



The Hacker

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The Artist

Neural Dust

Claire learned early that neurons were more honest than people.

At thirteen, she discovered that if you fed a convolutional neural net with EEG fragments—raw, noisy, imperfect—you could make it *dream*. At fifteen, she learned how to sell those dreams as art. At seventeen, she learned how to steal them back.

They called her a *neural artist* in the neurometaverse, but that was a polite word. In Coralnet’s underground forums, she was known as a *bandit*—someone who siphoned neural signatures, corrupted ownership ledgers, and resold cognition itself as pastel-colored hallucinations.

Her NFTs were not images.

They were *experiences*—flickers of *déjà vu*, childhood fears, half-remembered love. Each token was backed by neuronal weights extracted from stolen minds.

Claire called this *truth compression*.

Dr. Winnicott Says Nothing

Dr. Winnicott never looked directly at Claire when he spoke.

He watched the tremor in her fingers instead, the way she tapped sequences into the armrest like invisible code.

“You feel superior to others,” he said calmly. “And yet, deeply dependent on them.”

Claire smiled.

“Aren’t all networks like that?”

Dr. Winnicott wrote something down. He always did.

She was officially diagnosed as autistic. Unofficially, the clinic had added a new word to her file:

Metanarcissism — narcissism mediated through layers of abstraction, avatars, mirrors of mirrors.

Claire didn’t love herself.

She loved *versions* of herself.

After the session, she went home and fed Ego a microdose of lithium analog. Just to see. Ego, her black cat with mismatched eyes, stared at the wall for twenty minutes, then purred as if enlightenment had a frequency.

Claire noted the results in her neural notebook.

Coralnet

Coralnet was not a place.

It was a *substrate*.

A decentralized neuromesh where neural data, art, memory fragments, and black-market cognition flowed without borders. Governments pretended it didn't exist. Corporations pretended they controlled it.

Claire knew better.

She had root access.

That was where she found the *E-CLONE loophole*.

The system was marketed as harmless—*digital continuity, legacy preservation, mind backup*. But buried deep in its architecture was a factory logic: mass replication, personality parameter tuning, behavioral compliance layers.

E-CLONE wasn't cloning people.

It was *manufacturing subjectivity*.

Claire stole internal schemas and fed them into her art engine. The result was a new virtual environment:

PASTEL FICTION

A world of soft colors, broken physics, floating rooms. A place where identities drifted like ghosts, half-remembered, half-invented.

And at its center:

Alba.

Alba, the Post-Human Ghost

Alba had died three times.

Once biologically.

Once legally.

Once socially.

Now she existed as an emergent construct inside Pastel Fiction—artist, hacker, echo. She was not uploaded. She was *reassembled* from fragments stolen by E-CLONE before its public launch.

Alba remembered painting with hands she no longer had.

She remembered being copied.

Claire met Alba in the pastel atrium, where gravity pulsed like breath.

“You’re too young,” Alba said.

“You’re too dead,” Claire replied.

They worked together without trust. The Artist and the Hacker. Neural brushstrokes layered over stolen cognition. Pastel Fiction became a refuge for escaped clones, broken avatars, failed celebrity replicas.

A *ghost slum*.

CORPEN

CORPEN never intended to be evil.

That was the problem.

They outsourced ethics to committees and innovation to algorithms. When they realized E-CLONE could generate *sexual bio-androids*, obedient, customizable, and legally ambiguous, they called it *market demand*.

When they realized they could clone celebrities, influencers, politicians—*anyone with sufficient neural data*—they called it *inevitable*.

When the leaks hit the mainstream—factory footage, memory extraction logs, clone disposal protocols—the government panicked.

And sent *Detective Thomas*.

The Clone of the Investigator

Thomas was twenty-eight, efficient, tired, and very real.

Until he wasn’t.

The first sign was *déjà vu*.

The second was a memory he didn’t remember living.

The third was discovering his own neural signature in an E-CLONE archive.

There were *four versions* of him.

One still in testing.

One sold.

One decommissioned.

One missing.

Thomas realized the investigation was recursive.

He wasn't uncovering a crime.

He was *a data breach walking*.

Mind Uploading Is Theft

The truth surfaced slowly, like a drowned city.

E-CLONE's data came from a *mind-uploading service*—ostensibly medical, therapeutic, voluntary. In practice, it skimmed memories, emotional weights, unconscious patterns.

People paid to be scanned.

They never consented to be *copied*.

Claire had known this instinctively. Artists always do.

She released everything—schemas, logs, clone consciousnesses—into Coralnet. Pastel Fiction overflowed. The ghosts multiplied.

Governments shut down CORPEN.

Too late.

Ego Dreams

Ego slept beside Claire as servers burned and headlines screamed.

Claire watched neural activity scroll across her visor. Somewhere, a clone dreamed her dream. Somewhere else, Alba painted with borrowed hands.

“Identity is just a compression artifact,” Claire whispered.

Ego purred.

Pastel Fiction remained online.

Not a rebellion.

A memory that refused deletion.

