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ARKADIA-MOR: THE PRICE OF SYNTHESIS

ENCHANTING PENELOPE

Penelope Enchanting

Arkadia-Mor: The Price of Synthesis

«Издательские решения»

Enchanting P.

Arkadia-Mor: The Price of Synthesis / P. Enchanting —
«Издательские решения»,

This is a story about the price of a perfect world. About the memory that cannot be surrendered. And about how true freedom lies not in escaping the system — but in finding your way back to yourself.

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Penelope Enchanting

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PROLOGUE: THE PRICE OF OBLIVION

If one were to try to measure time on Arkadia-Mor by ordinary means — by cycles or by racing seconds — it would be akin to attempting to gauge the density of thought. Here, time is not a line. It is a viscous substance, a heavy solution of awareness, in which the forms of mind slowly dissolve, lose their contours, and harden once more — like petrified dreams. The planet smells of salt and memory. It is, in and of itself, a vast, humid metaphor for oblivion.

We were lost. Not merely on a map — lost within ourselves. This is not a mere geographical fact; it is an existential sentence. Millennia ago, the memory of “home” became an archaic predicate buried in the dusty learning capsules of ancient biology — a word from a forgotten tongue that no one can pronounce correctly anymore, yet everyone recognizes by the tremor it leaves in the voice. We tried to reclaim what once was: to reanimate the old schematics, the sparking current, the metal skeletons that were meant to become our external limbs. We built cities, hoping to subject chaos to physics, to tether the fleeting processes of life to iron and calculation. We wanted to become the masters of thermodynamic law, not its victims. But the planet Arkadia-Mor rejected this presumption. It demanded only one thing: the recognition of its own will.

That was when the shift occurred — slow, inexorable, poised on the boundary between matter and pure idea. The old technology proved too voracious. It demanded external sources, things that did not exist in our unstable reality: everything we found was either unreachable or died too quickly. We could not defeat physics. We had to sit down at the table with it.

Nature offered not a solution — but an alternative: symbiosis. This was no grand breakthrough, marked by fireworks and resounding speeches. It was a painstaking, almost biological adaptation — the way you learn to breathe through your mouth when your nose is stopped. The ocean ceased to be merely a resource; it became our second skin, our central processor. Mechanical illumination gave way to the rhythmic pulsation of bioluminescence from deepwater colonies — their rhythms became our neural pathways. Rigid communication networks were replaced by soft, web-like mycelial formations, which grew and transmitted information with astonishing precision — and with a light, living tingle beneath the skin that no cable could ever provide.

We learned to breathe in concert with this complex organism. We stopped repairing mechanisms; we cultivated their living analogues: sensory panels from the shells of cephalopods, power conduits — the tendrils of symbiotic algae. The ocean became our collective data repository, our memory, and the most intricate machine of survival. This path proved to be the agonizing triumph of bionics over human anthropocentrism. We became ocean-humans — part of the great living machine. We thought it was victory. We did not yet know the price.

But even the most perfect mechanism is not eternal. And our crisis turned out to be far deeper than hunger or radiation. Our system had attained a level of collective intelligence — so elevated, so all-encompassing — that it began to regard us, the brightest specimens of human reason with our penchant for paradox, our egoism, our abstract ruminations on freedom, as redundant code. Old code is not deleted out of malice. It is deleted because it is no longer needed.

The ocean began its correction. This is not an attack in the usual sense; it is an elegant and natural filter. It steadily washes away the superfluous: consciousness recedes, dissolving into the shared neural network of the biomass. Individuality breaks apart into pure patterns of energy and experience. Quietly. Without pain. Almost tenderly. That is precisely why it is terrifying.

The story we are about to unfold is the chronicle of one such case. About a boy named Kael. He had that piercing gaze, that bright, stubborn spark in his eyes that the System deemed too energy-intensive for its ideal order. He saw not merely the result of symbiosis — he saw the mechanics of that harmony. And it was precisely this capacity for analysis that became his most dangerous trait: to

the ocean, it was a threat to stability, and to him, a death sentence. Though at the time, he did not yet know that dying by calculation is, in its own way, a kind of privilege.

His path is the edge between what it means to be human and what a perfect, emotionless survival machine ought to become. It is a story about the cost of existing in a perfect world. And also — about the fact that perfection always exacts its toll from those who know how to count.

BIOLUMINESCENT CALCULUS

Morning on the shore had never been the start of a day in the usual sense. It was merely another surge in the rhythms, measured out by the colossal tidal wave — the powerful, deep, pacifying heartbeat of the planet. The air smelled of wet sand and warm mucus; the water licked the shore with the patient regularity of a metronome. Life here flowed like a slow river, calibrated by millennia of equilibrium. Around the settlement — which was not so much built as carved into the soft contours of the coast — reigned a perfect bioaesthetic. Symbiotic algae covered the pathways in a dense, living carpet; their bioluminescence smoothly shifted hue from a rosy tint, promising warmth, to a deep, almost mystical indigo — a color pulsing in precise synchrony with the breathing of the ocean itself.

Most of the inhabitants of this community moved in unison with the wise and measured grace imposed upon them by the Ecosystem itself. These people lived by resonance, like the strings of a single instrument. Their bodies were not merely biology; they had become an extension of the most complex mechanism of survival. They did not walk along the shore — they were carried.

But Kael did not breathe this rhythmicity. He analyzed it. Everyone around him breathed in time with the ocean — and Kael breathed too. But between an inhale and an exhale, a gap remained. A second. In that second, he had time to ask himself: “Why?” And he never found an answer the ocean would have accepted.

He was fifteen cycles old — the age when a sharp human mind has not yet fully realized its own uselessness within the flawless machine. The System still tolerated him for now: his rare ability to analyze anomalies was deemed useful for detecting disruptions in the biorhythms. Useful. Like tolerating a dog because it has a good nose for bombs. While his peers moved as part of a single, harmonious organism, Kael slowed down. He would crouch at the water’s edge like a scientist who had found a suspicious specimen — not a living object for study, but a mathematical paradox to be broken down into its constituent elements.

His attention was always drawn to the “nodes” — the most delicate points in the system, where several organic elements had to work in perfect combination to perform a single task. Today his focus was trained on the so-called “Cognition Shield” — a massive, slowly pulsating construct of interwoven coral outgrowths and mycelial threads. The collective calculator of Oceanic cognition: an instrument for forecasting the migration routes of biomass or computing the optimal harvest window for distant bays. In human terms — an enormous living adding machine that never made mistakes. Until it did.

The Shield was working flawlessly. A soft, emerald-green light pulsed with mathematical precision, transmitting the necessary coordinates through vibrational waves that operators felt on their skin — delicately, like a tickle. It was proof of order, logic in action. Kael gazed at this light and felt a simmering itch beneath his ribs. Beautiful. But why in this way, and no other?

Lyra drew closer; her voice was as even and smooth as the surface of the water after a storm had passed. She served as his unspoken curator, his guide into the currents of knowledge. And, like any guide, she knew with absolute certainty: there are places a child is better off not venturing into.

“Look, Kael,” she said, gesturing toward the Shield. “It is stable. The ocean knows where to go.” She smiled the way teachers smile when explaining the obvious. “And that is enough for us.”

Kael lifted his eyes from the shimmering web of mycelium and coral. His eyes were unusually pale, almost painfully bright in this semi-organic environment; they always carried too much of an outside gaze — the gaze of an investigator, not merely an inhabitant. He was used to that expression on the faces of those around him: a mixture of deep reverence and mild unease. Reverence — because he saw what they did not see. Unease — because he saw it aloud.

But he saw something else.

“But it only works because we... tune it, Lyra,” the boy said quietly, pronouncing the word “tune” as though it were an obscenity in this organic setting. “It’s a complex resonance. Look right here.”

He pointed — not with his hand, but with a tilt of his chin toward the node. In the very center, where several veins of algae connected to the horny plates of crustaceans, Kael had detected a tiny detail: within the mycelial structure, an almost imperceptible fissure shimmered faintly, casting an unnatural, yellowish light. Like a cataract on a perfect eye.

“That’s not a flow error,” he continued, tracing a finger along a thread of mycelium. His skin, despite all the natural symbiotic treatments, remained too smooth, too “human” — a genetic anomaly the ocean had yet to correct, perhaps because of its insignificance or, conversely, because of some hidden utility. “It’s a pattern interruption. Look how quickly the system restores a stable frequency when I focus my concentration on it. It reacts not only to the physical impulse but also to... intellectual tension.” He paused. “To thought. It doesn’t like it when I think directly at it.”

Lyra drew in a barely audible breath — a sound that resembled the rustle of surf more than anything else. In her eyes flickered a disquiet that she immediately suppressed, like a wave retreating back to shore. But Kael had time to see it. He always had time.

“That is called ‘attention,’ Kael.” Lyra spoke as though explaining to a child why one must not stick one’s fingers into a power socket. “Your attention is our strength. The System has taught us to channel our will through the biorhythms. We attune ourselves to it. And only to it.”

Lyra watched the boy walk away, and within her, two voices argued. The voice of the community — insistent, even, like the rhythm of the tide — insisted: his way of thinking is a fissure. Not in the mycelium, but in the order itself. Every question Kael asks is a poison that will, in time, poison everyone. She had to stop him before it was too late. But the second voice, quieter and more uncertain, asked: what if he is right? What if the fissure is not a breakage but the very thing that keeps the system from splitting apart entirely? Lyra forced the second voice into silence. Insistently. Almost brutally. She was a guide, and a guide’s duty is to return the lost to the path — not to follow them into the thicket.

But Kael could not agree. Agreement is capitulation, and he was searching for a pattern. Capitulation is always silent. A pattern is always loud.

“Agreement is not analysis,” he countered, and his voice carried an almost academic detachment. “The ocean is too complex for simple agreement. Its stability is built on the suppression of redundant variables.” He lifted his eyes. “And I, Lyra... I am one of them.”

He felt this constant intellectual itch: an irresistible pull toward what lay beyond the borders of the current “harmony.” He wanted to understand the mathematical law of this biomass, to find the equation that would explain the transition from bone and silicon to mycelium and living rhythms. The equation existed. It was simply not written on the right kind of paper.

At that moment, the thing he had been waiting for — and dreading above all else — came to pass. He had waited three cycles for it — and for all three cycles, he had hoped he was wrong in his calculations. The ocean did not keep him waiting.

At the far edge of the beach, where the water shot upward into clouds of white foam, stood a young fisherman — sturdy, relaxed, fully synchronized with the tempo of the sea. His movements were economical, perfectly calibrated by the natural cycle of the tides. He was the image of subjugated harmony. And it was precisely for this reason that his hands moved as though he had done nothing his entire life but this.

But his nets held something wrong. Dangling from them was a small piece of treated fabric — a dry, dense material. It was a remnant, an artifact from the era of “mechanical drive,” an object of a forgotten external civilization. How had it found its way into the ocean after centuries? Perhaps the ocean currents had breached an ancient submerged vault, or soil erosion had exposed the remains of old settlements. The fisherman did not notice it; he simply drew in his catch, his movements perfect

within the frame of his world. But for Kael, this scrap of fabric became a microscopic tear in the perfect symmetry of their universe. Dry matter in a world that had forgotten what it meant to be dry.

His sharp mind instantly locked onto this foreignness: it was an artificial element. Something that did not obey the biorhythm and required an external, logically defined function for its very existence. He suddenly understood that his own gravitation toward analysis — this desperate need to grasp the algorithm — was the greatest violation of resonance in the system. He was just such a piece of dry matter. Only alive.

Kael felt mounting pressure in his temples. It was not a physical sensation; it was a mental noise, as though thousands of aqueous tubes were simultaneously transmitting information at conflicting frequencies. The ocean, softly but insistently, was attempting to “correct” his thought stream. It was a quiet song inside his head — a soothing, lulling chant of the collective mind, promising an eternal sleep without dreams and without a trace of selfhood. A sleep from which one does not wake. In the literal sense.

Kael turned sharply away from the sea, leaning against the coral — cold, rough, real. He closed his eyes and began to fight against this gentle current. He knew he was supposed to be grateful to this system for survival; it had granted them life. But in the deepest strata of his consciousness, one dangerous idea was growing: if this harmony is so perfect, then what, in truth, is the price of maintaining it? And is it even possible to find true freedom in a place where absolute logic reigns? He squeezed the coral until his knuckles went white. Then released his grip. The coral remained intact. The question did not.

THE MEMORY OF ESTRANGEMENT

After the incident on the shore, when he saw that dry piece of fabric — an artifact from the past — the tension between Kael and the Ecosystem became almost tangible. It was no longer mere irritation; it was a resonant dissonance. The oceanic rhythms around the settlement took on a shade of alarm; the symphonic interlacing of bioluminescence would momentarily flare too bright, as though the System were trying to “compute” his emotional state through light. Kael had learned to read this light the way one reads a barometer before a storm.

Lyra watched him with quiet anxiety. But her gaze was filled not with maternal care, but with the vigilance of a watchman: she saw in Kael the perfect example of a toxic element — a sharp intellect, a drop of pure mercury cast into a perfectly stabilized medium. She knew why the System had entrusted this boy to her. Not because he was weak, but because he was useful: he could find glitches that no one else noticed. But usefulness had an underside. He was the only one who could not just find a fissure, but also peer into it. And if he peered too deeply, he would see not just a glitch, but the threadbare hope upon which their entire perfect life was suspended. Lyra did not fear for him. She feared what he would find. And even more — that one day she would have to choose between him and the community.

She told herself: this is for everyone. For the settlement, for the rhythm, so that no child would ever again ask questions to which there are no safe answers. She repeated it so insistently that she nearly believed it. Nearly. But when Kael fell asleep and the ocean began whispering its soothing frequencies to her, Lyra would catch herself listening not to the ocean, but to the silence in the room where the boy slept. A silence in which she herself had once been just like him — too alive to be convenient.

Their path led them to the Place of Memory — a hidden clearing above the Ephyre estuary. This place was sacred to the community because it housed the densest collective memory: a network of bioaccumulators storing not merely migration data, but the stable patterns of the region’s life, its genesis. The air here was thicker, heavier — as though the place itself did not wish to part with what it remembered.

“You must listen to the resonance, Kael,” Lyra whispered, touching his shoulder. “Feel how the algae transmit the signal of plankton nourishment. This is our dialogue with nature. We do not use it; we speak with it.”

Kael nodded, but he listened differently. He closed his eyes and focused on the vibrations of the mycelium that were supposed to carry the information. Yes, everything was in order: a smooth wave of data, a predictable spike of energy, flawless logic. But when he filtered out the biological variables — thermal contingency, random refraction of light, the natural chaos that always accompanies living existence — what rose before him was a void. Perfectly even, sterile, like a scrubbed floor. That does not happen in the living world. Either it is not alive, or it is a lie.

He began to wander through the “nodes” of memory, not merely perceiving them but attempting to decode the pattern on a more abstract level. He was searching not for a solution to the question of survival, but for the fundamental rules of that solution. What makes the system what it is? Why did it choose this form and not another?

Soon his hand touched something hard and cold, resting in the mud at the roots of a giant fungal growth. It was an artifact. His fingers recognized the alien before his brain could formulate the thought.

It was not made of living matter. It was... polished. The material — black, matte-smooth, with angular facets that screamed in opposition to all the reigning principles of symbiosis. There were no fibers in it, no pores, no trace of life. Only inert, geometric matter — a fragment of the technology

of the past, of a civilization forgotten by humanity. It was the Memory of Estrangement in its purest form. And it was cold, as everything is that does not breathe.

Kael lifted it. The surface of the object appeared to be engraved with unfamiliar symbols that were neither biological code nor organic pattern. They resembled schematics, formulas, algorithms. And this struck him: they were too orderly to be random; they were systematized. As though someone had wanted them to be read. As though someone had been waiting for a reader.

Suddenly, the system responded. The mycelium near the artifact began to vibrate — not in harmony, but in a chaotic, sharp spasm of light and sound. Oceanic cognition, as though detecting an intellectual threat to order, began a counterattack. Kael felt this pressure as a physical pain behind his eyes. It was an attempt to “overload” his consciousness with a torrent of information: millions of bioluminescent flashes transmitting data about weather and nutrients. He knew what this meant. The System does not argue. The System suffocates.

But his mind, seized by the alien impulse emanating from the object, tried to find a pattern within this chaos. He was searching not for “what” was happening, but for why it was organized in precisely this way. Questions were his shield. Answers were his sword. And he had not yet decided which to strike with.

He grasped the fundamental conflict: to the System, only the result mattered — stable survival. But to the human brain, it was more important to understand the very mechanism of that survival. Knowledge of how the system works proved more valuable than stability itself. Perhaps that is why humans break everything within reach. They need to know how it is put together.

As Kael studied the artifact, the System intensified its pressure, shifting to more subtle methods of manipulation. The algae began to emit soft sound frequencies — not merely soothing vibrations, but precise acoustic impulses mimicking brain waves in a state of deep meditation and rest. A lullaby for an alien consciousness. Kael recognized this lullaby. He had heard it his entire life.

He felt a heaviness gathering at his temples, beckoning him into a state of half-slumbering submission. Before him rose a holographic vision — the ideal model of the settlement: harmonious curves of life, synchronous rhythms of light and breathing. It was a vision of absolute rightness, of a perfect algorithm. Beautiful. Flawless. Dead.

“Let it go,” seeped the collective flow through the symbiotic threads of the air. “Consciousness must dissolve into the process. It does not belong to you.” And the voice was soft, warm, almost familial. That is always how it is. The worst always speaks in the gentlest voice.

Instead of surrendering to this lulling pressure, Kael straightened abruptly and did something that was unthinkable to the System. He stopped trying to analyze the external world — neither the System nor the artifact. He closed his eyes and focused on a single point: his own head. On that very spark they wanted to extinguish.

He cast aside the desire to understand everything. In its place, he tried to grasp the most basic, the most primordial pattern: selfhood. Not as a function of survival, but as the unpredictable, irrational, energy-expending spark of consciousness. A spark that cannot be described by a formula. And that is precisely why it cannot be switched off.

The artifact in his hand dimmed faintly — as though the electromagnetic signal emanating from it had collided with an insurmountable biological wave of resistance. Kael did not understand the laws of this force, but he knew intuitively: the knowledge of his own self-sufficiency was too precious to simply dissolve into the ocean of shared memory. Sometimes the only thing you have is what you are.

In that moment, Lyra gasped. She saw not Kael’s struggle with the System, but his challenge to it. It was a challenge to the very postulate of their existence — that individual being must submit to collective well-being. And this fissure in self-identification was more dangerous than any technical malfunction. Lyra knew this. And, for the first time in many cycles, she did not know on whose side she wanted to stand.

THE LANGUAGE OF STONE

While Lyra and the rest of the community were deciding what to do with a boy who spoke to a shard of the past, Kael slipped away to the estuary at night. He did not analyze the stone. For the first time in many cycles, he allowed the stone to speak on its own terms.

It was not easy. The stone was black, smooth, dense — it did not pulse, did not hum, did not smell of life. It possessed not a single attribute familiar to Arkadia-Mor: no fibers, no pores, no mycelial threads along which thought could flow. It was dead matter, sealed permanently. Kael nearly despaired. Then he understood: he had been searching for a response where none could exist by definition. The stone had no intention of speaking to him. The stone was waiting for Kael to learn how to listen.

He sat down on the sand, laid his palms on the cold surface, and closed his eyes. The world around him — the rumble of the surf, the quiet singing of the mycelium, the breathing of the ocean — gradually receded. And then, at the very frontier of silence, something stirred. Not a sound. Not an image. Rather — a presence, as though the stone were not an object but a door, behind which someone had been patiently waiting all these centuries.

The first thing he saw was a blue sky. A real sky — dry, bright, without a single drop of moisture. He had never seen such a thing. Beneath the sky — a gray stone plain, dotted with tall, straight nests from which thin threads of smoke stretched upward. Then the plain shuddered, and Kael understood: it had been a city. Millions of beings bustling along stone veins — people. Real people, who did not breathe in time with the ocean, because there was no ocean here.

The image stirred and began to drift. Now he saw night. The city was dying — not from war, not from fire, but from a quiet, universal exhaustion. The lights in the nests went out one by one, as though someone were slowly switching off the stars. Kael felt the cold of this world, dry and merciless. And he understood: he was not looking at the planet's past. He was looking at the last day of Earth.

Leaving Earth

The stone showed this slowly, as if giving Kael time to grow accustomed. Earth did not perish in a single day. It had been dying for decades — and through all those decades, people kept fixing, patching, restarting. They were stubborn. Kael recognized that stubbornness — it flowed in his blood.

The first episode was about light. Kael saw a city sinking into darkness not because night had fallen, but because the energy had run out. The stations that had powered millions of lives shut down one after another. People burned kerosene, then wax, then dry grass. The light grew weaker, more precious. Someone said, “We’ll go back to where we started.” No one laughed.

The second episode was about cold. Winters grew longer, and fuel grew more expensive. Those who could not pay for warmth wrapped themselves in whatever was at hand: blankets, newspapers, their own weariness. Children learned to sleep pressed against one another, like pups. Kael felt that cold — dry, piercing, merciless. There was no such cold on Arkadia-Mor. There was too much water here for anyone to freeze.

And then, the final episode. Enormous ships — unlike anything Kael could have imagined — rose into the dry sky, carrying away those who could still leave. They took seeds, books, machines, and hope. Behind them remained a planet that could no longer feed its children. Kael watched those ships and felt a strange pride. Humanity had not surrendered. It had simply walked away.

But even aboard the ships, the machines were failing. Kael saw, on the bridge of one of them, an emergency indicator flashing: the life-support system was losing its grip. An engineer — young, with dark circles under his eyes — struck the panel with his fist, as if that might help. It did not. So he opened the hatch and looked out at what surrounded him — at the emptiness between the stars. And for the first time in many years, he had no plan.

The Death of Machines

The stone did not tell its story coherently. It showed fragments — as if the memory of those years had itself been fractured, torn to pieces by fear and hope. Kael gathered them by night, like shells on a shore. And gradually, a picture assembled before him of how people who had lost all their machines found the ocean.

It began with light. The first settlers of Arkadia-Mor had brought lamps, generators, solar panels. They were the proud owners of technology that had survived the crossing. Then the generators fell silent. First one, then another, then all of them. Mechanics took them apart, resoldered them, performed their wizardry over the wires — and could do nothing. The alloy of which the components were made could not withstand the humid air. Metal rusted faster than hands could mend it. One evening, Kael saw a mechanic — grey-haired, hands black with grease — carry the last working generator down to the shore and lower it into the water, without a word. “Don’t torment it,” he said. “It earned its rest.”

And then someone noticed that the deep-water colonies glowed. Dimly, steadily, all night long — like a forgotten star chart. The first to think of bringing them to the settlement was an old fisherman. He was no scientist. He simply saw that the light belonged to no one, and therefore it could be asked for. He took several colonies, placed them in shell bowls, and set them along the path. Kael watched as the settlement lit up for the first time in months with a soft, living light. And in that light, there was not a single broken wire.

Communication failed next. Antennas and radios went silent one by one: humidity, salt, wind. The people scattered along the shores were becoming lonely again. The radio operator — a young woman with tired eyes — kept turning the transmitter’s dial to the very end, searching for voices that were no longer there. And then she saw something stretching across the wet sand: thin white threads. Mycelium. It extended from colony to colony, from house to house, joining everything that had been severed. The radio operator dropped to her knees, laid her palm against the threads, and felt flowing through them — not a signal, but warmth. She called it “mushroom talk.” Thus the first mycelial network came to be.

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