

Neural Sins

PREQUEL · PROTOCOL 00 · THE CALIBRATION

“Emotion is the deadliest addiction.”

A free prequel scene from the Neural Sins Universe
companion to *The Memory Eater* – Book 01

The Calibration

AstraVeyne Tower – 03:14, City Standard – six years before

The first thing he edited was the way she said his name. Not the sound of it. The weight. He thinned it until it landed on her tongue like a confession she did not remember practicing, and then he set it down carefully, the way another man might set down a glass of something expensive.

Lyra Vance was nineteen. She did not remember sitting down in the chair. She did not remember signing the consent. She did not remember the corridor, or the elevator, or the woman who had taken her coat. She remembered, faintly, that her mother had once kissed her behind the left ear on the nights she still counted as a person, and she remembered that this was the exact place on her skull where the calibration needle now warmed.

The room was the color of a closed eyelid. A nurse who was not a nurse hummed a song she used to love before she stopped being allowed to love things. The hum was off by a half-step, on purpose. AstraVeyne had a paper on it. Comfort, deliberately imperfect, was easier to trust.

“Open,” he said.

She opened. Not her mouth. Something quieter.

He was somewhere behind her, in the soft part of the room she could not turn her head to see. His voice arrived already familiar, the way weather is familiar — not a person, a condition. She had been in this chair fourteen times. She remembered none of them. Her body remembered all of them. Her body was already leaning forward, the way a flower leans toward a window even after the sun has gone.

“Tell me the last thing you remember loving,” he said.

She tried. She really did. There was a shape there. A doorway. A name that started with a vowel. A laugh that had sounded like rain hitting copper. She reached for it the way a person reaches in the dark for the lamp they remember owning, and the implant hummed, gentle as a lullaby, and the memory folded itself in half and slid neatly under the door.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Good,” he said.

He came around the chair then, slowly, the way a man comes around a chair when he wants the woman in it to understand that the not-touching is a choice. He sat down across from her. He crossed one long leg over the other. His suit was the color of an apology that was never given. Somewhere on the eighty-fourth floor a glass of red wine tilted toward a man who had not yet decided what to do with her, and she did not know that yet, and she would not be allowed to know it for another six years.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

She did not. But her body did. Her body had a file on him her mind was not cleared to read.

“You’re the one who fixes me,” she said, and the words arrived without her permission, in the soft devotional cadence of someone reciting a prayer they were taught as a child and then taught, later, to forget they had ever been taught.

“Yes,” he said.

He leaned in. Close enough that she could smell the cold metal of his cologne, the faint ozone of the editing suite, the sweeter sharper note underneath — the one her nervous system had been trained, over fourteen sessions, to read as *safe*. He brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. The implant glowed once, a slow red pulse beneath the skin, and the part of her that had been about to flinch unlearned the flinch in real time.

“Tonight,” he murmured, “I am going to give you back exactly enough of yourself to fall in love with me again. And in the morning I am going to take it out, and you are going to wake up clean, and you are going to walk out of this tower thinking you slept well for the first time in months. Do you understand me, Lyra?”

She did not. She nodded anyway. Her body nodded for her. Her body had been nodding for a long time.

She should have been afraid.

She was not.

That was the part of the calibration he was most proud of.

Six years later, in a different chair, in a different tower, she would meet a man named Kael Strade who had been shackled to the floor for forty-one hours and had not stopped smiling. She would not remember this room. She would not remember the hum that was off by a half-step. She would not remember the suit the color of an apology never given.

But the first time Kael Strade said her name, something behind her left ear would warm, very faintly, the way an old scar warms before rain. And she would lean forward in her chair, the way a flower leans toward a window, and she would not know why.

Her body would know.

Her body had always known.

— end of prequel scene —

Continue the story in *The Memory Eater*

Book 01 of the Neural Sins series — out now on Amazon.

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