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# The Memory Broker

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## Introduction

Memories are currency in this city. They shimmer, falsify, disappear, and reappear at the flicker of a synaptic node or the slip of a desperate smile. In the labyrinth of rain-soaked alleys and humming neon, the business of remembering—and forgetting—is as commonplace as bartering for food or shelter. Here, identity doesn't end with what you've lived; it stretches, it fractures, it can be bought, stolen, erased. That's the bitter reality that keeps Sam Lawson awake at night, haunted by memories he's certain aren't his own and troubled by gaps in his childhood that yawn when his mind turns quiet.

Sam is a memory broker—a trader, a technician, a reluctant confidant to city dwellers aching to forget their worst nights, or crave the sweet ache of someone else's nostalgia. He operates out of the fringes, a liminal shadow between legal and illicit commerce, where every transaction comes with consequences. His clients are the desperate, the dangerous, the elite; they pay in secrets and hard-earned cash. The city itself seems to pulse with secrets, alive with the hum of servers and the murmur of deals being made in the dark corners Sam knows too well.

But for all Sam's skill in untangling the stories embedded in his clients' minds, his own history is blurred at the edges. Flashbulb images—that don't belong—pop behind his eyes: faces he never met, cries he never uttered. He keeps his distance from intimacy, certain that anyone too close might become collateral in the brutal trade he's been forced to master. Sam's life is built around control: control over his own mind, the delicate systems he operates, and, he hopes, the repercussions of every transaction completed.

Today's world is one where justice itself can be digitally edited, where proof of crime or innocence is as fragile as the latest implant. It is a world teetering between possibility and oblivion, the ethical boundaries long reduced to ashes. For Sam, every deal is a gamble with someone's soul—including his own.

Yet, despite the veneer of detachment Sam wears, every client is a reminder: memories don't just define the past—they forge the future. As he takes on a new case, fraught with political undercurrents, all the rules change. He is thrust into a conspiracy that makes him question not only his work, but the very fabric of reality. The borders between what's remembered, what's implanted, and what's true begin to blur until nothing—and no one—is safe.

Beneath it all, Sam's deepest battle is internal: fighting for the scraps of his authentic self as he spirals into a maze of betrayals and shocking revelations. In this city,

memories are never what they seem. And neither is Sam.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Forget to Survive

The rain never truly stopped in Neo-Kyoto. It was a constant, shimmering veil that coated the grimy chrome and perpetual neon, turning every alley into a mirrored canyon. Sam Lawson navigated it like a ghost, his long coat shedding the drizzle as he ducked into the anonymous mouth of an old service tunnel. The air instantly thickened with the smell of ozone and damp concrete—the familiar scent of the black market.

His destination was a nondescript door, its surface scarred with decades of neglect. No street numbers, no signs, just a faint pulse of energy humming beneath the scratched steel. This was the entrance to 'The Veil,' one of the city's many subterranean memory parlors. It catered to those who wanted to offload their burdens, or sometimes, to acquire the burdens of others. Tonight, Sam was there for the former.

The interior was a stark contrast to the dreary outside: a low hum of power conduits, soft, amber lighting, and the distant murmur of hushed conversations. The air tasted of sterile aircoditioning and something metallic, like blood mixed with copper. Sam pushed through a beaded curtain, the cheap plastic clicking a rhythmic protest.

He spotted his contact, Kaito, already waiting at a recessed booth. Kaito was a fixer, a middleman with more connections than principles, his face a patchwork of old cybernetic scars that shifted with the ambient light. He nodded, a slow, deliberate movement that acknowledged Sam's arrival without warmth.

"Lawson," Kaito's voice was a low rasp, like gravel dragged over concrete. He gestured to the empty seat opposite him. "Punctual as ever. Always a good sign when dealing with... delicate merchandise."

Sam slid into the booth, the synthetic leather cold beneath his palms. He didn't bother with pleasantries. "Who's the client, and what's the memory worth?"

Kaito's lips, thin and bloodless, stretched into something that might have been a smile. "Worth a lot, my friend. A very lot. Our client is a high-profile individual, influential in the energy sector. Let's just say, their political ambitions require a cleaner slate than their recent past provides."

Sam leaned back, the familiar prickle of apprehension starting in his gut. High-profile meant high risk. The higher the stakes, the more likely the involvement of the Syndicate, or worse, the Memory Enforcement Bureau. "What kind of memory are we talking about, Kaito? A bad breakup? A financial misstep?"

Kaito chuckled, a dry, humorless sound. "Something far more... permanent. A death. Not one they caused, mind you, but one they witnessed. A very public, very inconvenient death that occurred during a private meeting."

Sam's jaw tightened. Erasing the memory of a witnessed death was complex. The human mind clung to trauma, making extraction difficult and often leaving phantom echoes. It also brought him uncomfortably close to his own blurred edges, the fragmented images of a past he couldn't quite grasp. "Details. Date, time, location. Anything that helps pinpoint the neural pathways."

"Patient, Lawson, patient." Kaito tapped a finger on the polished surface of the table. "Our client insists on absolute discretion. No names, no faces. You'll be dealing with their proxy. The memory itself has been extracted and pre-processed for your... convenience."

This was unusual. Sam preferred to perform the initial neural scan himself. Pre-processed memories often meant a third party had already tampered with the data, making it less stable, less reliable. "Pre-processed? You know how dangerous that is. Contamination, data corruption... it could unravel the whole thing."

"The client is willing to pay extra for the risk," Kaito countered, his eyes glinting. "They trust no one, least of all their own mind. And they believe your reputation for... thoroughness is worth the gamble."

Sam's reputation was built on clean extractions and seamless implants, a precision that separated him from the crude butchers in the lower districts. But that precision relied on untainted data. "Show me the package."

Kaito slid a small, featureless data chip across the table. It shimmered with a faint blue light, indicating it contained neural data. Sam picked it up. It felt cool and inert in his palm, yet held the potential to reshape a life. He connected it to his neural reader, a slim device that unfolded from his wrist-comm.

The data streamed across his optical display, a chaotic kaleidoscope of raw neural impulses. He filtered through it, looking for structural integrity, for any signs of tampering beyond the standard compression. The raw data showed the distinct markers of traumatic recall: elevated cortisol levels, heightened adrenaline, visual cortex overload. The memory was undeniably violent. A man falling, a sudden impact, silence.

"It's clean," Sam conceded, though a nagging unease persisted. Too clean, perhaps. The trauma signature was strong, but the surrounding emotional noise was muted, as if someone had already performed a crude emotional dampening. "But it's been

handled. Who pre-processed it?"

Kaito shrugged, a gesture that conveyed both ignorance and indifference. "A third party, as I said. All you need to do is integrate the blank slate, ensure the memory is completely suppressed."

Suppressing a memory was one thing; outright erasing it was another. Sam preferred suppression, leaving the neural pathways intact but dormant, a safety net in case of unforeseen complications. Erasing a memory was like cutting a thread from a complex tapestry—it could unravel the whole thing. But the client wanted a total wipe.

"The price?" Sam asked, tucking the chip back into his jacket. He needed to analyze it further in his lab, away from Kaito's watchful eyes.

Kaito named a figure that made Sam's internal system flash green. It was enough to keep him afloat for months, enough to fund his own elusive search for answers about his past. "Half now, half upon confirmation of success. The proxy will be in touch with coordinates for the procedure."

Sam pushed himself out of the booth. "You tell your client I'll do my best, but these procedures are never foolproof. There are always risks."

"Risks are part of the game, Lawson," Kaito said, his eyes following Sam. "Just don't forget who you're dealing with."

Sam gave a curt nod and exited The Veil, the silence of the service tunnel a welcome respite from the low thrum of the memory market. The rain had picked up, lashing against the grimy walls. As he walked, the data chip felt heavy in his pocket, a tiny shard of someone else's trauma. He ran a preliminary scan again, just to be sure. The trauma signature was undeniable, but a faint, almost imperceptible whisper of foreign data pulsed beneath it. It was like a hidden current in a deep river, easy to miss unless you were looking for it. A seed of suspicion began to sprout in Sam's mind, but he pushed it down. Money was money. And his own fragmented past wasn't going to piece itself together.

He glanced over his shoulder. The alley was empty, save for the dancing neon reflections on the wet pavement. But he felt a prickle, as if eyes were watching him from the shadows. Paranoia was a standard occupational hazard in this line of work. Yet, as he quickened his pace, the unease lingered, a premonition of something far more dangerous than a simple memory trade. He was about to step into a current that would drag him into a conspiracy he couldn't possibly imagine, where the very concept of truth was just another commodity to be manipulated.

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