

# The Glass Circuit

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For those who refuse to forget.

Like a jazz riff, memory loops and bends, never the same way twice  
—but always familiar.  
—city saying, overheard in the glass circuits

Memory is a door we keep opening, even when the house has burned.

— from the city's unofficial history

## Chapter 1: The Memory Thief

Night. The city exhaled static and glass, its skyline a jagged circuit board pulsing with unsleeping light. Within the blacked-out windows of the Belladonna Tower, Mara adjusted her gloves, sealing the synth-leather tight over her fingers. She inhaled—the taste of ozone, antiseptic, and the faintest ghost of jasmine from the client’s perfume. Every scent a memory. Every memory a weapon. The forger’s tools were silent as breath: a neural quill for rewriting synaptic scripts, a set of data vials glinting with iridescent code, and a single silver blade for the old-fashioned jobs. To Mara, the ritual was half penance, half art. She traded in what people called “the soul’s currency”—not just the facts of someone’s life, but the way sunlight fell on their first heartbreak, the smell of their father’s coat, the secret thrill of being chosen in a crowded room. She knelt beside the sleeping client: Eva Muir, heiress and political pawn, her identity a mosaic of ambitions and borrowed narratives. Mara clicked open the neural quill, the graphene filaments unfurling with a faint blue shimmer. “Are you ready?” she whispered, though Eva would not answer. She pressed the quill to the client’s temple.

The interface hissed—Eva’s eyelids fluttered—Mara’s mind slid sideways, falling into the slipstream of borrowed time. — She’s sixteen, running through a field of wheat lit by molten dawn. Her brother’s laughter spools behind her, bright and impossible. Then: a crash of water, the lake, cold and lucid. She dives—her lungs fill, her body crystallizes with the ache of being young and infinite. It’s not Mara’s memory. But she tastes it. She is Eva, she is the brother, she is the wheat, the dawn, the water. Pull back, Mara commands herself. Thread the new story. She weaves in a fracture: a quarrel, a hidden letter, a sense of betrayal that would explain Eva’s hesitation in Parliament, her sudden mistrust of her handlers. Mara’s work is invisible. Seamless. She feels the weight of each lie settle, feather-light but irrevocable. She surfaces. Breathless. The memory is altered; the world, fractionally shifted. Mara closes her eyes for a heartbeat, letting the false dawn burn away. She removes the quill, wipes the client’s brow. In the outer room, the client’s handler waits with a transfer chit and veiled contempt. “Done?” he asks. Mara nods. She never says goodbye. Outside, the city is slick with rain. Mara’s reflection wavers in the glass—her face, a blur between who she was and who she must never become. --- Gray morning. The files in his inbox were stacked like gravestones: Case #3481—Memory Tampering. Investigative Officer Simon Ishaan scrolled through the data, his jaw knotting as the new report flagged a familiar signature.

He remembered Mara, though he told himself he didn’t. Years ago—before her name was on every black-market list—she and Simon had shared a studio on the east embankment, back when memory work was still half-theory, half-rebellion. She taught him how to hack the city’s neural mesh; he taught her how to read people’s tells.

Now, the woman in the surveillance feeds was only a ghost haunting the periphery of his career. Simon's hands trembled, just enough to be hidden by the mug he held. He sipped, the bitter coffee anchoring him to the present. The victim —Eva Muir. Symptoms: narrative dissonance, emotional disassociation, contradictory recollections of key life events. Classic markers of an overwritten memory. The forger's calling card: a single blue iris, painted in nanopolymer at the edge of the subject's dreamscape —the same motif as in the case that broke Simon's trust, years ago. He forced himself to scan the logs again. Each timestamp was a footstep in the snow, vanishing as quickly as it appeared. "Simon?" The voice was his supervisor, gruff with fatigue. "You're leading the Muir case. Priority One."

And, Simon —get personal, you're off." He nodded, swallowing questions. He was already too deep. The city's neural forensics lab was a cathedral of hard light, every surface reflecting the algorithmic constellations of human experience. He slid the client's memory files into the analyzer, watching as the screen lit with fractal blooms of data: Eva's childhood, partitioned into color-coded segments, each tagged with likelihood scores for authenticity.

In the center —an anomaly. The blue iris, infinitely replicating. Simon stared at it, pulse quickening. He felt the old ache, the mixture of awe and grief. Mara's art had always been beautiful. Dangerous. He wondered if she'd recognize him, now that both of them had become what they swore they'd never be. He closed his eyes. For a moment, he let himself remember: Mara laughing in the rain; Mara tracing lines on his palm, telling stories about the future. He opened his eyes. The present, with all its razor edges, waited. --- Mara's workshop was a sanctum carved from abandoned circuitry and secondhand dreams. She laid out her next commission: a memory for an immigrant girl whose father's face was blurring in the migration—her only proof of home threatened by bureaucratic erasure. Mara's own father spoke in her mind, his voice like stones turning in water: \*Our memories are the only territory they can't take by force\* She wondered if that was still true. She queued the memory: summer heat, a song on the radio, the way her own mother's hands guided her through the steps of a dance no one else remembered. She coded the sensations, using a poetic algorithm that let the feelings bloom from bare facts: the sticky sweetness of mango, the sound of rain on a tin roof. She was careful—leaving just enough longing in the memory to make it feel real, but not so much that it hurt. Each commission was a bargain with power. The rich paid Mara to forget their crimes; the poor, to remember who they were. The city's neural net made experience just another commodity—bought, sold, stolen.

Mara saw herself as a revolutionary. But sometimes, alone in the half-light, hands stained with borrowed joy, she wondered if she'd become a colonizer of intimacy. Her terminal chirped. New message: an encrypted request. The code was old, personal. It was Simon's—she could tell by the pattern, a mnemonic only the two of them shared. A request for a meeting. She hesitated, heart thudding. She hadn't seen him in years.

She tapped a reply: Midnight. The old footbridge. --- Simon waited at the footbridge, hands in his coat pockets, rain sluicing down from a bruised sky. The bridge was overgrown, half-swallowed by moss and time. It was the kind of place you came to bury the past—or exhume it. He checked his watch. Midnight. His breath steamed in the cold air. He replayed the evidence in his mind: Eva’s overwritten timeline, the blue iris, the increasing boldness of the forger’s work. He ran through the protocols, but the rules felt flimsy, insubstantial. He’d thought about arresting Mara, once. But every time he’d gotten close, something stopped him: the memory of her hands; the stories she told when they lay together, tangled in the neural mesh, inventing futures. He tried to focus. The city was different now, its soul splintered into data and desire, and Mara was both the architect and the symptom. Footsteps. Mara appeared, a shadow limned by the bridge’s dying lights. “Simon,” she said, her voice low, almost gentle. He faced her. “You’re still using the blue iris.” She shrugged, half-apology, half-defiance. “It’s a signature. Or a warning.” He studied her, searching for the girl he’d loved—the one who once believed memory was liberation, not theft. “Eva Muir,” he said quietly. “You tampered with her.” Mara lifted her chin. “She paid for a new story. She got what she wanted.” Simon’s anger flared. “Wanting and \* consent \* aren’t the same. You rewrote her loyalties. You changed who she is.” Mara’s eyes flashed. “Who owns experience, Simon? The state? The market? Or the person living it?” He hesitated. “It’s not that simple.” “It’s exactly that simple,” she replied. “They built a network to harvest our dreams. I just give people a way out.” Simon shook his head. “You’re playing God.” She smiled, weary and sharp. “Only the stories. Never the ending.” Lightning forked across the sky, illuminating the river’s black sprawl. Simon stepped closer, lowering his voice. “Stop. Before you cross a line you can’t come back from.” Mara’s laughter was brittle, breaking the night’s tension. “There’s no line left, Simon. Only stories.

”She turned, disappearing into the gloom. Simon watched her go, heart torn between duty and something older, more dangerous. --- Mara ran through the city, rain lashing her face, adrenaline burning cold in her veins. She ducked into an alley, heart pounding, mind spinning with Simon’s words. She remembered the first time she’d altered a memory—her own, erasing the image of her mother’s body slumped by the window, the smell of broken iris petals thick in the air. She’d replaced it with a memory of her mother smiling, alive, singing.

The lie had saved her. But every time Mara touched someone’s mind, she felt the cost. A sliver of herself, lost in transmission. She reached her safehouse, breathless. She dropped to her knees, opening her palm. A blue iris, pressed and faded, stared up at her. The last real thing from her real past. \*Who am I, if every memory can be rewritten?\* she wondered. She closed her eyes, letting the rain and silence fill her.--- The city’s surveillance grid was tightening. Simon moved through bureaucratic corridors, file after file flickering with evidence—signatures, anomalies, stories that didn’t fit.

He listened to victims: a mother who'd forgotten her child's birthday; a dissident who remembered a prison that never existed. All traced back to the blue iris, Mara's mark. Simon's supervisor pressed him: "You have to end this. She's destabilizing everything." He nodded, but inside, doubt gnawed at him. He saw the gray zones —the places where Mara's interventions had saved people, restored dignity to the erased, given voice to the voiceless. The city's memory market was a brutal ecosystem. Without Mara, who would write the counternarratives? One night, Simon examined his own memories. He accessed the neural logs—the night he and Mara first touched the mesh, the taste of her mouth, the rush of possibility. But the memory glitched. For a split second, he saw himself standing alone, Mara already gone. \*Had she changed his memories, too?\* The thought hollowed him. If he couldn't trust his own mind, what was left? He closed the log, hands shaking. --- Word spread.

The market was changing—new laws, stricter surveillance, rumors of black- bag extractions for memory forgers. Mara worked faster, her commissions tinged with urgency. She risked more, weaving stories for those on the edge of forgetting. She dreamed: a house with no windows, a voice calling her name, over and over. She woke, uncertain if it was a memory or a warning. She met a client in a shuttered café — an old bookseller whose son had been disappeared by the state. He wanted to remember his child's laugh, not the knock at the door. Mara hesitated, the ethics knotting inside her. "Will it still be \*his\* laugh?" he asked, voice shaking. Mara looked at the blue iris on her worktable. "It will be your memory. And that's enough." She worked late into the night, fingers trembling as she coded the joy, the weight of love unbroken by absence. She wondered who would remember her, when this was over. --- Simon's world narrowed to the hunt. He followed Mara's traces through datastreams, through whispered stories in immigrant bars, through the eyes of those she'd helped and those she'd harmed. For every crime, there was a counterweight —a life rebuilt, a wound eased, a story reclaimed. He began to see the outlines of a pattern: Mara wasn't just stealing memories.

She was building an archive—a hidden library of true and false stories, a map of what the city wanted to forget. He realized: she wasn't just a thief. She was a storyteller. And the city, for all its power, was afraid of stories. He prepared his warrant, his final confrontation. But as he stared at Mara's blue iris, he felt a strange, aching hope. \*Maybe some stories need to be stolen\* --- Rain again. The city's lights smeared across the river, colors bleeding into night. Mara stood on the same footbridge, neural quill in her pocket, heart raw. Simon approached, badge in hand, eyes shadowed with grief and resolve. They faced each other, rain streaking down their faces. "You have to stop," Simon said, voice tight. Mara shook her head. "Someone has to remember. Someone has to choose." He held out the warrant. She saw his hand trembling. "Who are we, if we can't trust our memories?" he asked, voice breaking. She stepped closer, her hand covering his.



“We are the stories we believe. Even now.” For a moment, time stilled—the rain, the river, the ache between them. A siren wailed in the distance, growing louder. Mara leaned in, pressed her lips to his ear. “You have a choice, Simon. Remember me as your enemy. Or remember me as the one who tried to save you.” She slipped past him, vanishing into the dark. Simon stood alone on the bridge, the warrant dissolving in his fist. Somewhere in his mind, a memory flickered—Mara’s laughter, bright and impossible, echoing through a field of golden wheat. He didn’t know if it was real. But he chose to believe it. --- In the city’s neural archive, a new file bloomed—untagged, origin unknown. Inside, a memory unfurled: A woman’s hand, planting a blue iris in broken earth. Rain fell, and the flower opened, bright as hope. The market would try to erase it. But this story—this memory—had roots. And somewhere, Mara ran through the rain, carrying all the stolen stories, rewriting the world one memory at a time. Rain pelts the city in musical torrents, a symphony of water on glass and neon. The streets, wet and glistening, reflect an architecture of half-remembered dreams. Against this backdrop, Elian threads the alleyways—a shadow in a world built on shadows, a craftsman of forgetting whose own memory is marred by an absence he cannot name. The city, both womb and grave, hums around him: humming with secrets, with transactions, with the persistent ache of things lost and found.

He was always good with patterns. It’s how he learned to forge memories in the first place—by listening to the way a voice wavers on a painful word, or the flicker in someone’s gaze when they reach for a recollection that doesn’t quite land. He knows how to build a memory so real it fits into the bone, grows roots in the mind. But living with other people’s memories is like living in a hall of mirrors: after a while, you start to forget which reflection is your own. Tonight, his apartment is thick with humidity and the faint sting of ozone—the air outside electric, the city’s arteries swollen with stormwater. Elian sits at his worktable. An array of neural threaders and synaptic readers glimmer before him, surgical in their precision. The harvested memory files—each a ghostly lattice of light—hover at the edges of his vision, waiting to be spliced, rethreaded, or quietly erased. He thinks of the client: Marius Delacour, a financier with a famously impenetrable reputation. The request is simple, and impossible. “There was an event,” Delacour had said, eyes so dark they seemed bottomless.

“I want every trace gone. Not just the memory—records, feelings, dreams, rumors. I want to live as if it never existed. Even if it didn’t.” The man had smiled, a smile that never reached his eyes. Elian’s hands moved deftly over the equipment, remembering the tremor in his own chest when Delacour named the date: June 9th, 2096. It echoed in him, a hollow bell, and he could not say why. Across the city, Inspector Mara Lin sits in her windowless office, the rain muffled against reinforced glass. She is thirty-five, drawn, her hair clipped short in a style that precludes vanity. Her workspace is lined with case files and old-fashioned paper notes—a rebellion against the city’s digital tide.

She is one of the few left who believe in memory's sanctity, who fights the quiet war against those who would buy and sell the past. A new file sits on her desk: Delacour's request for a security clearance alteration, flagged by a back-end script. There's something off about the transfer sequence—a signature in the logs she recognizes from other cases, always peripheral, always unresolved. The codename: "Artisan". She's seen his handiwork before. A wife who forgets the birth of her daughter. A councilman suddenly freed from guilt. Lives subtly rewritten, the past shaped to fit the present's convenience. But there is always a residue, a displaced echo in the mind, like the scent of rain on hot concrete. Mara writes a note to herself: "Find the forger. Find out who wants to forget."

In his workshop, Elian stares at the neural map projected before him. His own memories, locked and encrypted, float behind a firewall of his own devising. There is a single fragment—recurring and incomplete—a child's voice calling out, a hand reaching for him in the dark. He has spent years trying to access it, to excavate its meaning. Every attempt ends in static, in a surge of pain behind his eyes. He wonders, sometimes, what it is that he is hiding from himself. Tonight, the job is different. This is not the usual surgical extraction or bespoke insertion. Delacour wants an event erased so thoroughly that not even the absence remains.

The request gnaws at Elian, because the more he tries to trace the shape of the trauma, the more he feels its outline inside himself. The city outside howls, the wind battering the glass. He begins his work: mapping neural networks, isolating emotional triggers, constructing a lattice of plausible deniabilities. The process is part art, part science—a dance at the edge of what the human mind can bear. He slips into the memory engine, the world dissolving into colors and sensations: the taste of copper, the scent of burning leaves, rain beating on the corrugated metal.

He is in the memory now. But whose? Mara Lin follows the trail: a foundry worker whose wife claims he was home the night of the fire, despite security footage to the contrary. A child who draws the same impossible symbol, over and over, in the margins of her schoolwork. She connects the dots, the pattern forming in the gaps between what is recalled and what is real. She can feel it—the looming erasure, the chill that comes before a storm. She combs through Delacour's records: charitable donations to a trauma ward, sealed settlements out of court, a single incident sealed so tightly that not even the usual data brokers can pry it open. She thinks of the forger, of the ethics of memory, of the city's slow slide into curated amnesia. Her own mother, years ago, had elected to forget the day Mara's father died. Mara remembers watching her mother's face transform: the absence of pain, and with it, the absence of love. She vowed never to let go of a single memory, no matter how unbearable. It is what makes her relentless, what drives her through the city's maze of half-truths and engineered forgetting. Elian dives deeper. The traumatic event sits like a black hole at the center of the mind, warping everything around it. But there is no source memory, only the echo—a phantom pain where something should be.