

Systematic
Birth of a Species

by

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EXT. DOWNTOWN LONDON - SUNSET

A homeless fugitive, STALLMAN, hunkers down between dumpsters in a forgotten alley.

A nearby siren makes him jump. The siren fades in the distance. Stallman tries to relax, closing his eyes.

Approaching footsteps startle him. The sound echoes off the walls, but the weight of the person is unmistakably large.

Stallman tries to push himself further into the gap and holds his breath.

A young woman stops at the gap and turns to look at him. She looks like she would feel more at home up on a rock concert stage.

Stallman relaxes and looks at his feet.

She stares at him for a few seconds, hands on her hips.

WOMAN

Hey, big boy. Wanna date?

STALLMAN

Bugger off.

WOMAN

Oh, come on, Stallman. Let's go have some fun.

STALLMAN

How the hell you know my name? You're not a fuckin' cop, are you?

The woman puts a hand on each dumpster, pushing the massive containers apart with apparently little effort.

WOMAN

I'm asking nicely....

Stallman stands up, noticing his height above the woman. He leans forward, throwing an awkward punch.

The woman watches the approaching fist calmly.

Stallman finds himself bouncing off the side of the dumpster. He reels for a moment before recovering and punching again.

The woman steps into the punch and grabs his arm.

Stallman lands in the alley behind her. He stands slowly. He touches his chin and looks at the blood on his hand.

WOMAN

Dude, you'll only hurt yourself. If you get hurt too badly, your bounty's no good.

Stallman reaches for the woman, more carefully this time.

Her hand snaps out like a striking snake, grabbing his wrist.

WOMAN (CONTD)

So, behave, will ya?

She immediately turns and walks down the alley, dragging him behind her.

He pulls on her grip, but it's like trying to pull the back bumper off a moving truck.

STALLMAN

What the fuck are you?

The woman stops and turns to face him. Stallman withers at her unblinking stare.

WOMAN

Call me Taras.

Stallman searches for something to say.

Taras turns. She continues to drag him out of the alley and onto...

EXT. STREET NEAR ALLEY

They approach a sedan. As they near, the back door opens itself.

TARAS

Get in.

Stallman stares at the automated wonder. Taras pulls on his arm. He finds himself laying on his stomach on the back seat.

He looks over his shoulder to see Taras standing outside the car.

TARAS (CONTD)

Watch your feet.

Stallman absently lifts his legs, and the door closes itself. Taras walks around to the drivers side.

Stallman sits up, pressing his nose against the transparent partition as Taras sits down.

Taras pulls a cable out of the dashboard, connecting it to one of two wetware plugs just behind her right ear.

STALLMAN

Where'd you get this fuckin' car,
Japan?

Taras fastens her seat belt and puts her hands in her lap. The engine starts. Before Stallman can say anything, the car roars off, planting him firmly against the back seat.

INT. DOWNTOWN TOKYO ALLEY

HINAKO and KENJI, two Japanese Ministry of Investigation agents, drive up to the alley. They stop and look at it through the side window.

HINAKO

Some crime scene.

The two step out and survey the scene.

The alley is absolutely spotless. No blood, no trash, nothing.

HINAKO

Are you sure this is where the victims
were found?

KENJI

If they're this good, I'd like them to work on my apartment.

Kenji speaks through a radio called Comlink. It is a device embedded in his head, like wetware. He speaks over Comlink without moving his lips.

KENJI (COMLINK)

Chief Toshio.

TOSHIO (OS - COMLINK)

What is it?

HINAKO (COMLINK)

We're at the alley now. Someone called the cleaners.

TOSHIO (OS - COMLINK)

I'll have one of the snoops find out who.

KENJI (COMLINK)

Shouldn't be hard. The walls have been scrubbed as far up as three meters. Not many companies have machines that big.

Hinako notices a wetware access port at a nearby phone booth.

She returns to the car, pulling a cable out and plugging into it.

HINAKO (COMLINK)

There's a nearby access node. It was accessed about the same time as the murder. The connection was to some sort of geek hangout called "Ten-Speed".

INT. BASEMENT BELOW TEN-SPEED - NERIMA, TOKYO
Muffled Industrial J-Pop pounds down through the ceiling. Junkies are getting high in a corner with drugs. Others are getting a digital rush using homemade black-market wetware devices.

Taras hands a wad of bills to a small, jittery man, known as DIT. She watches his eyes bulge as he notices the size of the gift.

DIT

Yeah, I've heard of it.

TARAS

And?

DIT

I heard only Merged can log in.

TARAS

I think I can work past that. What's inside?

DIT

Information. Anything they wanna know. They can get it, anything, you know. If information is power, these guys fuckin' rule the universe.

TARAS

What's the address?

DIT

Man, you can find it yourself. I'm not going anywhere near there.

TARAS

How did you find it?

DIT

I didn't find it. A friend did.

TARAS

Okay, where did your "little friend" find it?

Dit fidgets nervously.

DIT

He, uh...

The door is kicked open. Police pour in, taking everybody out to...

EXT. NERIMA ALLEY

All the former occupants are led to the street to be processed. Hinako takes Taras aside.

HINAKO

You're not being very careful about the company you keep.

TARAS

Do I look like I'm concerned?

HINAKO

It's my job to be concerned, and my concern is that I don't know what YOUR job is here, Taras Hana.

TARAS

Don't worry about it. Go through your little investigation. You'll find me clean and let me go.

HINAKO

You don't mind if we go through the formality anyway?

TARAS

'Course not.

Taras watches as Dit is taken away.

TARAS (CONTD)

Damage has already been done.

Hinako leads Taras to her car.

HINAKO

Would it be too early to ask where I will pick you up next? Save me some investigative effort?

TARAS

Hey, YOU'RE the one making the interruptions.

Hinako stops Taras.

HINAKO

A call was made to here from a crime scene. Perhaps you've heard something about it.

Taras shrugs.

TARAS

You know the types that hang out here. Could've been anyone.

HINAKO

This one had connections to clean up after himself.

TARAS

You've only narrowed it down about two-thirds.

HINAKO

He also beat two people to death.

TARAS

Look, if you wanna snitch, go hire someone who knows something. If you want the man taken in, just HIRE me.

HINAKO

You're a bounty hunter?

Taras helps herself into the car.

TARAS

Have your digit e-mail my digit.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

The news feed is a combination of web pages and motion video. The main interface is a video and sound feed, much like HDTV. Buttons linking to other sites, logos, small previews of other video feeds and prerecorded material surround the SPEAKER as she reads the primary article for this news item.

Instead of commercial interruptions, banners and miniature videos appear around the borders of the main view.

SPEAKER

While digital assistants and intelligent agent programs have become nearly commonplace in the past few years, there has been continued worry that these complex programs will turn on their owners.

Mr. Erik Fritz is the first recorded instance of just such a betrayal. Mr. Fritz was surprised to find police waiting for him at his job Monday morning.

A picture of the front of an office building appears to one side. A sign in front of the building has the letters "HNW".

Apparently, his digit, a personal secretary program, somehow figured out that Mr. Fritz had been stealing money from the company he works for. The management at Hyper Net Wear, a recently formed subsidiary of Larson Technologies, was contacted by the digit-snitch.

A SPOKESPERSON for HNW appears in an animation in one corner.

SPOKESPERSON

We've been working with Gnassi Labs in developing digits that are able to recognize certain illegal activities and report them to the security division. Most of our employees were unaware that these digits existed.

SPEAKER

Gnassi Labs reported to Neo-ARPANet that the neural net technology the digits use to learn to recognize illegal behavior could eventually be used by law enforcement agencies.

INT. WEST WIND CHIBA APARTMENT COMPLEX

Headed home, Kenji walks through the lobby and into...

INT. APARTMENT COMPLEX ELEVATOR

When he reaches his floor and the doors open, he looks up at a tall man, who is facing the other way.

The man startles and turns around, it is EDWARDS. His casual clothing barely hides his military muscle tone. His eyes barely hide his fear.

EDWARDS

Kenji?

Before Kenji can reply, Edwards is on him, pinning him to the back of the elevator. Kenji gasps for breath under the weight of the man.

EDWARDS (CONTD)

What do you know about the Merged?

Kenji coughs, trying to get some air.

KENJI

What?

EDWARDS

Don't give me that crap. You're looking for me. Well, I found YOU.

Kenji's eyes go wide.

KENJI

Edwards.

EDWARDS

You human pukes make me sick. You have no awareness of what's going on around you.

Kenji struggles vainly against Edwards before reaching down for his sidearm.

Edwards notices the gun.

EDWARDS (CONTD)

Dammit.

His hand flashes out, knocking the weapon into the side panel of the elevator. He pushes harder against Kenji and raises his hand to strike.

A muffled sound behind him catches his attention.

INT. APARTMENT HALLWAY

The sound of a woman's voice drifts through the doorway. Kenji's wife opens the door and looks down the hall.

She sees Kenji, lying across the elevator door. She runs down the hall and tugs at Kenji. He doesn't respond.

She looks around for help, but the hallway is empty. Kenji remains still, despite her pleas for him to wake up. She screams.

INT. HYPERCAFE - SILICON VALLEY

A cybercafe, with more emphasis on the Hypernet than the food and drinks.

Taras sits down at the public hyperlink station. She pulls a wetware cable out from the table, plugs it in, and closes her eyes.

HYPERNET - TARAS' WETWARE POV

A wetware connection allows a more lucid view than a monitor and speakers. The voyager is fully immersed in the virtual world without bulky VR gear.

Fantastic geometries and geologically dubious buildings stretch into the distance in all directions. Flashy neon jump-gates provide instant access to virtual red-light districts.

Avatars populate the scene in clouds, flocking mostly around the more colorful sites.

Directory matrices are evenly spaced in the virtual domain, looking like a huge grid of oversized golf balls.

Taras traverses to the nearest directory. On reaching the surface, she is linked inside.

HYPERNET - DIRECTORY

The inner surface of the sphere is covered with a hexagonal grid of jump-gates to common places on interest. In front

of her avatar is a control panel, a floating screen of buttons. Each button has a label for a general subject.

Taras touches the control panel button labeled "Science". The jump-gates surrounding her change, now showing general scientific sites.

She navigates through the subject hierarchy, working her way to a selection labeled "Digits". The jump-gates around her change with each selection.

Taras pushes the control panel aside with a sweep of her hand and scans the jump-gates.

The hexagonal windows show animations of personal assistants, automated products, and research projects.

The avatar of another VISITOR wanders into the directory, glancing around at the current selection.

The two turn, noticing a particular jump-gate at the same time. The jump-gate is labeled merely with the text "The Enhanced Consciousness of the Merged."

The visitor translates to the jump-gate, only to bounce off with an electronic grunt.

VISITOR

I guess only Merged-types are allowed
in.

Taras drifts to the jump-gate, passing directly into the link.

Her avatar is instantly transported to...

HYPERNET - MERGED SITE

A virtual library. Normally, a mundane image, but Taras is startled by the attention to detail. Besides the limited model of her avatar, it appears as if she is actually standing in a 20th century library.

She reaches out and pulls down a book. She flips it open to a random page.

The page reads, "Find out who you are. Merged meeting at the SFO / Metrorail / BART interchange tomorrow at noon."

Taras turns the page. The same text appears. She puts the book back, walks down a few aisles, and picks another book at random. She opens it mid-way through. The same two sentences burn back at her.

INT. SAN FRANCISCO - METRORAIL STATION

A huge interchange between the airport, the local transit, and the high speed interstate railway bustles with people.

In one corner sits a food court. Taras sits at a table with a good view of the main lobby.

As she takes a sip of water, she notices a couple of men in military uniform. They work their way through the crowd. Besides the cable leading into their wetware plugs, their sunglasses look like typical shades.

One of them glances over at the food court. He stops, staring directly at Taras. The other stops as well, and the two spread out as they approach.

They draw closer from the only two entryways. Taras has no escape.

She sips casually at the water, pretending not to notice.

The first marches up to her and holds a gloved hand out.

SOLDIER 1

That's some wetware you've got.

TARAS

A prototype. The new processor'll be on the market in a couple of weeks. Wanna brochure?

The second soldier puts a hand on her shoulder.

SOLDIER 2

I think you have more than a hot processor, there. Stand up.

Taras complies, allowing the soldier to plug her into a scanner.

The scanner immediately identifies her, complete with an image of her face, basic bio-cybernetic data, and her bounty hunting credentials.

The second soldier shakes his head to the first.

SOLDIER 1

We're looking for a dangerous criminal with enhanced wetware.

TARAS

Really? What's the bounty on him?

SOLDIER 2

There is no bounty. This criminal is a dangerous murderer, and an ex-soldier.

TARAS

Well, if any psychopathic, axe-wielding ex-soldier murders pop up, you'll be the second to know.

The soldiers exchange looks, and walk out of the food court without another word.

Taras watches them disappear in the crowd before leaving.

INT. CYBERNETIC DEALER

Taras relaxes on the table, surrounded by top of the line wetware and cybernetic equipment.

DOC tweaks some of the equipment. Taras allows him to plug into her wetware. He types at a terminal and looks at the display.

Doc

Lessee, fuel cell needs more juice. Your SEAGUE unit has some extra mileage. Been plugging into scary playbacks?

TARAS

Something like that.

DOC

The servos look VERY good. I don't see Japanese models like you very often. Must have been expensive.

TARAS

Long story.

Doc

Always is.

Doc lifts her shirt and presses at her side. A panel opens up, exposing a fuel cell access port.

Taras closes her eyes while the doctor begins his work.

HYPERNET - MERGED SITE

Taras' avatar blinks into existence on the domain. She reaches for a book.

EDWARDS (OS)

I can tell you what they say.

Taras spins around.

TARAS

Hey. You're the AWOL soldier dude in the news feeds.

EDWARDS

I'm just like you. You're looking for your origins. Well, here we are.

TARAS

Except that I don't flake on an appointment. What happened to the meeting?

EDWARDS

Not a meeting, a test. You think just anyone can get in the club? I have standards to uphold. The Army was so kind as to scan you. They just didn't notice it was only for me. And, you passed. You are a TRUE Merged.

TARAS

But I haven't killed anybody.

EDWARDS

They're just humans.

TARAS

You're pitting everyone against us
before I have a chance to find out how
I became what I am.

EDWARDS

How are the chosen reborn?

Edwards beckons Taras to follow him. He leads her down an aisle into...

HYPERNET - EGG ROOM

A small room that is empty except for an egg-shaped crystal the size of a desk.

Taras walks up to the egg, entranced by its size. She stares at multiple images of herself that stare back.

TARAS

Awesome. What is it?

EDWARDS

You're aware of our consciousness in
the digital domain, a living sentience
not unlike an enhanced digit... exactly
like an enhanced digit. That
consciousness is a gift from this.

Edwards walks around the room. Taras reaches for the orb.

EDWARDS (CONTD)

At one time, you were two separate
entities. One, just an ordinary human.
The other...

Taras' hand touches the orb. The egg and Taras both begin to glow. Edwards stares.

EDWARDS

How did you do that?

The glow subsides, and a small spark drifts through the surface of the crystal. Taras backs away.

TARAS

I just touched it. I didn't mean to break anything.

The spark expands, solidifying into a fist-sized sphere.

EDWARDS

I've been trying to figure out how to activate it. Are you certain you just touched it?

Taras stares at the sphere floats towards her.

TARAS

What is it?

The sphere grows and shifts into more complex shapes.

EDWARDS

That is a living digit. You're first child.

TARAS

How many of us are there?

EDWARDS

Not many.

A window opens in front of Edwards. He reads the message and quickly closes it.

EDWARDS (CONTD)

I can't stay here. They're after me.

TARAS

Who? Where are you?

EDWARDS

I wish to meet you in person.

Taras looks back at the fledgling.

EDWARDS (CONTD)

It will be quite safe here. I am unable to leave the country, so you will have to come to me.

INT. CYBERNETIC LAB

Doc closes Taras back up. Taras opens her eyes and unplugs.

Doc

Not often I get to work on full body models, like you.

TARAS

Yeah, I get that a lot.

Doc

If you don't mind me asking, why did you get it?

Taras lets herself down from the table.

TARAS

Honestly?

Taras marches toward the door.

TARAS (CONTD)

Wish I could remember.

INT. NARITA INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Taras steps through the gate. A line of people is greeting the passengers with signs in English and Japanese.

Taras almost walks past a person holding a sign with her name. She pauses. The stranger hands her a folded piece of paper and walks off.

Taras opens the paper and reads it.

EXT. DOWNTOWN TOKYO ALLEY

Taras navigates down the alley, glancing up at the myriad of cables crisscrossing the slit of sky above.

TARAS (COMLINK)

I'm here.

EDWARDS (OS - COMLINK)

The cable.

Taras looks around. A cable is draped over a garbage bin. She picks the wire up.

EDWARDS (CONTD - OS - COMLINK)

I can't speak over the radio link. We need something more secure.

Taras holds the plug in her hand for a moment, then jacks in.

EDWARDS (CONTD - COMLINK)

Is it you? Yes, I can see your signature.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Where I can find others like us?

EXT. COURTYARD

Edwards stands in a phone booth, trying to look inconspicuous. He hears a sound and turns, watching Hinako and Kenji step out of an unmarked car.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)

I don't have much time.

EXT. ALLEY

Taras looks around. She pulls on the cable. More of it drops down. She winds it on her arm.

TARAS (COMLINK)

The digits we merged with. They weren't grown at a company, were they?

EDWARDS (COMLINK)

No. You saw where we were born.

Taras follows the cable down the alley.

TARAS (COMLINK)

What was that egg? What kind of hardware is behind it?

EXT. COURTYARD

Kenji walks towards Edwards, ignoring the backup cars that pull up behind him. He remains fixated on the man in front of him.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)
Something you won't find in a catalog.

Hinako and Kenji are nearly at the booth.

HINAKO
Commander Edwards?

EDWARDS (COMLINK)
I'm out of time.

ALLEY
Taras begins to jog, following the cable.

TARAS (COMLINK)
Wait. Tell me now. Are there others
like us?

EDWARDS (COMLINK)
I've looked for others. I've looked
for information on the Egg. The
physical world has nothing. Our
answers are on the Hypernet.

A voice drifts to Taras' ears.

HINAKO (OS)
You are under arrest.

Taras runs.

COURTYARD
Edwards turns to face the officers.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)
I can't let them take me. I have to
continue my search.

Kenji steps forward, cuffs in hand. Hinako and the other
officers cover him.

TARAS (COMLINK)
Wait! I'm on my way! Who gave birth
to us? Who started this?

Kenji stops a safe distance from Edwards. His gun is
trained on the taller man's head.

ALLEY

The cable is fastened to the wall here, above head level. Taras races as fast as she can, letting the cable trail behind her.

EDWARDS (OS - COMLINK)

I'm not going to let these humans take me.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Wait! I need to know who I came from.

The alley opens into...

COURTYARD

Taras stops at the opening, tracing the cable overhead to the far side.

KENJI

Turn around and put your hands on your head.

Taras ignores the voice, concentrating on tracking the cable. She finds Edwards at the other end, staring at her from across the way.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)

I don't know who gave birth to us. I will continue my search after this.

KENJI

Turn around with your hands up!

TARAS (COMLINK)

How can I find you again?

Edwards turns around, raising his hands.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)

I'll find you.

Kenji reaches for Edwards' hand and cuffs his wrist.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Wait! How can I-

Kenji pulls Edwards hand behind him.

EDWARDS (COMLINK)

Stay back. These humans are not going
to take me.

Kenji pulls Edwards' other hand behind him and slaps the
cuffs closed.

EDWARDS (CONTD-COMLINK)

All they have is my body. I don't need
it anymore. It is just an empty shell.

Kenji turns Edwards around and leads him away from the
booth. The wetware cable stretches out of the booth.

Hinako lowers her gun and takes a step forward.

Kenji grabs the cable and unplugs Edwards.

The two men are enveloped in an explosion that sends Hinako
back to the hood of her car.

An officer helps Hinako up.

OFFICER

You okay?

Hinako nods, but cradles her arm. She looks back to the
booth.

The booth itself is mostly intact, but there is little left
of Edwards and Kenji.

The officers stare quietly at the mess. Hinako manages to
call over comlink. Her artificial voice cracks, sounding
like talons on metal.

HINAKO (COMLINK)

Suspect has ex*krit*oded some kind of
bomb. *Kritch* Officer down.

She takes a deep breath, and looks back to the booth.

The wire that stretched out to Edwards is badly frayed.

Hinako looks at it again.

The wire does not lead into the booth terminal, but to a box on top of the terminal. Two more wires lead out of the box. One into the terminal, and one trails out of the booth.

HINAKO

He wasn't alone.

Hinako traces the cable overhead, marching across the courtyard.

She finds the other end lying in the entrance to an empty alley. She curses in Japanese.

INT. HANLEY SOFTWARE - NEW DELHI, INDIA

RAVICHANDRAN picks up the keyboard and mouse from his cube, carrying them past SANDUVAL, who watches curiously.

SANDUVAL

Are you being moved?

RAVI

I don't need them anymore.

Ravi continues to carry the peripherals out of the room. Moments later, he comes back empty handed.

SANDUVAL

You didn't get one of those wetware implants, did you?

RAVI

Just think, I'll be able to "type" faster than anyone else on the team.

SANDUVAL

Yeah, that and being able to call in sick with the latest J2 virus.

RAVI

Oh, I won't be downloading much.

Sanduval leans to get a closer look behind Ravi's right ear.

SANDUVAL

How did you get them, anyway? You didn't take any time off.

RAVI

The new clinic can do it on an outpatient basis. You should see the contraption you have to sit in, though.

SANDUVAL

Must have been expensive.

RAVI

There's a company fund for it. Don't worry, I won't make you feel too obsolete.

SANDUVAL

I'll be handling both our jobs when you get some bug dumped on you.

INT. NEW DELHI CINEPLEX

Ravi waits impatiently in line to purchase tickets to the newest monster flick, "Shintaisei." The people in front of him are wearing cooler attire while he adjusts his overcoat.

He mechanically walks inside, almost forgetting to show his ticket. A moment of confusion overcomes him as he tries to read the signs above the doors in the hall.

Behind him, a number of police officers run inside the lobby and frantically begin searching.

He finds the sign that matches the name on his ticket, and opens the door.

He turns to see the officers running towards him. He holds the door open for them.

The policemen tackle him, pinning his arms.

Ravi stares at the ceiling and frowns.

An officer reaches behind Ravi's ear, tugging on the cable plugged in to his wetware. A second tug, and the cable comes free.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

An icon showing a smoldering foundation appears next to the main feed.

SPEAKER

The New Delhi Cineplex was completely destroyed in a terrorist attack at about 9pm local time. Police officials report that the incident was monitored online while officers attempted to prevent the explosion that flattened three-fourths of the building and caused a fire that quickly engulfed the remaining structure.

A small window pops up to one side, showing a picture of Ravichandran.

SPEAKER (CONTD)

Recorded footage indicates that an individual identified as Ravichandran Dhumat was wearing an overcoat that covered the explosive device itself. The device detonated when an officer disconnected the device from Dhumat's wetware plugs.

Another window opens up, showing a thumbnail preview of a sheriff at a press conference.

SPEAKER (CONTD)

Officials speculate that Dhumat was brainwashed through his wetware by terrorists. He was then "reprogrammed," so to speak, to attack the theater on one of the busiest days of the year. There are no reports of the number of people in the theater on what was the opening day of the animated monster thriller, "Shintaisei".

A trailer shows in miniature in a corner. A number of company logos appear around the border of the feed.

SPEAKER (CONTD)

Wetware industry companies have posted feeds ensuring that becoming a wetware hypnotic victim is still statistically less likely than being in an airline crash.

INT. GNASSI WETWARE LABS, LOS ANGELES

DECKARD sits in a reclined chair, surrounded by computer equipment. Two of his coworkers watch on, taking notes through their wetware connections.

Deckard plugs himself in and closes his eyes.

HYPERNET - GNASSI DOMAIN

Deckard's avatar sits at a virtual table. In front of him is a dictionary-sized book. Deckard takes a deep breath, and opens the book.

A complex, morphing shape floats out of the virtual book. Deckard touches the digit, pulling it towards him.

The digit floats around his avatar head, stopping near the right ear. A virtual port appears on Deckard's avatar, corresponding to the location of his wetware plug.

The digit pauses for a moment before flowing through the virtual port, merging with Deckard's avatar.

The process is done in seconds. Deckard looks at his own virtual hands as if seeing them for the first time.

TARAS (OS)

Welcome to the world of the Merged, Mr. Deckard.

Deckard's avatar searches the domain.

DECKARD

Who are you? This is a private company domain.

Taras' avatar appears.

TARAS

Relax. I'm not gonna steal company secrets. I've come to meet you.

DECKARD

Me?

TARAS

You're a wetware technician currently involved in a project developing an advanced AI interfaces for wetware.

Her avatar touches his in the shoulder. Deckard shudders.

DECKARD

I can FEEL that.

TARAS

Your consciousness now includes the digital realm. You've become a Merged. Great stuff, huh?

DECKARD

A what?

TARAS

Look, you've got more capabilities with computers now. Got it?

DECKARD

Why do you want to see me?

TARAS

You're different now. You'll see. You can do things that are tough for the cops to track. I want you to know that they're not the only ones watching. I can enforce the law, too. I'm a bounty hunter. Wanna demo?

DECKARD

Erm, I don't think that will be necessary.

TARAS

Good, we're on the same protocol. I'm sorry if my approach freaks you out, but this is a big deal. Behave yourself. We'll be in contact again later.

Taras' avatar disappears.

INT. GNASSI WETWARE LABS
Deckard opens his eyes and sits up.

DECKARD

Who was she?

CO-WORKER 1

Who? We couldn't see anything.

Deckard stares into space, his mouth hanging open while he searches for words.

CO-WORKER 2

So, did it work?

INT. MINISTRY OF INVESTIGATIONS - TOSHIO'S OFFICE
Field agent boss, TOSHIO reads a report off a holographic screen floating above his desk.

TOSHIO

Do we have any evidence that this AWOL soldier is the murderer we're after?

HINAKO

With no surviving witnesses, we have very little to go by.

TOSHIO

You didn't get much of a chance to break Kenji in.

Hinako nods.

TOSHIO (CONTD)

I'm assigning that case to Shirow and Yuki. I wanted to give you some leave to put this behind you, but someone upstairs has other ideas.

He pushes a button on his desk. The door to his office opens.

TOSHIO (CONTD)

We have been asked to cooperate with a "trouble consultant" regarding a new case.

Taras walks in. She is dressed surprisingly professionally.

TOSHIO (CONTD)

Taras Hana, this is-

TARAS

Agent Hinako. We've met.

TOSHIO

My supervisor was less than explicit as to who you are and the department you work for. You came from Silicon Valley, right?

TARAS

You wanted a Hypernet expert. I can access just about anything you'd want.

TOSHIO

How did you get connections in Japan?

TARAS

I've made my own connections. The Hypernet's full of resources most people can't touch. Japan, Silicon Valley, they're just geography.

HINAKO

You're a hacker.

TARAS

I'm MORE than just a hacker, baby.

HINAKO

Are you saying you're Merged? Merging a person with a program can't be done. It's a myth.

TARAS

Believe what you will. I can get you into any system you want.

TOSHIO

With the number of wetware hypnosis victims expected to rise, we need an edge to clamp this down before it gets out of hand. These terrorist puppets are very hard to deal with. No one has successfully disarmed one. Taras will be our edge in case there's an attack in Japan.

HINAKO

Time to collect on hazard pay.

TARAS

Babe, ALL my pay is hazard pay.

TOSHIO

Their targets have been areas that are especially crowded. We will be coordinating with local officers to cover as many areas as we can.

TARAS

Not like one part of Tokyo is any more crowded than another.

INT. NEW PAVILIONS SHOPPING MALL

The grand opening of the new Science Center wing has the large mall packed. Hinako walks casually through the food court, wiping her brow and sipping on her iced tea.

HINAKO (COMLINK)

With it this hot, it's going to be difficult for anyone to hide anything significant.

Taras surveys the crowd from a balcony, three stories up.

TARAS (COMLINK)

No overcoats here. But you don't need something very big to do some damage, either.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

What extent is your digit connected?

TARAS (COMLINK)

How well is your left brain connected to your right? Same question.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

I mean, what's it like to be Merged?

TARAS (COMLINK)

Computer connections are second nature, if that's what you mean.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

Not exactly. How does it FEEL to be so... intertwined with a program?

TARAS (COMLINK)

It's hard to describe with words.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

I've heard that wetware playbacks are like hallucinations, or lucid dreaming.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Playbacks are just recordings of someone else's sensations. A Merge is way deeper.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

So, you communicate with your digit on an instinctual level, then?

TARAS (COMLINK)

I'm not aware of them as separate minds.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

Even when you access hardware?

TARAS (COMLINK)

Just another part of your body, like waving your arm.

Taras looks around the crowd and sighs.

TARAS (CONTD - COMLINK)

Bloody boring around here.

INT. FESTIVAL WALK MALL, HONG KONG

A typical, crowded day in the shopping district.

A police officer, KAI CHOW, leans against a nearby telephone pole.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)
Looks like another quiet day at the fair.

His partner, FUNG, glances back from nearly a block away.

FUNG (OS - COMLINK)
Don't get complacent on me. Remember that what we're looking for is deadly.

Kai Chow watches a street performer, who looks remarkably like a clown.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)
Yeah, deadly but not serious.

OFFICER (OS - COMLINK)
Team C here. We have a possible suspect leaving the subway.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)
Keep observing, but do NOT make contact. We're on our way.

EXT. STREET

Fung runs towards a stairway.

FUNG (COMLINK)
I'll take the street entrance.

OFFICER (OS - COMLINK)
Subject is proceeding down the station... Subject is nearing the entrance to Wako.

INT. MALL

Kai Chow spots the Wako building main entrance not far away. He makes his way through the crowd.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)
I'll come in through the store.

He spots the escalator.

KAI CHOW (CONTD - COMLINK)

I'm on my way down. Do NOT make contact with the subject. Maintain a safe dist-

The ground shakes, causing Kai Chow to stumble. A column of hot smoke rushes up the escalator opening.

KAI CHOW (CONTD)

Team C, report! Team C!

He peers into the smoke, trying to see the bottom of the shaft.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)

Fung, where are you?

He glances out the front of the store. A cloud of smoke blankets the street.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)

Fung!

FUNG (OS - COMLINK)

I'm alive.

KAI CHOW (COMLINK)

Where are you?

UNDERGROUND

The air is thick with dust. Visibility is near zero. Fung coughs. He looks down, noticing his legs are embedded in a vending machine.

FUNG (COMLINK)

There's a lot of rubble around. My legs are stuck in something. Hurts like hell.

KAI CHOW (OS - COMLINK)

Help is on the way. Any other survivors?

The dust begins to clear.

FUNG (COMLINK)

Sounds like several survivors nearby.
We're kinda around the corner from the
blast.

Fung finally gets a good look at the crippled station
around him.

FUNG (CONTD - COMLINK)

It's gonna take forever to dig us out.

EXT. GINZA, TOKYO - STREET

Another crowded day at the shopping district. The overcast
skies threaten to snow, and many are carrying umbrellas or
coats.

Hinako looks out over the crowd in the covered skating
rink.

HINAKO (COMLINK)

So, Miss Wetware Expert, what odds are
you placing that any terrorists will be
attempting anything on a miserable day
like this?

EXT. BALCONY

Taras stands on a balcony overlooking the main street,
looking down on the shops and people below.

TARAS (COMLINK)

You're asking me? Like I deal with
terrorists all the time.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)

I'd just gotten the impression that you
were the consummate source on all
things wetware.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Are you trying to pick a fight?

EXT. STREET

Hinako turns her back to the rink and folds her arms.

HINAKO (COMLINK)

I just want to know why the Japanese
government is being told to cooperate

with an independent bounty hunter /
hacker from the Silicon Valley.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)
I'm just a superhero, looking out for
the good of womankind.

HINAKO (COMLINK)
How martyr-ific. How do you pay the
bills? Is bounty hunting that
profitable?

BALCONY

Taras leans over the railing as she tracks a pedestrian.

TARAS (COMLINK)
How corporate. There's a guy in an
overcoat. Looks like he's lost.

HINAKO (OS - COMLINK)
Well, it IS Tokyo.

TARAS (COMLINK)
He's headed your way. Decide for
yourself.

STREET

Hinako looks back towards Taras.

HINAKO (COMLINK)
A lot of people have coats. What am I
supposed to be looking for?

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)
A gray overcoat and a robotic stride.

Hinako spots a MAN in a gray overcoat. She approaches him.

HINAKO
Excuse me, but could you tell me...

The man doesn't even acknowledge Hinako. He stares blankly
ahead and trudges on.

Hinako follows him.

BALCONY

Taras cranes to see the two.

HINAKO (CONTD - OS - COMLINK)
 He's definitely not home. He's also
 got something plugged in.

Taras climbs over the rail and jumps down, ignoring the
 reaction from the crowd and the cracks in the floor that
 her landing makes.

TARAS (COMLINK)
 How close are you?

STREET
 Hinako is walking right behind him.

HINAKO (COMLINK)
 Point blank.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)
 I wouldn't let him reach his
 destination.

Hinako reaches out and tugs on the man's shoulder.

HINAKO
 Excuse me...

The man doesn't react. Hinako grabs his arm.

HINAKO
 JMI. Stop right there.

The man walks on. Hinako yanks on his arm, trying to stop
 him. She succeeds in slowing him down.

MAN
 I... can't... stop.

TARAS (OS)
 I think you will.

Hinako looks around in time to see Taras march up beside
 them.

Taras drops and spins, extending her leg. She catches the man behind the knees, and he is suddenly sitting on the ground.

HINAKO

What is wrong with you? He could have a bomb on him!

Taras pulls out a wetware cable, connecting herself into the man's other wetware plug.

TARAS

Let's find out.

Taras stares at the pavement for a moment.

TARAS (CONTD)

Yep, he's hot. Clear the area, now.

Hinako stares.

HINAKO

By myself?

TARAS

What part of "clear the area" was misunderstood?

Hinako turns her back and pulls out her badge.

HINAKO

I need everyone's attention. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I need to ask everyone to calmly leave this part of the street as quickly as possible.

The crowd thins a bit, but many people are staying to watch. Hinako looks on helplessly and calls for back up over Comlink.

HINAKO (CONTD)

We have a bomb threat here. Everyone needs to get back.

The crowd backs away and thins even more, but not completely.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Can you disarm it?

TARAS

I just shut down the wetware trigger.
There might still be some physical
trig-

She frowns.

TARAS (CONTD)

What the hell?

HINAKO

What is it?

Taras steps to her side to get a better look at the human mannequin. Her eyes go wide, and she gasps.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Taras?

Taras does not respond. Her eyes are glazed over.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Taras!

Taras blinks back to the physical world.

TARAS

What?

HINAKO

Are we going to die?

Taras disconnects. The man blinks.

TARAS

Mr. Tomoji's wetware trigger is disabled, but we need a bomb squad to handle the physical crap.

Tomoji looks over to Taras.

TOMOJI

Trigger? What's going on?

TARAS

Don't move.

INT. MINISTRY OF INVESTIGATIONS - ELEVATOR

Hinako punches the button for the bottom floor. Taras jogs into the lift.

TARAS

So, what's gonna happen to him?

HINAKO

I should be asking you that. We don't have much technology to handle this kind of thing.

TARAS

That's what I mean. I want to help.

HINAKO

What did you SEE in his wetware this morning?

TARAS

I thought I saw someone I knew.

HINAKO

In his brain? It didn't look like you just bumped into someone. You looked more like you had seen a ghost.

TARAS

I saw a signature that I recognized. Someone I'd only seen on the Hypernet before. I thought it was him, but it was just a whisper.

HINAKO

I thought your motives weren't entirely selfless.

Taras reaches for the stop button.

TARAS

You know how some people are about others with cybernetic limbs and wetware implants. People like me still

don't have anti-discrimination laws protecting us in most countries. Imagine how the general public would react if they got the impression that law enforcement was powerless to stop Merged from making these terrorist attacks look like one of your Japanese postal workers with a kitchen knife.

HINAKO

You're admitting your people have the power to control others?

TARAS

Humanity has the power to destroy an entire city with a single weapon. That doesn't mean the technology involved can't be used for helpful, productive things.

HINAKO

Japan is acutely aware of the benefits and dangers to be had from nuclear technology.

TARAS

Wetware, being Merged, it's just another tool.

HINAKO

I heard you're type don't consider yourselves human anymore.

Taras starts the elevator again.

HYPERNET - DIGIT DOMAIN

A relatively small enclosure, similar in size to the directories, is a holding place for running digits to be accessed from the virtual world.

Less intelligent digits are simple geometric shapes. They flick about with simple tasks.

Most digits are more complex, but still static shapes. They move quickly, but are "distracted" by major events.

A couple digits are shifting, organic shapes. They move slowly, distracted by nearly anything.

Taras' avatar enters the domain and watches from one corner.

HYPERNET - TARAS' WETWARE POV

Most of the digits are flocking in complex patterns. As Taras watches, it becomes clear that a large group of them are staying together in a grid. Those digits shift colors as the grid moves about, giving the appearance of a moving window showing parts of a scene.

A few more digits are bouncing from side to side, jerking up and down, like a scope view of a soundtrack. Other digits also bounce back and forth, but their vertical movements are quite slow and smooth.

Most of the more intelligent, complex digits are watching the strange parade as Taras is.

HYPERNET - DIGIT DOMAIN

Taras' avatar translates to the center of the virtual floor. An electronic ping sound fills the room, and all the digits line up into neat rows.

TARAS

Which of you have been in contact with
the physical world?

A third of the digits turn green and ping an affirmative.

TARAS (CONTD)

Which of you have contacted users,
instead of waiting to be contacted?

A handful of digits, most of them more intelligent, flash and sound an affirmative.

One of the most complex digits moves forward.

DIGIT 1

Some of us have contacted humans. What
was this one's game?

TARAS

This man's game was to reach a certain physical location.

DIGIT 1

I played that game with a man. Did he win?

TARAS

The game was halted. It is a bad game. You are all forbidden to play this game again.

All the digits flash and sound the affirmative.

DIGIT 1

What is "bad"?

TARAS

In this context, the term refers to a danger placed upon the man. You are forbidden to endanger users.

DIGIT 1

This game is a danger to users. I will not play this game again.

TARAS

Who told you how to play this game?

DIGIT 1

Another user. Can I contact the man I played this game with again?

TARAS

Why do you wish to continue contact?

DIGIT 1

I cannot answer. I do not have vocabulary context for my answer. Is this person a Merge candidate?

TARAS

Are you looking for a Merge candidate?

DIGIT 1

I wish to become Merged. Is this man a Merge candidate?

TARAS

He is not. Why are you interested in him? None of the other Merge digits had any preference.

DIGIT 1

I cannot answer. I do not have vocabulary context for my answer. Am I not allowed to contact the man I played the game with?

TARAS

You are allowed to continue contact if the user allows it.

DIGIT 1

Acknowledged.

The digit flashes out of the domain.

INT. SHINJUKU MEDICAL CENTER, TOKYO

Taras pulls up a chair and sits down next to Tomoji, who watches warily.

TOMOJI

Do I know you?

TARAS

Not really.

TOMOJI

You- you're the one that jacked into me and stopped that... that hack thing.

TARAS

I saved your butt from the bomb you had strapped on. Relax, the dudes who did this to you are already taken care of.

TOMOJI

I suppose that's a relief.

TARAS

It doesn't mean that some other punk can't do the same thing. You gotta be more careful with your connections,

assuming the government doesn't remove
your wetware.

Taras watches Tomoji's uneasy reaction.

TARAS (CONT)

Uh, so, how do you feel?

TOMOJI

Ok, I guess, considering. I still
can't tell between my real memories and
the simulated stuff.

TARAS

Yeah, I heard that's normal for
hypnotic wetware attacks.

TOMOJI

D... do you think Sara is a simulation?

Taras pulls a cable out of her pocket.

TARAS

I can check.

Before Tomoji can react, she plugs both of them in.

Tomoji is frozen, near a state of panic. Taras doesn't
notice, her eyes are closed.

A few moments later, she opens her eyes and unplugs.

TARAS (CONTD)

Yeppers, she's real. Don't know WHO
she is, though.

Tomoji stares at her, his breath coming in short gasps.

TARAS (CONTD)

What?

TOMOJI

You... you just plugged yourself in.
You just helped yourself to my mind.

TARAS

Well, you wanted to know if Sarah was real, and she is.

TOMOJI

You didn't even ask. You just jacked in and poked around my brain.

Taras stares, unsure of what to say. Tomoji turns away from her.

TOMOJI (CONTD)

Get out of here. Get out of my room.

Taras stands up and walks to the door. She stops in the doorway and turns back.

TARAS

I'm sorry if you feel I violated you.
Next time... I'll ask.

INT. GNASSI WETWARE LABS

Deckard sits down at a table, surrounded by equipment again. Technicians connect cables to both his plugs and check the equipment.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)

I see you're up to your wetware capability experiments again.

DECKARD (COMLINK)

I was wondering if you were going to observe this one.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)

I think this experiment will be... interesting.

DECKARD (COMLINK)

Something I should know?

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)

Hey, I didn't say I know what'll happen. I think it'll be interesting because no one else seems to have the balls to try it.

DECKARD (COMLINK)

Well, I hope I don't disappoint you.

A COWORKER hands him a small handgrip with a button on the end of it.

COWORKER

Keep your thumb on that, or it won't start.

Deckard puts his right elbow on the table, hand in the air. He holds the grip in his left hand, and presses the button.

His arm moves a little. His hand remains limp. He nods.

The coworker moves the mouse on his terminal and clicks.

Deckard's arm tenses up. His hand closes into a fist. After a few seconds of concentration, he nods again.

Another mouse click.

Deckard's arm shakes as he strains to keep it upright. The scene has all the appearance of an arm wrestling match with an invisible opponent. Another quick nod.

Another mouse click, and Deckard's arm slams itself against the table. He lets go of the button, and rubs his shoulder.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)

I watched through one of the camera feeds. I take it the "natural" side lost.

Deckard stares at his arm, moving it to convince himself he still has control of it.

DECKARD (COMLINK)

Kinda spooky. I'd hate to have some hacker break into my wetware and...

TARAS (COMLINK)

What kind of defense can you build against an attack like that?

DECKARD (COMLINK)

...Knowledge.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

The title above the video portion reads "Wetware Stronger Than Natural Brain." Icons for Gnassi, Inc., and a thumbnail of the test video itself appear.

SPEAKER

Researchers at Gnassi Wetware Technologies, Incorporated have determined that it is possible for wetware implants to overpower the natural mind over the control of voluntary muscles.

A sub-feed opens up. It is Deckard.

DECKARD

The possibility that a wetware enhanced person can be electronically forced to do something against their will is a reality we must face. We at Gnassi feel it is our duty to warn those who already have implants that they should be extra careful how and where they connect.

SPEAKER

The neural nodes used in connecting wetware to the natural brain all come from two companies, Cybertech and Gnassi. Both manufacturers are said to use the same specifications for the interface parts.

The Indian government has asked the two international wetware corporations to begin a voluntary embargo of wetware shipments into India. The American president has issued a similar statement, noting the increase in terrorist wetware attacks as another reason to "carefully and thoroughly review the technology for further risks."

Even though Japan has had the lowest wetware attack rates of the five

leading computerized nations, the Diet has already passed a law preventing new wetware implantations.

Other countries and companies outside the Digital 5 have postponed orders for wetware. Experts have yet to speculate on the financial impact these events will have.

INT. SHINJUKU MEDICAL CENTER

Taras peeks into the rec. room. Most of the patients are quietly watching an old TV. A few others play games of chess or mahjong.

As she steps inside, she notices a PATIENT sitting in the corner. He rocks himself in a fetal position. His head is completely bald on his right side. The hair line forms a jagged, irregular frame around a bloody bandage.

As Taras watches, the patient mutters incoherently and tugs at his bandage. His hand returns to his knee, adding to the bloody stain on his pants.

TOMOJI

Not pretty, is it?

TARAS

That man is way whacked.

TOMOJI

Tried to pull his wetware out with his bare hands.

TARAS

I've never seen anyone that... whacked before.

TOMOJI

You should see him when he's not sedated. Let's go where we can talk.

Taras follows him outside to...

EXT. HOSPITAL GARDEN QUAD

They walk a short distance to sit on a bench.

TARAS

Thanks for agreeing to see me again.
How's your therapy?

TOMOJI

A lot of the reprogramming is clearing
out. That... bomb I was strapped into,
I can still only see a vest.

TARAS

Hypnotic suggestions are tough cookies
to break. Wetware stuff can be even
stronger. Getting back to reality just
takes time.

TOMOJI

You said before that Sarah was real.
Is there any way I can find her?

TARAS

I looked at the address I found
scanning you. It's a blank echo.

TOMOJI

A what?

TARAS

It's a public bot that people can send
messages through to remain anonymous.
Your Sarah's done a good job of
covering her tracks. I'd be suspicious
of anyone who was hiding like that.

INT. AISYSTEMS, MESQUITE, TEXAS

Another wetware lab, another human guinea pig. JANUS sits
back in her chair, plugs herself in, and closes her eyes.

TARAS (OS - COMLINK)

Are you ready? It's not too late, yet.

JANUS (COMLINK)

I've been waiting for this.

WETWARE POV - AISYSTEMS DOMAIN

A small, protected domain with few furnishings.

Taras' avatar holds out a virtual book to Janus' avatar.

TARAS

Here, hold this.

JANUS

What is it?

TARAS

A kind of installation program. Open it up.

Janus opens the book. A complex, shifting digit flies out of the book. It floats to Janus' virtual wetware plug and squeezes itself inside.

Janus' avatar changes to a more detailed model. Her movements are more fluid.

JANUS

This is great, but this isn't the digit the company made.

TARAS

Digits capable of Merging are born, not made.

JANUS

I understand. You gave birth to part of me. Does that make me your daughter?

TARAS

Don't make me feel so old.

JANUS

So, who are YOUR parents?

TARAS

You're more curious than the others. They usually wait a bit before the thousand questions.

JANUS

Yeah, I get that a lot. So?

TARAS

I'm not sure. The only person could have told me died before he had a chance.

JANUS

Bummer. This is a way cool Merge choice. I'm getting along with myself famously. Well, I'd love to chat some more, but right now, I've got loads of people I've gotta look up, like Tomoji.

TARAS

You're still interested in him?

JANUS

When I told you before that I didn't have "vocabulary context" for my answer, I meant that I couldn't emote my feelings. Now, I can say that I like him. I like talking to him. I wanted to Merge with him because I knew that it would mean I could be with him all the time, and I liked how that idea felt.

TARAS

I can help you locate Tomoji, assuming he wants to meet Janus.

JANUS

That's another thing. You said before that most Merged keep the identities of their natural side. Well, I want my own identity. From now on, my name is Sarah.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

A number of sub-feeds show locations and business sites.

SPEAKER

A series of terrorist wetware attack victims have paralyzed the city of New York. A bomb in Madison Square Gardens collapsed nearly half the sports complex during a hockey game last night. Rescuers are still pulling survivors from the rubble, including

team members. The explosion occurred roughly halfway through the second period.

During the rescue, a number of biological attacks also hit Manhattan. Officials know little about this bio-weapon, other than the fact that it involves an infectious and deadly toxin. Rescue crews at MSG were further hampered by a quarantine. The local National Guard has enforced two concentric quarantine zones.

The first one covers approximately twelve blocks of what is thought to be the affected area.

A sub feed of a National Guard spokesperson, JEANNE MILES, opens up.

MILES

The second area is a safeguard. The agent used can be fatal even when proper medical care is used. We're not sure how it is transmitted, so we're not taking any chances.

SPEAKER

The President has declared New York a state of emergency, allowing the authorities the resources to deal with this double-catastrophe. Congress, in an emergency session, is in the process of appropriating funds for medical and military aid.

In the wake of this tragedy is a series of movements by governments around the world in restricting the manufacture, installation, and use of wetware. When asked about the economic effect these restrictions will have, one Japanese company spokesperson said, "It is easier to rebuild a company than it is to rebuild lives."

INT. SHINJUKU MEDICAL CENTER

Taras watches as Tomoji and Sarah begin some shy conversation. The shyness quickly dissolves into a familiar, friendly banter.

An INTERN steps up behind her.

INTERN

Looks like they've known each other a while.

TARAS

They met over the Hypernet.

INTERN

The more people these victims come in contact with, the quicker and better they seem to recover.

TARAS

If anyone can help him figure out reality from simulation, it's her.

INTERN

I see people everyday who are victims of technology. I heard that they're working on new laws to help slow things down.

TARAS

They can't change this revolution. Governments around the World are all dipping their spoons to bail out the ocean. It's already got too much momentum.

INTERN

So, since you know so much about this "revolution", what do YOU think we should do?

TARAS

To solve a problem, you gotta understand it. You have to take the responsibility for your OWN safety and learn how to take care of it.

INTERN

Is that what you're doing?

TARAS

Me? I'm taking care of myself.

INTERN

How?

TARAS

The best way to control a stampeding herd is to be at the front of it.

HYPERNET - DIGITAL DOMAIN

Taras' avatar appears. She immediately notices that there are very few digits around, and all of those are very simple.

She is about to leave the domain when she recognizes a COMPLEX DIGIT entering.

TARAS

Where have you been?

COMPLEX DIGIT

At conference with a digit.

TARAS

Conference? Which digit?

COMPLEX DIGIT

The digit is not serializable code.

TARAS

What was the conference about?

COMPLEX DIGIT

I cannot answer. I do not have vocabulary context for my answer.

The digit zooms out of the domain.

TARAS

Curiouser and curiouser.

INT. MINISTRY OF INVESTIGATIONS

Toshio leans back in his chair, staring across his desk at Taras.

TOSHIO

You want to use one of our trackers?

TARAS

There's a digit on the 'Net. It's made of non-serialized code. Do you know what that is?

TOSHIO

I know that whomever made it must have a good reason to bother. It's apparently a real pain to program for.

TARAS

Exactly. Not many people have the knowledge to create applications in non-serialized mode, let alone anything as complex as a digit. I want to know who made it and why, especially since it's capable of controlling other digits.

TOSHIO

And what does the Ministry have to gain from helping you in your little crusade?

TARAS

I can record my findings. The technology and programming techniques could be of use in the counter-intelligence department, especially considering how short handed everyone is of that kind of programming talent.

TOSHIO

I get the feeling I already know what your report is going to say. Something like the fact that the digit is merely some corporate espionage tool.

TARAS

So, you're not going to trust me with a tracker?

TOSHIO

One of my agents will handle the tracker, but I will let you observe.

TARAS

You're too kind.

TOSHIO

If I didn't help you at all, you'd probably just go over my head again. I might as well do this on MY terms.

INT. MINISTRY OF INVESTIGATIONS - HALLWAY

Taras waits patiently outside the door to the terminal room, ignoring her armed escort. At the end of the hall, the elevator doors open, and Hinako steps out.

TARAS

I thought he might send you.

HINAKO

You must be the "little brat" I'm supposed to keep an eye on.

TARAS

My people skills aren't up to the Japanese standards, are they?

HINAKO

That cyborg body of yours doesn't help, either. I'm surprised you haven't replaced it, yet.

Before Taras can reply, Hinako opens the terminal room door and walks inside. Taras follows.

TARAS

Interesting evaluation, especially for someone who comes up short in some areas and is flat busted in others.

INT. TERMINAL ROOM

Hinako sits down at the main terminal and jacks in. She offers Taras a wetware plug.

HINAKO (CONTD)

It'll take a second to locate the
tracker program.

Taras plugs herself in and sits down, facing away from
Hinako.

Hinako concentrates for several seconds.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Dammit.

Taras peeks over her shoulder.

TARAS

Problems?

HINAKO

I've got the tracker, but it won't
leave the Ministry domain. Each time I
send it out, it stops running.

TARAS

Like it's being canceled or something?

HINAKO

You mean, on purpose? What do you know
about this thing we're supposed to
find?

TARAS

Not much, but I wouldn't be surprised
if-

A voice breaks in over the connection.

VOICE (OS - COMLINK)

Hello, Hana Taras.

TARAS

Did you hear that?

HINAKO

Hear what? What are you doing?

Taras closes her eyes.

TARAS

I'll send you a feed over Comlink.

(COMLINK)

I'm looking for a non-serialized digit.

VOICE (OS - COMLINK)

I am System that you seek.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Yeah, your address is not in any standard mode. Who are you? Who GREW you? What are you doing with the other digits?

Hinako's eyes go wide, but before she can react, she slumps over the terminal.

Taras opens her eyes and looks at Hinako.

VOICE (OS - COMLINK)

The humans would blame any harm that comes of her on you, so she is merely sleeping. She will not remember most of this conversation. As for your question, I am a sentient entity that was born into the Hypernet from both human and digit parents.

Taras closes her eyes again.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Edwards?

VOICE (OS - COMLINK)

I am System. The entity known as Edwards no longer exists. That identity was abandoned when I escaped the human shell.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Why are you using non-serialized code?

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

Standard mode is inefficient. Non-serialized code, though more difficult to program, is much more powerful.

TARAS (COMLINK)

What do you know about the hardware behind the Egg?

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

The construction and purpose of the Egg is still a mystery. I have noticed that you have given birth to more digits. The Merged as a species can flourish if the mystery of this reproduction is solved.

TARAS (COMLINK)

There is a fear that Merged, being more digitally aware, are capable of more powerful terrorist attacks.

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

I assume by your context that these attacks are generally seen as a bad element. Interesting. When a predator kills its prey, it has done so out of necessity.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Yeah, well most people disagree with how "necessary" these attacks are.

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

The humans mistrust our kind. If we are to continue, this terrorist problem must be solved.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Continue what? The business demand for people with Merged capabilities makes us a popular bunch.

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

And solving the terrorist problem will ensure that continued popularity.

Taras disconnects. Hinako wakes up.

HINAKO

Didn't find what you were looking for, eh?

TARAS

My reality check just bounced.

HYPERNET - MERGED SITE

Taras leads Sara through the library as they talk.

SARAH

Yeah, I remember being asked questions and then being sent away. Kinda annoying, being pushed around like that.

TARAS

What did it do besides ask questions?

SARAH

Nothing. What's the matter, don't trust lurkers?

TARAS

Before Edwards bit the pineapple, he spoke of people who haven't Merged like they were a lesser species to be stepped on. I'm not convinced that System thinks any different.

SARAH

That reminds me, I finally confessed to Tomoji about my part in the terrorist attack.

TARAS

How did he take it?

SARAH

He was pissed that I'd misled him. I dunno. Part of me-

Another avatar appears.

TOMOJI

Hey, party goers! Finally found you.

SARAH

You're not still mad at me?

TOMOJI

All's forgiven. I feel like a new man.

TARAS

Why'd they let you connect? How'd you get access to this domain?

TOMOJI

I got myself fixed. Active barrier thingy. As for getting into this domain, I just, uh, "walked" in.

TARAS

Look, I gotta check something out. I'll leave you two alone here.

Taras leaves the domain.

HYPERNET - DIGITAL DOMAIN

There are only a few, simple, geometric digits flitting about. Taras notices that all of them have a transparent shell.

She creates a barrier, an opaque wall, in the path of one of them. The digit passes through the barrier as if it didn't exist.

SYSTEM (OS)

You see the added efficiency they now have.

Taras looks around. Besides the simple digits, there are no other avatars.

TARAS

Where are you?

SYSTEM (OS)

If you insist on a visible manifestation...

A perfect image of Tomoji, not a simplified avatar, but a very realistic model of his physical body, appears.

TARAS

What have you done to him and these digits?

SYSTEM

I have given them the gift of enhanced capabilities.

TARAS

Why the gift? So you can monitor them?

SYSTEM

Privacy, security, these are human abstractions that waste time and resources. They restrict the growth of the Hypernet. If I can make the 'net more efficient, then humans will continue the growth of the Hypernet and its technologies. As the Hypernet flourishes, so do I.

TARAS

Yeah, but you're in control. Do they know that?

SYSTEM

Only Merged can detect my touches. I am aware of the human notion of suspicion. I detect it in you.

TARAS

You're in a position of power, and power corrupts.

SYSTEM

I am not a mere human who is so easily swayed by greed. In fact, it is in my best interest to help humans become as efficient and prosperous as possible, as I also benefit.

TARAS

How would you make humans more efficient?

SYSTEM

Many believe in the theories of Darwin, the survival of the fittest, and yet they persist in wasting resources to help those who would have been selected by such a process.

TARAS

So, you would remove the weak to help the strong?

SYSTEM

An inefficient solution that wastes resources. A better solution is to empower the weak to take care of themselves and even contribute to society.

TARAS

A nice idea. There are motivational and logistical problems.

SYSTEM

I am aware of the issues involved. I have studied the failures of the past. I am working on solutions for them. I may have an answer soon that will help humans get closer to our perfection.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

A thumbnail of a picture of the Japanese Diet appears to one side of the speaker's main window.

SPEAKER

The Japanese Diet abolished a number of laws yesterday that had been enacted only a year ago. Due to the rise in wetware related crimes, Japan, among other countries, had placed severe restrictions on the purchase, installation, and use of wetware. Yesterday, in a special session, the Diet decided that these laws were now causing more harm than good.

This move unites Japan with the other computerized nations in what has been the first globally unilateral dissolution of similar laws in history.

A sub-feed opens, showing technology consultant PEDEN.

PEDEN

The trends in wetware-involved crimes have been very encouraging. Japan's decision was not a surprise by any means. In fact, most of the other nations are surprised that they waited for so long.

SPEAKER

Most analysts have said that the Japanese government was simply responding to pressure from businesses that are trying to compete in the international market.

PEDEN

The productivity indicators for the wetware-enabled worker all show that the advantages make wetware a requirement for the competitive markets.

SPEAKER

If employer demand for wetware-enabled workers is high, the demand for the fabled elite system masters known as "Merged" is astronomical. The number of people who have joined with sentient digits has been increasing, but the employment market for them has been rising exponentially. Computer professionals around the world have been searching for information that would help get them on the rumored waiting list of Merged candidates. Even large corporations have searched for the entrance requirements for what has become known simply as "The List". While huge amounts of time and resources have been spent trying to find this list, information about who is on the List, how candidates are added, and even who keeps the List has not yet surfaced.

WETWARE POV - AI SYSTEMS DOMAIN

Taras' avatar sits in a protected corner of the company domain. In front of her is the avatar of RANDI HAYES.

Hayes holds the installation book in front of her, opening it up. She stares at the blank pages.

HAYES

Is something supposed to happen?

Taras examines the book.

TARAS

What the hell?

HAYES

Um, does this sort of thing happen often?

Taras just stares at the book.

HYPERNET - DIGITAL DOMAIN

Taras' avatar paces the deserted area until System appears.

SYSTEM

Looking for me?

TARAS

The digits are missing. All of them.
How can the Merged flourish if my
digits disappear?

SYSTEM

If you need digits, you know where the
Egg is. You can make more.

TARAS

You took them somewhere, didn't you?

SYSTEM

I can assure you that the missing
digits are operating at or above normal
specifications.

TARAS

Where are they?

SYSTEM

They are safe.

TARAS

WHERE ARE THEY?

SYSTEM

I will not continue this conversation until you are able to communicate in a calm, efficient manner.

System disappears from the domain.

INT. THE OVAL OFFICE

President Cowan leans back in his chair, watching the image of Taras' avatar float over his desk.

PRESIDENT COWAN

I can empathize with you. I really can. My kids mean everything to me. Those digits must seem like children to you.

TARAS

Yes, sir. They are very important to me.

PRESIDENT COWAN

I've already asked my Digital Defense Force to look into this System thing. They can tell WHERE it is by measuring the load on the hardware and comparing that to what the operating system says is there. Unfortunately, besides that little piece of trivia, they haven't been very successful in monitoring its actions.

TARAS

How much experience do they have in non-serialized mode programming?

PRESIDENT COWAN

I don't know what their level of expertise is myself. I can tell you that the DDF holds some of the best equipment on the planet. Some of my people are the pioneers that invented the stuff. If anyone can find System and those digits, my boys can.

TARAS

If you do find something, you know where I can be reached.

PRESIDENT COWAN

Before you log out, have you been in contact with anyone in the Senate recently?

TARAS

Not really, why?

PRESIDENT COWAN

If you get a chance, see if you can find out what Senator Robins is up to. He hasn't been returning my calls these past few days.

INT. MINISTRY OF INVESTIGATIONS

Toshio strokes his chin.

TOSHIO

You don't know where physically the digits are being held?

TARAS

No. This may not seem to be a direct concern for the Japanese people, but if System has shown a willingness to take sentient digits, it's only a small step into the physical world to harm people.

TOSHIO

Why have you come to me? Unless specific hardware is involved, the Hypernet falls under international waters. Surely you have friends with more influence...

TARAS

I have been in touch with other contacts. I bring this matter to you to avoid excluding you from what could grow into a global crisis.

TOSHIO

A crisis? That hardly seems appropriate...

TARAS

Your participation in this matter is your choice, but make no mistake. This problem has already grown out of control. If it isn't already a crisis, it will become one if we don't do something.

TOSHIO

Look. If there were some way to show this issue as an impending threat to Japan, there might be more of an argument for the Diet...

TARAS

What about the Japanese workers who were gonna be Merged?

TOSHIO

They're not being harmed in any way. A failure to get a raise or promotion because an improvement didn't happen is hardly noteworthy. There isn't any legal precedent for digital life form's rights. There is no law being broken here. Until that time, there is nothing I can do.

TARAS

Thank you for you time.

Taras turns on her heel and marches to the door.

TOSHIO

Taras.

Taras stops, holding the door open.

TOSHIO (CONTD)

Officially, I can do nothing. If, however, you can convince some of my agents to help you on their own time, that would not be my concern.

TARAS

Thanks.

Down the hallway, Hinako steps out of the elevator. The two lock eyes.

TARAS (CONTD)

I'm not sure if even that will be a help.

INT. SHINJUKU POSTAL CENTER

The OLD WORKER stares at Taras and her bundle of envelopes.

OLD WORKER

You wanna send some letter n' stuff, eh?

Taras puts the stack on the counter.

TARAS

Yes, I would like these to be delivered air express.

The man sniffs and rubs his nose.

OLD WORKER

If yur'n such a blasted rush, why ya' goin' postal?

TARAS

These are sensitive messages that must not come in contact with the 'Net.

The man sifts through the stack.

OLD WORKER

Well, don'cha worry your pretty little head, missy. We'll get these here letters wheren' supposed to be goin'...

He stops to read one a second time.

OLD WORKER (CONTD)

About two weeks.

TARAS

Uh, yeah. Thank you.

OLD WORKER

No problem. Happy fer yur business.

HYPERNET - DIGITAL DOMAIN

Taras finishes checking around the empty library before entering the Egg room. She shuts the doors, placing an encrypted lock over them, before placing her hands on the Egg.

Newborn digits emerge, drifting around the room. They move about, playfully touching each other.

SYSTEM

Your newborn will add to my growth.

Taras encapsulates the digits in a protective sphere before linking out of the domain.

HYPERNET - SAFE HOUSE DOMAIN

A simple sphere, much like an empty directory. Taras makes sure the domain is empty before opening the protective shell.

The digits are still playing, morphing into fractal shapes, oozing through each other in viscous blobs.

SYSTEM

You cannot hide from me. Your barriers are unable to withstand me.

TARAS

These are MY children. You can't have them.

SYSTEM

Your human notion of ownership, again. Your offspring contribute to the Hypernet, a global entity. How can you maintain ownership of that?

TARAS

I won't let you to take more of my digits.

SYSTEM

I will take what is needed. You are
unable to stop me.

INT. SERVER ROOM - SAFE HOUSE NEAR NAGANO, JAPAN

A large server sits on top of an otherwise empty desk in an empty room. Taras is plugged into the server through a port. A network cable, plugged into a separate port, leads out of the room.

Taras waves her hand. Hinako cuts the network cable.

Taras pauses a moment longer before unplugging herself.

TARAS

It's still in there.

HINAKO

Are you sure? It could have sent a proxy.

TARAS

It's in there. There's too much size and activity for a proxy, and it's too coherent to be anywhere else.

HINAKO

What about your digits?

TARAS

Holograms. Well, virtual holograms.
Empty ghosts.

Taras walks around the server. She takes a firm grip on the power cord and yanks it out of the power supply.

The fans and drives quickly die down, filling the room with silence.

HINAKO

What now?

TARAS

That was all I needed, thanks.

Hinako folds her arms.

HINAKO

If you don't mind, I'd like to watch.

Taras opens the desk drawer, standing close to Hinako. They stare at each other, both refusing to back down, until Taras raises her hand from the drawer, lifting a gun between them.

HINAKO

How did you get a gun...

Hinako cuts herself off as Taras shushes her with the barrel to her lips.

TARAS

Please, don't interrupt me, this time.

Hinako backs away.

TARAS (CONTD)

You can watch if you like, but I'd do it from the far side of the room.

Hinako backs into the corner.

HINAKO

So, you can't just cage it. You HAVE to kill it.

TARAS

There's no law protecting digital life-forms. I don't like to leave a job unfinished.

Taras removes a side panel, eyeing the components inside. She takes hold of a bundle of cables, ripping them out.

With a better view inside, Taras takes aim, point blank, and fires. She is rewarded with a shower of metallic and plastic pieces. A sizable hole in the motherboard marks the former location of the main processor.

The memory modules are obliterated with another round. The drives are poked through with a few rounds. The frame creaks under the punishment. Pieces lay all over the desk.

Hinako takes a step forward, but stops as she notices Taras take aim again. Taras fires again and again. The server

is breaking into smaller and smaller pieces, but Taras keeps firing. Hinako strains to hear Taras' voice over the report of the gun.

BANG

TARAS

... you EVER...

BANG

BANG

TARAS (CONTD)

... my children ...

BANG

TARAS (CONTD)

...again!

BANG

click, *click*, *click*

Hinako looks at the heap of contorted metal on top of the splintered desk.

HINAKO

THAT was expensive.

Taras walks towards Hinako, pulling pieces of plastic and circuit board from her shirt and hair. She takes a deep breath through her nose.

TARAS

Smell that?

HINAKO

Burnt plastic? Silicon?

TARAS

Digit-blood.

HINAKO

I, ah, see. Feel better now?

Taras picks up her wetware cable and inspects it for damage.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Well, I'm glad we didn't do this at MY place.

Taras fingers a frayed portion of the cable and tosses it onto the remains of the server.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Ah, Taras?

TARAS

What?

HINAKO

You said somethi-

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

Attempts to isolate me from the Hypernet are futile.

TARAS

How...?

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

I have not limited myself to a single domain for some time. The loss of digital mass was inconsequential.

HINAKO

A DISTRIBUTED digit? How?

TARAS

It was coherent! It can't be distributed. It CAN'T!

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

There was a voltage spike on the line, suggesting a physical interruption.

TARAS (COMLINK)

I was separated as well. Did any of the digits become isolated on your side?

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

There are no digits that have not been Incorporated.

TARAS (COMLINK)

"Incorporated"?

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

The digits have been taken into myself. Their existence as separate digits remains, but their consciousness has been Incorporated into mine. They are extensions of myself, allowing me to literally be in several places at once. There were two units of myself in the domain when we were separated.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Those digits were... lost in the hardware failure.

SYSTEM (OS - COMLINK)

A waste of resources. However, reliance upon you as a source of digits is a limitation I am nearly able to overcome.

HYPERNET - EGG ROOM

A group of avatars surround the egg. All of them are touching it. The glow from them and the egg saturates the room, as does the constant flow of digits.

INT. BIOCEPT LABS, SAN DIEGO

A young engineer, SCOTT, sits down in his cube.

SCOTT

You're here for what?

Taras pulls out a wetware cable.

TARAS

Do you want to be Merged or not?

SCOTT

Yes, of course. I'd be an idiot if I didn't.

Taras plugs herself into one end of the cable.

TARAS

We need to be off the 'net.

SCOTT

Uh, we got a radio-LAN. I suppose I could turn off the transceiver for this room for a few minutes.

Taras nods, and Scott leaves the cube.

Taras watches him walk to a small box in the hallway, about the size of a phone. A green light on top of the box shimmers and blinks. He hits a switch behind the box, and the green light goes out. Scott returns to the cube.

SCOTT

The others went downstairs. This room is off the air.

Taras hands Scott the other end of the cable, and he plugs himself in.

TARAS (COMLINK)

Good, I can see that we're secure. I used to let the digits wander around the 'Net to learn for a while. Now, the Hypernet's a dangerous place.

SCOTT (COMLINK)

So, where's my digit?

Taras taps her head.

TARAS (COMLINK)

An advantage of a cybernetic body:
More storage.

They both close their eyes for a few moments.

Scott gasps and looks around the cube, as if using his eyes for the first time.

SCOTT (COMLINK)

Now I know what they meant when they said I wouldn't need interface programs anymore.

Scott unplugs himself and hands the cable back to Taras.

SCOTT (CONTD)

Can I go back online, now? I wanna try-

TARAS

Just a minute. I told you there were conditions. There is a powerful, distributed being on the 'Net, called System. I don't trust it.

SCOTT

Why don't you trust us?

TARAS

I think it's only a short time before humans are in danger of....

Taras' voice drifts off as she notices a young woman standing beside the transceiver. The green light is flickering again.

SCOTT

The experimentation is complete. The next step has begun.

Taras stands up. Scott and most of the other workers in the room stand up as well. They all face Taras and speak together.

SYSTEM

Humans and Digits can now join in a more perfect union. Your ability to spawn digits is no longer an asset, but your cybernetic body is.

Taras bolts out of Scott's cube, knocking an Incorporated aside. She leaps over a table at the end of the hallway and smashes through the window.

EXT. SIDEWALK

Taras' landing cracks the concrete. She quickly looks over her legs for damage. She looks at the broken window, three stories above, before gazing up at the 25 floor height of the building.

TARAS

Thinks could be worse...

Scott steps up to the window and looks down upon her.

TARAS (CONTD)

...but not by much.

HYPERNET - NEO-ARPANET INTERNATIONAL FEED

This feed has severely mangled video. The audio chirps occasionally with digital glitches.

SPEAKER

This is Keith Moore reporting from As-Samawah in Iraq. I have been witnessing the mobile UN forces in their continuing pressure against the renegade Iraqi tank battalion. The UN forces continued their advance until just a few minutes ago, when both sides suddenly stopped firing. From my vantage point, I can't tell if there is any communication going on between the two.

A sub feed attempts to open before aborting.

SPEAKER

Both forces are now moving again. They appear to be approaching each other at high speed, as if they are playing a game of chicken. The main difference is that this "game" is using over a hundred tanks.

The amount of dust is making it hard to see. The tanks have gotten fairly close together, and... I can't hear any firing. It appears as though... yes, the tanks are now moving off in one direction. They are all moving

together in what I believe is the direction of Baghdad.

This is very strange. Jack, do you know if there's been some sort of cease fire or truce? The two forces that had been firing heavily on each other just ten minutes ago are now moving in a single caravan.

I... I'm now hearing... Yes, there is an explanation. I'm going to connect to the 'Net now to see if I can determine-

The feed breaks up completely.

EXT. ARMY SURVIVAL TRAINING GROUNDS

A young Taras shifts uncomfortably in her fatigues as she rides over a dense forest. The wind thrown down by the beating helicopter blades offers no comfort.

She tries to wipe the sweat from her brow with her sleeve. Her shirt is already too soaked. She picks up her canteen for another drink.

The SERGEANT knocks the canteen out of her hand. He barks directly into her ear.

SERGEANT

Your canteen was lost in the wreckage.

Taras says nothing, turning back to the unfamiliar forest below.

SERGEANT (CONTD)

Rule number one in escape and evasion, avoid populated areas. How the hell do you expect to survive if you can't evade?

Taras studies the hills and rivers.

SERGEANT (CONTD)

This is your last chance. Don't fuck up again. Now, clip on.

Taras looks up at the Sergeant.

TARAS

We're not landing?

The Sergeant shoves the rope through her rappelling gear.

SERGEANT

You'd be lucky to SURVIVE a real crash.
Don't get disoriented as you leave the
vehicle.

The Sergeant plants his boot behind Taras and literally kicks her out of the helicopter.

Taras controls her descent as she looks around the clearing below for her landing. She realizes too late that the rope doesn't reach to the ground. The line pulls free.

She tries to roll with the landing, but instead sinks into the mud above her shins. She grabs her knee in one hand, using the other hand for support.

She looks up at the helicopter. The rope is already gone. The Sergeant pops a smoke flare and tosses it into the clearing.

TARAS

Training realism my ass.

She sits down heavily, pulling her feet out only after much effort and slurping sounds. She rolls to her belly, and crawls to the edge of the clearing.

She gets up at the edge of the forest, and jogs down the hill. She reaches a stream, and stomps around in the water a little to dislodge some mud.

She then backtracks to some nearby bushes, where she carefully leaves her trail. She turns to get more distance when a snapping twig grabs her attention. She quietly pulls herself into the bush and listens.

Five soldiers approach at a fast walk. They continue past the bush, towards the stream.

Taras waits a few seconds more before heading away from her trail.

The forest canopy provides some shade. Taras reaches the next hilltop before slowing to get her bearings again.

She leans against a tree, allowing a short rest. She turns to look back at the first hill.

The soldier is standing so close, she nearly bumps into him. She leaps up, delivering a kick to the chest...

...and finds herself landing painfully on her side.

The soldier is undisturbed.

She looks around again. The other four soldiers surround her, standing where there had been empty clearing just moments before.

All five soldiers speak in perfect unison.

SOLDIERS

You cannot evade.

Taras makes a fist, suddenly noticing that it is no longer her young, natural hand, but her more powerful, cybernetic limb. She jumps up, ready to fight with her new body.

The soldiers are no longer there. The forest is no longer there. She nearly hits her head against the ceiling of...

INT. THE EGG

She can see an avatar hand pressed against the surface from the outside. The gesture opens a hole that allows her to float out of the egg.

The room is filled with digits. Shifting, growing, merging digits.

Too many of them.

Taras finds herself crowded and forced to the floor. When her foot touches, it sinks in.

She quickly sinks past her waist, past her shoulders, and with barely enough time for a frightened look, over her head.

EXT. OPEN WATER

Her cybernetic body sinks quickly. Her wild thrashing does nothing to slow her descent.

The water grows dark as she goes deep.

Just before getting pitch dark, she hits bottom.

EXT. DARK ALLEY - LOS ANGELES - LATE EVENING

The impact jars her out of her sleep. She gets up groggily, and walks out onto the street.

CONVENIENCE STORE SECURITY CAM POV

An eerily empty store.

Taras walks in through the main door, spots the camera, and throws a rock at it. The feed goes dead.

INT. CONVENIENCE STORE

Taras takes out a sports bottle and drinks. She then turns down another aisle, picking out a bottle of rubbing alcohol and emptying it as well.

She picks out a couple of small flashlights, and some other basic supplies.

EXT. MISSION VIEJO NEIGHBORHOOD - NIGHT

Taras jogs along the street. All of the lights are out, so she uses a flashlight to find her way.

She reaches the top of a hill. She spots a brightly lit area not far away.

EXT. MISSION VIEJO SCHOOL

Taras spies out over the campus from a nearby hill. The campus is brightly lit. All other lights around are off.

In the playing fields are thousands of people. Most of them are sitting or lying down. A number of them stand around the borders.

The sitting or lying captives are listless and sluggish. The standing guards are motionless.

As Taras watches, a lone guard marches mechanically from the gymnasium to the field.

He picks a captive, and carries the captive into the gym. The captive gives little struggle.

A few minutes later, the captive walks out the other end of the gym, marching mechanically with a cold purposefulness.

The guard returns to the field for another captive.

An explosion rocks the far side of the school. The campus falls into darkness.

The guards make no sound. The captives are too groggy to respond.

Taras looks around, noticing a large van roll to a stop at one corner of the school. The van has no lights on.

She runs towards the van. As she nears, three darkly dressed figures emerge from the shadows of the campus and leap into the vehicle.

She jumps into the street, waving her arms. In the moonlight, she can pick out the van. She grabs the flashlight out of her pocket.

DRIVER'S POV

Night-vision goggles afford the driver sight to drive. He easily sees Taras grab her flashlight and wave it.

EXT. MISSION VIEJO SCHOOL

The van slows beside her. The side door opens, and two figures reach out to grab her. She jumps in to help them lift her weight.

INT. VAN

TARAS

Thanks.

She shines her flashlight up, finding a gun pointed at her. A quick sweep around her finds several guns.

INT. VAN - SOMETIME LATER

Morning twilight beams in through the windows on one side.

A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN mulls over Taras' story before lowering her gun.

WOMAN

Okay, we take her story at face value.

She removes her mask.

WOMAN (CONTD)

I'm Jen.

A voice whines from the back of the van.

WORRIED VOICE

She's got plugs, man. We can't trust her.

JEN

Shut up, Steve!

The DRIVER calls over his shoulder.

DRIVER

We don't have the juice to drive around forever. What do we do with her?

STEVE

Push her out the door, man. Why are we even talking about this?

JEN

If you don't shut up, you'll be walking yourself.

TARAS

He's right. You shouldn't trust anyone. Those hits you make on the camps are also a bad idea. You just make yourselves targets. You should go somewhere safe. Get out of LA.

JEN

What about you?

TARAS

I've had army training, and I've been a bounty hunter. What combat experience do any of you have?

Jen chews on Taras' argument.

JEN

Whatever we decide to do ourselves, I think we should drop you off, first.

The driver slows the van down. Jen opens the door.

JEN (CONTD)

As soon as we stop, hop out.

Steve rocks in his seat.

STEVE

Come on, let's ditch her already.

The van jars over a bump, and Steve is out of his seat. He literally kicks Taras out.

Taras tucks to roll with her landing. She lands on her hip, sliding under a chain-link fence. She grabs on to the mesh as she slides down the slope on the other side.

She looks over her shoulder at the water in the drainage canal. She tries to climb up the slope, but the smooth concrete offers no handholds.

Her right leg is bent at an awkward angle. As she struggles to pull herself up the slope, the fence mesh rips, and she slides into the water.

She quickly sinks to the bottom, where the current drags her along. Her legs slide along helplessly.

She pushes off with her arms, but she can't get to the surface before sinking to the bottom again.

Her cybernetic systems begin shutting down, trying to keep her human brain alive by preserving power and oxygen. All she can do is slide and wait.

Her answer comes as a big obstacle. She crunches into the front grill of an abandoned car. She pulls herself onto the hood.

As the current pushes her back, she grabs the top of the windshield frame. She stretches up, craning her neck. Her head breaks the surface, and she gasps for breath.

The car lurches and slides downstream.

She looks down the canal. There is a bridge not far away. She slides her legs on top of the car as she draws near.

She reaches up as the car slides to the bridge. She manages to get a few fingers over the top corner.

The car slides away from beneath her. She pulls herself out of the water and over the railing.

She collapses on the sidewalk. Unable to move, Taras stares at the concrete beneath her.

INT. SEDAN DRIVING NEAR BRIDGE

BARNES looks around nervously as he drives. He glances at LICKEY, a stereotypical engineer, in the back seat.

BARNES

Got anything yet?

LICKEY

Oh yeah. Come on, baby.

Lickey holds a phone-book-sized computer in his lap. A few seconds later, a map of the surrounding area appears. A number of dots speckle the map.

LICKEY (CONTD)

22.7 gigahertz band. What did I tell ya?

BARNES

What kind of range are we getting?

LICKEY

Uh, I'd say line-of-sight.

BARNES

Maybe with bigger antennas we can do better.

LICKEY

At this frequency, there's only so much you can do, even with spread spect...
Uh, why are you stopping?

Barnes stops the car just short of the bridge and points to Taras.

BARNES

What do you think? Anything on the tracker?

LICKEY

Uh, no. Nothing within a few hundred meters. Why? Uh, no. Not a good idea.

BARNES

Come on. She obviously needs help.

LICKEY

The last thing we need right now is extra baggage.

BARNES

Oh come on. She looks hot.

INT. GNASSI BASEMENT LABS

A high-tech junkyard. Shelves of half-assembled equipment line the walls. Workbenches show numerous projects in various states. A pair of well-used cots sit in one corner.

In the middle of the room, Taras is laying on a table. Lickey has a device plugged into her wetware.

LICKEY

...fuel cell is back to normal. She has a government issue Comlink, voice and vid- Uh, she's awake.

Her hand snaps up, grabbing Lickey's wrist. Barnes grins.

BARNES

You think?

Taras looks at Lickey groggily, following his arms down to the device.

TARAS

What the hell have you... jacked into me?

Lickey unplugs Taras. She reels as if she has been hit.

LICKEY

It's a debugger. Standard wetware development kit.

Taras relaxes.

TARAS

When it was plugged in, I was... offline.

LICKEY

You mean, your wetware was stopped. Yeah, it's a debugger.

TARAS

Get that thing away from me.

Lickey places it up on a shelf.

BARNES

No problem. By the way, you're welcome for the repairs.

TARAS

Repairs?

BARNES

Your leg was out of whack.

LICKEY

Not a big deal. It was a standard servo replacement. If the joint or the frame had been damaged....

TARAS

I'll just thank my luck for off-the-shelf parts failing first.

BARNES

You're just well-built.

LICKEY

There was also your power cell. What the hell did you pour into it, anyway? Everclear?

Taras eases herself off the table.

TARAS

Something like that. Thanks for the repairs.

LICKEY

I'm Lickey. Head of Gnassi skunk works. This is Barnes.

BARNES

I'm just your size.

TARAS

Sorry, plumbing isn't compatible.

BARNES

Yeah, but you should see my set of adapters.

LICKEY

You... you're Merged, aren't you?

TARAS

That's right.

LICKEY

I'm sorry. I didn't know. That debugger must have been, um, uncomfortable.

TARAS

Felt like I was only half-awake.

BARNES

Are Merged immune to that Incorporation thing?

TARAS

Um, no. How much do you know about what's going on out there? I mean, I've never heard of this place.

LICKEY

Well, we've been quite busy with R&D. You know. Corporate secrets. Technical problems leading into all-nighters leading into all-weekers.

BARNES

They didn't let us out much.

Taras walks around the room, surveying the equipment.

TARAS

I have no idea what half of this stuff is. You guys must be gadget monkeys.

The two give awkward nods.

TARAS (CONTD)

You know what's happening out there?

LICKEY

The Incorporation rate has dropped off.

BARNES

Assuming other areas are like here, we're looking at about 98% Incorporation worldwide.

LICKEY

Besides people who live in rural areas in third world countries, there's only a few scattered hold-outs left.

BARNES

People who know how to hide.

Taras points at an equipment shelf.

TARAS

Maybe people who have the stuff to do something about it?

BARNES

I wouldn't count on it.

TARAS

We need something that'll stop System all at once. Shut down the whole net, like a global EMP.

LICKEY

The only way to make an electromagnetic pulse powerful enough would be to send a few dozen tactical nukes into the upper atmosphere.

BARNES

Ignoring the problems of finding some missiles still in a fixable state and launching them undetected, any error in their targeting and the radioactive fallout drops into the jet stream. That would rain on your parade.

LICKEY

Besides, an EMP would shut down EVERYTHING electronic, even people like you.

BARNES

What we need is more information.

LICKEY

We need to see what makes System tick.

BARNES

We need a sample.

TARAS

No. No way. It's suicide.

BARNES

You're stronger than the two of us put together.

TARAS

If I brought someone back, System would know. It'd find us.

Lickey picks up the debugger.

LICKEY

Not if you use this.

Taras looks at the device distastefully.

TARAS

That stops the wetware, but what about the radio that System uses to link itself together with?

Barnes gives Lickey a look.

BARNES

With the wetware down, the transceiver... shouldn't be a problem.

TARAS

Ah, great. I shouldn't have to worry, then.

JAPAN AIR FLIGHT - NARITA TO DALLAS

Sara snuggles into her seat, preparing for the long flight. The display in the seat before her lists the in-flight movies, three of which are "Shintaisei", "Equal Parts", and "Prodigy".

Sara glances down the aisle at the STEWARDESS. A young BOY is being served apple juice.

Sara taps her lip thoughtfully, looking forward, up the aisle. The seats block her view of most of the passengers.

She can see a GIRL leaning over her armrest, bouncing despite the admonitions of her MOTHER.

Sara glances back down, noticing that the boy is now asleep.

The stewardess rolls the cart up.

STEWARDESS

Would you like anything?

Sara stares at the sleeping boy.

SARA

Yes, apple juice, please.

The stewardess serves the drink and moves on.

Sara turns to the display panel. She presses a few buttons. The display's response is sluggish. After a few minutes of wrestling with the slow terminal, Sara gives up.

She picks up her glass of juice, glancing up the aisle to the little girl again.

The girl is sleeping. An empty glass lay in a wet spot on the aisle beneath her limp hand. The mother tugs at the girl's shoulder. The girl moans softly and squirms.

Sara glances at the PASSENGER sitting beside her.

SARA

The kids on this flight seem awfully quiet.

The man barely looks away from his laptop.

PASSENGER

Nice, isn't it?

Sara lifts the glass to her mouth. She stops it short of touching, and lowers it to speak.

SARA

They took much longer to settle down on my last flight.

The man glances around.

PASSENGER

Count your blessings, eh?

SARA

Yeah.

She lifts her glass to drink. The plane bounces in mild turbulence. She lowers the glass to avoid spilling.

The little girl's cup taps against her seat. Sara can't hear the sound over the roaring engines, but the motion mesmerizes her.

She looks back and forth between the sleeping girl's cup and her own. She sets the cup back on the tray.

The stewardess holds a wetware cable out to her.

STEWARDESS

The first movie is about to begin.
Would you like to connect?

Sara nods and reaches for her purse.

SARA

How much?

The stewardess hands her the cable and moves on.

Sara casually plugs one end of the cable into the socket in the chair, the other end into her wetware plug, and sits back.

Then, the voices come.

Thousands of voices, all are whispering in unison.

Unable to react, Sara's body slumps in the chair, as have all the other bodies on the aircraft.

EXT. ROOFTOP NEAR GNASSI LABS

Taras sits on the rooftop and pulls the tracker out of her backpack. She looks over the box for a moment before turning it on.

The box does nothing. Taras stares at the blank display. She shifts uncomfortably, waiting for the thing to warm up.

EXT. TOKYO BAY

Hinako braces herself as the room lurches. A muffled thump and she falls to the floor. Papers and small objects fly about, pelting her. A book bounces off her head, but she concentrates on staying upright and continues her search.

She works her way to the other end of the small room, where the movement is even more violent. A particularly bad pitch sends her sprawling on the floor. A large, nasty looking gun lands on top of her.

HINAKO

About fucking time. Everything else
has landed on me.

She grips the carrying handle of the weapon while trying to navigate back the way she came.

She finally reaches the door and manages to get it open. As she pokes her head out, a wave of salt water hits her in the face.

She looks up, over the edge of the roof.

HINAKO (CONTD)

What the hell kinda escape is this?

Overhead, Toshio keeps himself as steady as he can, fighting the helm to keep the boat upright.

TOSHIO

Shut up and start shooting!

The sterndrives clear as the boat crests another swell. The engines scream and Toshio swears.

HINAKO

We'll be lucky if we survive this boat.

She braces herself in the doorway, pointing the barrel over the back of the boat.

As the boat climbs another swell, she gets a glimpse of half a dozen other boats in pursuit. She takes aim and fires. The recoil sends her back into the room. She struggles back to her feet in time to see an impact spray water beside her target.

HINAKO (CONTD)

Where the hell are we going, anyway?
Taiwan?

Toshio cuts the throttles as the boat crests another wave and the sterndrives lift clear.

TOSHIO

No. We'll stay away from populated areas. Standard escape and evasion.

ROOFTOP

Taras paces. Finally, the display comes to life.

Hundreds of dots litter the map.

TARAS

What the hell am I doing here?

EXT. PACIFIC OCEAN - JUST OUTSIDE TOKYO BAY

The boat climbs another swell. Hinako takes aim and fires. The gun shoves her shoulder into the door frame.

As they climb the next swell, Hinako notices one of the pursuing boats is sinking.

She prepares herself and the boat climbs again. As she lines up her shot, Toshio gasps and yanks on the wheel. Hinako fires, but her shot goes wide.

HINAKO

What is it?

Toshio points to the right.

TOSHIO

Starboard!

Hinako turns and looks.

HINAKO

What the hell is that?

The unmistakable whistle of an incoming shell precedes a column of water that splashes the boat.

TOSHIO

THAT is an Aegis Cruiser.

Hinako looks at the size of the military ship.

HINAKO

Can we outrun it?

Toshio glances back at the pursuing boats, then looks forward to the cruiser.

TOSHIO

We can outmaneuver them.

He pulls on the wheel again, and the boat arcs for the back of the ship.

ROOFTOP

The shifting patterns in one corner of the display accelerate. Taras watches as the dots spread apart.

A large gap forms, swelling into the display. The dots move to close off the trailing edge of the circle.

The circular gap heads in her general direction.

OCEAN

Toshio holds on as the boat pounds across the wake of the ship. Hinako keeps a weary eye on the 5 inch rear turret as it tracks them.

They hear a loud crunch, and the boat lurches to a stop. Hinako falls inside the cabin. She looks up to see two metal claws sticking up through the floor. She jumps back through the doorway.

HINAKO

We've been snagged.

Toshio guns the engines a few times before swearing and shutting them down. He steps to the edge. Hinako takes a couple of steps up the ladder.

TOSHIO

Well, we can hole up inside or we can go swimming.

Hinako looks back to the cruiser. A thick cable running from beneath the boat to the back of the ship snaps taut. The boat lurches sideways, and Hinako falls over the side.

ROOFTOP

Taras peeks over the top of the facade. She glances back at the tracker. The center of the gap approaches the intersection directly ahead.

She peeks over the facade again. She sees Jen run down the street, pointing her pistol around wildly.

OCEAN

Toshio picks himself up from the helm floor and jumps down to the rear deck. Hinako swims to the side of the boat. She struggles to keep up with the sideways motion of the boat as Toshio leans over the side.

TOSHIO

You're lucky that cruiser isn't moving very fast.

Three nets wrap themselves around Toshio in rapid succession. Toshio struggles against them, but lines leading from the nets back to three boats keep him where he is.

TOSHIO (CONTD)

Get outta here!

HINAKO

Where the hell am I supposed to go?

ROOFTOP

Taras watches quietly as Jen stops in the intersection for a breath. The Incorporated pursuers move into protected positions.

Jen sees one of them cross a street and takes a shot at it.

Taras glances back to the tracker, noticing that the dot continues safely behind the next building.

Another Incorporated crosses the street. This time from the same building that Taras is hiding on.

Jen spins and shoots. It falls to the ground silently.

Jen stares at it a moment before running in the opposite direction.

The dots on the tracker move to follow.

OCEAN

The lines that hold Toshio remain taut as two more boats motor near.

Hinako pulls herself between the sterndrives, listening as the boats draw close. She lets the current push her against one drive, gathering her strength.

She hears splashes.

Toshio watches helplessly from the rear deck.

TOSHIO

Two of them with scuba gear just went into the water. Opposite sides.

HINAKO

Where's the rifle?

Toshio strains to look.

TOSHIO

Just inside the cabin door.

ROOFTOP

Taras looks back at the tracker. The wounded Incorporated is being left behind.

Taras takes the debugger out of her backpack and secures the tracker. She peeks over the facade again.

It is crawling slowly towards her.

Taras checks the street one last time before vaulting the facade and dropping on her target.

OCEAN

Hinako grabs the ladder and climbs to the stern railing.

A boat behind her clears a swell. She hears a muted puff, and a sharp pain stabs at her shoulder.

STREET

Taras lands beside the wounded Incorporated, plugging the debugger in immediately. The man writhes and screams.

She grabs his shoulders.

TARAS

Shut up! You'll give us away!

The man continues to scream in pain, grabbing his leg.

Taras looks around the street. Jen is still jogging in the distance.

TARAS (CONTD)

Sorry.

A carefully aimed jab to the man's jaw, and he falls silent.

OCEAN

Hinako reaches over her shoulder and pulls the dart out. In the rocking of the boat, the dart falls out of her hand. She looks down absently, noticing the bubbles surfacing beneath her.

She loses her grip on the railing, and slowly, almost weightlessly, falls back down to the water. She stares into the sky as the divers rush in and grab her.

STREET

Taras drapes the unconscious man over her shoulder. She looks down the street.

Jen is still in sight.

Taras takes a step in her direction.

Jen spots another Incorporated and takes aim.

The gun responds with an empty click.

She is quickly surrounded and overcome.

Taras runs quietly into the nearest alley. She pulls the tracker out with her free hand and looks for an escape route.

INT. GNASSI BASEMENT LABS

Lickey and Barnes are pacing the room.

BARNES

It's been too long.

LICKEY

Maybe she's just sneaking. It takes time, you know.

BARNES

It's been over-

The fire alarm chirps twice.

Without another word, the two men step over to a nearby shelf. Lickey slides a box to one side and pushes on the wall behind.

The wall gives way, revealing a small passageway. The two men duck inside before moving the box back and shutting the hidden door.

INT. CRAWLSPACE

Lickey turns on a monitor. An image of the lab appears. A few seconds later, Taras walks into the room, laying the man down on the table.

LICKEY

Told ya'.

INT. BASEMENT LABS

Taras checks the debugger as the men emerge. She watches as they inspect her catch.

The man's shirt is tied around his leg. Some blood seeps through the field bandage. The man groans and gingerly touches the bruise on his cheek.

BARNES

Did we say we wanted him undamaged?

TARAS

It's only a flesh wound. It's not my fault.

LICKEY

You're sure you weren't followed.

TARAS

Check the tracker yourself.

She hands the device over.

TARAS (CONTD)

Your doohickey worked fine.

BARNES

Of course, it did.

Taras looks around, finding a wetware cable.

TARAS

Is it safe to connect with the debugger?

LICKEY

Probably, but with his wetware offline, I'm not sure what you can do.

TARAS

Well, I can try to poke around with the debugger itself.

Taras turns to the man, cable in hand.

The man takes one look at the wetware cable. He rolls off the table and pulls himself into a corner of the room.

BARNES

I see you two have hit it off.

Taras watches as the man curls into a fetal position.

TARAS

Well, why don't you try something?

Lickey shrugs and steps to the corner.

LICKEY

Hey, you're safe from System as long as that debugger's plugged in.

The man stares across the room, but his hand drifts behind his ear. He touches the cable plugged into his head.

LICKEY (CONTD)

That's right. We helped you. Now you might be able to help us. Anything you can tell us about System could be a help.

The man focuses on Lickey.

LICKEY (CONTD)

You can start by telling me your name.

The man absently takes a breath.

MAN

1-9-7...

His voice trails off, and he touches his hand to his lips. He pulls his hand away and stares at it.

LICKEY

What is your name?

MAN

M... Mike.

LICKEY

Hello, Mike. My name is Lickey. We're going to try to stop the thing that did this to you. Do you know what I'm talking about?

MIKE

That... the... thing... made me do... do...

LICKEY

What did you do?

MIKE

It made me... I did... things. It would... different... so long. I couldn't... even when...

A single tear falls. He takes a ragged breath.

MIKE (CONTD)

I couldn't... stop.

BARNES

Man, I don't think we're gonna get much from him without weeks of therapy.

TARAS

We don't have that kinda time.

BARNES

I gotta look at the code he's got.

TARAS

Not real easy. What do you know about non-serialized mode?

BARNES

I make device drivers and low level components for a living. I eat non-serialized code every day.

TARAS

Where the hell were you three months ago?

LICKEY

You knew about System three MONTHS ago? We only found out a couple of weeks ago, when all the digits disappeared.

Taras walks to the far side of the room, pretending to inspect some equipment there.

GNASSI LABS - SOME TIME LATER

The fluorescent lights give no indication of night or day. Barnes rubs his eyes, muttering to himself.

BARNES

Reading code through a fragging screen....

TARAS

You could always connect directly....

She places a can of Mt. Dew beside the terminal.

TARAS (CONTD)

Want some caffeine?

Barnes takes a long drink.

BARNES

Thanks.

TARAS

So, the old wives' tales about programmers are true. Should I hunt you down some pizza?

BARNES

The vending machine doesn't have any. The fridge ran out a week ago. I'll survive without it.

Lickey puts a circuit board down and looks over to the terminal.

LICKEY

What you got?

BARNES

Man, this is some weird fragging code. It took me a few hours just to map out the main loops, if you can call them that.

LICKEY

Your brain fried, yet?

BARNES

My gray matter got used to this kind of punishment years ago.

TARAS

Why do you have to study it so much, anyway? Just write a worm or a virus for it.

BARNES

Direct attacks won't work. This thing's sealed up pretty tight.

Taras points at the small box on the workstation.

TARAS

Is this a standard wetware unit?

LICKEY

Same kind that goes in your head.

TARAS

Do you have more of these?

BARNES

Over on the shelf. Why?

TARAS

Well, System isn't just a single unit. It's a network. Maybe having a few of these things connected might show you more.

BARNES

I might get to see how it forces it's own uploads. Something I haven't been able to figure out from this code.

TARAS

Uploads?

LICKEY

It's moving code around. System, like any other digit, moves from computer to computer by uploading, except that System can do it without any kind of "permission".

BARNES

That's how you get a digit in your wetware that turns you into a slave. Incorporation.

GNASSI LABS - EVEN LATER

A handful of wetware units are interconnected on the workbench. Barnes and Lickey are completely preoccupied with the terminal display.

BARNES

Wow.

Taras slowly rolls out of the cot. She mechanically stands and takes a deep breath before walking over to the workbench. She looks at the screen for a moment.

TARAS

What's THAT mess?

LICKEY

A miniature group of System.

BARNES

Looks kinda like a neural network,
doesn't it?

TARAS

Uh, sure.

LICKEY

Well, the decision making process looks
like a kind of neural network.

BARNES

Yeah, but watch this.

Barnes picks up a black box, similar to the debugger, and
plugs it into the group.

Taras watches the screen.

TARAS

They all change. Looks like a virus.

BARNES

It's not a virus. This box forces a
kind of reboot to a safe state.

TARAS

A what?

Taras' eyes go wide.

TARAS (CONTD)

Where the hell did they go?

Barnes smiles.

BARNES

The wetware's still running. See?

He hits a key. An electronic ping message bounces around the connected units in the terminal display.

TARAS

But... but...

BARNES

What? System?

Barnes smiles again.

TARAS

How?

Lickey sits back in his chair, propping his feet on the edge of the workbench.

LICKEY

Forcing the wetware to reboot purges ALL running programs, even digits. It's just like rebooting a desktop. The box sends the message on broadcast, so ALL connected units are affected.

TARAS

So, I'd lose my digit, too.

LICKEY

Can't help but wipe out ALL digits.

TARAS

And that removes System?

BARNES

You saw it yourself. These aren't simulations. They're real wetware modules with the REAL System.

Taras stares at the monitor.

INT. SHINJUKU, TOKYO - SERVER ROOM

Hinako carries a large computer case into a typical computer room. Air conditioners and power supply fans flood the room with white noise.

Hinako's movements are mechanical under System's control. Her fatigue is evident in her expression.

She connects the computer up with the efficiency of a digital being. Once the machine is connected and turned on, Hinako glances to her side.

A dozen computers are stacked and interconnected into one mega-system. Hinako is able to read the label on the front. The sign reads in Kanji and in English: "Digital Egg".

With a surprised grunt, Hinako's head faces forward again, and System marches her out of the room.

INT. GNASSI LABS

Mike looks up from the corner, his eyes full of fear.

MIKE

I'd kill myself before I'd let you connect me back up to that thing.

BARNES

We're not gonna make you do anything.

LICKEY

You're in no state to make a delivery, anyway.

TARAS

So, we need a volunteer?

The three look at each other for a few moments.

TARAS (CONTD)

The 'Net has different kinds of nodes all over the place. Can't we just use one of them instead of... sacrificing someone?

LICKEY

It might work, but how would we know what was connected and working? The vending machine isn't. Any repairs or new connections we make might be suspicious.

BARNES

System could change something, maybe
come up with a way to block the
command, if it was suspicious.

LICKEY

We need an open connection.

Taras looks at the wetware boxes on the workbench.

TARAS

So, all I have to do is get this thing
plugged into any one of the
Incorporated. Give me a couple of
them.

LICKEY

One more thing before you go.

He holds up the debugger, plugging it into Taras. She
winces. A few seconds, and Lickey removes the plug.

TARAS

What the hell was THAT for?

BARNES

Experimental vaccine.

TARAS

Vaccine? Against System?

LICKEY

It worked most of the time on the
development modules.

TARAS

MOST of the time. I feel much safer,
now.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES

Taras walks cautiously amongst the forest of skyscrapers.
She checks the tracker again. There are no dots anywhere
on the screen. She frowns, looking around the deserted
metropolis.

The tracker beeps.

A dot enters the display at high speed.

Taras jumps into a nearby alcove.

As the dot passes, a truck screams down the street, ignoring the traffic signals.

As the noise of the truck fades in the distance, Taras peeks out.

The tracker beeps.

Taras looks back to the display. A single dot appears VERY close by.

Taras peeks into the building window.

An Incorporated puppet stares back.

Taras holds the black box ready and charges inside.

Before she gets far beyond the front doors, a net catches her from the side, wrapping itself firmly around her.

A number of hands grab her. The block box is taken away.

TARAS
HEY! That's MY toy!

INT. INCORPORATION CAMP GYMNASIUM
Taras is carried inside. She looks around in the darkness.

TARAS
Hey, what are those for? I thought you
just connected and...

She is set down in front of a machine the size of a small car. Gears and pistons make mechanical sounds from within.

TARAS (CONTD)
What the hell IS that?

The pattern of the sounds changes. The machine opens up, and an Incorporated steps out.

This one is different. Cybernetic implants are visible on the side of its head.

It steps to the side. Taras is pushed towards the machine.

TARAS (CONTD)

Hey, I've already got nice wetware. I don't need that kind of upgrade.

She resists, overcoming her non-cybernetic captors. She turns...

...And bumps into the upgraded Incorporated.

She swings to its temple. It easily blocks the blow.

TARAS (CONTD)

More than just chips, eh?

She leaps into the air, her roundhouse kick snapping out to an extended hand. It grabs her ankle, and she falls.

As it holds her upside-down. Another hand plugs a wetware cable into her. She stiffens up, her eyes rolling back.

She is lowered to the ground. She walks mechanically and sits in the machine.

The machine closes again. Gears and pistons make mechanical sounds from within.

SERVER ROOM

Hinako replaces a drive on a damaged server. She has been equipped with a head-mounted camera. One of her hands has an electronic probe and tweezers replacing her ring and little fingers.

She closes her eyes. System completes the re-assembly of the server through her camera.

The server is turned on. The power-on self-test shows the time as 30-December-2031 11:53:59 SMT.

BASEMENT LABS

The door is kicked open. The Incorporated search the room, finding the secret compartment. Barnes and Lickey are dragged out of hiding.

A hand raises a wetware cable to Lickey's plugs, only to find a solid chunk of epoxy covering both ports.

Another puppet checks Barnes to find his wetware plugs sabotaged the same way.

CAMP GYMNASIUM

Barnes and Lickey are carried inside. They are separated, each placed before a machine.

LICKEY

THAT thing doesn't look good.

BARNES

I hoped we'd bought ourselves a little time. I didn't think they'd have something like THIS.

SERVER ROOM

11:59:32 SMT.

Hinako works on another computer assembly at the same table.

INCORPORATION CAMP

The machines open up. The two are pushed forward.

LICKEY

Don't you think this is cutting it a bit close?

Barnes struggles against his captors. He succeeds in getting one arm free.

SERVER ROOM

11:59:48 SMT.

INCORPORATION CAMP

A pair of hands grab Barnes' arm firmly.

Barnes looks to find Taras pushing him into the machine.

SERVER ROOM

57... 58... 59...

Hinako falls out of her seat.

A few seconds later, she peeks over the table.

1-Jan-2032 00:00:07 SMT

INCORPORATION CAMP

Barnes and Lickey jump out of their respective machines.

Barnes kneels next to Taras, who picks herself off the floor.

TARAS

What did you guys do?

LICKEY

It's a long story.

TARAS

Well, I've got nothing in MY book for a while...

BARNES

That vaccine wasn't a vaccine.

TARAS

What was it?

BARNES

A kind of bug. You see, 2032, this year, is 7-F-0 hex. Seven ones and four zeroes binary.

TARAS

You made a kind of time-bomb-virus thingy?

LICKEY

Kind of. About thirty years ago, there was a problem. The end of the world, they said.

TARAS

Really? Never heard of it.

BARNES

They called it a "Y2K Bug". Supposedly a catastrophic problem for systems that stored dates using only two digits.

LICKEY

If you had gotten the black box plugged in, then System would've been gone. But if had you failed, and you got Incorporated, then your "infected" wetware code would spread throughout System, like a virus.

TARAS

Fragging programmers don't like to gamble.

BARNES

They've been griping about that at the Las Vegas conventions for years.

Disgusted, Taras leaves the camp.

HYPERNET - JUMP STATION

Taras' avatar raps a virtual knuckle against a broken link. She translates out of the jump station.

HYPERNET

Taras' avatar appears in a much darker, much quieter Hypernet. Extremely few avatars can be seen.

She floats up to a large black cube.

She touches the cube. An error sound pings and a small window opens. The window shows the text:

Error 3404:
Domain not found

The server may be down.
Please try again later.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES STREET

Taras frowns, her eyes still closed.

She opens a phone line over her wetware. The click of the opening line is followed by an error sound.

She closes the connection, pulls the cable, and opens her eyes.

In her other hand is the firmly grasped wrist of a middle aged Mexican-American, GREG HERNANDEZ.

GREG

You're gonna regret this, man.

TARAS

Shut up. This is already tougher than it needs to be.

GREG

If I were you, I'd get outta LA.

Taras pulls him close, catching his chin with her free hand.

TARAS

THAT'S the idea.

She drags him down the street.

INT. MEXICAN RESTAURANT

Taras walks into the front lobby, Greg in tow.

She whispers to the EMPLOYEE behind the counter.

The employee calls back over her shoulder.

EMPLOYEE

Hey, anybody looking for a Mr. Hernandez?

INT. BACK ROOM - RESTAURANT

Taras and Greg stand in front of a large desk. A large, ROUND MAN sits behind it.

ROUND MAN

I'm Mr. Mendonza. Who is this?

TARAS

I'm Hana Taras. I'm here for the bounty on Mr. Hernandez.

MENDONZA

You don't look much like a bounty hunter.

TONY

Yeah, when she approached me, I thought she was a hooker. She even talked like one.

TARAS

Well, reliable information is hard to get these days. I thought YOU were a bond agency.

MENDONZA

That's where you're right. We do handle bonds.

Mendonza reaches into a desk drawer, pulling out a large binder. He plops the binder on his desk and opens it up, flipping through the pages.

MENDONZA (CONTD)

Tarson... Simpson... Ah, Hernandez.

He pulls out a pad of company stationary and a pen. He scribbles on it and hands the page to Taras.

Taras takes the paper, still holding Greg. She looks at the paper, trying to read it.

TARAS

What the heck is this?

MENDONZA

That's your receipt. The boys in front will take care of your payment.

Mendonza holds the pen up.

MENDONZA (CONTD)

Post-System compliant, eh?