

## The Memories

He plunged his knife deep into his awaiting victim. He saw her eyes flicker and widen, the gaping, broken hole of a mouth beneath the gag quickly becoming sunken and grotesque. Her pupils rolled back into her head.

She was still breathing, but it had become laboured, clinging on to the air as if she were drowning. He smiled as wave after wave of cold, sweet sweat lapped the back of his neck and beaded across his forehead. The rush was indescribable. He felt the shattered ribs moving beneath him, warm blood coating his hands, her own stiff hands pulling and clawing at his neck in one last feeble attempt to escape the darkness that was coming.

Slowly, he slid the knife out. She gasped as the night air hit the open wound he had left and began to sink silently into the fallen leaves and mud. He rose. The trees overhead rustled and groaned in the autumn breeze. Cars rallied back and forth across the motorway just out of eyeshot but nobody was there to hear that last breath of hers. Shuddering and snivelling, she curled into a ball and lay still.

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Aaran Selwyn woke with a start, his head thumping. Entangled in countless cables which draped and wound over his bed and covered his feeble limbs, he lay breathless. The walls around him were spinning and melting in abstract waves of light and colour. Pulsing. His thin dressing gown was plastered to his back in sweat and he felt like he might be sick. Then, slowly, darkness slid over the room and within a few seconds all was quiet and still. Fading light streamed through the skylight into an otherwise shadowy box of an apartment. Other than the clutter of large machines and computer pads strewn around the place, there wasn't much in the way of furnishings. He stared at the ceiling. Pushing his hand to the wall, he laboured himself into a sitting position, pulling various wires from his temples and wrists, and looked at the clock.

7:15pm. 18<sup>th</sup> September 2025.

He groaned, his parched lips cracking with the movement. Without thinking, his arm reached for his bedside table where, placed carefully between two large flashing power bricks on a black leather coaster, there sat a glass of iced water. Greedily, he gulped the water down, its coldness rushing immediately to his head. Clarity began to reassert itself. The memory had been vivid, perhaps more so than most. He could not remember how many he had experienced in the past several months. In truth, he could not even remember how it had all

begun. His mind was awash with visions, unfamiliar tastes, smells, and unfinished dreams, his eyes still branded with random flashes of different people and times and places.

The phone rang. Taking his pinky, Aaran placed it lightly inside his ear. After a moment, he felt the vibration of his call connecting.

“Aaran, you awake?”

A male voice, deep and gravelly. There was a warm humour in his tone. He recognised the voice, but could not say where from.

“Who is this?”

“It’s John, Aaran. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten your buddy John?”

John. Of course. How could he have forgotten?

“Sorry John, I didn’t recognise your voice there. How are you?”

“I’m good, Aaran. Listen, I’m sending you an update for your sense module so I need you to do a few things for me.”

“Ok John, thanks very much for that. What do the new updates do?”

“Nothing major, buddy, just a firmware upgrade and a few crash fixes. Things should run smoother once it’s installed.”

“Ok, what do you need me to do?”

“Just get in your chair and I’ll talk you through it,” said John.

Aaran glanced to his left. There, right beside his bed, sat his small, aluminium-framed wheelchair, its control lights blinking with a cool, blue glow. The loss of his legs had never quite sunk in, despite the fact it had happened long enough ago that he could not remember ever being able to walk in the first place. Slowly, he edged himself closer to the edge of the bed. Grabbing one of the armrests with his left hand, he pulled it towards him, whilst pushing his weight onto his right. He spun himself towards the chair, inching his body down, but his muscles gave out at the last second, causing his tailbone to thud painfully onto the seat. He inhaled sharply, but did not cry out. It was a regular occurrence these days.

“Okay John,” he winced, “That’s me in the chair.”

“Brilliant, mate,” John replied, “Now first, I want you to go over to the big black machine next to your bed.”

Aaran looked around, spotted the machine and wheeled himself over to it.

“Okay.”

“Right, now I want you slide your finger along the touchpad in front of you. That should bring up a menu. Touch the button that says ‘Save & Send’. After you’ve done that, let me know.”

He stroked a bony finger over the smooth surface of the screen and watched it flicker to life. A logo of a snake coiled round an old-fashioned column flashed up momentarily, before the menu displayed itself. In the corner of the screen were a collection of letters and numbers, followed by a name. JSR-5923-Kevin Roland Smith. He did not know what that meant or who Kevin Roland Smith was. Perhaps he was an administrator on the system. Aaran hovered over each icon until he came to a picture of an envelope.

‘Save & Send’.

He touched the screen, which then made a subtle beeping noise before locking itself once again.

“Okay John,” he said, “That’s it done.”

“Righto, thanks Aaran. I’ll get that update sent over. In the meantime, take a rest, you sound like you need it.”

Before Aaran could reply, he felt his senses begin to falter. The sounds of traffic outside faded into nothing. His vision blurred, his mouth dried, and darkness closed in to take him.

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“You gonna take it, man?”

He opened his eyes. In front of him stood a man, short and slim, but with a wiry strength to him, his tattooed arms taut and ready. His eyes were hard like marbles, their darkness barely made visible by the orange glow from the streetlamps overhead, diffused through layers of bed sheets hung up on washing lines between the two old buildings. Voices, footsteps and televisions could be heard emanating through the night from behind the windows of each individual flat, muffled and obscured but audible nonetheless. Deep in the pit of his stomach, he felt sick.

“Hey, are you listenin’ to me?”

He turned nervously to face the man before him. Eddie, he remembered, that was his name. The tone was urgent. A bead of sweat ran down the side of Eddie’s bald head. He was nervous too. He held one arm outstretched, clutching a small package wrapped untidily in metal foil. There was a tattoo on his wrist, only just legible in the dimness. Eddie’s hand was shaking slightly. He looked closer, trying not to appear obvious. It read, ‘Velasquez’. But he had taken too long. Quickly, sensing his eyes, Eddie pulled his arm away, his demeanour changed.

“Nahhh man, what shit you tryin’ to pull?”

In a flash, the package was gone, replaced by a gun. Three more men emerged from the shadows, wearing hoods and carrying various other intimidating weapons. He felt a wave of dread sweep over him. Eddie pointed the pistol towards him slowly, its metal barrel shining orange in the cool night air. His voice cracked as he took an echoing step down the alley towards him.

“You a cop, man?”

He stayed silent. Sweat was pouring down his back, soaking into the clothes he had bought that morning. The radio burned into his chest, his heart beating so hard it felt like his whole body was pulsing. Dizziness began to blur the edges of his vision. He began to look around but there was no way out. Shit. Eddie held the gun flush against his face, its cold edge causing his limbs to go limp.

“You hear me, huh? Are you a fuckin’ rat??” Eddie screamed.

Before he could reply, Eddie had reached out and ripped open his shirt. It was over. There, held with duct tape to his chest, was the radio, blinking red every few seconds as it always did, unknowing of the plight it had put him in. He stared, Eddie stared. The three thugs stared. For a second, nobody moved. One of the men chuckled. He could hear Eddie’s breath, shallow and shaking. Whether through fear, anger, cold, or a combination of the three he did not know. Dark marble eyes bored into his skull, the pressure of the gun unbearable.

“You fuck...”

And suddenly the calm was gone, replaced by his mind exploding; he felt a cacophony of noise, pain and heat, and everything burst violently into white, then red, then black.

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Aaran awoke to the sound of birds whistling and calling outside his window. He was calm, silently tracing thoughts through his mind yet not holding onto any for long. Why was he here? How long had he been in this place? He sat up, touching a hand to the wall, feeling its cool surface against his palm. His shallow breaths funnelled slowly out before him in little puffs of steam which disappeared promptly into nothing. It was a cold morning. A single solid beam of bright sunlight streamed through the narrow skylight above him, casting the room into a bold marriage of radiant light and shadow. Where the sun's rays struck, they accentuated the darkness behind each object in the apartment. The larger the object, the deeper the gloom that lurked behind.

Aaran twisted himself, hanging his legs over the side of the bed and hunching his shoulders. He stretched his arms out, making sure to remove each of the nodes and wires attached to his extremities, working out the aches he had developed during the night. As usual, he remembered little of his dreams. Disconnected faces without names floated hazily around places he had never been, silently staring as if somehow he should be the one to be able to piece it all together. He had tried, but he had never gotten far.

The clock read 8:13am. At least this time the sense module had woken him on time. He collapsed into his chair, wincing as yet again his arms gave out beneath him, sending him crashing onto his backside. Next to the largest machine, he noticed one of the screens was on. He wheeled himself closer, trying to pick out what was on it. There was a logo emblazoned on a blue background. As he eased himself further towards the screen, he could see that it was the same logo he had spotted before: a snake coiled around a white column. In the very corner of the screen, in the tiniest of fonts, was a name.

He craned his neck towards the screen, his face so close that the colours began to burn his eyes. Straining, he narrowed his eyes and read the name.

Cobra.

He stared at the screen, those five letters repeating themselves over and over until they were emblazoned in his mind. Why did that word feel significant? His eyes began to ache as the word drilled into them, his brain concentrating on nothing other than the screen, his head arching ever closer and closer and closer.

The phone rang. Aaran jumped a foot in the air as the ringtone blared through his head. He took a deep breath, his heart thumping, before managing to compose himself and place a finger in his ear. The call connected.

“Hi there, Aaran. Have a good sleep?” chimed a young, cheerful voice Aaran didn't recognise.

“Who is this?” quizzed Aaran.

“It’s me, Aaran. It’s John.”

John. That was it. John.

“Hello John.”

“Hi Aaran,” said John, “So how are you finding the new upgrades on your sense module?”

“I feel good this morning,” said Aaran, “I’m glad this update wakes me up on time at least.”

“Well I’m glad to hear that, Aaran.”

“There is another thing, John,” said Aaran, thinking of the logo and the name that had appeared on his screen.

“Of course, what’s the problem?”

“Well it’s not really a problem, just that one of my computer screens is on and—“

He paused. As he was talking, he had turned to face the screen in question, but it was no longer showing the snake wrapped around the column, or the word he had found so intriguing. In its place was a standard desktop screen with all the usual options. In the corner of the screen was a familiar sight.

“Aaran, you there?” crowed the voice in his ear, but he wasn’t listening.

‘EV-111023-Kevin Roland Smith.’ he read.

“Aaran?”

Who was Kevin Roland Smith? And what did the seemingly random sets of numbers and letters mean?

“Aaran!”

John’s voice was raised. Aaran blinked and shook his head.

“Sorry John I... I just thought I saw something on my screen, that’s all.”

“You should drink some water, have you had any this morning?”

That seemed a strange question, thought Aaran. Had he had any water? Come to think of it, he was extremely thirsty. He turned to face his desk and sitting there on his leather coaster was a full glass of ice water. Strange.

“Did you put that water there, John?” he asked.

“Me? No, of course not,” chuckled John, “You probably left it there for yourself and forgot all about it.”

Aaran guessed that made sense. He grabbed the glass with both hands and raised it to his lips, gasping as the cool liquid reached his throat. John was right, he did need a drink.

“I think you should get some more rest, Aaran,” said John, “You seem a bit... confused.”

Yes, Aaran thought, he was confused. But sleep would be a good idea, come to think of it. He opened his mouth to tell John, but stopped mid-breath, exhaustion ploughing into him and causing him to slump in his chair. His eyes flickered shut, and he felt no more.

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The bell tolled 8 o'clock. Pigeons scattered from the square and made their way onto the roofs of various buildings on the far side of the river, which made gentle splashes as it lapped up alongside its stone banks. There was a subtle breeze, almost unnoticeable but for the gentle movements of the flags above the spires far above him. He knew the time was now upon him, but he was calm as he made his way to the boats.

As he stepped onto the pier, a large, ponytailed man stood out in front of him. He held out his ring finger. The man examined it, his expression unreadable behind his dark shaded glasses. After a moment, he gave a slight nod and stood aside.

Inside the yacht there were various people milling about. Some looked affluent, others shifty and mysterious. Some were both, and others neither. He glanced around the finely decorated cabin, hoping to catch a glimpse of the woman he had come here to see, but she did not seem to be in attendance. He felt a distinct pang of annoyance.

“So you did make it after all then...”

He spun around at the sound of the voice, smooth as velvet. Deep for a woman's, but no less feminine. There she stood, glass of champagne in hand, fondling a curl of her sleek, auburn hair with the other. Her body portrayed a gait of airiness, yet her eyes showed the true meaning of her visit.

“So you've made your decision then?” he growled.

“If I hadn’t, do you think I would be here talking to you?” she parried, her full lips curling into a pout.

“Fair enough,” he said, “Needless to say I’ll get the job done right. Your husband won’t be a problem no more.”

“Good...” she purred, “I daresay I won’t miss him.”

As he made his way back onto the pier, the sun had already begun to fade behind the tall buildings, a red glow enveloping the square with a strange luminance only found when the sun’s light has almost faded. There was a stillness that he found soothing despite knowing the risk he was about to take. It would be worth it, he told himself, even for her gratitude alone it would be worth it.

He set off along the cobbled street, turning up the sidestreet towards where he had parked the car. The still damp stones glittered under the fading strips of light that filtered through the narrow tenements and the alcoves grew black in the growing dusk. He pulled up the collar of his jacket and bustled on.

“Don’t s’pose you’ve got any change, mate, have you?”

At first he didn’t see where the voice had come from. Then he noticed him, his figure becoming more apparent as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. It was a man, huddled in a pile of old clothes beneath one of the ancient alcoves. The smell was horrendous. He was about to carry on, but something about the thought of the man sleeping outside on a brisk night like this made him stop. He fumbled in his coat pocket and tossed a pound into the hat at the man’s feet. The man snorted.

“That all I’m gettin’?” he burred.

“You’re lucky I even stopped at all, pal, be grateful for it.”

The man laughed, a raw, inharmonious sound of humour and grit, like two slabs being rubbed together.

“You richies are all the same,” said the old man.

Something about his voice made him stop and take note. He felt like he had heard it before somewhere, but from where he could not say. He had urgent business to attend to, he knew, yet something about the old man had caught his curiosity.

“You sleep here every night?”

The man chuckled again, the gravelly sound unsettling, and yet compelling.

“Course not! I’ve got a home to go to!”

“You mean you’re not actually homeless?” he asked, outraged.

“Just because I ain’t got a house don’t mean I ain’t got a home,” sneered the old man. His black eyes glinted like steel ball bearings as the last of the sunlight crept slowly down the alley and into the gloom.

“Who are you, old man?”

“Old?” cried the man, “Old?? What makes you think I’m old?” He chuckled again.

The sound of distant cars and a slowly growing wind punctuated the silence. A few blocks away, the bell tower struck nine, the chimes echoing ominously around the houses.

“Do you want to know my name, sir?” whispered the man, the shape of a grin appearing from beneath the shadowy doorframe.

“Okay then,” he said, “You’ve piqued my curiosity. What is your name, old man?”

“Well first of all,” he quipped, stepping slowly out of the shadow, “This old man is actually more of a young man.”

His eyes were the first to be revealed, deep, dark brown pools that looked like bottomless cups of coffee. Then his nose, a gnarled, thin, twisted point that looked as if it had been shaped cruelly out of wax, a caricature of poverty, but with wit to match. Lastly, his mouth, a broken, scarred line, curled at the edges in permanent jest, scraped onto skin stretched tightly across his face like clingfilm. It was a young face, beaten and bruised, weathered into an expression years beyond what it was meant for.

He knew that face.

“My name,” he whispered, “Is Kevin Roland Smith.”

Aaran screamed. He ran but he knew the man was following him. The man that had his face. The buildings crumbled into dust around him and his eyes turned upside down. Who was Aaran Selwyn? The sky’s mouth had opened up and he was falling into it. The man with his voice, with his face. He spun into the gaping whirlwind and fell timelessly into nothing, nowhere, no-one.

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Kevin Roland Smith awoke from a dream he felt had gone on for most of his life. He reached up and felt his sallow face, surprised to find it clean shaven and smooth, looked with aching eyes to see that his hands were clean and his fingernails trimmed. Where was he?

He looked around and saw a room filled with blinking machines and little else. Nothing here was familiar to him. He glanced down, alarmed to find that his limbs were attached with wires to each of the machines. Without hesitation he ripped them from his skin. He could hear the sounds of traffic and birds outside, but something was wrong. The cars were too quiet, and the wind too loud, as if man-made. He jumped to his feet and promptly collapsed to the floor, his head striking the side of a machine painfully. Shocked, he realised that he could not move or feel his legs. Looking up, he spotted a wheelchair by the side of the bed. With great effort, he lifted himself up into the chair.

And then he saw the clock. 2:34pm. 27<sup>th</sup> September 2025.

2025.

This had to be some kind of joke. The last he remembered, it had been 2014. What had happened to the last eleven years? Perhaps he had been in a coma? He looked around at all the machines, at the strangeness of the apartment. But if this was a coma, where were the doctors?

Then, out of the corner of his eye, he spotted something he recognised. Wheeling himself over to take a closer look, he focused his attention on one of the computer screens. Taking up the majority of the screen was the image of a snake coiled around a column. It was a logo he knew.

And suddenly the images began to flood into his head. Being thrown into a van, lying in darkness for days. Things that had happened years ago, and yet to him they seemed like yesterday. He remembered the men in Kevlar riot gear, each emblazoned with the logo. The name he would remember forever. Cobra.

The company who preached that he would be part of a new generation of prisoner. Prisoners who would help catch criminals and earn their freedom. It would be harmful to their bodily functions over time, but it would be worth it. They would use the sense modules to transfer memories, witness crimes and provide the evidence, all for the greater good of Cobra.

And then it hit him. He looked around. All these machines, the apartment, the date, it all made sense. Cobra had been using his mind for the past eleven years.

His breath came quick and uneven, stuttering through tired, cracked lips. His head was pounding, making it seem like the whole room was shifting with every rush of blood. He ran

a trembling hand down the nearest piece of equipment, cold and smooth to the touch. The sense module that had been holding him here had finally slipped up. He was not supposed to see himself in the memory.

Conscious that it would only be a matter of time before the admins noticed, he tapped the computer screen to bring up the menu. Various options lay before him. He tapped the image of a window and watched as the blue sky that had previously shone through the skylight disappeared to be replaced by a solid block of green. A greenscreen. The whole apartment was a fake!

Scrolling through the options, his fingers shook uncontrollably, causing him to open numerous windows. Videos filled the screen, past recordings of himself strapped to the nerve gear. He began to rock back and forth as he watched himself writhing and convulsing over and over, each night the same, every day his body wasting away to almost nothing. He watched in horror as his past self discovered for the first time that his legs would no longer function. Tears welled up in the corner of his eyes as he watched the young man struggle to lift himself, his legs continually collapsing beneath him as he tried over and over in vain to walk again. He had to get out of here.

Closing the windows, he calmed himself. The room was still, nobody had noticed yet that he was awake. He hovered over several icons until he came to the one he wanted.

‘Unlock Door’

He pushed the button and waited, afraid to even breathe. Fearful that at any moment the men in riot suits would storm through the door and capture him again. For a long few seconds, nothing happened. And then, groaning and creaking on hinges that had not been used in years, the door swung slowly open. Kevin could see nothing outside beyond a bright, white glow which seemed to be spreading inside, covering the apartment walls in an ethereal glow. He could barely look.

After what seemed an eternity, Kevin, slowly began to push himself towards the door. He stopped at the threshold, suddenly hesitant. He wondered what Cobra would do when they found out he had woken. Shivering, he glanced up and down the doorframe, its grimy surface streaked with areas of bright metal where the rust hadn't yet touched. He ran his spindly fingers through thin hair, clasping his head with both hands. And before he could stop himself, he was crying. Not just tears, but full blown sobs that shook his entire body. He held his face to his knees, rocking backwards and forth, not knowing quite what he would do.

His hell was over. Brushing the tears from his cheeks, he set himself. He didn't know quite what the future would hold for him, but there was only one way to find out. Grabbing the sides of his wheelchair, he pushed. Pushed himself upwards, onto his shaking legs. At first it felt like he might fall again, but seconds passed and he stayed up. He put one foot in front of the other, and took a step. After several seconds, he took another. Halfway into the white

glow from the door, he glanced back at the room that had been his home. His prison for eleven solitary years.

In his head he said goodbye, not out of fondness or any sense of belonging, but simply for the sense of closure it brought him. He took another step, fading entirely out into the white, and was gone forever.