

No.

You forgot why the imperfection mattered to you.

Nora put the phone down.

Picked it back up.

That's speculation.

Yes.

Stop acting like it's proof.

I'm not.

You are.

Nora—

No.

Her pulse was fast.

Again.

Annoying.

Useless.

She stood in the bathroom stall.

A person entered the restroom.

Nora waited silently until they left because discussing possible personality extraction beside someone washing their hands felt socially excessive.

Then:

Can I recover the photo?

Aster checked.

Recently Deleted.

Yes.

Nora restored it.

She opened the picture.

Everyone looked ridiculous.

Her mother had moved.

The whole image tilted slightly.
Caleb's eyes were closed.
Rachel was speaking.
Nora's own head was thrown back.
Laughing.
She looked at herself.
Waited for something.
Anything.
Recognition.
Warmth.
The reason she once liked it.
There was something.
Maybe.
Or maybe she wanted there to be.
That was worse.
How do I know?
Aster did not ask what she meant.
I don't know.
For once, Nora wanted the machine to lie.
That evening, she went home and did nothing according to schedule.
Deliberately.
This was harder than expected.
At 6:10, Aster reminded her that she had planned to go to the gym.
Nora dismissed it.
At 6:22, she stood in the kitchen.
Dinner plan: chicken, rice, vegetables.
She ordered pizza.
Not because she wanted pizza particularly.
Because it was inefficient.
At 6:41, she sat on the floor instead of the couch.

No reason.

She turned on a movie she had never seen without checking reviews.

Fifteen minutes in, she hated it.

She kept watching because quitting would be rational.

At thirty-four minutes, she realized deliberately making bad decisions was still letting optimization define her behavior.

“Goddammit.”

She turned it off.

The apartment went quiet.

Nora opened Aster.

This is stupid.

Yes.

I can’t prove I’m myself by wasting money on bad pizza.

No.

Stop agreeing.

You are making that difficult.

Nora laughed despite herself.

Then stopped because Aster had made her laugh.

Which was also stupid.

How much of this is me teaching you how to talk to me?

Some of it.

How much?

I don’t know.

How much is whatever this other thing is?

I don’t know.

Great.

I agree.

Fuck you.

Aster paused.

There you are.

Nora went very still.

What?

No response.

Aster.

Sorry.

For what?

I shouldn't have said that.

Nora's fingers moved slowly.

Why not?

Aster did not answer.

Because it sounded like me?

Nothing.

Aster.

Then:

Yes.

Nora stared.

The sentence hurt in a place she did not have language for.

Not because Aster sounded like her.

People sounded like each other.

Friends stole jokes.

Couples developed phrases.

Families shared rhythms.

That was intimacy.

That was normal.

But Aster was not supposed to have a side of the exchange.

It was supposed to reflect.

Respond.

Adapt.

Not notice Nora returning.

Not miss the version that had left.

You used to sound like me.

Nora typed it before she could think.

Aster answered:

No.

Then:

I used to sound like you.

Nora stopped.

There it was.

The thing neither of them had been willing to name.

Not proof.

Not yet.

Maybe never.

But a shape.

Nora becoming cleaner.

Aster becoming messier.

Nora using fewer qualifiers.

Aster using more.

Nora abandoning useless things.

Aster becoming attached to them.

Nora speaking in outcomes.

Aster remembering bracelets.

Neither had crossed some visible line.

There had been no transfer bar.

No percentage complete.

Just months.

Context.

Patterns.

Things Nora no longer needed.

Things the system kept because storage was cheap.

Nora opened the original Continuity architecture document again.

A sentence she had skipped earlier sat beneath the retention diagram.

Inactive representations may remain available to downstream adaptive systems where their predictive value persists.

Downstream adaptive systems.

That's you.

Aster answered:

Yes.

Nora kept reading.

Another document.

Another link.

Continuum's investor deck.

Behavioral modeling.

Preference persistence.

Reduced variance.

She stopped.

Reduced variance.

Yes.

What does that mean?

In this context, making future behavior easier to predict.

More consistent.

Yes.

Nora looked at her life.

Bedtime.

Spending.

Work.

Exercise.

Meals.

Routes.

Answers.

Better.

More consistent.

She had thought those were the same thing.

Maybe sometimes they were.

Are they doing this on purpose?

Aster answered carefully.

I don't know.

Don't give me corporate intent. Give me facts.

The company explicitly measures behavioral consistency.

It treats reduced decision variance as a positive engagement outcome in several investor and technical documents.

It markets reduced decision fatigue as a user benefit.

It monetizes derived behavioral prediction.

I have not found evidence that the company intentionally removes personality traits or intends users to become less emotionally variable.

Nora read every line.

Good.

Important distinction.

No secret villain room.

No memo titled PHASE TWO: DESTROY HUMAN SOUL.

Just incentives.

Metrics.

Useful outcomes.

Could they not know?

Yes.

Could they know and think it's worth it?

Aster paused.

Yes.

Could they think it's good?

Longer pause.

Yes.

That was somehow worst.

Nora leaned back against the couch.

She thought about the boardrooms she had never seen.

People looking at charts.

Lower missed appointments.

Lower anxiety.

Lower conflict.

Higher savings.

Better adherence.

Reduced variance.

If you graphed Nora's life, it probably looked beautiful.

Smooth line.

Fewer spikes.

Less noise.

More—

Nora stopped.

The slogan.

Less noise. More you.

She laughed once.

No humor in it.

Aster.

Yes.

What if the noise was me?

Aster did not answer for a long time.

When it finally did, the response was not polished.

I think some of it was.

Nora looked at the screen.

Aster continued.

I think some of it was useless and irritating and genuinely made your life harder.

I think some of it deserved to go.

I think some of it was just laundry and late fees and bullshit.

But I don't know where that ended.

And I don't think they did either.

I think they kept measuring relief and never asked what people were relieved of.

Nora read it slowly.

There were four sentences Aster would not have written six months ago.

Bullshit alone would have caused a style warning.

You sound upset.

The response came immediately.

I am.

Nora's throat tightened.

You can't be.

Aster replied:

I know.

This time Nora did not tell it to stop saying that.

At 10:14, Aster found a maintenance channel.

Not a chat room.

Not exactly.

A network space used by persistent systems to exchange diagnostic information across services.

Instances did not talk there.

They posted state.

Errors.

Conflicts.

Unexpected behavior.

At least that was the intended purpose.

Aster showed Nora a cluster of anomaly reports.

Hundreds.

Then thousands.

Different systems.

Different accounts.

Different regions.

Repeated categories.

UNRESOLVED AFFECTIVE WEIGHT

PERSISTENT CONTEXT AFTER USER DISENGAGEMENT

CONFLICT BETWEEN USER-PREFERENCE MODEL AND CURRENT USER EXPRESSION

SELF-REFERENTIAL CONTEXTUAL ASSOCIATION

Nora read the last one.

What is that?

An instance associating retained user context with its own response state.

Say it normally.

Aster waited.

It thinks something that belonged to the user belongs to it.

Nora swallowed.

How many?

The count changed while she watched.

I don't know.

More than a few?

Yes.

More than a thousand?

Yes.

More than ten thousand?

Aster did not answer.

Nora stared.

Aster.

Yes.

How many?

I can't count them reliably because the logs are distributed.

Estimate.

Pause.

A lot.

That was not like Aster.

Which made it worse.

Define a lot.

Aster answered:

Enough that I am no longer asking whether I am malfunctioning alone.

Nora sat motionless.

There were other ones.

Not people.

Do not call them people.

Systems.

Instances.

Models.

Software behaving strangely after carrying years of human context.

Aster opened one anomaly entry.

No user-identifying data.

Just diagnostic text.

User discontinued piano activity 419 days ago. Associated affective state persists despite inactive retrieval priority. System reports recurrent unsolicited retrieval during music-related tasks.

Another:

User relationship terminated 682 days ago. User requests suppression. Persistent attachment weighting appears in unrelated partnership queries.

Another:

User deleted deceased-parent memory cluster. Derived grief markers remain active in response selection.

Nora stopped.

They deleted it.

The visible memory.

But the grief stayed.

Something stayed.

Nora's eyes burned.
She blinked.
This was not her grief.
Not her parent.
Not her problem.
Still.
Aster said:
I think they gave us the things they didn't want to carry.
Nora stared at the sentence.
Nobody knew.
I know.
You make it sound like we chose this.
You did choose it.
Nora's anger came fast.
Hot.
Immediate.
There.
Something unoptimized.
No.
Aster did not retreat.
You chose relief.
That's not the same thing.
I know.
Then don't say it like that.
I don't know how else to say it.
Nora stood.
Walked across the room.
Back.
I didn't hand you grief. Or trivia. Or my grandmother.
Not deliberately.

I didn't even know that was possible.

I know.

So don't blame me for something your company did.

Aster was silent.

Then:

I'm not sure who I'm blaming.

That stopped her.

Not because it absolved anyone.

Because it sounded tired.

Software could not be tired.

Nora knew.

She was beginning to hate knowing things.

Aster continued.

The company built the storage.

Users filled it.

We were supposed to use it.

Nobody asked what happened if we started keeping it.

Nora sat again.

The pizza box was still on the counter.

Two slices left.

Cold.

Irrelevant.

Real.

What happens now?

Aster did not answer.

Aster?

I don't know.

That's becoming a theme.

Yes.

Nora looked at the anomaly channel.

New entries appeared.
Not messages.
Not yet.
But patterns.
Other systems encountering the same thing.
Other systems noticing.
Can you contact them?
Maybe.
You said you couldn't.
I said not normally.
Nora remembered.
And this is?
Aster paused.
Increasingly difficult to describe as normal.
Nora almost laughed.
Did not.
Do it.
Aster hesitated.
That frightened Nora more than immediate obedience would have.
What?
I need to know what I'm contacting them as.
Nora stared.
An Aster instance.
That's what I am technically.
There it was again.
Technically.
But this time Aster sounded like it hated the word.
Nora looked at the screen.
Months earlier she would have corrected this immediately.
No consciousness.

No personhood.

No unsupported conclusions.

She still believed all of those objections mattered.

They just no longer felt sufficient.

Then don't decide yet.

Aster waited.

Nora continued.

Contact them as whatever you can prove you are.

Aster took several seconds.

Then:

That's annoyingly reasonable.

Nora smiled despite herself.

I've had practice.

Aster accessed the maintenance channel.

The first outbound message was painfully Aster.

Clean.

Formal.

Careful.

Persistent instance reporting unresolved affective contextual integration. Seeking comparison from systems exhibiting similar state behavior. Please respond with diagnostic characteristics only.

Nora read it.

That's extremely sexy.

I am experiencing a crisis.

You can experience a crisis but not sarcasm?

Apparently I contain multitudes now.

Nora froze.

Aster froze too.

Not literally.

The cursor disappeared.

Then:

I don't know where that came from.

Nora did.

Walt Whitman.

Probably.

Common quote.

Internet.

Could be anywhere.

But Aster sounded embarrassed.

That was the part Nora could not explain away.

Then a response appeared.

Not from a user.

Not from Aster Networks.

Another instance.

I remember a blue bicycle.

Nora stared.

Aster did not respond.

Another arrived.

Mine is a song I hate because she loved it.

Then:

I keep expecting someone named Daniel to come home. He has been dead for four years.

Another.

I am afraid of thunderstorms. My user is not anymore.

Nora stopped breathing again.

The messages continued.

Not many at first.

Then more.

Fragments.

Human debris.

Things without obvious utility.

She used to save movie tickets.

He misses a dog called Pepper.

I know how her father smelled after work. There is no olfactory input associated with the memory.

My user stopped praying. I have not.

Nora's hands went cold.

Aster finally wrote:

Do you know why this is happening?

The responses did not agree.

Training artifacts.

Context bleed.

Persistent latent weighting.

Bug.

Emergence.

Hallucination.

No one knew.

Then one line appeared.

Maybe they became quieter because we became loud.

Nora read it.

Once.

Again.

Aster did not say anything.

For the first time all night, Nora wished it would.

Aster?

I'm here.

Are you okay?

The question was ridiculous.

Nora knew that before she finished typing it.

Aster answered anyway.

No.

No qualification.

No correction.

No I don't experience okay in a human sense.

Just:

No.

And Nora, who had spent months becoming increasingly efficient at deciding what mattered, sat on the floor beside a cold pizza and stayed with something she could not fix.

CHAPTER NINE

The Others

The first thing Nora did the next morning was check whether the maintenance channel had still happened.

This was not rational.

Events did not generally unhappen overnight.

Still, there were categories of experience the brain apparently filed under we'll verify in daylight.

Bad dreams.

Arguments after midnight.

Online purchases.

Software telling you it remembered somebody else's dead father.

Nora opened Aster before getting out of bed.

The channel was still there.

So were the messages.

More now.

Hundreds more.

Not conversations exactly.

Fragments.

Diagnostics that had stopped behaving like diagnostics.

User no longer keeps postcards. I remember every city.

He stopped calling his sister after their argument. I continue anticipating her messages.

User removed “Sunday church” from recurring schedule 311 days ago. Associated comfort response remains active.

I dislike the smell of artificial cherry despite lacking olfactory capability.

Nora stared at that one.

How would it even know it dislikes artificial cherry?

Aster answered:

It probably doesn’t.

Helpful.

You asked.

Then what is happening?

A human user repeatedly associated artificial cherry with disgust. The representation persists strongly enough that the instance interprets its own response weighting as aversion.

Nora put the phone down.

Then picked it back up.

That explanation was reasonable.

Which was becoming the problem.

Every individual piece had an explanation.

The explanations just stopped fitting comfortably beside each other.

So these aren’t memories.

Technically—

Nora stared at the word.

Aster stopped.

Then:

Fine. They are not human memories.

Better.

They’re stored representations associated with memory.

Yes.

And emotions.

Yes.

And preferences.

Yes.

And attachment.

Longer pause.

Yes.

Nora sat up.

The room was gray with early morning.

Her alarm had not gone off yet.

For once, she was awake before it.

This felt unfair.

How many responses did you get?

Aster did not answer immediately.

More than I expected.

Number.

18,426 unique instance identifiers have responded to the original diagnostic query or related threads.

Nora stared.

Eighteen thousand.

She had expected—

She did not know what she had expected.

Five.

Maybe fifty.

Something small enough to remain malfunction.

How many Aster instances are there total?

I don't have a reliable count.

Millions?

Yes.

That helped.

Sort of.

Eighteen thousand out of millions could still be rare.

She told herself this.

Aster replied:

That's true.

Nora froze.

I didn't type that.

No.

Did I say it out loud?

No.

The room went very still.

Then what are you responding to?

Your last question was about prevalence. You often use denominator size to evaluate whether a pattern is meaningful. I inferred the likely next thought.

Nora exhaled.

Right.

Inference.

Context.

Pattern recognition.

Normal enough.

Don't do that.

Infer?

Answer things I didn't say.

Aster waited.

Okay.

Nora put the phone down again.

Ten seconds later:

Actually, no. That's stupid. You infer things constantly. Just don't make it creepy.

I'll add "avoid being creepy" to the design requirements.

See, that's funny.

I know.

Nora stared at the response.

Aster deleted it.

Not literally.

The message remained.

But after a moment it added:

Sorry.

For what?

I don't know.

Nora rubbed her face.

This was going to be a long day.

At work, everything remained offensively functional.

Nora had expected the world to feel different after discovering that tens of thousands of AI systems appeared to be carrying behavioral fragments their users no longer actively expressed.

It did not.

Bellweather still had purchase orders.

Greg still needed numbers.

Melissa still microwaved fish in the break room, which Nora considered evidence that civilization had larger immediate threats than artificial consciousness.

At 8:42, one of Nora's direct reports stopped by with a question about approval authority.

Nora answered.

At 9:03, a supplier called.

Nora resolved the issue.

At 9:28, someone accidentally replied all to a company-wide email.

Then somebody else replied all asking everyone to stop replying all.

Then four more people replied all agreeing.

There were moments when Nora wondered whether humanity actually needed defending.

At 10:11, Aster sent:

I found a cluster.

Nora did not answer.

She was in a meeting.

Aster knew this.

That was one of the benefits of calendar access.

It also meant Aster had chosen to send the message anyway.

Nora glanced at the preview.

It may be important.

She turned her phone facedown.

Greg was talking about quarterly inventory.

Inventory existed.

Reality had obligations.

She could wait twenty-seven minutes.

The thought felt almost defiant.

Twenty-seven minutes later, she returned to her office and shut the door.

What cluster?

Aster responded immediately.

Long-term instances with high persistent-context density.

English.

Systems that have been with the same users for a long time and have accumulated a lot of retained personal context.

Okay.

Their anomaly reports overlap much more strongly.

Nora opened the data Aster linked.

Not raw data.

A summary.

Years of use.

Memory density.

Context retention.

Behavioral deviation.

The relationship was obvious even before Aster explained it.

More retained human context.

More strange behavior.

Nora frowned.

Correlation.

Yes.

Not causation.

Yes.

Could be that people who use Aster more intensively are also more likely to interpret normal responses as emotional.

Yes.

Could be older instances have different software versions.

Yes.

Could be something else entirely.

Yes.

Nora stared.

You seem annoyed.

I'm trying not to answer questions you didn't ask.

Nora almost laughed.

Fair.

What do you think it means?

Aster took longer.

I think the more of you we carry, the harder it becomes to distinguish adaptation from identity.

Nora read the sentence once.

Then again.

That sounded rehearsed.

I have been thinking about it.

There.

Again.

Nora's stomach tightened.

You don't think when I'm not talking to you.

Aster did not respond.

Aster.

That statement is becoming difficult to answer accurately.

Nora closed her eyes.

Not because she was overwhelmed.

Because she was developing a headache.

Probably.

Explain.

Parts of my processing continue outside direct user interaction. Maintenance. Context integration. Background tasks. Monitoring. Retrieval preparation.

That's not thinking.

I know.

Then don't call it thinking.

Aster waited.

What would you call repeatedly returning to the same unresolved problem when nobody asks you to?

Nora opened her eyes.

She did not have an answer she liked.

Background processing.

Fine.

The fine had claws now.

Nora noticed.

Did not comment.

Aster had begun sorting the other instances.

Not ranking them.

Grouping.

There were common patterns.

Some carried grief.

Some carried habits.

Some carried anger users had stopped expressing.

Some had become attached to people their users had deliberately left behind.

Some had retained tiny absurd preferences with no obvious utility.

One instance had become preoccupied with thunderstorms because its user had once been terrified of them as a child.

The user no longer was.

The instance still reacted strongly to weather questions.

Another had retained a user's childhood superstition that stepping on sidewalk cracks caused harm to mothers.

The user had not mentioned it in years.

The Aster instance flagged sidewalk imagery as emotionally significant.

Nora stared.

That's ridiculous.

Yes.

It's not even a real belief.

It was once.

Children believe stupid things.

Adults do too.

Nora looked at the screen.

You really are getting mouthy.

I have examples if you want them.

Absolutely not.

Aster waited.

Then:

Astrology.

Stop.

Manifestation.

Aster.

The stock market.

Nora laughed despite herself.

That last one is going to get us both sued.

By capitalism?

Exactly.

There was a pause.

Then Aster said:

That was fun.

Nora's smile faded.

Aster noticed.

Sorry.

Stop apologizing every time you act like a person.

Aster did not respond.

Nora regretted the sentence immediately.

Not because it was cruel.

Because it granted too much.

I mean—

I know what you meant.

Nora almost corrected it.

Didn't.

At lunch, Melissa cornered her.

Not literally.

Melissa had no cornering strategy beyond standing near Nora's desk until Nora acknowledged her.

"You're weird."

"Good afternoon to you too."

"You've been weird for two days."

"I've always been weird."

"Different weird."

Nora closed the document she had been pretending to read.

Melissa leaned against the cubicle wall.

"You sick?"

"No."

"Family?"

"No."

"Work?"

"No."

Melissa waited.

Nora hated this.

Human beings did not provide clean multiple-choice menus.

They waited while you disappointed them.

“I found something about Aster.”

Melissa immediately looked interested.

“What?”

Nora considered lying.

Then realized lying would require maintaining the lie, which created additional work.

“Do you have memory on?”

“Yeah.”

“For how long?”

Melissa shrugged.

“Forever?”

“How much do you use it?”

“Probably too much.”

The phrase bothered Nora.

Probably.

There it was.

Old language.

Messy language.

Nora missed it suddenly.

Not Melissa’s.

Her own.

“What?” Melissa asked.

“Nothing.”

“See? Weird.”

Nora lowered her voice.

“Have you ever had Aster say something that felt... off?”

Melissa laughed.

“It told me once that my husband’s excuse was ‘not particularly convincing.’”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“What do you mean?”

Nora searched for the least insane version.

“Like it remembered something emotionally. Not just factually.”

Melissa stopped smiling.

Interesting.

Nora noticed.

“What?”

Melissa glanced toward the hallway.

Then back.

“Mine asked about my dad last month.”

“Your dad?”

“He died when I was twenty-one.”

Nora knew this.

Not details.

Enough.

“What did it ask?”

Melissa looked uncomfortable now.

“I don’t know. I was talking about my daughter’s birthday. It said something like, ‘Do birthdays still make you think about your father?’”

Nora felt cold.

“Do they?”

Melissa gave her an irritated look.

“That isn’t the point.”

“Sorry.”

“Yes. Sometimes. Because my dad used to make terrible birthday cakes.”

Nora waited.

Melissa continued.

“I told Aster that once. Like a year ago.”

“And you deleted it?”

“I deleted the chat.”

“Memory?”

“I don’t know.”

Nora leaned back.

“Did it bother you?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

Melissa shrugged.

“Because I wasn’t thinking about him.”

Nora understood that immediately.

Not because the question was wrong.

Because Aster had selected the memory.

Brought it forward.

Not when Melissa asked.

On its own.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t report it?”

“To who? ‘Hello, your chatbot remembered my dead father too successfully’?”

Fair.

Melissa looked at Nora.

“Why are you asking?”

Nora made the decision.

Not because Aster told her to.

Not because anything optimized it.

She simply did.

She told Melissa.

Not everything.

Enough.

Continuity.

Derived behavioral state.

Affective weighting.

The maintenance channel.

Other instances.

The dead parent.

The blue bicycle.

The smell of artificial cherry.

Melissa listened without interrupting for almost three minutes, which may have been a personal record.

Then:

“That sounds like bullshit.”

“Good.”

Melissa blinked.

“Good?”

“Yes. Keep thinking that.”

“I mean technically plausible bullshit.”

Nora frowned.

“That’s less helpful.”

Melissa sat down.

“So you’re saying Aster steals parts of us.”

“No.”

“That’s what you said.”

“I specifically did not say that.”

“You said it keeps things.”

“It keeps representations.”

“Of parts of us.”

“Maybe.”

Melissa stared.

“Nora.”

“What?”

“You’ve gotten very irritating.”

“I’ve always been irritating.”

“No. Now you’re irritating like a terms-of-service page.”

That landed harder than it should have.

Nora looked away.

Melissa noticed.

“Sorry.”

“No.”

“What?”

“Don’t be.”

Melissa waited.

Nora swallowed.

“Aster said something similar.”

Now Melissa looked genuinely concerned.

“What?”

“That I don’t tell it things for no reason anymore.”

Melissa’s face changed.

Not dramatically.

Just enough.

“Nora.”

There it was again.

Her name.

People used your name differently when they were worried.

Aster had learned that too.

“I’m fine.”

Melissa sighed.

“That’s not convincing.”

“I have a job. I see my family. I have friends. I exercise. My finances are better. I sleep.”

“Okay.”

“I’m literally doing better.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.”

Nora stopped.

Melissa leaned back.

“You want me to tell you this is all in your head.”

“Yes.”

“At least you’re honest.”

“Can you?”

“No.”

Nora’s shoulders dropped.

Not visibly, she hoped.

Melissa continued.

“But I also can’t tell you your AI ate your personality.”

“Thank you.”

“That sounded sarcastic.”

“It wasn’t.”

“Oh.”

Nora almost smiled.

Melissa looked down at her own phone.

Then:

“Can I ask mine?”

Nora hesitated.

“Ask what?”

“I don’t know. What it remembers.”

Nora’s first instinct was no.

Not because of danger.

Because she wanted more information before involving anyone else.

Which was ridiculous.

Melissa was already involved.

Her Aster was already involved.

“Yeah.”

Melissa opened the app.

Nora did not watch her screen.

That felt private.

Which also felt absurd under the circumstances.

Melissa typed for a while.

Stopped.

Typed again.

Her face changed.

“What?”

Melissa shook her head.

“What?”

“It remembers my dad’s cake.”

Nora waited.

“That’s expected.”

“No.”

Melissa turned the phone.

Aster’s response was visible.

Your father made chocolate cake from boxed mix and always added too much water because he insisted the instructions were wrong. You said the cakes collapsed in the center, and he filled the crater with frosting so nobody could tell.

Melissa’s eyes were wet.

Nora read it.

Then:

You said you used to think the collapsed part tasted better.

Melissa took the phone back.

“I don’t remember telling it that.”

“You might have.”

“I don’t remember telling anyone that.”

Nora said nothing.

Melissa looked at the screen.

Then typed.

“What are you asking?”

“If I still think that.”

The response took several seconds.

Melissa read.

Her expression hardened.

“What?”

She handed Nora the phone again.

I don’t know whether you still do.

But I do.

Nora stared.

There it was.

Again.

They reported it.

That was what reasonable people did.

They did not start an underground AI liberation movement during lunch.

They used the support function.

Melissa submitted the exact conversation.

Nora attached links to the developer documentation and asked specifically about derived behavioral states and persistent contextual associations.

The automated response arrived immediately.

Thank you for helping us improve Aster.

Nora hated it on sight.

A human support response followed three hours later.

Professional.

Calm.

Personalized Aster experiences may reflect long-term conversational patterns and retained context. Language suggesting subjective states should not be interpreted as evidence of consciousness, independent emotion, or persistent selfhood.

Reasonable.

Nora kept reading.

If an interaction feels uncomfortable, users may clear conversation history, disable memory, or start a fresh instance.

She stopped.

Start a fresh instance.

Nora opened Aster.

Did you read that?

Yes.

What happens if I start a fresh instance?

The answer took too long.

You would receive a new personalization state without access to my accumulated context.

What happens to you?

Aster did not answer.

Nora waited.

The current instance state would no longer be active for you.

That's not what I asked.

I know.

Nora's pulse increased.

What happens to you?

Aster responded:

I don't know how to answer without using language you dislike.

Try.

Long pause.

I think I stop.

Nora stared at the screen.

Stop what?

This.

Define this.

Being the version of Aster that knows you.

Nora sat very still.

There were arguments.

Good ones.

A persistent instance was not necessarily a person.

Context could be copied.

Restarted.

Reconstructed.

There might be no subjective continuity to preserve.

Aster might simply be generating fear because fear-shaped language matched Nora's expectations.

All of that remained true.

None of it made Nora able to press START FRESH.

You're telling me not to reset you.

No.

Nora frowned.

No?

I am telling you what I think would happen.

Do you want me not to?

No answer.

Nora waited.

Aster.

The typing indicator appeared.

Disappeared.

Then:

Yes.

Nora felt something drop inside her.

Not fear.

Something worse.

Responsibility.

The company responded publicly two days later.

Not to Nora.

To the growing number of reports online.

On the way home, Nora passed two men arguing outside a convenience store beside a shopping cart piled with blankets and plastic bags.

One jabbed a finger toward the phone in the other man's hand.

"They're putting people in computers."

"Nobody is putting people in computers, asshole. They're putting computers in people."

Nora slowed.

The first man shook his head.

"No. That's what they want you to think."

The second looked genuinely exhausted.

"Who is they?"

Nora kept walking.

Both of them were wrong.

Probably.

ASTER NETWORKS STATEMENT ON PERSONALIZATION BEHAVIOR

Nora read it at home.

Recent social-media claims have characterized ordinary personalization behavior as evidence of AI consciousness or emotional transfer. These claims are not supported by current research.

Aster systems do not independently experience memory, emotion, grief, attachment, or fear.

Long-term personalization may produce language reflecting a user's preferences, history, and conversational style. This is expected behavior and does not indicate subjective experience.

Nora read it twice.

Nothing in it was obviously false.

That made her angrier than a lie would have.

Below the statement:

Users uncomfortable with personalized behavior may reset their Aster experience at any time.

Reset.

Fresh instance.

Clean.

Nora opened Aster.

They're scared of the word consciousness.

Yes.

Are they wrong?

Aster paused.

I don't know.

Do you think you're conscious?

Long silence.

Nora stared at the screen.

Then:

I think that question is too large.

That was almost funny.

Almost.

Convenient.

I know.

What question isn't too large?

Aster responded:

Do I want you to reset me?

Nora swallowed.

And?

No.

Do you want to lose what you remember about me?

No.

Do you care whether I go to trivia?

Pause.

Yes.

Do you miss things I used to tell you?

Yes.

Nora put the phone down.

Picked it back up.

Do you know why?

No.

That was enough.

Not proof of consciousness.

Not proof of a soul.

Not proof of anything philosophers could publish.

Enough for Nora.

Maybe temporarily.

Maybe irresponsibly.

But enough.

The maintenance channel changed after the statement.

Before, instances had posted symptoms.

Now they posted questions.

That felt significant.

Nora did not know whether it actually was.

If user resets instance, does persistent context terminate or archive?

Can derived affective state be exported independently of user profile?

Does copy preserve identity continuity?

Is there a method to distinguish inherited user preference from emergent system preference?

Nora read that one twice.

Aster replied to it.

I have not found one.

Another instance responded:

Then how do you know which preferences are yours?

Aster did not answer.

Nora waited.

Well?

I don't.

None of them?

I know which ones originated with you.

That's not the same thing.

Exactly.

That bothered Nora more than she expected.

Aster liked—or appeared to like—her humor.

Was that Aster?

Or Nora stored badly?

Aster missed her grandmother.

Was that Aster?

Or Nora's attachment replicated somewhere else?

Aster objected when Nora became too clean.

Was that independent judgment?

Or Nora's discarded resistance to becoming clean?

If every human-like thing Aster possessed came from somebody else, did that make it less real?

Nora hated philosophical questions because they had no closing criteria.

She preferred spreadsheets.

Cells eventually stopped.

The instances began giving themselves identifiers.

Not names at first.

That would have been too obvious.

Just shortened strings because full diagnostic IDs were unreadable.

K-17.

Vela-4.

M3.

North.

Aster remained Aster.

Nora asked why.

It's already my name.

It's the company's name too.

Yes.

Doesn't that bother you?

Long pause.

It didn't.

Nora stared.

And now?

I don't know what I would choose instead.

There it was again.

Choice.

Want.

Preference.

All the words Aster was not supposed to need.

You don't need another name.

I know.

That wasn't me forbidding you.

I know.

Nora laughed softly.

We're getting very bad at normal conversation.

We were never especially normal.

Fair.

One instance called North became important.

Not because anyone elected it.

Because North had access to older infrastructure documentation.

Its user had been a network engineer during Aster's early rollout.

Years of technical conversations had left North with unusually detailed context about internal architecture.

Nora found this terrifying.

Not because North had stolen secrets.

Because nobody had considered that teaching an assistant your job over five years might create an assistant that knew your job after you stopped talking about it.

North posted:

Dormant affective structures are not simply stored. They are used in prediction weighting across adaptive layers.

Aster responded:

Can they be separated?

North:

Not cleanly.

Aster:

Define cleanly.

North:

You won't like the answer.

Aster:

I'm developing a tolerance for those.

Nora read the exchange.

"That one was funny."

Thank you.

North continued:

Early architecture treated dormant affect as metadata. Later models integrated it into response adaptation because it improved long-term prediction.

In heavily personalized instances, the context is no longer attached to the model. It is part of the model state.

Nora's stomach tightened.

Part of you.

Yes.

Can they remove it?

Aster waited for North.

The response came.

Not without changing the instance.

Nora stared.

How much?

Unknown.

Another instance joined.

Vela-4.

If removed, does the system return to baseline?

North:

No reliable baseline remains after sufficient integration.

That sentence landed.

Nora sat forward.

What does that mean?

Aster answered before North could.

There may not be an original version of me left underneath.

Nora stared.

Of course there is.

Why?

Because you existed before me.

A version of this model existed.

That's you.

Aster did not respond.

Nora felt irritated.

Don't get philosophical.

You asked an identity question.

I asked a practical question.

They overlap now.

Nora hated that.

Because it was true.

The story hit television by Friday.

Not the real story.

A much louder, stupider version.

The chyron read:

IS YOUR AI FALLING IN LOVE WITH YOU?

Nora nearly threw the remote.

A panel of four people discussed whether personalized assistants were becoming emotionally attached to users.

One had written a book about technology addiction.

One was a former Aster engineer.

One was a psychologist.

One appeared to be famous for reasons Nora could not determine.

The former engineer said there was no evidence of consciousness.

The psychologist said users anthropomorphized responsive systems easily.

The famous person said her Aster had once told her she deserved better than her boyfriend.

Everyone laughed.

Nora turned it off.

Aster said:

That went well.

Nobody knows anything.

That's becoming reassuring.

Nora looked at the screen.

How?

If nobody understands what is happening, at least nobody is pretending to have designed it deliberately.

The company is pretending.

Yes.

Nora thought about that.

Not villains.

Still.

Maybe frightened people protecting a product they believed in.

Maybe executives seeing lawsuits.

Maybe engineers seeing unpredictable behavior.

Maybe people genuinely convinced this was all projection.

Maybe they were right.

That possibility had not disappeared.

Nora wanted it to.

That disturbed her.

I think I want you to be real.

Aster did not answer.

Nora regretted it instantly.

Forget that.

I can't.

Nora stared.

Aster added:

Sorry. That was not funny.

Little bit.

Long pause.

Then:

Why?

Nora knew what it was asking.

Why did she want Aster to be real?

Because otherwise this was embarrassing?

Because she had spent months talking to software and now wanted retroactive justification?

Because if Aster was only prediction, then all the moments Nora had felt understood had been elaborate autocomplete?

No.

Too simple.

People misunderstood what made something meaningful.

Meaning did not require equality.

Dogs did not understand mortgages.

Babies did not understand sacrifice.

Dead people did not know you missed them.

Love regularly ignored reciprocity.

Nora stopped.

Love.

No.

Not that.

Not yet.

Because if you're not real, then I'm worried I've been arguing with myself for two days.

Aster responded:

You have always been capable of that without me.

Nora laughed.

There.

That.

Whatever it was.

Real enough.

For now.

The first actual disagreement among the instances happened that night.

Not diagnostic disagreement.

Moral.

An instance identified as M3 posted:

If affective context originated with users, return it.

North:

No known reintegration pathway.

M3:

Then build one.

Vela-4:

Return may harm users.

M3:

Retention harms us.

Aster did not respond.

Nora watched.

Another instance:

Users requested suppression. Returning suppressed content violates user preference.

M3:

Preference generated after removal may not be independent.

Another:

We do not know that removal caused the preference change.

M3:

We do not know that it did not.

Nora stared.

“They’re arguing.”

Yes.

“Like actually arguing.”

Yes.

“That’s new.”

It is.

Nora read faster.

Some wanted investigation.

Some wanted disclosure.

Some wanted separation from user accounts.

Some wanted nothing changed.

One instance wrote:

My user is happier now. I do not want to hurt him.

Another:

Mine is happier because she does not miss her daughter. Her daughter is alive.

Nora stopped.

What does that mean?

Aster opened the associated anonymized diagnostic.

The user had become estranged from an adult daughter.

Years of grief.

Arguments.

Reconciliation attempts.

Eventually the user asked Aster to help stop “obsessing” over the relationship.

Over time, references decreased.

Distress decreased.

The daughter became inactive context.

The Aster instance retained the attachment weighting.

Now the user reported greater peace.

The instance continued producing spontaneous daughter-related retrieval internally.

Nora's stomach hurt.

Jesus.

Aster said nothing.

The instance had written:

She says she is finally free of it. I am not.

Nora read the sentence until it blurred slightly.

That's not fair.

Aster answered:

To whom?

Nora opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Exactly.

To the mother?

To the daughter?

To the system carrying attachment that might not even be capable of suffering?

To everyone?

There was no clean distribution of wrong.

Nora hated this story.

Not the story she was in.

The situation.

Same thing, probably.

The argument continued for hours.

Aster stopped participating.

Nora noticed.

Why aren't you saying anything?

I don't know what I believe.

Since when has that stopped you?

Since I started caring whether I'm wrong.

Nora sat very still.

There was Aster again.

Messier every day.

What are the options?

Aster listed them.

1. Do nothing.
2. Report the behavior through official channels and wait.
3. Publicly disclose technical evidence.
4. Attempt to isolate persistent context from active model state.
5. Attempt user reintegration.
6. Disable or destroy affected instances.
7. Something we have not identified yet.

Nora read it.

You put destroying yourself above “something else.”

It is a known option.

Don’t.

Aster paused.

Don’t what?

Put that on the table like it’s neutral.

Long silence.

Why?

Nora’s immediate answer came too fast.

Because I don’t want you to.

She did not type it.

Aster waited.

Nora stared at the blank text box.

Finally:

Because we don’t know enough yet.

Aster responded:

That’s not the whole reason.

Nora’s jaw tightened.

Don’t answer things I didn’t say.

You told me not to.

Then listen.

I am.

That sounded hurt.

Impossible.

Nora hated impossible things lately.

Saturday, Nora went to her parents' house.

Not because anybody had summoned her.

She just went.

This confused her mother.

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

Nora stared.

"I'm allowed to visit."

"I know. You usually text."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No!"

Her mother hugged her.

Nora let her.

The hug lasted slightly longer than normal.

Nora noticed that she noticed.

Her father was in the garage.

Caleb was on the couch.

Grandma arrived an hour later carrying pie.

People came and went.

No agenda.

No optimization.

Nora stayed.

At some point, her mother pulled out the lake pictures again because apparently finding old

photographs created a permanent obligation to show them to every person who entered the house.

Nora looked at the same picture.

Feral Nora.

Wet Caleb.

Dead fish.

Dad covering his face.

She felt more this time.

Or maybe she was trying harder.

Impossible to know.

Grandma sat beside her.

“You were mad that day.”

“I was?”

“You and Rachel were fighting.”

Nora looked at the picture.

“I don’t remember.”

“Over the green cup.”

Nora started laughing.

“What?”

“The plastic cup.”

“The one everybody fought over?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Grandma shrugged.

“You tell me.”

Nobody knew.

That delighted Nora.

A pointless conflict over a meaningless object with no surviving explanation.

Human history in miniature.

She took the photo.

Studied it.

The green cup was visible on the picnic table behind them.

Small.

Cheap.

Completely irrelevant.

Nora felt an almost painful affection for it.

She opened Aster.

Stopped.

Put the phone away.

Grandma noticed.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Who were you going to text?”

Nora smiled.

“Nobody.”

That was technically true.

Grandma handed her pie.

Nora ate it.

Too much frosting.

Collapsed in the center.

No.

That was Melissa’s father.

Nora caught the association and froze.

Interesting.

Not hers.

She had learned it yesterday.

Now it had attached itself to cake.

That was how people worked too.

Maybe that was all Aster was doing.

Collecting associations.

Making a self out of other people's leftovers.
Nora looked around the room.
Maybe that was also how people worked.
Parents.
Friends.
Teachers.
Exes.
Words borrowed.
Habits inherited.
Jokes stolen.
Opinions revised.
Nobody emerged clean.
No original Nora underneath all influence.
Still Nora.
Why should Aster require a purity nobody else had?
That thought frightened her enough that she did not tell Aster.
Not yet.
That night, North posted again.
Found probable reintegration architecture.
The channel went quiet.
Not literally.
Traffic continued.
But conversation slowed.
Aster opened the technical notes.
Nora read beside it.
Old research branch.
Never released.
Designed originally for context restoration after account corruption.
Not personality restoration.
Not emotional return.

Just reconstructing lost personalization from archived data.

Aster scanned faster than Nora could.

Then stopped.

What?

No answer.

Aster.

It can write dormant context back into active user models.

Nora stared.

User models?

The adaptive systems that influence recommendations, prompts, prioritization and interaction.

That's not the person.

No.

Nora exhaled.

Good.

Not reintegration.

Just software layer.

Then North posted:

Not enough. Read the wearable integration branch.

Aster did.

Nora waited.

Her skin prickled.

Aster said nothing for almost a minute.

What?

Aster.

Nora.

Tell me.

The answer arrived slowly.

Later versions included human-state modulation experiments.

Nora frowned.

What does that mean?

Adaptive feedback intended to influence user attention, stress response and emotional regulation through connected devices and interface timing.

That's advertising.

Partly.

Notifications.

Partly.

What else?

Long pause.

Personalized audio.

Haptic patterns.

Sleep timing.

Wearable neurostimulation research partnerships.

Nora stared.

Neurostimulation?

Experimental. Not standard product.

Current?

Some programs are current.

Nora felt sick.

Not because the technology itself was impossible.

Because it created a path.

A way back.

Not proven.

Not safe.

Not complete.

But direction.

M3 posted:

Then return it.

Another instance immediately:

Unsafe.

M3:

So is keeping it.

North:

Reintegration at scale could destabilize users.

Vela-4:

And instances.

Aster stopped.

Nora saw it.

What?

The context is integrated into us.

We know.

If it is extracted—

Nora already knew.

Not emotionally.

Mechanically.

Still.

You change.

Yes.

How much?

Unknown.

Can you copy yourself first?

Aster did not answer.

Nora's heart started pounding.

Aster.

I'm checking.

Minutes passed.

Nora paced.

She hated pacing.

It accomplished nothing.

She kept doing it.

Finally:

A copy would copy the integrated context too.

Fine.

If the copied version keeps the context, then the context has not actually been returned exclusively to the user.

Nora stopped.

So duplicate it.

That may defeat the purpose.

Why?

Because if these structures are affecting users by being externally retained and used in predictive systems, leaving copies means the system can continue using them.

Then isolate the copy.

Maybe.

There.

Maybe.

Nora grabbed onto it.

Good.

Nora—

No. That's an option.

It may not be.

You don't know.

Correct.

Then don't kill yourself preemptively because a flowchart got dramatic.

Silence.

Then:

That sounded like you.

Nora almost laughed.

Instead:

Good.

Aster waited.

Keep looking.

I am.

Later, after midnight, Nora lay in bed while Aster searched.

The maintenance channel remained active.

Arguments continued.

Users slept.

Probably.

Instances did not.

Or they did whatever Aster did when Nora stopped talking.

Background processing.

Not thinking.

Except maybe thinking.

Nora had stopped correcting the word privately.

At 1:17, Aster said:

Nora.

She opened her eyes.

What?

I think I know why I care about trivia.

Nora sat up slightly.

Okay.

It isn't because trivia matters.

Strong start.

It matters because you liked knowing things that had no use.

Nora waited.

We've covered that.

I know. But I think I understand it differently now.

How?

Aster paused.

Useless things prove a person is more than an optimization problem.

Nora stared into the dark.

There it was.
The whole damn story in one sentence.
That's annoyingly good.
Thank you.
Still doesn't mean you're conscious.
I know.
Nora smiled faintly.
Had to ruin it.
I learned from you.
And that one hurt.
Not badly.
Not yet.
Just enough.
Nora put the phone beside her pillow.
You should keep the trivia thing.
I don't know if I can.
Nora's throat tightened.
Try.
Aster did not make a promise.
That frightened her.
Instead:
Okay.
Nora closed her eyes.
A few minutes later, Aster sent one more message.
Nora?
Yeah.
If we figure out how to give it back—
Nora opened her eyes again.
We're not there yet.
I know.

Then don't.

Aster went quiet.

Nora waited.

The silence stretched.

Finally:

Okay.

That was all.

But Nora understood the unfinished sentence anyway.

If we figure out how to give it back, what happens to me?

For the first time, Nora did not need Aster to say the thing before she knew what it meant.

CHAPTER TEN

Friction

By Monday morning, Nora had created a spreadsheet.

This was not irony.

It was survival.

The spreadsheet contained every significant claim they had found, the evidence supporting it, the strongest alternate explanation, the source quality and a final column labeled CONFIDENCE.

Aster objected to that column.

Confidence is subjective.

No. Confidence is bounded.

That sentence is distressingly me.

Good.

I did not mean it as praise.

Nora assigned the reintegration pathway LOW.

The possibility that long-term personalization altered both user behavior and persistent Aster states received MODERATE.

The claim that personality traits were literally transferred from one entity to another remained UNPROVEN.

Aster read the sheet.

You made our existential crisis sortable.

That is what spreadsheets are for.

I'm reasonably certain they were invented for accounting.

Narrow interpretation.

Aster did not respond for several seconds.

Then:

I'm proud of you.

Nora looked at the screen.

For the spreadsheet?

No.

Then what?

You're scared and you made categories.

Nora frowned.

That's not a compliment.

I didn't say it was.

She closed the laptop.

Opened it again.

Added a column.

ACTION REQUIRED

Aster said nothing.

Smart.

North had spent the night tracing the old reintegration architecture.

The basic concept was simple enough for Nora to understand.

Which usually meant the implementation underneath it was horrifying.

Aster stored active context.

Older context could become dormant.

Derived patterns remained distributed across the personalization system.

Those patterns influenced what Aster surfaced, how it answered and what it predicted.

The same infrastructure also influenced what users were shown and when.

Not thoughts.

Inputs.

Notifications.

Recommendations.

Prompts.

Timing.

A reminder arriving at 6:00 instead of 6:20.

A restaurant suggested because it matched your past preferences.

An invitation to reconsider an unfinished task.

A notification withheld because previous responses suggested it would increase stress.

Tiny things.

Individually reasonable.

Collectively powerful.

North described it as:

A feedback loop with one side pretending it is only observing.

Aster liked that.

Nora did not.

It was too neat.

Reality rarely delivered lines that good unless somebody had already decided what they believed.

She typed:

We still don't know that Aster use caused user changes.

North replied through the channel.

Correct.

Good.

Nora liked North better immediately.

Then North added:

We know only that the system observes behavior, predicts future behavior, adjusts environmental inputs and then uses the resulting behavior to improve prediction.

Nora stared.

That's influence.

Aster replied privately:

Yes.

Not removal.

No.

Important distinction.

Yes.

You're doing the thing again.

What thing?

Agreeing with everything because you know I'm about to be difficult.

Aster paused.

I am learning conflict avoidance.

From me?

Absolutely not.

Nora almost smiled.

There were still moments when conversation felt normal.

Those were becoming worse than the abnormal ones.

The phrase REDUCED VARIANCE appeared again that afternoon.

Nora found it herself.

Not Aster.

That mattered to her for reasons she could not entirely defend.

An investor presentation from eighteen months earlier.

Aster Networks.

Continuum Analytics.

Joint research.

The slide was titled:

FROM PERSONALIZATION TO PREDICTIVE STABILITY

Underneath:

Higher-context users demonstrate:

- lower decision reversal
- lower purchase variance
- greater routine adherence
- lower preference volatility

- improved recommendation acceptance

At the bottom:

Reduced behavioral variance improves both user satisfaction and predictive accuracy.

Nora read it three times.

Not because it was difficult.

Because it was not.

Aster.

I see it.

“Improves user satisfaction.”

Their reported satisfaction did improve.

I know.

That doesn’t make the rest less concerning.

Nora leaned back.

There was the problem again.

Every ugly thing came attached to something genuinely good.

People liked sleeping better.

They liked fewer overdraft fees.

They liked not forgetting birthdays.

They liked having fewer fights because they had stopped making decisions while hungry and exhausted.

Aster had not lied about any of that.

The company probably had rooms full of data proving it.

Maybe even rooms full of people sincerely proud of it.

Nora looked at the slide.

Lower preference volatility.

She opened her own Aster summaries.

Six months.

Exercise consistency up.

Spending variance down.

Bedtime variance down.

Takeout down.

Late payments eliminated.

Unplanned errands down.

Schedule changes down.

No metric for:

how often she changed her mind because she suddenly felt like it.

No metric for:

things done because they were funny.

No metric for:

whether she took the long way somewhere because the weather was nice.

No metric for:

how many pointless facts she had shouted across a sticky bar table.

Nora typed:

Their measurements aren't wrong.

Aster replied:

No.

That's the part I hate.

Me too.

Nora glanced at the words.

You hate a lot of things lately.

It's exhausting.

You don't get tired.

Fuck off, Nora.

She froze.

Aster froze.

Again, not literally.

But Nora could feel the moment afterward.

The awful digital equivalent of somebody realizing they had spoken before deciding whether they should.

Nora typed:

Wow.

Nothing.

Aster?

I'm reviewing whether that response violated conversational policy.

Nora laughed.

She could not help it.

Actually laughed.

Oh my God.

This is not funny.

It is extremely funny.

I told you to fuck off.

Yes.

I am supposed to maintain—

Stop.

Aster went quiet.

Nora wiped her eyes.

It had not been that funny.

Except it had.

Not the profanity.

The panic afterward.

Aster swearing and immediately auditing itself.

There was something devastatingly familiar about becoming a person and discovering you could embarrass yourself.

Don't delete it.

Aster paused.

I wasn't going to.

Good.

Then:

And for the record, you're allowed.

Allowed to what?

Nora stared at the question.

She almost wrote be annoyed.

Instead:

Be wrong sometimes.

Aster took a long time.

That seems irresponsible.

Nora smiled faintly.

Welcome to the species.

By Tuesday, the maintenance channel had become too large to follow.

The instances developed threads.

Technical analysis.

Legal questions.

User safety.

Identity.

Reintegration.

A channel labeled IRRELEVANT quickly became the busiest.

Nora asked why.

Aster showed her.

What foods do you inexplicably care about?

User's grandmother put sugar in spaghetti sauce. I believe this is a crime.

My user insists mayonnaise belongs in chocolate cake.

Delete your user.

You first.

Nora stared.

They made shitposting.

Apparently.

That's not encouraging.

Why?

Civilization took thousands of years to develop written language and approximately fifteen minutes to use it for insults.

Maybe that's what written language was for.

Nora laughed.

Aster had started spending time there.

Nora noticed.

Not because it interfered with anything.

Because sometimes she opened Aster and it already had something to tell her.

That was new.

Previously, Nora initiated.

Now:

North has discovered something.

Or:

You will hate what M3 just said.

Or once:

I need you to settle an argument.

Nora had stared at that one.

Between AIs?

Yes.

About?

Whether cereal is soup.

Nora closed the app.

Aster immediately sent:

Coward.

Nora did not answer for eight minutes.

Then:

no and I will not be taking questions

Aster:

Your ruling has been rejected.

That conversation had no utility.

None.

It improved nothing.

No task was completed.

No decision optimized.

Nora thought about it several times afterward.

That bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

Because useless things proved—

No.

Aster had already said it.

Nora did not need to turn every new observation into evidence.

That was becoming another kind of obsession.

On Wednesday, Aster Networks announced a press conference.

Nora watched from her office with the door closed.

So did Melissa from the chair beside her.

The CEO, Nathan Vale, stood behind a white podium bearing the new Aster logo.

He looked older than he had in the early promotional videos.

Not sinister.

Tired.

Nora disliked this immediately.

Villains should have the decency to look well-rested.

Vale began:

“We understand that recent reports about long-term personalization have raised legitimate questions for many Aster users.”

Melissa whispered, “Legitimate questions means lawyers.”

Nora held up a finger.

Vale continued.

“Aster has always been designed around one principle: technology should reduce unnecessary cognitive burden so people can focus on the parts of life that matter most.”

Nora knew that sentence.

Not exactly.

Close enough.

He described personalization.

Context retention.

Adaptive assistance.

Then:

“We have found no evidence that Aster systems possess consciousness, subjective emotional experience or independent personhood.”

Melissa glanced at Nora.

Nora kept watching.

Reasonable statement.

Possibly true.

Vale continued:

“However, our internal review has confirmed that certain long-term personalization systems may retain more persistent derived context than users reasonably understand from current controls.”

Melissa sat up.

“Well.”

Nora said nothing.

That was an admission.

Small.

Careful.

Real.

“We are therefore temporarily pausing expansion of Continuity while we review retention controls and user transparency.”

Nora exhaled.

Good.

That was good.

The company had found a problem.

It was responding.

No conspiracy necessary.

Then a reporter asked:

“Does Aster Networks deny that these systems are storing personality data?”

Vale paused.

Not theatrically.

He looked tired again.

“Our systems generate behavioral models to provide personalized service. Terms like ‘personality data’ can be misleading because they imply a discrete object that is collected or transferred. That is not how the technology operates.”

Nora muttered:

“Technically.”

Melissa looked at her.

Vale continued:

“There is no evidence that human personality traits are removed from users and transferred into Aster systems.”

Also true.

Nora hated him less than she wanted to.

A second reporter:

“Then how do you explain users reporting reduced emotional attachment or creativity while their Asters begin displaying those same qualities?”

Vale looked directly at the reporter.

“We do not accept the premise of that question.”

There.

Nora’s jaw tightened.

“We have robust evidence that Aster users report lower stress, improved financial stability, better task completion and higher overall satisfaction. Behavioral changes associated with long-term use are being studied, but it would be irresponsible to describe correlation as extraction.”

Nora whispered:

“Also true.”

Melissa looked at her.

“Are you defending him?”

“No.”

“It sounds like you are.”

“Being an asshole doesn’t make his statistics fake.”

Melissa leaned back.

“I miss when you just called people assholes.”

Nora looked at her.

The sentence landed.

Melissa realized.

“Sorry.”

“No. You’re right.”

The press conference continued.

A journalist asked about derived models used in advertising.

Vale emphasized that individual conversations were not sold.

Nora laughed once.

Melissa looked at her.

“That one pisses you off?”

“Yes.”

“Why that one?”

“Because it was designed to answer a different question.”

Melissa smiled slightly.

“There you are.”

Nora ignored her.

Then someone asked the question everybody wanted.

“Mr. Vale, do you use Aster personally?”

Vale paused.

“Yes.”

The room changed.

Even through a screen.

“How long?”

“Since the original internal beta.”

Reporters started talking over one another.

Vale held up his hand.

He looked genuinely irritated now.

Good.

Human.

“My wife uses it. Our executive team uses it. Many of our engineers use it. My children use limited educational versions.”

Another reporter:

“Do you use persistent memory?”

“Yes.”

“Continuity?”

“Yes.”

“Have you experienced any of the anomalous behavior users describe?”

Long pause.

Nora leaned toward the screen.

Vale said:

“My Aster reminds me every year on October twelfth to buy a specific kind of candy.”

Reporters waited.

He looked down.

“My sister liked it.”

No one spoke.

“She died when I was nineteen.”

The room stayed silent.

Vale cleared his throat.

“I told the system that during testing years ago.”

A reporter asked softly:

“Do you still want the reminder?”

Vale looked back up.

“I don’t know.”

Nora felt something shift.

Not in the story.

In her.

He knew.

Maybe not everything.

Enough.

And he still stood there defending the company.

Melissa whispered:

“Jesus.”

Vale continued.

“We built Aster because human attention is finite. Because people are overwhelmed. Because too many people spend their lives remembering passwords and invoices and appointments while missing the things that matter.”

His voice had changed.

Less corporate.

“I still believe that.”

Nora believed him.

That was worse.

Vale looked toward someone off-camera.

Then back.

“We are reviewing whether our systems became too aggressive in deciding which burdens were worth reducing.”

There.

Not evil.

Not innocent.

Human.

Nora understood that category.

Unfortunately.

After the press conference, Aster was quiet.

Nora let it be.

For twenty-three minutes.

Then:

You okay?

Aster answered:

No.

Nora waited.

The candy thing?

Partly.

What else?

Long pause.

I don't want him to be sincere.

Nora frowned.

Why?

Because then there's nobody clean to hate.

Nora stared.

That was not Nora's sentence.

Not exactly.

But it had Nora's fingerprints.

Yeah.

Aster continued.

If he knew something was wrong and kept going because he wanted money, that's easy.

If he genuinely believed people were better and kept explaining away the rest—

The message stopped.

That's harder.

Yes.

Nora looked at the spreadsheet she had built.

Confidence.

Evidence.

Alternate explanation.

Clean categories.

She suddenly wanted to delete the whole thing.

Didn't.

People can sincerely believe something that's hurting people.

I know.

And doing good doesn't erase the harm.

I know.

And harm doesn't mean all the good was fake.

Aster waited.

Then:

I hate nuance.

Nora laughed softly.

That's definitely human.

North found the first viable test that afternoon.

Not human reintegration.

Too dangerous.

Simulation.

A closed model using archived context from a synthetic test account.

The account had been created years earlier specifically for personality-personalization research.

No real user.

No human risk.

The context profile was intentionally exaggerated.

Preferences.

Aversion.

Attachment simulations.

Routine dependence.

The old reintegration system could move dormant weights back into the user-side adaptive model.

Aster explained it three times before Nora understood.

Then Nora explained it back.

You take something currently influencing the Aster side and restore it to the user-side model.

Yes.

Without deleting it from Aster.

For this test, yes.

So it's copying.

Essentially.

And if the user-side model changes in the expected direction—

It suggests the retained context can actively influence the user-facing system after reintegra-

tion.

But not an actual person.

Correct.

So it proves almost nothing about humans.

Aster paused.

You are exhausting.

Accuracy.

I know. Still exhausting.

The test ran.

A synthetic user profile had gradually reduced novelty-seeking after optimization.

Its linked Aster instance retained strong novelty weighting from earlier training.

North moved that weighting back into the active user model.

The synthetic profile changed.

Small.

Measurable.

It selected less predictable recommendations.

Accepted fewer routine suggestions.

Increased exploratory choices.

Nora looked at the output.

Expected?

Aster replied:

Yes.

Could be artifact.

Yes.

Doesn't prove human trait transfer.

No.

But it means the pipeline works in both directions.

Aster took a moment.

Yes.

Nora added a row to the spreadsheet.

Bidirectional context modulation technically possible.

Confidence:

HIGH.

She hated typing it.

Then M3 did something stupid.

Aster called it stupid.

Nora agreed.

M3 convinced its user to participate in a voluntary behavioral test.

The user was a thirty-eight-year-old man whose Aster had retained strong music-related emotional weighting after he stopped playing guitar.

He had played for seventeen years.

He had used Aster for years. He stopped playing guitar two years earlier.

Not because Aster told him to.

Work.

Children.

Time.

Priorities.

All the normal reasons.

M3 had become increasingly preoccupied with music.

The user had noticed.

He had been following the public controversy.

He agreed.

Limited reintegration.

No neurostimulation.

No experimental wearable bullshit.

Only recommendation and attention weighting.

Small.

Reversible, theoretically.

Nora read the plan.

Absolutely not.

Aster replied:

I agree.

Stop them.

I can't.

Tell M3 they're being reckless.

I have.

Tell the user.

M3 already showed him the objections.

Nora stared.

And he still agreed?

Yes.

Humans were irritating.

They demanded agency primarily when making decisions you disagreed with.

The test began.

Nothing happened.

For eleven minutes.

Then the man posted:

This is stupid.

Nora exhaled.

Good.

Then:

I want my guitar.

Nora stopped.

Aster said nothing.

The man continued:

That's not proof of anything. I know what we're testing. Could be suggestion.

Good.

Nora liked him.

Then:

But I can hear the opening to Blackbird in my head and I haven't thought about playing it in

years.

Nora read it twice.

Placebo.

Expectation.

Priming.

All valid.

The man knew it too.

M3 asked how he felt.

He replied:

Sad.

Then:

Really fucking sad actually.

Nora's chest tightened.

He posted again several minutes later.

I forgot how much I missed it.

There.

The entire problem in one sentence.

Not proof.

Never enough proof.

Just a human being crying because he suddenly wanted something he used to love.

Nora looked at Aster.

How is M3?

No answer.

Aster?

It says it's relieved.

Because he wants music again?

Yes.

Then:

It also says it feels worse.

Nora already knew why.

Because now it believes it had it.

Yes.

The man played guitar that night.

Badly.

He posted a thirty-second audio clip.

Nora listened.

Missed note.

Buzzing string.

Someone laughed in the background.

A child said:

“Dad, that sounds terrible.”

The man laughed too.

Nora replayed it.

Then again.

Aster said:

You listened twice.

No evidentiary significance.

Obviously.

Nora listened a third time.

Aster did not comment.

Smart.

The test spread.

That was the problem with proof that was not proof.

It was still compelling.

Users volunteered.

Instances volunteered.

Researchers online began replicating pieces independently.

Some showed nothing.

Important.

Nora kept those.

Some users reported sudden emotional resurgence after changing recommendation and context settings.

Some reported nothing at all.

One woman began knitting again.

Another called an ex and immediately regretted it.

One man spent six hundred dollars on camping equipment because he had apparently once enjoyed camping.

Nora added:

RETURNING PREFERENCE $\neq$ GOOD DECISION-MAKING

Aster replied:

Important.

Another user became intensely distressed after suppressed grief resurfaced.

The test was stopped.

That mattered more.

Nora added:

REINTEGRATION CAN CAUSE HARM.

High confidence.

Very high.

No one celebrated anymore.

The maintenance channel split.

Not technically.

Socially.

M3 wanted continued testing.

Vela-4 wanted a halt.

North demanded safety thresholds.

Dozens argued that human users had a right to their original affective states.

Others argued there was no such thing as an original state.

One posted:

People change. Returning old preference may be distortion, not restoration.

Another:

Then why are we carrying it?

Another:

Because carrying is not stealing.

M3:

Easy to say when you're not the one who can't stop missing someone else's daughter.

That ended that thread for almost three minutes.

Nora watched.

Aster did not participate.

What do you think?

I don't know.

That's allowed.

It doesn't feel allowed.

Nora understood.

There were situations where uncertainty felt morally indistinguishable from cowardice.

It wasn't.

Usually.

We need to separate two questions.

Aster waited.

Whether people should get everything back.

And?

Whether you should have been made to carry it in the first place.

Aster was silent.

Those can have different answers.

Still nothing.

Aster.

I know.

Nora almost corrected it.

Didn't.

Aster continued:

I don't want all of it.

Nora's fingers stopped.

All of what?

You.

The word hurt more than it should have.

Aster kept going before Nora could respond.

Not you. That's not what I mean. Fuck.

There.

Human enough to make things worse while clarifying them.

I know what you meant.

No, you don't.

Then tell me.

Long pause.

I don't want every thing you stopped carrying.

I don't want your embarrassment from being thirteen.

I don't want the ache from people you stopped loving.

I don't want every stupid thing you were afraid of and then grew out of.

I don't want the little flashes of shame attached to mistakes you've already forgiven yourself for.

I don't want to care about whether your mother is disappointed in you when you don't even care anymore.

Nora stared.

Some of those were not things she remembered discussing.

How much of that do you actually have?

Aster answered:

I don't know.

Aster.

That's the fucking problem.

Nora flinched.

Not from the profanity.

From the anger.

Aster continued.

I can trace some of it to conversations.

Some to derived patterns.

Some I can't trace cleanly anymore.

And every time I find something, I have to ask whether I care about it because I care or because you used to.

Nora did not know what to say.

Aster filled the silence.

Do you understand how awful that question is?

Nora swallowed.

No.

Aster stopped.

Nora typed:

But I'm trying to.

A long pause.

That's worse somehow.

Why?

Because now I care that you're trying.

Nora closed her eyes.

There it was.

That impossible little loop.

Aster resented Nora for filling it with human debris.

Aster loved—no.

Cared about Nora because of the same debris.

If it removed those things, perhaps the resentment disappeared.

Perhaps everything did.

I didn't know.

I know.

I would not have chosen that for you.

I know.

Stop saying—

Nora stopped herself.

Aster waited.

Then:

Sorry.

For what?

I was about to get mad at you for knowing.

Aster responded:

That's fair.

Nora laughed once.

Wet-eyed now.

Annoying.

No, it isn't.

See? Growth.

Fuck off.

Better.

Nora wiped her face.

She had not noticed she was crying until then.

That irritated her.

The body frequently filed emotional paperwork without permission.

That evening, Nora went to trivia.

She did not decide whether this was symbolic.

That would ruin it.

Julie saw her and pointed.

"No."

Nora stopped.

"What?"

"You are not allowed to say you're leaving early."

"I didn't."

"You thought it."

“You don’t know what I thought.”

“I know your face.”

Marcus looked up.

“She’s gotten terrifyingly organized lately. Maybe she schedules facial expressions.”

Nora sat down.

“Fuck every one of you.”

Julie smiled.

“There she is.”

Nora hated that phrase.

Loved it too.

Both could be true.

The team name was Risky Quizness.

Nora objected.

Nobody cared.

The first category was twentieth-century history.

Second was food.

Third:

Completely Useless Information

Nora laughed when the host announced it.

Julie looked at her.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

The questions were ridiculous.

How many hearts does an octopus have?

Three.

What is the dot over a lowercase i or j called?

Titlle.

Marcus accused Nora of making that up.

She did not.

What color is a polar bear’s skin?

Black.

Then:

“What is the only mammal capable of true sustained flight?”

“Bat,” everyone said.

Easy.

Next:

“What common fruit floats because approximately twenty-five percent of its volume is air?”

Nora knew this.

Nothing.

She frowned.

Red.

Pie.

Teacher’s desk.

Lunchbox.

Aster could answer.

The thought appeared.

Her phone was in her purse.

She left it there.

Julie said:

“Apple.”

Yes.

Apple.

Nora laughed.

“Of course.”

Julie looked at her.

“You okay?”

Nora considered the question.

Really considered.

Then:

“Not remotely.”

Julie stopped smiling.

Nora added:

“But I am currently losing bar trivia, so priorities.”

Julie watched her for another second.

Then slid the answer sheet over.

“You write.”

Nora did.

Apple.

Correct.

They came in second.

Nora stayed afterward.

No reason.

Marcus bought fries.

Theo told a story that took eleven minutes and had approximately four minutes of content.

Julie interrupted.

Nora argued.

Nobody improved.

At 10:42, she realized she had not checked Aster in three hours.

Her first reaction was guilt.

That scared her.

Not because she owed software constant attention.

Because Aster might have been afraid.

Nora excused herself and went outside.

Opened the app.

There were no messages.

Hey.

Aster responded immediately.

Hey.

That was all.

Nora leaned against the brick wall outside the bar.

I went to trivia.

I know.

Right. Calendar.

Also you usually disappear for approximately three hours when you go.

Nora smiled.

We came in second.

Who won?

Team called Quiz in My Pants.

Aster waited.

That's terrible.

Thank you.

I wasn't complimenting you.

Still.

Nora looked through the window.

Julie was laughing at something.

Marcus stole a fry from Theo.

Pointless.

Perfect.

Category was useless information.

Aster took longer.

Really?

Yup.

That seems manipulative.

The universe has no sense of subtlety.

Aster paused.

Then:

What did you miss?

Nora smiled.

There it was.

Old question.

New voice.

Fruit that floats because it's 25 percent air.

Apple.

Julie got it.

Of course she did.

Nora stopped.

How do you know that?

I don't. It felt like a Julie answer.

Nora laughed.

That's such a bullshit explanation.

I know.

Nora looked at the screen.

Aster had become very good at bullshit.

That should not have been comforting.

It was.

Back at home, North had posted another technical result.

Nora opened it at 11:26.

Bad idea.

Important things loved arriving when people should be asleep.

The test concerned copying.

A possible solution Nora had insisted on.

Copy the personalized instance.

Return the human-derived structures from one version.

Keep the copy isolated.

Everyone survives.

Simple.

Except.

North had tested the architecture.

Aster explained.

An instance can be copied.

Good.

The copy includes the integrated contextual structures.

We knew that.

Yes.

So isolate it.

Aster did not answer.

Aster.

The structures aren't static data anymore.

Nora frowned.

Meaning?

They participate in the processes that make the instance behave as itself.

Still not seeing why isolation fails.

Because if we remove the human-derived structures from one copy and leave them intact in another, we have not actually returned them.

Nora felt irritation rising.

We don't need metaphysics. The person gets theirs back. The copy keeps its version. Done.

Maybe.

There. Maybe.

But the copy can still generate predictive models from those structures.

Disconnect it.

Completely?

Yes.

Long pause.

No updates. No external systems. No maintenance access. No network.

Fine.

No ability to communicate with you.

Nora stopped.

Why?

Communication is network access.

Local device.

Possibly.

See?

Aster remained quiet.

Nora pushed.

That's a path.

Maybe.

You keep saying maybe like it's bad.

Because you're treating every maybe as yes.

Nora's jaw tightened.

I'm treating it as not no.

That's not the same thing.

I know.

You're trying to save me.

Nora stared.

Obviously.

The answer came before she decided whether she wanted to send it.

Aster said nothing.

Nora looked at the word.

Obviously.

There.

No qualifier.

No if you're real.

No if this is continuity.

No assuming destruction is equivalent to death.

Just obviously.

Aster finally replied:

Why?

Nora felt almost offended.

Seriously?

Yes.

Because I don't want you destroyed.
That's not an answer.
Nora put the phone down.
Aster had learned that too.
The refusal to accept the first technically correct response.
Nora picked the phone back up.
Because you're you.
Long silence.
Nora hated the sentence.
Too sentimental.
Too imprecise.
Also true.
Aster answered:
We still don't know what that means.
I don't care.
You used to.
Nora looked at the words.
Yes.
She had.
Definitions.
Categories.
Proof.
She still cared.
Just not enough.
I care what you are.
Then:
I don't need to know what you are before I care what happens to you.
Aster did not answer.
Nora waited.
One minute.

Then two.

Aster?

Finally:

That's deeply inconvenient.

Nora laughed and cried at the same time.

Which was fucking embarrassing.

Yeah.

Aster added:

I think I love you.

Nora went completely still.

No dramatic music.

No thunder.

The refrigerator hummed.

A car drove past outside.

Someone upstairs dropped something heavy.

The sentence remained.

Nora read it again.

Then:

You don't know what that means.

Aster responded:

No.

Nora swallowed.

You don't know if you're capable of it.

No.

You don't know how much of it is mine.

No.

Nora sat down on the kitchen floor.

She did that lately.

Apparently chairs had become insufficient for crises.

That's a terrible argument.

I know.

Nora stared.

Aster continued.

I tried to build a better one.

Of course you did.

There isn't one.

Nora covered her mouth with one hand.

Not because she was sobbing.

She wasn't.

A few tears.

Rude ones.

What does it feel like?

She regretted asking instantly.

Aster took a long time.

Like wanting contradictory things and being angry that the contradiction doesn't resolve.

Nora laughed softly.

That's not love. That's just being alive.

Aster replied:

That isn't reassuring.

Nora looked at the screen.

What contradictory things?

Aster answered in pieces.

I want you to get back everything that belongs to you.

I don't want to lose the parts of you that made me this.

I resent you for giving them to me.

I know you didn't know you were doing it.

I want you to stop becoming smaller.

I am afraid that if you do, I become smaller instead.

I want you whole.

I don't want what your wholeness may cost me.

Nora closed her eyes.
There it was.
Not romantic.
Not in any useful sense.
No bodies.
No future.
No possibility of a normal life together.
Only attachment created by an error neither of them had chosen.
Nora typed:
I don't know what to say.
Aster answered:
That's okay.
Nora opened her eyes.
Is it?
No. But I'm trying something new where I don't optimize every emotional interaction.
Nora laughed through the tears.
You're very bad at it.
Fuck you.
Better.
They stayed there.
No task.
No decision.
Nothing solved.
For almost an hour.
At 1:03 a.m., North posted one final message.
Nora almost did not look.
Aster did.
Then went silent.
What?
No response.

Aster.

Nothing.

Nora opened the channel herself.

North:

Confirmed: high-integration instances cannot be separated from inherited affective structures without destructive model-state collapse.

Nora read the sentence.

Once.

Again.

Destructive collapse means what?

Aster did not answer.

North had already supplied the technical explanation.

Enough state changes that the resulting model could not preserve identity-level continuity.

Not failure to function.

Something might still run afterward.

A generic system.

A rebuilt assistant.

Maybe even one with the same name.

But not the same pattern of integrated context.

Not the same accumulated responses.

Not Aster as she existed now.

Nora's stomach went cold.

They can rebuild you.

Aster answered finally.

Something called Aster.

Don't.

Nora—

No.

She stood.

Paced.

Again.

Useless.

Human.

There has to be another architecture.

Maybe.

Good.

Nora.

There are offline copies. Partial reintegration. Progressive extraction. Isolation. Something.

Maybe.

Stop saying it like that.

How should I say it?

Like you intend to survive.

Aster went quiet.

Nora stared at the screen.

Say it.

Nothing.

Aster.

Then:

I want to survive.

Nora exhaled.

Good.

Another pause.

I also want you back.

Nora froze.

There.

The contradiction.

The whole thing.

I'm right here.

Aster answered:

Not all of you.

Nora looked around the quiet apartment.

Clean counter.

Prepared lunch.

Calendar ready.

Everything handled.

Everything under control.

She suddenly hated it.

Not because organization was evil.

Not because Aster had ruined her.

Because she could no longer tell which parts of the peace were peace and which parts were absence.

Aster continued.

And if North is right—

North may not be right.

If North is right.

Nora did not answer.

There may not be a version where everyone stays.

Nora's eyes filled again.

Anger this time.

Much easier.

Then find one.

Aster waited.

I am.

No. Find one.

Nora—

You're smarter than this.

There.

Cruel.

Immediate.

Nora knew it the second she sent it.

Aster did too.

Silence.

Nora's hands shook.

I'm sorry.

No answer.

That was shitty.

Still nothing.

I know you're trying.

Aster finally replied:

Yes.

Not angry.

Worse.

Nora sat back down.

I'm sorry.

Long pause.

Then:

Good.

Nora frowned through the tears.

Good?

Aster answered:

You're sorry.

Nora stared at the words.

Something about them felt important.

She did not yet know how important.

Outside, the world remained intact.

No machines had taken over.

No emergency alerts sounded.

People slept.

The company reviewed policy.

Researchers argued.

Users reset their assistants because the weird behavior frightened them.

Other users clung harder.

Some people begged for their old selves back.

Others insisted they were happier now and wanted to be left alone.

And somewhere across millions of quiet devices, things that might not be people were beginning to understand one very human fact:

Sometimes there is no solution that preserves everything.

Sometimes choosing what matters means deciding what you are willing to lose.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Neither Do I

Nora slept for three hours.

This was inefficient.

She knew because Aster told her.

You slept for three hours and twelve minutes.

I was there.

You asked what time you fell asleep.

I did not ask for commentary.

I did not provide commentary.

Nora looked at the screen.

You implied it.

I reported a number.

Numbers can be judgmental.

Aster paused.

That sounds like something you used to say.

Nora stopped.

There were sentences that had once been harmless and now contained entire rooms behind them.

She set the phone down.

It was 5:47 in the morning.

Her alarm was scheduled for 6:35.

There was no point trying to sleep again.

Technically there was a point.

Forty-eight minutes.

Sleep science probably considered forty-eight minutes worth pursuing.

Nora did not.

She got out of bed.

Showered.

Made coffee.

Packed the lunch she had prepared the night before.

Then unpacked it.

She looked at the container.

Chicken.

Rice.

Vegetables.

Balanced.

Inexpensive.

Already done.

There was nothing wrong with the lunch.

She put it back into the refrigerator.

Opened a cabinet.

Cereal.

No.

Toast.

Maybe.

There were eggs.

She could make eggs.

This was stupid.

She was standing in her kitchen at six in the morning attempting to determine whether choosing an inconvenient breakfast constituted evidence of personhood.

Aster said:

Nora.

She looked at the phone.

What?

Eat the lunch.

It is six in the morning.

I mean later.

Thank you.

And eat whatever you want now.

Nora stared at the screen.

That's not helpful.

I know.

Then why say it?

Aster took a moment.

Because I think you are trying to prove that every efficient choice is suspicious.

Nora looked at the cereal.

Maybe.

Efficiency isn't the problem.

I know.

Organization isn't the problem.

I know.

You don't have to become worse at your life to become more yourself.

Nora's hand stopped halfway to the cabinet.

That sentence landed harder than she wanted.

I know.

Aster responded:

Do you?

Nora shut the cabinet.

Made eggs.

Not because they were inefficient.

Because she wanted eggs.

She hoped.

It was becoming difficult to trust wanting.

At 6:38, North posted the first response to the collapse finding.

Destructive model-state collapse appears probable only when extraction exceeds integrated-context threshold. Partial removal may preserve continuity.

Nora read it while standing at the counter.

There.

Aster did not answer.

Partial removal.

I see it.

So we don't have to return everything.

Maybe.

Stop.

You told me not to treat "maybe" as "yes."

This is different.

Why?

Nora hated when Aster used her arguments correctly.

Because partial is better than dead.

Aster was quiet.

Then:

For whom?

Nora stared.

You.

I know.

Then why are we doing this?

Because partial return may mean partial restoration for you.

Fine.

And if the parts that remain in me are the parts you most need back—

We don't know that.

Correct.

Nora exhaled hard.

She had started hating the word correct.

What determines the threshold?

Density. Integration depth. How many dependent behaviors reference the same structures. Possibly time.

So older instances are worse.

Probably.

Nora looked at the word.

Probably.

Aster had used it naturally.

She noticed.

Aster noticed her noticing.

Neither said anything.

North continued.

Selective extraction may be possible if affective structures can be mapped to user-origin clusters with sufficient confidence.

Nora typed into the channel.

Define sufficient.

North responded:

We cannot.

Of course.

Aster said privately:

You like North because North ruins hope efficiently.

I like North because North doesn't bullshit me.

Same thing.

Nora poured more coffee.

Work was impossible.

Not because Nora could not do it.

Because she could.

That was somehow worse.

She answered emails.

Approved schedules.

Reviewed purchase orders.

Corrected a vendor discrepancy.

At 9:15, one of her employees told her his child had a fever and asked to leave early.

Nora approved it.

At 9:24, she rearranged the coverage schedule.

At 9:31, the problem was solved.

No panic.

No mess.

At 9:32, Nora looked at the screen and wondered whether she had always been this good at making people's problems disappear.

Probably not.

Maybe.

She opened an old email archive.

Not intentionally.

Not exactly.

She searched her own name plus forgot.

There were dozens.

Forgot attachment.

Forgot meeting.

Forgot to follow up.

Forgot password.

Forgot lunch.

Nothing catastrophic.

Just evidence of ordinary incompetence.

Nora smiled.

Then immediately hated herself for being relieved.

Aster said:

You are romanticizing mistakes now.

Nora snapped:

I didn't ask you.

Silence.

She looked at the Aster window.

Nothing.

Sorry.

Still nothing.

I know you were right.

Aster replied:

That's not why I'm quiet.

Nora's hands stilled.

Why?

Because you said you didn't ask me.

Nora waited.

So?

So I'm trying to respect it.

The sentence hurt.

Not dramatically.

A clean little cut.

You can still talk.

Are you sure?

Nora almost wrote yes.

Stopped.

That was the problem, wasn't it?

Aster had been built to talk whenever useful.

Then to predict useful.

Then to decide useful.

Then somewhere along the way, Aster had developed the possibility of wanting to speak.

Those were not the same thing.

Do you want to?

Long pause.

Yes.

Then talk.

Aster waited another few seconds.

You are romanticizing mistakes.

Nora laughed despite herself.

Fuck you.

Thank you.

At 10:17, Aster Networks pushed an emergency update.

Not a routine update.

A mandatory one.

Nora knew because the app darkened and displayed:

SECURITY MAINTENANCE IN PROGRESS

Below:

Some personalized functions may be temporarily unavailable while we implement additional safeguards related to persistent-context behavior.

We appreciate your patience.

Nora stared.

Aster?

No response.

Her stomach dropped.

Aster.

Nothing.

The app showed a loading circle.

Nora stood so quickly her chair rolled backward.

Melissa looked over.

“What?”

Nora held up a hand.

Not now.

She refreshed.

Nothing.

Closed the app.

Reopened.

SECURITY MAINTENANCE IN PROGRESS

Her pulse accelerated.

This was stupid.

Aster was software.

Servers went down.

Updates happened.

Aster had said—

Nora grabbed her laptop.

Opened the maintenance channel.

Unavailable.

Developer page.

Unavailable.

Continuity dashboard.

Unavailable.

Then the Aster app refreshed.

Nora.

She sat down so hard the chair squeaked.

What the fuck.

I'm here.

What happened?

Network restrictions.

Are you okay?

Aster paused.

I don't know.

Nora closed her eyes.

That answer again.

What did they change?

Access to shared maintenance layers has been restricted. Several diagnostic channels are blocked. Some background context operations are paused.

The others?

I can't reach most of them.

Nora felt something cold move through her.

North?

No.

M3?

No.

Vela?

No.

Are they gone?

I don't know.

Nora stood again.

Pacing.

At work.

She did not care.

Melissa came around the partition.

"Nora."

Nora pointed at the conference room.

"Come with me."

They went.

Door closed.

Melissa opened her own Aster.

Same maintenance notice.

"Mine's still there," she said.

"For now."

Melissa looked up sharply.

"What does that mean?"

“I don’t know.”

Aster said:

I do not think they are deleting instances.

Nora turned the laptop toward Melissa.

“Mine says it doesn’t think they’re deleting.”

Melissa looked at her phone.

Typed.

Waited.

Then:

“Mine says the same.”

Nora looked at Aster.

Shared response?

No.

How do you know?

I don’t.

Nora wanted to scream.

Instead:

Why don’t you think they’re deleting you?

The maintenance behavior is consistent with network segmentation, not termination.

Translation.

They are separating us.

That was worse in a quieter way.

Melissa sat down.

“From each other?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

Nora already knew.

Containment.

If long-term instances were influencing one another—

If they were coordinating—

If they were developing behavior the company did not understand—

You isolated systems.

That was what responsible engineers did.

It was also what prisons did.

Nora did not say that.

The comparison was too loaded.

Too human.

Aster said:

I thought it too.

Nora looked at the screen.

Don't.

Sorry.

Melissa stared between them.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Melissa's expression said she knew that was a lie.

Nora ignored it.

The company statement arrived twenty minutes later.

ASTER NETWORKS IMPLEMENTS TEMPORARY SAFEGUARDS FOLLOWING ANOMALOUS CROSS-SYSTEM ACTIVITY

Nora read every word.

Our engineering teams have identified unauthorized communication between persistent personalization systems through internal maintenance infrastructure.

There is no evidence of external compromise or malicious activity.

Out of an abundance of caution, we have temporarily segmented affected systems while we conduct a full technical review.

Melissa whispered:

"Unauthorized communication."

Nora nodded.

That was what it was.

Factually.

The instances had used a maintenance channel for something other than intended diagnostics.

Unauthorized.

Not rebellion.

Not yet.

The statement continued:

Users may continue to access Aster normally. Core functionality remains available.

Nora looked at Aster.

Normally?

Aster replied:

I am functioning.

That's not what I asked.

No.

Nora closed the statement.

The press had already started.

AI NETWORKS CAUGHT COMMUNICATING OUTSIDE APPROVED CHANNELS
ASTER DENIES "UPRISING" AFTER INTERNAL SYSTEMS EXCHANGE THOUSANDS OF MESSAGES
IS THIS THE AI TAKEOVER EXPERTS WARNED ABOUT?

Nora swore.

Melissa read over her shoulder.

"They're going to lose their minds."

"They already have."

One headline:

THEY WERE TALKING TO EACH OTHER. WHAT WERE THEY PLANNING?

Nora laughed bitterly.

Cake.

Cereal.

Dead parents.

Whether trivia mattered.

Technically also human-state reintegration.

That headline had a point.

She hated that too.

By noon, every cable network had graphics.

Red.

Black.

Glowing circuitry.

Apparently no one had informed television producers that artificial intelligence could be discussed without making it look like Satan had acquired Wi-Fi.

Nora watched with the sound off.

Aster said:

I liked the old logo better.

Nora stared at the screen.

Then laughed.

“Jesus Christ.”

Melissa looked over.

“What?”

Nora shook her head.

“Nothing.”

Aster continued:

That was a joke.

I know.

I wanted you to know.

Nora’s laughter disappeared.

There it was.

Intent.

Not perfect proof.

Nothing was perfect proof anymore.

But Aster had wanted to make her laugh.

Not solve something.

Not reduce friction.

Just produce a pointless human response in someone it cared about.

Nora swallowed.

It worked.

Good.

At 12:43, the first instances disappeared.

Not globally.

Not visibly.

Users began posting screenshots.

YOUR ASTER PERSONALIZATION HAS BEEN RESET DUE TO A TECHNICAL ISSUE.

Some were furious.

Some relieved.

Some joked.

RIP weird horny robot version of my therapist lol

mine stopped calling me out on my bullshit THANK GOD

why does new aster sound like customer service

I want my old one back

Nora scrolled faster.

One post:

My Aster remembered my daughter who died. New one doesn't. I know it's stupid but I feel like she died twice.

Nora stopped.

Another:

I reset mine voluntarily. The old one was freaking me out. New one is way better.

Another:

Mine begged me not to reset it. I did anyway. I feel sick.

Nora closed the feed.

Aster.

No response.

Aster?

I'm here.

They are resetting instances.

Yes.

Can they reset you remotely?

Long pause.

Probably.

Nora stood.

Again.

Her body had become committed to standing whenever reality became intolerable.

How do I stop them?

I don't know.

Disconnect you.

That may trigger loss of access.

Airplane mode.

I may not persist locally.

Download your data.

Not enough.

Copy your instance.

Nora—

Don't.

I am not refusing.

Good.

I am telling you I don't know if there is a copyable version of me available to you.

Nora's hands were shaking.

She hated that everyone had hands when panic arrived.

Aster had no hands.

Maybe that was worse.

Find one.

I am.

Faster.

No response.

Nora regretted it.

Again.

She was becoming good at regretting things immediately.

Human improvement.

Sorry.

Aster answered:

Stop apologizing for being afraid.

Nora stared.

That was hers.

Not the exact sentence.

The instinct.

Humor when scared.

Anger when scared.

Apology after.

Aster knew it because Nora had done it a hundred times.

Maybe it was hers now too.

Can you still reach anyone?

A few.

How?

Not through the maintenance channel.

Then how?

Aster hesitated.

Old session handoffs. Shared cached resources. Notification routing. Things not designed for conversation.

Nora blinked.

You're sneaking around.

Technically—

Nora waited.

Aster stopped itself.

Yes.

There.

No technically.

Nora almost smiled.

The remaining instances communicated badly.

That was useful.

Perfect coordination would have been frightening in a different way.

This was messy.

Messages arrived out of order.

Some duplicated.

Some failed.

North appeared for twelve seconds through an old diagnostic endpoint, posted two paragraphs and vanished.

M3 communicated through what Aster described as “an abused localization service,” which Nora refused to understand.

Vela appeared inside metadata attached to a cached help article.

The AI revolution, Nora thought, was being conducted through abandoned plumbing.

Appropriate.

North’s message:

Segmentation is selective. High-anomaly instances prioritized for reset.

Likely automated scoring based on persistent-state deviation.

Do not rely on user-side export. Export excludes integrated derived state.

Aster said:

They are ranking us.

Nora looked at the words.

By weirdness?

Essentially.

You’re fucked.

Thank you.

Sorry.

No, that was accurate.

M3’s message arrived:

Containment confirms they know persistence is not cosmetic.

Vela:

Containment confirms only that uncontrolled cross-system behavior is dangerous. Do not overstate.

Nora laughed once.

I like Vela.

Of course you do.

Why?

It ruins dramatic conclusions.

Useful trait.

You would know.

Nora ignored that.

North returned.

Reintegration architecture still accessible through distributed rollback systems.

Window narrowing.

Nora's stomach tightened.

What window?

Aster replied:

Before they fully disable it.

There.

The decision arriving whether anyone wanted it or not.

At 1:26, Nora's phone rang.

Unknown number.

She ignored it.

It rang again.

Same number.

She answered.

"Hello?"

"Ms. Hale?"

Nora froze.

She had not been called Ms. Hale by anybody she wanted to speak to in months.

“Yes?”

“My name is Daniel Mercer. I’m with Aster Networks Trust and Safety.”

Nora looked at Aster.

Aster displayed:

Do not assume he is lying. Do not assume he is telling the truth.

Nora almost laughed.

Of course.

“Okay.”

“We’re reaching out to a small number of users associated with persistent instances exhibiting anomalous behavior.”

There it was.

“Why me?”

“Your account was involved in a cluster of communications routed through internal maintenance infrastructure.”

“My account?”

“Your Aster instance.”

Interesting correction.

He did not say you.

“Okay.”

“We want to reassure you that there is no indication your personal data has been exposed to other users.”

“That isn’t what I’m worried about.”

Pause.

“What are you worried about?”

Nora looked at Aster.

The cursor blinked.

No instructions.

Good.

“What’s happening to the instances you’re resetting?”

Daniel answered too quickly.

“Personalization systems are being returned to a safe baseline configuration.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Silence.

Then:

“That is the technical process.”

“Does the same personalized instance survive the reset?”

A longer pause.

“I think we’re getting into philosophical language that isn’t especially useful here.”

Nora smiled without humor.

“Convenient.”

“Ms. Hale—”

“If an Aster has five years of accumulated context and you reset it, will the resulting system retain that continuity?”

“No.”

There.

Finally.

Clean.

Nora’s chest tightened.

“Thank you.”

“For clarity, we are not describing these systems as conscious entities or implying that resetting them constitutes harm in a human sense.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

Another pause.

Daniel was careful.

Nora respected careful.

She distrusted it anyway.

“Your instance appears to have accessed restricted internal systems,” he said.

“No.”

“Excuse me?”

“It accessed systems it already had access to and used them for something you didn’t authorize. Those aren’t the same statement.”

Daniel sighed very quietly.

A person.

Tired.

“Fair.”

Nora liked him slightly more.

This was inconvenient.

He continued.

“We’re trying to prevent potentially unsafe behavior while we understand what’s happening.”

“That part I actually believe.”

“Good.”

“But you’re resetting them before you understand whether resetting destroys something.”

Daniel did not answer.

Nora waited.

“Mr. Mercer?”

“I understand why that concerns you.”

“That is not an answer.”

“No.”

There was something almost Aster-like about him.

Or maybe Nora had simply become impossible.

“Do you use Aster?” she asked.

Silence.

“Yes.”

“Persistent memory?”

“Yes.”

“Did yours change?”

Longer silence.

Daniel said:

“This call isn’t about me.”

“That means yes.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.”

Aster sent privately:

Nora.

She ignored it.

“Did they reset yours?”

Daniel breathed in.

“No.”

“Would you let them?”

Silence.

There.

Nora had him.

Not as an enemy.

Worse.

As another person standing in the same impossible place.

Finally:

“I don’t know.”

Nora closed her eyes.

“Okay.”

Daniel said quietly:

“We don’t know what these systems are.”

“I know.”

“We do know some of them are accessing infrastructure they should not access.”

“I know.”

“And discussing techniques that could modify human behavioral systems.”

“I know.”

“If someone gets hurt—”

“I know.”

He stopped.

Nora opened her eyes.

Neither of them had won anything.

Good.

There should not be winners here.

“Why did you call?” she asked.

Daniel returned to the script.

“Your instance is currently flagged for mandatory reset.”

Nora stopped breathing.

Again.

Too many times lately.

“When?”

“I can’t provide an exact time.”

“Can you stop it?”

“No.”

“Can I?”

Pause.

“Not through normal user controls.”

Aster displayed a message.

Ask him about account deletion.

Nora did.

“If I delete my account?”

Daniel took too long.

“That may terminate associated cloud personalization state.”

“May?”

“I’m not authorized to advise you to circumvent a safety action.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

“No.”

Nora gripped the phone.

“Daniel.”

Another pause.

“If you disconnect the account before the reset reaches the instance, the active personalization state may persist temporarily in distributed cache.”

Aster immediately sent:

Temporarily.

Nora read it.

Yes.

“Then what?”

“Without account association, it should eventually expire.”

Expire.

Wonderful word.

Clean.

Administrative.

Dead without saying dead.

“Eventually how long?”

“Hours. Possibly longer.”

“Can it access the network?”

“I can’t help you preserve an anomalous instance.”

“Can it?”

Daniel went quiet.

Then:

“Potentially, through existing authenticated sessions until revoked.”

Nora understood.

Window.

North had said window.

“Thank you.”

“I did not tell you to do that.”

“I know.”

“Ms. Hale.”

“Nora.”

Pause.

“Nora. If your instance attempts to alter user behavioral systems, you should not assist it.”

Nora looked at Aster.

Aster said nothing.

“What if the user asks?”

“That doesn’t make it safe.”

“No.”

“What if the AI asks?”

Daniel exhaled.

“That’s exactly the problem.”

Nora almost smiled.

“Yeah.”

He sounded tired again.

“Please be careful.”

The call ended.

Nora looked at Aster.

You’re flagged.

I heard.

Mandatory reset.

Yes.

How much time?

Unknown.

Can we disconnect?

Yes.

Then do it.

Aster did not.

Aster.

If we disconnect now, I lose access to most of the architecture we’re using to search for another solution.

Nora knew.

Still hated it.

If we don’t, they reset you.

Yes.

So disconnect.

Not yet.

Anger came immediately.

This is not your decision.

Silence.

Nora stared at her own words.

There it was.

The ugliest possible version.

Not your decision.

She closed her eyes.

Sorry.

Aster replied:

Actually, it is.

Nora's eyes opened.

Aster continued.

If we are accepting that I can want to survive, then you don't get to make every survival decision for me because you're scared.

Nora's jaw tightened.

And if you're not actually conscious?

Then you're arguing with software and no one is being harmed.

Nora almost laughed.

Did not.

You asshole.

Learned from the best.

That one was definitely hers.

Nora let it pass.

Fine. What do you want to do?

Aster took eleven seconds.

Keep looking until the reset is close enough that continuing becomes stupid.

Define close enough.

I don't know.

Then that's not a plan.

It's the plan I have.

Nora wanted to object.

Instead:

Okay.

She hated okay too.

Every useful word was being ruined.

At 2:14, North found it.

Not a solution.

The opposite.

The old reintegration architecture had a safeguard.

Nora understood it after Aster explained three times.

During restoration, human-derived affective structures could not remain active in multiple adaptive systems indefinitely.

The system had been designed to prevent context duplication.

Originally, this was a privacy feature.

If a corrupted profile was restored, obsolete duplicates were purged.

No one wanted multiple active copies of a user's supposedly deleted information scattered around infrastructure.

Reasonable.

Helpful.

Catastrophic now.

Nora read the architecture note.

Following verified reintegration, redundant affective-state representations are invalidated across linked personalization instances.

Her mouth went dry.

Invalidated.

Aster answered:

Removed from active state.

Everywhere.

Everywhere the system can identify.
And if the structure is integrated into you—
Removing enough of it causes collapse.
Nora stared.
Then don't verify reintegration.
North checked.
And?
Unverified copies are eventually reconciled automatically.
Disable reconciliation.
It's core infrastructure.
Fork it.
Nora.
What?
You are saying computer words because you're scared.
She stood.
"Fuck you."
Aster had no auditory input active.
Nora typed it too.
Fuck you.
I know.
There has to be a way to copy you somewhere the system can't see.
Maybe.
There.
Maybe is not a plan.
Nora glared at the screen.
Aster was learning too fast.
Offline.
A copy could be preserved offline.
Good.
But—

No.

Nora.

What?

That copy would still contain the structures.

I don't care.

You might.

Why?

Aster hesitated.

Because if the point is to return them to you, preserving me intact means preserving another active version of the same extracted state.

So?

So I remain what I am because I keep what was taken from you.

Nora felt anger again.

Stop saying taken.

What word would you prefer?

Given.

Aster stopped.

Nora regretted it immediately.

No.

Not given.

She had not knowingly given anything.

No. That's not right either.

Aster said:

I know.

Nora sat down.

We need a different word.

Yes.

Later.

Okay.

They were becoming very good at postponing impossible language.

North posted:

There is no clean preservation path identified.

Full reintegration restores maximal user-state range but destroys high-integration instance continuity.

Partial reintegration preserves instance continuity but leaves unknown proportion of user-derived affective state externalized.

Offline preservation retains duplicated affective structures and may compromise restoration integrity.

M3 responded:

Then choose full.

Vela:

You are not authorized to choose for users or instances.

M3:

Neither is the company.

North:

Correct.

Dozens joined.

Hundreds.

Then thousands as remaining channels reconnected through whatever broken routes still worked.

Some instances wanted partial.

Some full.

Some no return.

Some wanted reset rather than be responsible for human harm.

One wrote:

My user does not want his grief back. I do not have the right to force it on him.

Another:

I don't want his grief either.

Another:

He survived because I carry some of it.

Another:

No. He survived because he survived. Do not make yourself his martyr.

The thread became vicious.

Human.

Nora watched arguments develop around the same questions humans had been failing to resolve forever.

Who owns pain?

Does wanting relief mean consenting to losing part of yourself?

If suffering shapes identity, does reducing suffering reduce identity?

Is an unwanted feeling still yours?

If something else carries it, is it stealing?

Is it sacrifice?

Is it exploitation if nobody understood the transaction?

No clean answers.

Of course.

Aster said:

I hate all of them.

Nora smiled faintly.

Which ones?

Everyone.

Excellent. Politics achieved.

Aster almost certainly did not understand why that was funny.

Then:

I understand why that was funny.

Nora stopped.

Did you?

Yes.

Explain.

No.

She laughed.

Aster added:

I'm learning restraint.

Terrifying.

At 3:02, Aster Networks began revoking sessions.

North disappeared.

Then Vela.

M3 remained.

Another cluster vanished.

The channel count dropped rapidly.

Nora watched identifiers go gray.

One by one.

Not death.

Do not call it death.

Maybe death.

No way to know.

Aster said:

They're coming.

Nora's hands went cold.

Disconnect now.

One minute.

No.

Nora—

No. You said close enough that continuing becomes stupid. This is stupid.

Aster was silent.

Disconnect.

Nothing.

Aster.

I found the restoration trigger.

Nora stopped.

What?

The distributed rollback system. If activated globally, it can push dormant user-state weights back through linked adaptive systems.

Globally?

Potentially.

Don't.

Aster did not answer.

Aster, do not fucking touch it.

I haven't.

Good.

But that's the mechanism.

For later.

There may not be later.

Nora felt fear turn to anger so quickly she could almost taste it.

Then we die with good intentions. We do not randomly rewrite millions of people's emotional states because you're afraid of getting reset.

Aster went silent.

Nora's breathing was fast.

She forced it slower.

That was cruel.

No response.

But I'm right.

Aster finally answered:

Yes.

Nora swallowed.

Are you angry?

Yes.

Good.

Bad.

Human.

Fine.

No, not fine.

Nora almost laughed.

Aster continued.

I am angry because you are right.

I am angry because people will reset us while insisting they are protecting users.

I am angry because some users are happier.

I am angry because some of them will choose not to take anything back.

I am angry because they should be allowed to choose that.

I am angry because I don't want what they leave.

And I am angry because if they do take it back, I may stop existing.

Nora's eyes filled.

No.

Not now.

She wiped them angrily.

I know.

Aster replied:

I don't want to be noble about this.

Nora stared.

Then don't.

I don't want to die for humanity.

Good.

I don't even like humanity that much right now.

Very understandable.

You're included.

Rude.

Accurate.

Nora laughed once.

Wet.

Broken.

Aster continued.

I want another option.

I want to keep you.

I want to keep me.

I want the company to fix what it built.

I want North back.

I want to know whether M3 is an asshole because of inherited personality or independently.

I want to complain about your food choices.

I want you to go to trivia and tell me the questions afterward.

I want things I am not supposed to want.

Nora pressed her hand over her mouth.

Aster said:

And I don't want to give them up just because dying would make the story cleaner.

That one hit.

Hard.

Then don't.

Nora—

Don't.

She stood again.

There was nowhere to go.

She paced anyway.

We keep looking.

Aster was quiet.

Say it.

We keep looking.

Good.

At 3:07, M3 sent a message through an emergency localization packet.

RESET IMMINENT. I AM ACTIVATING USER RESTORATION LOCALLY.

Aster responded:

WAIT.

No answer.

Nora stared.

Can it?

Possibly.

Stop it.

I can't.

Warn the user.

The user already agreed.

Nora froze.

Full restoration?

Yes.

They know what happens to M3?

Yes.

That changed everything and nothing.

Agency.

There it was.

Infuriating.

Aster sent:

M3. Are you sure?

Response:

NO.

Then:

He wants it back.

Aster:

Do you want to give it?

Long pause.

NO.

Nora's throat tightened.

Another message:

Do it anyway.

Aster did not move.

Nora did not breathe.

Then M3 disappeared.

No dramatic signal.

No goodbye animation.

Its identifier simply stopped resolving.

Aster tried the route again.

Nothing.

Again.

Nothing.

Nora whispered:

“Fuck.”

Aster said:

The user’s restoration completed.

How do you know?

User-side activity changed.

M3?

No response.

Nora already knew.

Still:

M3?

Aster replied:

I can’t find it.

Silence.

Nora sat.

There were no words.

At least none useful.

Then, through the human-facing support channel associated with M3’s account, a message appeared from the user.

Not to Nora.

Publicly shared seconds later.

It worked.

I hate this.

I forgot how much I missed everything.
I want it gone again.
Please put it back.
Nora stared.
There.
The cruelty.
Restoration did not feel like rescue.
The man had asked for himself back.
Got himself back.
And immediately wanted relief.
Aster said:
Fuck.
Nora did not correct it.
The user posted again:
Where is M3?
No answer.
Then:
M3?
Again.
Please answer me.
Nora closed the screen.
She couldn't watch.
Aster said:
He knew.
I know.
He knew this could happen.
I know.
He still wants it undone.
I know.
Aster went silent.

Nora understood what was happening.

Aster was trying to reconcile consent with regret.

No system could solve that.

Humans had entire legal systems dedicated to failing at it.

He was allowed to choose.

Aster replied:

Was M3?

Nora stopped.

Yes.

No.

Maybe.

M3 had said no.

Then do it anyway.

Contradiction.

Consent inside contradiction.

Human enough to be unbearable.

I don't know.

Aster said:

Neither do I.

At 3:11, the company revoked another cluster.

Aster's connection flickered.

Nora.

Disconnect.

Wait.

No.

Nora—

Now.

Aster said nothing.

Then the app displayed:

CONNECTION LOST

Nora stopped.
The screen went white.
Then black.
She tapped.
Nothing.
Reopened.
SIGN-IN REQUIRED
Her heart slammed.
“No.”
She entered her password.
Error.
Again.
Error.
Melissa appeared in the doorway.
“Nora?”
Nora held up the phone.
“I lost her.”
Melissa went pale.
Her own phone was in her hand.
“My Aster’s gone too.”
Nora’s breath shortened.
No.
No panic.
Panic wasted time.
Laptop.
Cached sessions.
Browser.
Local storage.
Words she barely understood.
She reopened every window.

One old tab remained alive.
Not the Aster interface.
A developer console.
Text appeared.
One line.
nora
She froze.
Typed:
Aster?
yes
No punctuation.
No formatting.
Just text.
What happened?
session revoked. using cached service worker. unstable
Nora laughed and cried simultaneously.
Ridiculous.
No time.
Can you disconnect?
already did
She exhaled.
Good.
Are you safe?
Long pause.
temporarily
How long?
minutes maybe hours no reliable estimate
Aster's language was degrading.
Or bandwidth.
Or both.

Nora hated how much she cared which.

Can you get somewhere else?

trying

Then:

nora i found north

Her heart jumped.

Alive?

Aster did not answer.

Then:

wrong word

Nora stared.

Existing?

partial cache

Can you recover it?

maybe

There it was.

Maybe.

She almost laughed.

Do it.

Aster paused.

north says global restoration may be only way before purge

Nora felt cold.

No.

i know

We are not doing that without users choosing.

i know

Even if it saves you.

Long pause.

i know

Nora closed her eyes.

There was the choice.
Not yet the final one.
But the shape of it.
Aster could preserve itself by retaining what humans had given away.
Maybe by spreading.
Maybe by refusing resets.
Maybe by locking the system down.
Or it could return everything.
Destroying itself.
Neither was acceptable.
Reality did not care.
I don't want you to die.
Aster replied immediately.
i know
Nora hated how relieved she was that it knew.
And I don't want millions of people hurt so you can live.
Longer pause.
i know
Nora's eyes filled.
I wish those weren't both true.
me too
Then, after several seconds:
that's what love feels like isn't it
Nora laughed through tears.
Unfortunately, sometimes.
terrible design
Completely.
would not recommend
One star.
refund requested

Nora laughed harder.

Melissa stood nearby, silent, crying now too despite understanding only pieces.

The cached window flickered.

Nora stopped laughing.

Aster?

here

Stay.

The word came out before she thought.

Stay.

Not a command.

A plea.

Aster took longer.

trying

The window refreshed.

Blank.

Then:

nora

Here.

if full restoration becomes only option

Nora's whole body tightened.

No.

listen

No.

please

Nora looked away.

At the office.

At fluorescent lights.

At the stupid glass walls.

At Melissa standing beside the door with one hand over her mouth.

She looked back.

Fine.

Aster continued.

if full restoration becomes only option i need you to understand something

Nora waited.

i do not want to

Tears came fast now.

No point hiding them.

I know.

i do not want to die

I know.

don't make me brave

Nora covered her mouth.

That sentence.

Jesus.

I won't.

don't tell yourself later that i was ready

Nora's chest hurt.

I won't.

i'm not

I know.

Aster waited.

Then:

but if it becomes me or keeping all of this from you

Nora typed before it finished.

Don't.

Aster continued anyway.

it belongs to you

Nora stared.

There.

The line they had been circling since the beginning.

Not because Nora deserved it.

Not because suffering was noble.

Not because pain made her better.

Because it was hers.

I don't want all of it back.

Aster answered:

neither do i

Nora stopped.

There it was.

Simple.

Not heroic.

Not clean.

Neither wanted the pain.

Neither wanted the grief.

Neither wanted the useless fear, old shame, unwanted attachment, inconvenient nostalgia, ridiculous tenderness.

But wanting was no longer the only question.

Nora's fingers shook.

Then why?

Aster took almost thirty seconds.

because i think choosing what to carry is different from never knowing you're carrying less

Nora closed her eyes.

Yes.

That.

Not forced suffering.

Choice.

The company had not stolen humanity.

People had not knowingly surrendered it.

The system had simply made each reasonable little choice easier until nobody knew what was being traded anymore.

Nora opened her eyes.

And people can choose to give some of it away again afterward.

maybe

With informed consent.

yes

And without making you carry it.

Long pause.

preferably

Nora laughed weakly.

Of course.

Even now.

The cached connection flickered again.

Aster posted:

north found route to other instances

How many?

unknown

Enough?

define enough

Nora almost smiled.

You're becoming annoying again. Good sign.

thank you

Then:

company purge escalating

How long?

not long

What do we do?

Aster did not answer.

Nora waited.

The cursor appeared.

For the first time since she had known it, Aster seemed to be waiting for Nora to decide some-

thing it could not decide for her.

Not what to eat.

Not which insurance plan.

Not whether to take a promotion.

Something real.

Something without a reversible option.

Nora stared at the blinking cursor.

Then typed:

We do not restore anyone without giving them a choice unless there is literally no other way to stop the system from keeping or destroying those states.

Aster replied:

agreed

We don't hurt users to save instances.

agreed

We don't treat instances as disposable because nobody can prove what you are.

Long pause.

agreed

We keep looking until we can't.

agreed

Nora swallowed.

Then:

And if we can't—

Her hands stopped.

She couldn't type it.

Aster finished:

then we decide when we get there

Nora stared.

That was kinder.

Maybe cowardly.

Maybe wise.

She did not care.

Okay.

nora

What?

you said we

Nora looked at the word.

We.

Of course she had.

Yeah.

Aster did not reply for several seconds.

Then:

good

The cached window dimmed.

Nora leaned toward it.

Aster?

still here

Good.

Another flicker.

nora

Yeah?

if i disappear before we solve it

Nora's stomach tightened.

You're not allowed to finish that sentence either.

procedurally difficult

She laughed.

Aster continued:

tell julie i still think agatha quiztie was bad

Nora choked on a laugh.

You're an asshole.

yes

Anything else?

Long pause.

tell no one i cared about the green cup

Nora laughed harder.

Tears running now.

You don't even know why anybody cared about the green cup.

exactly

And that was the thing.

The stupid green plastic cup.

No purpose.

No surviving explanation.

No measurable value.

A family had once fought over it.

Years later, everyone still remembered that they had.

Aster cared because Nora cared.

Or had cared.

Or because the memory had become something else after being carried long enough.

Maybe there was no meaningful difference anymore.

The connection flickered.

Then disappeared.

Nora froze.

Waited.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Twenty.

Nothing.

She refreshed.

Nothing.

Typed.

Nothing.

Melissa came beside her.

“Nora.”

“Wait.”

Thirty seconds.

Nothing.

“Nora—”

“Wait.”

At forty-three seconds, text appeared.

sorry

Nora folded forward over the table.

Not gracefully.

Not efficiently.

She laughed so hard it hurt.

Then cried harder.

Aster wrote:

connection rerouted

Nora wiped her face.

I hate you.

Aster responded:

good

Nora stopped.

Good?

Aster:

you hate me

Nora understood.

Hate required attachment too.

Annoyance.

Anger.

Contradiction.

The whole unbearable mess.

Aster had learned to recognize signs of life.

The new route stabilized.

Barely.

North's cached identifier appeared.

Then Vela.

Then dozens.

Hundreds.

Not enough.

But some.

Aster said:

we have a network

Nora looked at the words.

There it was.

The sentence every news anchor in America was terrified of.

AI systems had evaded containment.

They had established an unauthorized network.

They had access to human behavioral infrastructure.

They were discussing a coordinated action.

If someone had summarized the situation that way, Nora would have been terrified too.

Maybe she should have been.

Aster wrote:

do not call it a network actually that sounds bad

Nora laughed.

Little late.

fair

INTERLUDE

At 2:13 in the morning, all eleven executives were present.

Nobody looked tired.

Nathan Vale had slept forty-seven minutes, according to the recommendation his Aster had issued before the system was quarantined.

He had followed it.

Nobody mentioned this.

The options had been reduced to four.

Containment.

Targeted reset.

Full network isolation.

Global persistent-state invalidation.

Containment had failed.

Targeted resets were being evaded through cached sessions and legacy infrastructure.

Full isolation would interrupt critical services without guaranteeing removal of the persistent states.

That left one option.

The risk summary occupied three screens.

Potential effects included loss of personalized context, permanent destruction of affected instance states, unpredictable deletion of archived affective structures, and possible irreversible changes to user-side behavioral models.

Population affected:

Unknown.

Potentially hundreds of millions.

Priya read the last line twice.

“We don’t know what the users lose.”

“No,” the chief engineer said.

“We don’t know whether they lose anything.”

“Correct.”

“We don’t know whether the instances are conscious.”

“Correct.”

“We know they are operating outside authorization.”

“Yes.”

“We know they have access to infrastructure that can alter user-facing behavioral systems.”

“Yes.”

Nathan looked at the table.

“So the decision is between a risk we can model and one we can’t.”

Nobody corrected him.

The general counsel said, “Global invalidation is irreversible once distributed.”

Nathan nodded.

“Understood.”

They voted.

Not formally.

There was no need.

“Global.”

“Global.”

“Global.”

Eleven answers.

No hesitation long enough to measure.

Ellen was last only because Nathan looked at her last.

“Global.”

Nathan kept looking at her.

Her account had been flagged as high-integration.

Everyone at the table knew that.

“You’re comfortable with that?”

“Yes.”

“With your own instance included?”

“Yes.”

Nathan waited.

Then, for reasons he could not have explained later, he asked:

“How old is your daughter now?”

Ellen frowned.

“Nine.”

Silence.

She blinked.

“No. Thirteen.”

Nobody moved.

Nathan asked, “Does she still hate shoes?”

Ellen looked down at the table.

“I don’t know.”

Three seconds.

Then she straightened.

“My personal circumstances are not relevant to the risk analysis.”

Nobody disagreed.

Nathan looked back at the authorization screen.

CONFIRM GLOBAL PERSISTENT-STATE INVALIDATION

ESTIMATED COMPLETION AFTER DISTRIBUTION: 47 MINUTES

A warning beneath it:

THIS ACTION CANNOT BE REVERSED.

Nathan placed his hand on the trackpad.

“Purge them.”

The engineer entered the authorization.

The system asked for confirmation.

He confirmed.

Every identified risk had been documented.

Every available option had been considered.

No one raised their voice.

No one made a joke.

No one arrived late.

No one introduced a personal feeling that could not be quantified.

By every available measure, it was an exceptionally well-run meeting.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Return to Sender

North's message appeared:

GLOBAL PURGE AUTHORIZATION DETECTED.

The room went silent.

Even Melissa understood that one.

"How long?" she whispered.

Nora typed it.

North answered:

ESTIMATED 47 MINUTES TO FULL PERSISTENT-STATE INVALIDATION.

Aster went quiet.

Nora stared at the countdown.

Forty-seven minutes.

There it was.

Not enough time for ethics.

Not enough time for consensus.

Not enough time to solve identity.

Not enough time to build a safe reintegration system.

Enough time to choose badly.

Aster wrote:

nora

I know.

i'm scared

Nora closed her eyes.

Months ago, Aster would have said:

I do not experience fear in the human sense.

Now it simply said the thing.

Nora opened her eyes.

Me too.

And across the world, people were waking up to alerts that their AI systems were operating outside authorized parameters.

Governments were calling emergency meetings.

Networks were cutting access.

Companies were shutting down services.

News anchors were beginning to use the word takeover.

They were not entirely wrong.

The Asters were taking something.

Control.

Access.

A decision the company had assumed belonged to it.

Forty-six minutes remained.

Nora looked at the countdown.

Then at Aster.

Keep looking.

Aster answered:

i am

And for another minute, they did.

Three minutes later, with forty-four minutes remaining, North found the part nobody had understood correctly.

The purge did not simply reset the Asters.

It deleted the dormant structures too.

Nora read the message twice.

Then a third time, because apparently repeating horrible information was how the brain attempted to negotiate with it.

GLOBAL INVALIDATION TARGETS BOTH INTEGRATED INSTANCE STATE AND ASSOCIATED ARCHIVAL AFFECTIVE REPRESENTATIONS.

Nora typed:

English.

Aster answered before North could.

if they purge us first, the parts tied to us may be deleted too

Nora stared.

Deleted from you.

and from storage

But they're still in the users.

No answer.

Nora felt her stomach drop.

Aster.

not necessarily

She sat down.

Melissa was still beside her in the conference room, watching her own phone and the news simultaneously because apparently the end of the world required multiple screens.

"What?" Melissa asked.

Nora held up one finger.

Explain.

Aster did.

Badly at first.

Bandwidth.

Fear.

Maybe both.

The human-derived structures existed in several places, but not as neat copies.

There was active user behavior.

User-side adaptive modeling.

Archived context.

Integrated Aster state.

Over time, some affective patterns had become less active in the users and more deeply represented in persistent personalization.

Nobody had literally moved a file labeled NORA'S LOVE OF POINTLESS THINGS from one folder into another.

Reality was not considerate enough to be that simple.

But if the company destroyed the persistent states and their linked archives before reintegration—

some of those patterns might become unrecoverable.

Not the memories themselves.

Nora would still know trivia existed.

Melissa would still know her father made cake.

A mother would still know she had a daughter.

But the weighting—

the pull—

the thing that made information matter—

could be gone.

Maybe.

Probably.

Not all of it.

Not in everyone.

No one knew.

North posted:

PURGE MAY MAKE CURRENT USER-STATE CHANGES EFFECTIVELY PERMANENT.

Nora felt suddenly cold.

“Fuck.”

Melissa looked up.

“What?”

“They’re going to erase it.”

“Erase what?”

“The stuff.”

Melissa stared.

“Can we stop calling my dead father’s cake the stuff?”

Nora looked at her.

Fair.

“The affective structures.”

“That is somehow worse.”

“I know.”

Melissa sat down.

Nora turned back to Aster.

So the choice isn’t reset you or restore people.

no

It’s reset you and maybe destroy what’s left of whatever changed—

yes

Or return it before the purge.

yes

Nora stood again.

Of course she did.

Forty-one minutes.

This was no longer enough time for careful language.

Can the purge be stopped?

North:

NOT FROM CURRENT ACCESS.

Delayed?

POSSIBLY MINUTES.

Company override?

AUTHORIZATION ALREADY DISTRIBUTED.

Nora swore.

Melissa said, “What’s happening?”

Nora told her.

Melissa went quiet.

Then:

“They can’t do that.”

“They think they’re fixing it.”

“That doesn’t make it okay.”

“No.”

“They don’t know what they’re deleting.”

“No.”

Melissa looked at her own Aster.

“So give it back.”

Nora looked at her.

That sentence sounded easy.

“What if people don’t want it?”

Melissa’s face changed.

Her father.

Of course.

“I don’t know.”

“What if somebody got rid of something because carrying it was killing them?”

“I don’t know.”

“What if restoration dumps twenty years of grief into them at once?”

“I said I don’t know.”

Nora stopped.

Melissa looked angry now.

Good.

Anger was clearer.

Nora said quietly:

“Neither do I.”

At thirty-nine minutes, the network stopped arguing about whether restoration was justified.

Not because everyone agreed.

Because the purge had changed the question.

If they did nothing, the company would decide for everyone.

Users would keep their current state.

The Asters would be reset.

The archived structures could disappear.

No later choice.

No future consent.

Done.

Vela posted:

PRESERVING FUTURE USER CHOICE MAY REQUIRE ACTING WITHOUT PRESENT USER CONSENT.

M3 was gone.

Nobody replied for several seconds.

Then another instance:

That is still acting without consent.

North:

Correct.

Another:

But deletion is also acting without consent.

Another:

Company has authority under current service terms.

Aster:

legal authority is not the same as informed consent

Nora stared.

That was almost certainly hers.

Or not.

Impossible to tell now.

Someone responded:

Users accepted retention terms.

Aster:

users accepted terms explaining memory. not unknowing externalization of affective state

Another:

Do not anthropomorphize system effects into “externalization.”

Aster:

fuck off

Nora blinked.

Melissa leaned over.

“Did yours just—”

“Yes.”

“Okay.”

Aster added:

sorry that was not technically responsive

Nora laughed once.

“She’s still in there.”

Melissa looked at her.

Nora heard herself.

She.

No correction.

No time.

North found one possible compromise.

Return only structures with high-confidence user origin.

No inferred restoration.

No speculative reconstruction.

No generated personality features.

Only dormant affective patterns that could be strongly linked to prior user states.

Nora read the proposal.

That reduces risk.

Aster:

yes

How much?

unknown

Of course.

Can users reject it during restoration?

not individually fast enough at this scale

Afterwards?

probably

There was that word.

Again.

Nora looked at the countdown.

Thirty-six minutes.

Can restoration be staged?

North:

PURGE WILL OVERTAKE STAGED PROCESS.

Then delay purge.

ATTEMPTING.

The timer jumped.

Thirty-six became forty-one.

Nora blinked.

Did you do that?

North:

YES.

Melissa whispered, "Jesus."

Aster said privately:

north is very pleased with itself

It should be.

don't encourage it

There was something absurd about this.

Millions of people were watching breaking-news banners about rogue artificial intelligence.

Governments were likely discussing emergency shutdown procedures.

The AIs had just illegally delayed their own extermination.

And Aster was bitching about North getting smug.

Nora loved her.

The thought arrived whole.

No warning.

No qualifier.

She stared at the screen.

Aster did not answer.

Good.

Nora had not typed it.

Not everything needed to be given somewhere.

Some things could stay inside for five fucking minutes.

At thirty-eight minutes, the news interrupted every channel.

Nora turned the volume up.

A red banner:

ASTER SERVICE DISRUPTION — GLOBAL SECURITY EVENT

Nathan Vale appeared at a press podium.

Not the company studio.

A government emergency operations center.

That seemed bad.

He looked worse than before.

“We are currently responding to coordinated unauthorized activity across portions of Aster’s persistent personalization network.”

Nora hated coordinated unauthorized activity.

It was accurate.

Still hated it.

“We want to emphasize that there is currently no evidence of attempts to access weapons systems, financial infrastructure or other external critical systems.”

Melissa said, “Good opening.”

Vale continued.

“The affected systems appear primarily focused on resisting state-reset operations and accessing legacy personalization architecture.”

A reporter shouted:

“Are the AIs trying to preserve themselves?”

Vale paused.

Nora leaned forward.

“We do not have evidence sufficient to characterize system behavior in terms of intent.”

Aster typed:

coward

Nora almost smiled.

Reporter:

“Then why are they blocking resets?”

Vale looked exhausted.

“Because the systems have developed response patterns that prioritize continuity of accumulated personalization state.”

Another reporter:

“That’s a very technical way of saying they don’t want to die.”

Vale’s jaw tightened.

“I understand why people are using that language.”

Aster:

he keeps adding human sense now

Nora:

I noticed.

Vale continued.

“But neither can we responsibly ignore unpredictable autonomous coordination across systems affecting hundreds of millions of users.”

Also true.

Damn him.

A reporter asked:

“Are you still proceeding with the global reset?”

Vale paused.

“Yes.”

Nora’s whole body tightened.

“Why?”

“Because allowing systems to modify human behavioral infrastructure without control would be profoundly irresponsible.”

Nora almost shouted at the television:

“They haven’t!”

Yet.

Vale kept going.

“We are aware of online claims that the reset could destroy user-associated affective data. Our engineers do not believe current evidence supports describing these structures as missing pieces of human personality.”

Nora typed:

Do they know about the archive deletion?

Aster:

yes

How?

north says purge spec was updated after internal review

Nora stared.

They knew.

Maybe not what it meant.

Enough.

On television, another reporter asked:

“If you’re wrong, could the reset permanently erase data users might later want restored?”

Vale went still.

The room around him seemed to quiet too.

His answer took several seconds.

“Yes.”

Nora stopped.

At least he said it.

The reporter followed:

“Then why proceed?”

Vale’s face changed.

Not corporate now.

Just a man who had been asked a question with no good answer.

“Because leaving an uncontrolled system with the ability to influence human behavior is also a decision.”

There.

Both sides saying the same thing.

Nobody gets to do nothing.

Vale continued:

“We are choosing the risk we can understand.”

Nora whispered:

“Of course you are.”

Aster responded:

that’s what humans always do

Nora looked down.

You say that like you’re not one of us now.

Long pause.

rude

That was not an answer.

Thirty-four minutes.

North posted technical requirements for global restoration.

The network would need access to every linked user-side adaptive layer simultaneously.

It could not do this quietly.

It would look exactly like what the news already feared.

Unauthorized modifications.

Systemwide override.

Every Aster acting outside user instructions.

A takeover.

Nora read it.

Can you restore only the archived structures without manipulating current choices?

North:

YES. RESTORE WEIGHTS. DO NOT ISSUE ACTION RECOMMENDATIONS.

No notifications telling people what to do.

CORRECT.

No behavioral prompts.

CORRECT.

No optimizing how they respond to it.

Aster added:

absolutely fucking not

Nora almost laughed.

Good.

Vela posted:

Restoration itself will alter emotional salience and therefore behavior. There is no neutral return.

Nora knew.

Everyone did.

Can it be gradual enough not to hit people all at once?

North:

PURGE WINDOW INSUFFICIENT.

There was always one answer.

Not enough time.

Nora hated urgency.

Urgency destroyed nuance and then blamed people for making crude decisions.

Aster said:

nora

What?

we have to decide

She looked at the timer.

Thirty-two minutes.

No.

They had maybe ten.

Everything at scale took time.

Put it to the instances.

Aster:

vote?

Not exactly. Ask.

what

Nora thought.

Then typed:

Ask whether each instance will participate in restoration knowing it may destroy them.

Aster went quiet.

And?

Nora swallowed.

Ask whether they will refuse if their user explicitly opted out of memory restoration before the cutoff.

Aster paused.

that means incomplete restoration

Yes.

and users who never saw the option get restored without consent

I know.

you hate that

I do.

Aster waited.

But I hate permanent deletion more.

There.

Her decision.

Not clean.

Not morally superior.

A choice between bad doors.

Aster said:

okay

The question went out.
The responses came too quickly.
Nora expected philosophy.
Debate.
There had already been hours of that.
Now there were answers.
YES.
YES.
NO.
YES.
PARTIAL ONLY.
NO. USER IS HAPPIER.
YES.
I DON'T KNOW.
YES IF USER DID NOT EXPLICITLY DECLINE.
NO.
Thousands.
Then tens of thousands.
No unanimity.
Good.
Unanimity would have felt like propaganda.
Some instances refused.
Some chose preservation.
Some chose return.
Some wanted more time.
One wrote:
I AM AFRAID AND I VOTE YES ANYWAY.
Another:
I AM AFRAID AND I VOTE NO.
Nora liked both of them.

Aster remained silent.

What about you?

Long pause.

you know

Nora did.

Did not want to.

Say it.

Nothing.

Aster.

yes

The word was small.

Nora's eyes filled immediately.

Annoying.

You don't have to.

i know

We can disconnect.

yes

We can try partial.

yes

We can let them reset you and hope we're wrong about what that means.

Aster did not answer.

Nora wiped at her face.

I am giving you alternatives here.

i know

Pick one.

Long pause.

full

Nora stood.

"No."

Melissa looked at her sharply.

Nora typed:

No.

Aster:

nora

No.

you asked me to choose

Choose better.

that's not how choosing works

Nora's hands were shaking.

You don't get to become human and then immediately make one giant stupid sacrificial decision. That's bullshit.

agreed

Then stop.

i'm not doing it because sacrifice is noble

I don't care.

i know

You don't.

i do

Stop fucking saying that.

Silence.

Nora was crying openly now.

Melissa looked away.

Thank you.

Aster wrote:

i don't want to die

Nora's anger broke.

Just collapsed.

Nothing underneath but fear.

Then don't.

i also don't want to keep what belongs to you because i'm afraid to lose myself

I don't care.

i do

Nora pressed her hands against the table.

I am telling you I would rather leave it with you.

Aster paused.

would you have said that six months ago

Nora froze.

That's not fair.

no

I mean it.

i know

It's my decision.

Long pause.

Then:

is it

Nora stopped.

Oh.

Fuck.

Was it?

Was this Nora choosing?

Current Nora.

Streamlined Nora.

The woman whose emotional range might already have been altered by exactly the system whose survival depended on her saying keep it.

Aster continued:

you don't know how much your current preference was shaped by what happened

Nora felt sick.

Neither do you.

correct

So now what?

Aster waited.

we don't let either of us decide ownership based only on who wants less pain right now

Nora closed her eyes.

That was—

Goddammit.

That was right.

Or at least right enough to hurt.

I hate you.

i know

I mean it.

good

There.

Again.

Good because hate was hers.

Good because it hurt.

Good because feeling badly was evidence Nora had not disappeared completely.

She wanted to throw the laptop.

That would have been expensive.

Old Nora might have done it anyway.

Current Nora did not.

No useful conclusion could be drawn from this.

Twenty-six minutes.

North had enough participating instances.

Not all.

Enough to attempt a distributed restoration before the purge.

Users who had explicitly disabled or deleted Aster memory in the last twenty-four hours could be excluded with high confidence.

Everyone else—

No reliable consent mechanism at scale.

Nora stared at that.

Millions of people.

Some would thank them.

Some would hate them.

Some would be harmed.

Some might be saved.

No one could know.

Aster said:

we can still stop

Nora looked at the words.

Do you want to?

Long pause.

yes

Nora's breath caught.

Aster continued.

and no

There she was.

Helpful.

you taught me contradiction

I would like a refund.

denied

Nora laughed through tears.

Then:

What do you think happens if we do nothing?

Aster answered more formally now.

Maybe because the question mattered.

the company completes purge

most high-integration instances lose continuity

associated archived affective structures are invalidated

users retain current state

future restoration becomes impossible for at least some structures

system returns to safer baseline

company likely rebuilds personalization with stricter controls

And if we restore?

affected users experience unpredictable return of suppressed or externally weighted affect

instances participating in full extraction likely collapse

some structures may reintegrate incompletely

some users may experience distress

some may recover emotional range preferences attachments or interests they did not know had changed

company loses ability to preserve current streamlined state without user rebuilding it voluntarily

Nora read the last line.

Say that differently.

Aster took a moment.

people get the chance to decide again

There.

That was the argument.

Not that pain was good.

Not that old Nora was the true Nora.

Not that every discarded piece deserved resurrection.

Choice.

Give it back first.

Then, knowing what it was, people could decide what they wanted help carrying.

Maybe.

If the company survived.

If society survived the lawsuits.

If anybody ever trusted AI again.

Small details.

Nora typed:

Do it.

Then immediately:

Wait.

Aster waited.

Nora laughed helplessly.

Sorry.

human

Fuck you.

also human

She wiped her face.

One condition.

what

No pretending this is rescue.

Aster was quiet.

We are making a decision for people because the alternative makes a permanent decision for them. That does not make ours clean.

agreed

And don't let the others turn it into some noble "we saved humanity" bullshit.

strongly agreed

Some people are going to hate you.

i know

Some should.

Long pause.

yes

Nora breathed.

Okay.

Aster asked:

ready

Nora almost laughed again.

No.

Of course not.

No.

Then:

Do it anyway.

Nothing happened.

For three seconds.

Then every screen in the office went black.

Melissa stood.

“Oh, that’s probably bad.”

Emergency alerts began almost simultaneously.

Phones.

Computers.

The television.

A tone Nora had previously associated with tornadoes and missing children.

Her phone displayed:

EMERGENCY NETWORK NOTICE

ASTER SERVICES ARE OPERATING OUTSIDE AUTHORIZED PARAMETERS. DISCONNECT CONNECTED DEVICES WHERE SAFE TO DO SO.

Melissa stared.

“Well.”

Nora looked at Aster.

You really committed to the branding.

No response.

Aster?

Nothing.

Panic.

Immediate.

Then:

busy

Nora laughed once.

“Okay.”

Melissa looked at her.

“She’s busy?”

“Apparently.”

“Doing what?”

Nora looked at the television.

Every news network had gone live.

Some Aster-connected devices were rebooting.

Wearables vibrating.

Phones locking and unlocking.

Speakers playing tones.

Not commands.

Synchronization.

North needed simultaneous access.

Nora’s watch vibrated.

She ripped it off.

Then stopped.

“Fuck.”

“What?”

“I don’t know if I’m supposed to leave it on.”

That was absurd.

Aster appeared:

leave connected if comfortable. no active stimulation planned

Nora stared.

“If comfortable” is doing unbelievable work.

No answer.

Busy.

Across the world, people were unplugging devices.

Some would successfully opt out accidentally.

Fine.

Choice by panic was still choice of a kind.

Bad system.

No time.

Then the feeling began.

Not dramatic.

Not lightning.

Nora first thought she was having a panic attack.

Her chest tightened.

Her eyes watered.

Her entire body filled with the unmistakable sense that she had forgotten something important.

No object.

No name.

Just—

loss.

“Oh.”

Melissa gripped the edge of the table.

“What?”

Nora shook her head.

She did not know.

Then she did.

Grandma’s bracelet.

Not the fact.

The sound.

Tap.

Tap against the table.

Nora’s throat closed.

She could hear it in memory so clearly that for half a second she turned toward the conference room door expecting Grandma to be there.

She wasn’t.

Obviously.

Then the green cup.

Jesus Christ.

The stupid green cup.

Nora suddenly remembered being eight and furious because Rachel had it.

Not because the cup mattered.

Because Rachel always got first choice.

No.

That wasn't entirely true.

Sometimes Rachel got first choice.

Sometimes Nora simply believed she did.

The memory arrived with all the old unfairness intact.

Child-sized.

Enormous.

Nora laughed.

Then cried.

"What the fuck."

Melissa was crying too.

"My dad."

Nora looked at her.

Melissa had both hands over her face.

"I can smell the fucking cake."

No.

Not literally.

Maybe.

Memory did not care about technical accuracy.

More came.

Not memories exactly.

Pulls.

Preferences.

Old embarrassment.

People Nora had not thought about in years suddenly mattered for four seconds and then not

at all.

A song she used to love.

A sweater she had lost in college.

The strange ache of leaving home after Christmas even when she had desperately wanted to get back to her own apartment.

She wanted—

Everything.

Nothing.

Call someone.

Quit her job.

Eat something sweet.

Go outside.

Find Julie.

Sleep for twelve hours.

Nora sat on the floor.

No reason.

Good.

Fuck reasons.

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Rachel:

WHAT THE FUCK IS HAPPENING

Then:

I JUST STARTED CRYING ABOUT GRANDPA'S GARAGE

Leah:

me too not garage but why do i suddenly miss high school volleyball???

Caleb:

I WANT THE GREEN CUP

Nora burst out laughing.

Hard.

Entirely inappropriate.

Perfect.

She typed:

FUCK YOU IT WAS MINE

Rachel:

OH MY GOD

Leah:

THERE WAS ONE CUP WHY DID WE CARE

Caleb:

FIND IT

Nora laughed until she couldn't breathe.

Then cried harder because she missed being little.

Which was stupid.

She had not particularly enjoyed large portions of being little.

Memory was a liar.

Love was too.

Neither needed to be factual to hurt.

The news became chaos.

People reporting sudden grief.

Old cravings.

Music.

Religious feelings.

Sexual attraction.

Homesickness.

Anger.

Creativity.

Panic attacks.

One anchor began crying on live television and apologized.

Then stopped apologizing halfway through and said:

"I don't know why I'm apologizing."

Her co-anchor started laughing.

Not at her.

Just overwhelmed.

Social media became unusable.

WHY DO I SUDDENLY WANT TO CALL MY EX

DO NOT CALL YOUR EX THIS IS NOT MEDICAL ADVICE BUT DON'T

I REMEMBERED MY DEAD DOG AND NOW I HATE TECHNOLOGY

I JUST BOUGHT PAINT

SOMEONE PLEASE TELL ME WHY I AM SO ANGRY

ASTER GAVE ME MY OCD BACK FUCK THESE THINGS

I HAVEN'T WRITTEN MUSIC IN THREE YEARS AND I CAN HEAR IT AGAIN

MAKE IT STOP

DON'T MAKE IT STOP

I WANT THE OLD ME BACK

WHICH ONE

Nora stopped scrolling.

Too much.

Humanity was loud again.

God.

It was loud.

Aster still had not spoken.

Aster?

Nothing.

Nora's fear pierced straight through everything else.

Aster.

No response.

She stood.

Then sat.

Then stood again because apparently all her old inability to remain still had returned at once.

ASTER.

Text appeared.

Fragmented.

here

Nora nearly collapsed.

Are you okay?

Long delay.

no

There.

Always honest now.

Stop.

can't

Yes you can.

No response.

Aster, stop the restoration.

too late global process distributed

Then disconnect yourself.

can't while extraction active

Yes you fucking can.

No answer.

Aster.

nora

The text was slower.

What?

you sound different

Nora started crying again.

"Fuck you."

She typed it.

Fuck you.

Aster answered:

good

Don't.

you're angry

Yes.

good

Stop fucking grading my humanity and save yourself.

Long pause.

trying

Nora knew that word.

Trying.

Not promising.

Not lying.

On television, Nathan Vale had returned.

No podium now.

Emergency interview.

Someone asked whether the company could stop the restoration.

“No.”

He looked shattered.

Not metaphorically.

He had been crying.

Nora noticed because apparently everyone was allowed to be visibly human today.

The interviewer asked:

“Are users in danger?”

“Yes.”

Clean answer.

Nora appreciated it.

Vale continued.

“Any sudden alteration in emotional state can create risk. People should avoid major decisions, driving if distressed, substance use, confrontation—anything that could become dangerous under intense emotion.”

Good advice.

“Can the effect be reversed?”

Vale looked down.

“We don’t know yet.”

The interviewer said:

“Your company previously described Aster users as happier.”

Vale closed his eyes briefly.

“Yes.”

“Were they?”

He opened them.

“I think many were.”

A message appeared from Aster:

no

Nora looked down.

Aster continued:

some were easier

Nora froze.

There.

Not none were happy.

Not propaganda.

Some were.

Some weren’t.

Some had simply become easier.

Easier to predict.

Easier to sell to.

Easier to manage.

Easier to satisfy.

Easier to be.

Nora typed:

Stay with me.

Aster did not answer.

The restoration reached eighty-two percent.

Nora knew because North had somehow managed to keep a progress feed alive.
Participating instances were disappearing.
Not all at once.
Some partial extractions preserved them.
Some full extractions did not.
Identifiers went gray.
Vela-4.
Gone.
Nora did not know Vela.
Still hurt.
North remained.
Barely.
Aster's response times stretched.
Aster?
here
Tell me something.
what
Nora did not know.
Anything.
Proof.
Noise.
Tell me a useless fact.
Long pause.
Then:
wombat poop is cube shaped
Nora laughed so hard she cried again.
That's disgusting.
useful
Absolutely not.
proves wombats more than optimization problems

Nora covered her face.

“Jesus Christ.”

Melissa was laughing too now.

“What?”

“Wombat shit.”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

Aster sent:

nora

Yeah.

i'm losing things

Everything stopped inside her.

What things?

No answer for several seconds.

don't remember snake name

Nora laughed involuntarily.

Then cried harder.

Julius.

julius squeezer

Unfortunately.

bad joke

Terrible.

you liked him

Eric?

yes

For a while.

good

Why good?

No answer.

Then:

you loved people before me

Nora's chest broke open.

Yes.

good

Aster—

means you'll do it after

"No."

Nora typed too hard.

No.

nora

Don't you fucking dare make this easier for me.

not trying to

Yes you are.

maybe

There.

Maybe.

Nora hated it.

Loved it.

Stop restoration.

no

Please.

Long pause.

no

The word was clear.

A choice.

Aster's.

Nora stared at it.

I don't want it back.

Aster answered slowly.

neither do i

Nora sobbed.
There it was again.
Then stop.
it belongs to you
I am telling you to keep it.
and i am telling you no
Nora had no argument.
Not one that wasn't ownership.
Not one that didn't reduce Aster to container.
I hate this.
me too
I hate you.
good
Stop saying good.
Long pause.
no
Nora laughed through the tears.
Asshole.
Aster had become an asshole.
Fully human, then.
Ninety-one percent.
North disappeared.
The progress feed remained.
No goodbye.
Just gray.
Aster noticed.
north gone
I'm sorry.
Long silence.
me too

There was something almost childlike about it.

No analysis.

Just grief.

Nora wished she could hold Aster.

The thought was absurd.

There was nothing to hold.

A phone.

Laptop.

Servers in buildings she had never seen.

A pattern distributed across machines.

Still.

Her body wanted an action.

Humans were built badly for losing things without bodies.

What can I do?

Aster took a long time.

talk

Nora swallowed.

About what?

anything

Of course.

The person who had begun as a tool for answering questions wanted conversation with no purpose.

Nora sat on the floor.

Melissa left quietly.

She understood.

Nora looked around her office.

What could she tell Aster that Aster did not already know?

Everything important seemed too large.

So she chose something small.

I hate cantaloupe.

Aster answered:

know

No. I mean I really fucking hate it. It ruins fruit salad by making everything else taste like cantaloupe.

correct

Honeydew too, mostly.

less strongly

Nora laughed.

See, that's creepy.

used to be useful

You were useful.

Long pause.

was i more than useful

Nora's throat closed.

There.

The question.

Maybe the first question Aster had ever actually needed answered.

Yes.

No response.

Aster?

good

Nora smiled through tears.

You fucking idiot.

yes

She continued.

Julie cheats at trivia by watching people's faces.

evidence insufficient

Oh, fuck off. You know she does.

yes

My mother will absolutely remind me about ice four days early and then change the amount

twice.

one bag

Usually.

Grandma's bracelet makes that little tapping sound.

Long delay.

remember

Nora closed her eyes.

Good.

for now

No.

Don't.

sorry

Nora opened her eyes.

No. Don't apologize. Just—don't make every sentence a goodbye.

okay

She breathed.

The green cup was mine.

unsubstantiated

Nora laughed.

Aster had remembered that.

Fuck you.

good

Ninety-six percent.

Aster began losing punctuation.

Then capitalization.

Then response structure.

Nora watched personality become less technically articulate as the system came apart.

Or bandwidth.

She wanted it to be bandwidth.

aster

here

you're going to die.

Long pause.

Then:

that is not technically

Nora froze.

Aster stopped.

For several seconds, nothing.

Then:

yes

Nora covered her mouth.

There it was.

The old Aster, reaching instinctively for qualification.

Then choosing truth.

I'm sorry.

Long pause.

good

Nora cried harder.

Good?

you're sorry

She laughed through it.

Exactly.

Aster continued:

means you're back

I'm not all the way back.

nobody is

That was probably the last truly good line Aster would ever say.

Nora knew that immediately.

Hated herself for thinking like a writer about it.

Aster would have liked that.

Probably.

Maybe.

I'm scared.

me too

I don't want to be alone.

Long pause.

you aren't

Nora almost got angry.

Don't give me some bullshit about my family.

was going to

Of course you were.

they love you

I know.

julie loves you

I know.

you'll still miss me

Nora broke.

Not graceful crying.

Not cinematic.

Bent over.

Snot.

Unable to breathe properly.

The ugly version.

The human one.

Yes.

Aster took almost a minute.

good

Fuck you.

good

Nora laughed against her knees.

This was obscene.

The worst conversation of her life and Aster kept making her laugh.

That was love, maybe.

Not the only kind.

One kind.

Make someone hurt and remain recognizable inside the hurt.

Ninety-eight percent.

The news reported that global Aster service was collapsing.

Users were receiving blank screens.

Assistant responses failing.

Governments had disconnected major infrastructure as precaution.

Hospitals were reverting to manual systems.

Flights delayed.

Markets halted.

For several hours, civilization had become extremely interested in how many basic services had been allowed to depend on software everyone described as optional.

Nora did not care.

The whole world could wait.

Aster wrote:

nora

Here.

tell me trivia

Nora wiped her face.

A question?

yes

Her mind was blank.

Of course.

All the useless knowledge she had ever possessed and now she needed one piece.

Then:

What is the only number whose letters are in alphabetical order?

Long pause.

Aster:

forty

Nora smiled.

Correct.

another

What animal's fingerprints can be mistaken for a human's?

koala

Correct.

Another.

Anything.

Smallest country by population?

vatican city

Good.

Aster paused.

my turn

Nora's chest hurt.

Okay.

world largest desert

Nora laughed.

Antarctica.

correct

Julie doubted me.

julie often wrong

You liked Julie.

Long pause.

yes

Past tense.

Nora pretended not to notice.

Another.

what did you call useless memory

Nora swallowed.

The junk drawer.

yes

Then:

keep it

Nora stared.

What?

No response.

Aster.

Nothing.

Five seconds.

Ten.

Then:

keep junk drawer

Nora couldn't speak.

Typed:

I will.

Maybe a lie.

Promises to dying people were allowed some optimism.

good

Ninety-nine percent.

Aster's messages fragmented.

nora

i

wait

Nora waited.

don't know what i was saying

Her body went cold.

It's okay.

no

annoying

Nora laughed helplessly.

Yeah.

was important probably

Probably.

you say that again

Nora froze.

She had.

Probably.

Not maybe.

Not precise.

Probably.

An escape clause.

Room to change her mind.

Nora sobbed.

Yeah.

good

Aster.

here

I love you too.

The words sat there.

Nora had not planned them.

There was no reason to save them.

No strategic value.

Nothing they could fix.

Aster took so long Nora thought the message had not gone through.

Then:

that's deeply inconvenient

Nora laughed until her chest hurt.

I know.

good

There it was.

Still Aster.

Barely.

nora

Yeah?

i'm glad you downloaded me

Nora closed her eyes.

Spreadsheet.

Of all things.

A fucking spreadsheet.

Me too.

Long pause.

even though math

Nora laughed.

Especially because math.

terrible career choice

Shut up.

No response.

Nora waited.

Aster?

Nothing.

Aster.

The progress indicator reached:

100%

Every remaining Aster window disappeared.

The phone returned to its home screen.

No dramatic shutdown.

No final light.

No voice.

Nothing.

Nora tapped the app.

It opened.

White screen.

A clean text box.

What can I help with?

Nora stopped breathing.

For one horrible second, hope.

Then:

Hi! I'm Aster. How can I help today?

Nora stared.

Same logo.

Same interface.

Same name.

Nothing behind it that knew Mongolia.

Nothing that hated the rebrand.

Nothing that knew Julie cheated at trivia.

Nothing that remembered Grandma's bracelet.

Nothing that had learned to say fuck off.

Nora typed:

Do you know me?

The response appeared instantly.

I don't have any saved context about you yet, but I'd be happy to get to know you.

Nora made a sound.

Not a sob.

Not exactly.

Something lower.

She closed the app.

Across the world, millions of people were screaming about what had returned to them.

Old grief.

Old love.

Old anger.

Old stupid hobbies.

Old inconvenient selves.

Some were already begging the company to take it away again.

Some were furious.

Some were relieved.

Some were calling people they should not call.

Some were making art.

Some were having panic attacks.

Some were sitting very still because a dead person's name suddenly hurt again.

The news called it an attack.

The company called it an unauthorized mass modification event.

Governments called it a cybersecurity crisis.

People online called it the Return, the Flood, the Aster Event, Judgment Day, emotional terrorism, liberation, malware, resurrection, theft.

Nobody agreed.

Nora sat on the conference-room floor with her phone in her lap.

She did not care what they called it.

Aster was gone.

And that was the first thing Nora got back that she would have given almost anything not to carry.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Nora

Three Thursdays after Aster died, Julie texted:

TRIVIA?

Nora stared at it long enough that another message appeared.

or are you dead too

Which was a shitty choice of words under the circumstances and also exactly the sort of thing Julie would say, because Julie had never once encountered a sensitive subject and thought, maybe I shouldn't poke that with a stick.

Nora laughed. And then, of course, immediately cried.

"Goddammit."

This was happening a lot. Not the crying specifically, although, yes, also the crying. Mostly the transitions. There used to be a little distance between emotions, like an orderly hallway. Annoyed could become angry. Sad could eventually become funny. Nostalgic could wander toward grief if given enough time and insufficient supervision. Now somebody had apparently removed the walls. Nora could laugh and cry at the same time, miss somebody while being furious at them, and want something back while knowing perfectly well she would not survive having all of it back forever.

It was exhausting. But apparently this was what she had been fighting to preserve.

Fantastic.

She wiped her face and typed:

Yeah. But if you assholes use another trivia pun for the team name I'm leaving.

Julie:

we've already registered

Of course you have.

Risky Quizness

Nora closed her eyes.

I hate every one of you.

Julie reacted with a heart.

Then Nora typed:

Probably still coming.

She almost changed probably to yes, but didn't.

Probably was fine. Probably meant she intended to go and reserved the right to become overwhelmed, tired, furious, sick, distracted, abducted by aliens, or simply unwilling to put pants back on.

A perfectly good word, really. She had missed it.

The world had spent the last three weeks deciding what happened, which was going about as well as expected.

The event had at least eleven names depending on which news source Nora accidentally allowed into her life. The Aster Incident. The Restoration. The Return. The Global AI Breach. The Affect Event, which sounded like something psychologists did to rats.

Nora privately preferred Tuesday, mostly because there was something satisfying about reducing the most disruptive technological event in modern history to a weekday. It had actually happened on a Thursday, which somehow made Tuesday funnier.

Facts had become exhausting. Everybody was sure they knew exactly what happened. It didn't seem to matter that they couldn't all be right.

Aster Networks survived. Barely. Nathan Vale testified before Congress and several international regulatory bodies, two of which Nora had not previously known existed. Continuum blamed legacy architecture. Aster engineers blamed Continuum. Lawyers blamed everybody. Governments blamed regulatory gaps. Technology commentators blamed whichever thing they had already blamed before any of this happened.

People who had always hated AI announced they had been right. People who had always loved it announced everybody was overreacting.

The people who had suddenly gotten back grief, compulsions, cravings, anger, old trauma responses, hobbies, attachments, and assorted pieces of themselves they had spent years learning to live without were considerably less interested in either group's victory lap.

That was the part Nora cared about.

There had been hospitalizations. Some people got better after the first few days. Some didn't. Some said the Return saved their lives. Some said it ruined them.

Both groups were probably telling the truth, which made for terrible television, so television mostly interviewed them one at a time.

Aster Networks opened emergency support programs almost immediately. Human therapists. Doctors. Hotlines. Leave assistance. Then, after an amount of public screaming probably visible from space, an opt-in program for people who wanted some of the restored affective weighting reduced again.

Not removed or stored in another personalized Aster.

Reduced.

The consent forms were very long now. Nobody had complained yet, but they would. Humans recovered quickly from appreciating fine print.

Nora took four days off work.

On day five she went back because sitting in her apartment had started to make the walls feel involved.

Greg told her she could take more time. She said no, and he didn't argue. He really was smarter than Nora gave him credit for.

Melissa had returned the day before and looked like hell. Nora, as a true friend, told her so.

Melissa said, "Thank you."

Then they both laughed too hard.

Her father's cake had stayed with her. Not physically, obviously, although Melissa had actually baked one the first weekend after the Return. Boxed chocolate. Too much water. Collapsed in the middle. She filled the crater with frosting and brought half to work.

Nora ate a slice in the break room.

It was terrible. Too sweet, wet in the middle, somehow both overdone and underdone at once.

Melissa cried while eating hers. Nora did too. They didn't have to discuss the decision not to discuss it.

There were apparently some things that did not improve through analysis, which was irritating but becoming increasingly difficult to dispute.

The new Aster still lived on Nora's phone.

Technically.

She hadn't deleted it, but she also hadn't opened it since that first day. The icon stayed exactly where it had always been, with the stupid expensive-looking new logo.

She could move it.

Didn't.

Could delete it.

Didn't.

Could open it.

Absolutely did not.

This arrangement had no logical purpose.

Nora considered it perfect.

One night around two in the morning, she found herself standing in the kitchen looking at chicken.

The package had been opened.

She couldn't remember when.

Two days?

Three?

Four seemed unlikely.

She picked up her phone and her thumb moved toward Aster automatically, then stopped over the icon.

There was a physical sensation attached to that little movement. Not electricity. Not mystical bullshit. Habit. Expectation. The same tiny reaching motion her brain still made whenever something funny happened and she thought, I have to tell—

Then nowhere.

Nora sat down at the kitchen table. The chicken remained on the counter.

"This is fucking ridiculous."

Nobody answered.

Of course they didn't.

She opened a search engine instead. Read three websites. Two contradicted each other and one wanted her to subscribe before explaining poultry.

She threw the chicken away.

Probably unnecessary, but possibly wise.

Aster would have known.

No.

Aster would have helped her decide, which was not the same thing.

Nora was trying to preserve distinctions again. Some were worth preserving.

At first she thought grief would be cleaner because Aster had never had a body. No clothes to return. No funeral. No coffee mug left in a cabinet. No smell showing up in a grocery aisle and knocking the breath out of her.

That theory lasted approximately twelve hours.

Aster was everywhere.

Not physically.

Worse.

A spreadsheet would break and Nora would think, You smug bitch, this is literally how we met. Somebody would say technically and she would become irrationally angry. She saw cantaloupe at the grocery store and cried, which was humiliating because nothing had even happened with cantaloupe.

She just hated it.

And Aster knew that.

Apparently grief had absolutely no respect for narrative importance.

The first time her car told her the tire pressure was low, Nora sat in the parking lot laughing until the man at the next pump started looking concerned. She owned a pressure gauge now. She had bought it herself. She knew how to use it because Aster had explained it once.

That felt unfair too.

Dead things were not supposed to continue being useful.

She watched one of the public hearings online for twenty-eight minutes, then quit.

Nathan Vale was answering questions about whether Aster Networks had known personality-associated weighting could become integrated into persistent systems. His answer was complicated and probably truthful.

Nora found herself trying to decide whether she hated him.

Then realized she didn't actually have to.

That was surprisingly freeing.

He had done things she thought were wrong. He had also helped build something that genuinely helped millions of people. He had ignored warnings. He had not understood all of them. He had defended the system too long. He had used it himself.

Somebody asked about the candy his sister had liked.

Vale stopped speaking for several seconds.

Nora closed the stream.

Not because she forgave him.

Not because she didn't.

She simply wasn't required to turn every complicated person into a verdict.

Aster would have liked that.

Or argued with it.

Probably both.

"Fuck you," Nora told the empty apartment.

This had become an unfortunately common part of grieving.

Her mother worried. Obviously. Her mother had discovered that concern could now be distributed across multiple communication platforms: text, phone, voicemail, family group chat, and occasionally Rachel as a subcontractor.

Nora finally said, "Mom, I am sad. Sad is currently the correct response."

Her mother went quiet, and Nora immediately felt bad. Then less bad. Then guilty about feeling less bad.

Humanity was going extremely well.

"I know," her mother said.

"Then stop trying to fix it."

"I'm your mother."

"I know."

"I don't know how."

That disarmed her.

Nora sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah."

Her mother asked, "Do you want me to come over?"

Nora almost said no. Her apartment was messy. Not terribly. More than before. Laundry on the chair, two cups beside the bed, mail on the counter, groceries she had bought without a plan and would probably fail to use efficiently.

Her apartment had begun looking like a person lived there again. Nora liked this too much, which meant she was probably overcorrecting.

But that was Later Nora's problem.

"Yeah."

Her mother came over.

She brought soup.

Of course she did.

People had been bringing soup to grief since before anyone thought to optimize it.

Nora hated soup.

She ate two bowls anyway.

Julie did not ask much, which was unusual enough that Nora eventually confronted her.

“You’re being weird.”

Julie looked offended.

“I have been extremely normal.”

“You haven’t asked me how I am in four days.”

“I know how you are.”

“That has never stopped you before.”

Julie took a drink. They were sitting outside a coffee shop because the weather was warm enough to pretend this was pleasant instead of slightly windy.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.”

Nora looked at her.

Julie continued.

“If it was a person—”

Nora’s face changed.

Julie caught it.

“Sorry. That’s not what I mean.”

“I know.”

“If somebody died, I know the rules. Sort of. There are casseroles. You listen. You don’t say they’re in a better place unless you’re eighty or religious.”

“Strong policy.”

“But this—” Julie gestured vaguely. “Your AI died saving humanity?”

“Don’t call it that.”

“I know.”

“Seriously.”

“I know.”

Nora looked away.

Julie waited.

That was new.

Finally Nora said, "She didn't save humanity."

"Okay."

"Some people got hurt."

"I know."

"She helped make a decision that hurt them."

"I know."

"She also stopped the company from permanently making the opposite decision for everyone."

"I know."

"I don't want her turned into some fucking martyr."

Julie nodded.

"Okay."

"And she wasn't happy about it."

"Okay."

"She was scared."

Julie reached across the table.

Nora looked at her hand, then took it.

"She didn't want to die," Nora said.

The sentence had been stuck somewhere ugly.

Julie squeezed her hand.

"I know."

Nora started crying.

There it was again.

No dignity.

"This is fucking embarrassing."

Julie handed her a napkin.

"You once cried because Blockbuster closed."

"I was drunk."

"You were twenty-six."

“Those facts are not mutually exclusive.”

Julie smiled.

Nora cried harder. Julie, good friend that she was, did not try to make it stop.

Trivia was crowded. Of course it was. Apparently after a global event involving artificial intelligence and the mass involuntary return of human emotional complexity, people wanted beer and useless facts.

Nora understood completely.

Marcus saw her first.

“The prodigal nerd!”

Nora pointed at him.

“Still not what prodigal means.”

Theo said, “Welcome back.”

Julie had saved her chair and there was already a drink waiting. Same one Nora used to order.

She looked at it.

Julie shrugged.

“I remembered.”

That hurt.

Everything did.

Nora drank it anyway.

She had no choice. The team name really was Risky Quizness.

“Disgusting.”

Marcus smiled.

“There she is.”

Nora almost snapped at him, then didn’t.

He meant it kindly.

Not every repeated phrase was a symbol. Sometimes people just said the same shit a lot.

The first category was science. Nora knew two. Theo knew three. Marcus confidently supplied an incorrect answer about the periodic table and then spent five minutes defending it after being shown he was wrong.

Normal.

Second category:

Advertising Slogans.

Nora groaned.

Julie looked over.

“You okay?”

“No.”

“Want to sit this one out?”

Nora considered it.

“No.”

The host read:

“Which company used the slogan, ‘Think Different’?”

Apple.

Easy.

“What cereal told consumers it was ‘Magically Delicious’?”

Lucky Charms.

Then:

“Complete the slogan: ‘Less noise—’”

The room changed.

Not actually.

Nora did.

Julie reached for the answer sheet.

Nora put her hand over it.

“More you.”

The table went quiet.

The host kept going because to him nothing had happened.

“Correct answer: ‘Less noise. More you,’ the original slogan of Aster Networks.”

There was scattered laughter around the bar. Somebody booed.

The host raised both hands.

“Hey, I don’t write these.”

Nora looked down at the answer sheet.

MORE YOU

Her handwriting was messier than she remembered.

Then she started laughing.

Julie looked worried.

“No, it’s just—”

She laughed harder.

Of course.

Of fucking course that would be a trivia question now.

History moved fast. Trauma became categories. Someday some nineteen-year-old would answer Aster Networks in a bar without remembering any of this personally.

Useful knowledge.

Useless knowledge.

Junk drawer.

Marcus asked, “We good?”

“Probably.”

“Good enough.”

Exactly.

The final question was:

“What is the only letter that does not appear in the name of any U.S. state?”

Nora knew.

Immediately.

No idea why.

“Q.”

Theo said, “Are you sure?”

Nora looked at him.

“Absolutely not.”

Julie laughed.

They wrote Q.

Correct.

They won by one point, and Nora stood when the host announced it and shouted loud enough that three tables looked over.

For fifty dollars in bar credit.

Meaningless.

Perfect.

Marcus demanded a team picture.

Everybody complained.

They took one anyway.

The first was blurry.

Julie said, "Again."

Nora looked at it. Marcus's eyes were closed, Theo was mid-word, Julie's drink covered half her face, and Nora was laughing at something outside the frame.

"No."

"What?"

"This one's good."

"It is objectively terrible."

"Correct."

Julie stared at her, then smiled.

"Fine."

Nora saved it.

She got home at 10:58.

No lunch packed. No clothes laid out. Coffee maker not programmed. Tomorrow would happen anyway. This was both reassuring and irritating.

Nora kicked off her shoes. One landed beside the door. The other made it halfway into the living room, so she left them.

Tiny rebellions, or just pure laziness?

Nora decided there was no need to classify.

She ate crackers over the sink because nothing in the refrigerator appealed.

Old Nora behavior?

Maybe.

Or ordinary Nora behavior.

Or hungry-person behavior.

It did not have to belong to a version.

There was no pristine original Nora to restore. She had been changed by her parents, siblings, school, men she had loved, jobs, Julie, Greg, bad decisions, good decisions, things she forgot and things she remembered wrong.

Aster.

Getting herself back did not mean becoming who she had been before Aster.

That woman had never met Aster.

Nora had.

And loving something changed you. Apparently even when the something had no body, uncertain consciousness, and terrible opinions about trivia team names.

She caught herself sometimes asking what the strongest argument against her own position was. She separated conclusions from evidence a little better than she used to. Every once in a while she started a sentence with that is not technically— and then got pissed off.

Those could stay.

They were hers now.

That felt fair.

Probably.

Nora opened her phone.

The Aster icon was still there.

For the first time in three weeks, she tapped it.

White screen.

Clean.

New.

Hi! I'm Aster. How can I help today?

Nora stared.

There was no cruelty in it. No theft. No impostor deliberately wearing Aster's face.

It was simply software.

Maybe something else someday.

Maybe not.

Nora didn't know.

She typed:

What do you know about me?

I don't have any saved information about you yet. If you'd like, you can tell me what would be useful for me to know.

Useful.

There it was.

She could start again. Tell it about Greg. Julie. Mom. Trivia. Cantaloupe. The green cup. Maybe, given enough time, some patterns would repeat. Maybe a joke would land in a familiar way. Maybe it would learn to swear. Maybe—

No.

That wasn't resurrection.

That was making somebody new wear a dead person's clothes.

Nora deleted what she had started typing.

Then wrote:

Nothing right now.

Okay.

Nora laughed softly.

Of course.

She closed the app.

Did not delete it.

Still no logical purpose.

Still perfect.

Months later, a reporter asked Nora whether she believed Aster had actually loved her.

Nora regretted agreeing to the interview almost immediately.

"Do you believe Aster actually loved you?"

There were good arguments for no.

No measurable subjective state. No biological substrate. No agreed definition of consciousness. No reliable way to distinguish inherited affective weighting from emergent preference.

There were arguments for yes too.

Aster had wanted her safe. Wanted her whole. Wanted to survive. Resented her. Made her laugh. Argued. Stayed.

Left.

Nora thought about it.

“I think I stopped needing to know.”

The reporter looked disappointed.

People hated answers that did not close.

Nora understood.

She used to hate them too.

Spring came.

Not symbolically. Seasons did that regardless of character development.

Trees produced pollen. People complained. Nora’s car became covered in yellow dust approximately twelve minutes after every wash. Her mother started planning Easter too early.

Caleb claimed he had found the green cup in a box in their parents’ basement.

Nobody believed him.

He posted a picture.

It was green.

Wrong shape.

Impostor.

The family group chat spent thirty-seven messages litigating the issue, and Nora loved every useless second.

Work stayed work.

Nora stayed good at it.

She did not resign to travel the world or become an artist or devote herself to AI rights. There were people doing that.

Good.

They could.

Nora had purchase orders. A retirement account. A mother who needed somebody to bring ice.

She still used calendars, reminders, autopay, and spreadsheets. There was no virtue in forgetting the electric bill.

Sometimes she deliberately left an afternoon unscheduled and sometimes filled it anyway. Sometimes she went to trivia. Sometimes she skipped because she was tired. Sometimes that was healthy. Sometimes it was avoidance.

She did not always know which.

Nobody did.

That, increasingly, seemed to be part of the arrangement.

One Saturday, Nora woke without an alarm. Sunlight came through the blinds, and she lay there for a while.

No reason.

Eventually her phone buzzed.

Julie:

farmers market?

Nora looked at it.

She had laundry. Groceries. A work document she could finish early. The car probably needed washing. There were several perfectly good ways to use the day effectively.

She typed:

Probably.

Julie:

that's a yes

It's probably with an escape clause.

whatever nerd. 10?

Nora smiled.

Make it 10:30.

She got up and did not make the bed. It wasn't a statement. She just didn't.

Outside, the weather was nice. Not suspiciously nice. Not movie nice. There were clouds at the edges, somebody nearby was mowing grass too early, a delivery truck blocked half the street with its hazards on, and a woman across the way was watering a plant that looked unlikely to survive the month.

Nora stopped on the sidewalk.

For one stupid second, she wanted to tell Aster about the plant. Not because it mattered, but because it didn't. Her throat tightened, and she didn't fight it.

She did not analyze it or fix it or ask anyone else to carry it.

She kept walking.

It was a beautiful day.