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Neon Margin

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Introduction

Every city writes its own night. Ours prefers a palette of electric violets and pharmacy greens, light bleeding down rain-wet facades until the streets look like they're dreaming in high-definition. Above the crosshatched alleys, adverts braid themselves into the sky, whispering futures for rent, feelings on subscription, and memories by the gram. In a place like this, truth is not an absolute—it's a trade. We buy it, we sell it, and sometimes we steal it back.

Neon Margin begins with a job: a memory thief hired to break into a vault that eats people's pasts and sells them as luxury. The twist is the target. She's not there to filch a CEO's affair or a dissident's last rallying cry. She's hired to steal herself—her own erased childhood, classified and collateralized by a corporation that believes identity is just another asset class. It's a simple proposition with impossible edges: when the prize is your origin, what does success even look like?

This is a heist, yes—there will be blueprints etched in invisible ink, elevators that lie, and doors that open when you sing the right memory. But it's also a meditation on consent and selfhood in a world where the mind is porous and markets have teeth. What does it mean to agree when your options have been price-fixed? Who are you when what you remember has been curated for resale? The answers here are not tidy. The city doesn't do tidy. It does reflections: yours, mine, and the one that looks back with your face but someone else's story.

You'll walk augmented alleyways where overlays negotiate with your implants, making etiquette out of hallucination. You'll pass a clinic that launders recollections, a pawnshop that lets you hock Tuesday for the cash to make it through Wednesday, and a temple where the faithful tithe in first kisses and last words. Corporations loom like quiet gods, minting proof-of-truth tokens while funding op-eds about authenticity. Meanwhile, neighborhood syndicates code their own rules of consent, graffiti-stenciled onto brick in phosphor ink: borrow, but don't take; ask, but don't coerce; remember, but don't own.

The crew you'll meet are not saints. They're professionals with debts—financial, emotional, familial—each one fluent in the grammar of compromise. Their loyalties shift under pressure, not because betrayal is sexy but because scarcity is a patient sculptor. The choices they make are carved from a calculus of risk, guilt, and the long shadow cast by promises they can't afford to break. The chase is fast, but it's punctuated by quiet rooms where someone says the thing that can't be unsaid and the air gets heavy with what it might cost to be free.

Formally, this book moves like the city: quick cuts, flickers of neon, moments that linger in puddles. Some chapters arrive like a stolen fragment, others like a full download. Trust the seams. Memory is a mosaic, and so is narrative. If you find gaps, consider whether they're absences—or whether someone charged you to forget.

Neon Margin is meant to thrill, but it is also an invitation: to question the contracts we click, the pasts we curate, and the versions of ourselves we lease to survive. If you've ever wondered where consent ends when the market begins, or how much of you is negotiable when the bill comes due, I wrote this for you. Lace your boots. Keep your eyes on the reflections as much as the road.

We'll start where the light is gaudiest and the shadows are most honest. Step to the edge with me—the place where safety smears into hunger, where law becomes suggestion, where a life can be pawned and retrieved if you know the right song to sing to the lock. Welcome to the margin. Let's steal back what was taken.

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CHAPTER ONE: Static in the Blood

The rain in the Neon Margin didn't just fall; it dissolved. It came down as a fine, chemically-scented mist that turned the towering advertisements of the Lower East Siphon into smearing watercolors of corporate greed. I stood under a rusted awning, watching a holographic koi fish the size of a city bus swim through the humidity, its scales shimmering with a pharmacy-green glow. Every time it flicked its tail, it scattered a flurry of discount codes for synthetic serotonin into the lungs of the passersby. I took a shallow breath, tasted the copper and ozone, and felt the familiar hum of the dampness deep in my marrow.

My name is Kael, and I am a thief, though the tax office—if I still had a registered identity—would probably prefer the term 'Subconscious Retrieval Specialist.' I don't take jewelry, and I don't take data sticks. I take the things people have forgotten they ever owned, or the things they've been forced to forget by people with better lawyers. My nervous system is a highway of illegal glass-fiber optics and shunt-ports, a customized rig that allows me to interface with the wetware of the human mind. Usually, I'm stealing a rival CEO's secret offshore account numbers or a jilted lover's last shred of dignity. Tonight, I was just looking for a reason to keep the lights on in my flat.

The job had come through a dead-drop in a flickering noodle stall—a classic setup that smelled of nostalgia and cheap soy protein. The client had been a shadow behind a voice-scrambler, promising enough credits to buy a small island or, more realistically, a new pair of lungs that didn't rattle when the humidity hit ninety percent. The target was supposed to be a high-security vault managed by the Aethelgard Corporation, a behemoth that specialized in 'Identity Preservation Services.' In plain English, they were a memory bank. They took the parts of you that hurt too much to keep and locked them behind a firewall of ice and iron, charging you a monthly fee for the privilege of being hollow.

I felt a sudden twitch in my left forearm, a rhythmic pulsing of static that signaled my internal clock was out of sync with the local mesh-net. I tapped the interface port behind my ear, a small brass-ringed socket that leaked a faint warmth. The world shivered. For a second, the neon advertisements vanished, replaced by the skeletal architecture of the city's raw data—wires like glowing vines, security pings like fireflies. I blinked, and the violet and green reality snapped back into place. My blood felt heavy, like it was full of micro-plastics and old radio signals. That was the price of the trade; the more you inhabit other people's heads, the less your own body feels like a permanent residence.

A man in a translucent plastic poncho shuffled past me, his eyes glowing with the dull blue light of a low-grade sensory feed. He was probably watching a sunset over a prehistoric ocean while his feet splashed through the gray slush of the gutter. That was the dream they sold in the Margin: that you could be anywhere else but here, as long as you had the credits to rent the headspace. I envied him for a fleeting second before I remembered that those feeds were usually looped, five-minute segments of bliss that eventually eroded your ability to perceive the present. He was a ghost in a raincoat, and I was the person who knew how to pick the lock on his soul.

I checked my haptics. The signal from my contact was late. In this part of the city, lateness usually meant one of two things: the person was dead, or they were reconsidering the price of their soul. I adjusted the collar of my jacket, the smart-fabric stiffening to block out the chill. The Aethelgard vault sat three blocks away, a windowless monolith of obsidian-glass that seemed to swallow the light around it. It didn't have signs or logos; when you're that powerful, you don't need to advertise. People find you when they're desperate enough to want to forget who they are.

The static in my blood intensified, a sharp, biting sensation that made my teeth ache. This wasn't standard interference. It was a localized jammer, the kind the Peacekeepers used when they were about to sweep a block for unregistered augments. I flattened myself against the brickwork, the cold stone soaking through my clothes. My HUD flickered to life, a crimson warning scrolling across my vision: EXTERNAL OVERRIDE DETECTED. I tried to shut down my ports, but the command was ignored. My own nervous system was suddenly a stranger, responding to a handshake protocol I hadn't authorized.

"Don't fight the handshake, Kael. It's rude." The voice didn't come from the street. It came from inside my head, vibrating against my jawbone through the bone-conduction implants I'd had installed in a black clinic three years ago. It was a woman's voice, polished and cold, like a diamond scraped across silk.

I gritted my teeth, fighting the urge to claw at the air. "Who is this? You're on a private frequency. That's a felony in this district, not that anyone's counting."

"I'm the person who just saved you from a very messy conversation with an Aethelgard recovery team," the voice replied. "They're two blocks over, triangulating your ghost-signal. You've been leaking data like a cracked pipe, love. Did you really think you could stand in the rain outside their front door and not trigger a diagnostic sweep?"

I felt a surge of heat in my neck as the woman—whoever she was—pushed a packet of encryption keys into my receiver. The static vanished instantly, replaced by a crystalline silence that felt unnervingly empty. My vision cleared. The man in the

poncho was gone. The street was empty, save for the drifting mist and the silent, swimming koi overhead. I looked at the Aethelgard building. It looked even more predatory in the sudden quiet.

"You're the client," I whispered, my voice sounding small against the hum of the city. "The one from the noodle stall. You're early, or I'm late."

"Time is a luxury neither of us has," she said. The voice was clearer now, the scrambler removed. There was a faint accent I couldn't place—something old, something from the upper spires where the air was filtered and the sun was more than a myth. "The job has changed. I'm not paying you to steal a corporate secret anymore. I'm paying you to find a specific archive. Parcel 809-Delta."

"What's in 809-Delta?" I asked, already knowing the answer would be a lie or a complication. In this business, nobody tells you the truth in the first act.

There was a pause, a heartbeat of electronic hesitation. "A life," she said finally. "Specifically, the first twelve years of a girl who died twenty years ago. Except she didn't die, Kael. She was just erased. They took her memories, her name, and her face, and they turned her into a blank slate for the market. I want those twelve years back."

I felt a coldness that had nothing to do with the rain. Memory theft was common; identity stripping was a different level of horror. It was a corporate capital punishment, a way to liquidate a person's existence without the mess of a body. "Who is she?"

"The archive will tell you," the voice said, sounding distant now, as if the signal was being pulled away by the wind. "But be careful, Kael. When you look into that particular mirror, make sure you don't blink. The girl in the vault... she's been waiting for a long time to meet herself."

The connection severed with a sharp, digital pop. I was alone again under the awning, the pharmacy-green light of the koi bathing me in a sickly radiance. My arm stopped twitching, the static in my blood settling into a low, dull ache. I looked down at my hands; they were shaking, just a little. I had a target now. Parcel 809-Delta. It sounded like a piece of freight, a line item on a balance sheet. But in this city, a line item was often all that was left of a human soul.

I stepped out from under the awning and into the rain, heading toward the obsidian monolith. My boots splashed in the puddles, reflecting the neon signs in broken, flickering fragments. I didn't know who the girl was, and I didn't know why a high-spire voice was paying me to find her. All I knew was that the vault was calling, and for the first time in years, the static in my blood felt like a countdown. The heist had begun, and the prize wasn't credits or tech. It was the one thing no one in the Neon Margin could afford to keep: the truth of who they used to be before the city broke them.

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