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## year zero

-O P.S.-

Hardly 20 minutes ago, the Faculty of Law's main auditorium was completely empty. Now, key figures from all branches of the scientific community were gradually pouring in, all eager to hear Dr. Penny Anesidora's presentation.

"I'm not usually one to get nervous," Penny said to her assistant, Etheus. "But today my anxiety is *through* the roof." Etheus's eyes followed her as she paced back and forth. Though they had been colleagues only 6 short years, he knew that Penny was not the nervous type. Her ability to remain calm in stressful situations is one of the reasons he fell in love with her in the first place. Etheus glanced through the curtain at the side of the stage. The room was almost full, the stuffy academics chatting excitedly amongst themselves.

"They look pumped, Penny. You're psyching yourself out on this one." Penny stopped pacing.

"That's exactly what I'm worried about," she replied.

\* \* \*

The lights in the room dimmed. The conversation fell to a murmur. Dr. Anesidora approached the podium. She placed her laptop on the podium's stand.

"Good evening," she said quietly into the microphone attached to the lapel of her jacket. Her voiced echoed through the now-silent lecture hall. She fumbled with the cord that connected her laptop to the massive holographic projector behind her. Her Circet controller bracelet adjusted the pigments of her skin cells to access the presentation controls onto her forearm. Dr. Anesidora tapped the "begin presentation command" near her wrist. The first slide appeared on the projection and laptop simultaneously. Her name and the title of her lecture "Mapping Thought" appeared over a stock photo of the brain superimposed on a CGI grid. Taking a deep breath, she stepped back from the podium, surveying her audience for the first time. They were motionless, a hundred pairs of eyes focused on her.

"I must admit, I have misled you. I billed this presentation as my findings on the continuation of research done by Ikara Kish. She and I had worked closely for a number of years on mapping the human consciousness, until her untimely death 6 years ago. Today, I would like to present to you the true nature of our research together." Whispers rolled through the audience.

"Yes, we had indeed been working on mapping the human consciousness, but about 7 years ago, Dr. Kish made a breakthrough neither of us had anticipated. We determined that human consciousness is the result of two interacting biological and physiological components. Our DNA provides a sort of genetic framework by which electrical impulses in our brain organize themselves. We call this 'proto-thought.'" Dr. Anesidora tapped the "next slide" command. A diagram of DNA molecules appear on the screen.

"At that point, we had no idea exactly how consciousness itself manifested in the brain. However, one night, after I had left the lab, I received a video call from Ikara." She caught herself. "Excuse me, Dr. Kish..." Dr. Anesidora's voice trailed off. The image of Ikara's sleep-deprived face was imprinted, permanently, in Penny's memory.

\* \* \*

"Penny, you need to come down here as soon as you can. This is big, really big." Penny had never seen a look so frantic on a face she knew so well. She had memorized the lines and curves of Ikara's features and seeing them so contorted from lack of sleep was, frankly, disturbing. When Penny arrived at the lab, Ikara's eyes were eagerly glued to her computer screen.

"Come here! Come here!" Ikara called out without looking up.

"Ikara...when was the last time you even closed your eyes?"

"Uh..." Ikara didn't look away from the screen. She tapped the pen in her hand fervently on the desk. "But that doesn't matter, I've found it! I've found it! Look there, Penny." She pointed at the screen. Digital representations that modeled electrical impulses in the brain flashed back and forth on the display. "This is the patient we scanned the other day. I compared these with the impulses from the catatonic patient from however many weeks back and ran a subtractive overlay, focusing on thalamo-cortical regions." She entered a keystroke. The flashing on the screen reduced significantly. "These are the impulses not present in the catatonic patient. This is conscious thought. "

\* \* \*

"Dr. Kish had not only discovered how brain activity in the thalamo-cortical related to the 'proto-thought' genes in our DNA, but she developed a computer algorithm to replicate the thalamo-cortical system of a particular subject based on their DNA as a digital framework. Her program takes genetic information and develops a data partitioning system that can house the impulses from a human brain in the same manner a hard drive houses computer data. We dubbed this the synthalamo-cortical framework, or STCF." Dr. Anesidora proceeded to the next slide. A .gif diagram of Dr. Kish's program manifested on the screen. The audience rustled, craning their necks to get the best possible view of the screen.

"At this point, Dr. Kish decided to take the next step. We began developing a system that would enable us to theoretically 'download' the electrical impulses from someone's brain into an STCF based on their unique genetic code. With the computing power available to us at the time, it took around ten days to create an STCF based on any particular genetic sample. Dr. Kish insisted we use her DNA as a model simply as a proof of concept. We developed the prototype, and everything seemed to check out. We ran a model of Dr. Kish's brain activity on the computer, detecting and fixing the problems with our preliminary framework. After several beta versions, we developed Version One of our STCF program. Using modelled brain activity, Version One was able to maintain digital brain activity with an accuracy of 93%." Dr. Anesidora paused.

\* \* \*

"Ikara, no. I can't let you take a risk like that."

"Trust me, Penny. It will work. We're never gonna get anywhere if we sit in the lab and run simulations for months on end."

"I agree, I agree. But please, let's find a test subject. Do you realize how much of a risk this is? You could die."

"I mean, well, technically..."

"I don't care. It's all the same at this point. I... we... can't risk losing you like that."

\* \* \*

"Before we could proceed with the first human trial, we spent a significant amount of time developing a viable method of 'downloading' electrical impulses from the brain onto the STCF. We tried multiple options. First we retrofitted an EEG interface, but the conductor nodes weren't strong enough to get a clear transmission of data. Then, we tried an interveinal conductor, which was slightly more successful. However, our computer couldn't distinguish conscious thought from other electrical impulses in the body. With a more powerful computer, this option may have been viable. Our third attempt was the most radical." Dr. Anesidora moved onto the next slide. A bicycle helmet shaped apparatus appeared on the projection. The rig itself consisted of five rigid chords, connected to a circular base, spreading out like the legs of a metallic insect. Each prong culminated in a disk with a small needle at its center.

"This is the neuro-circuit interface, or NCI. Borrowing from interveinal conduction technology, each of the five nodes is designed to slightly penetrate the skin of the patient's head. Each individual node is connected to a small computer at the base designed to first scan and compile all possible activity from the patient's brain and cross-reference it with a computer algorithm that predicts what electrical impulses are purely functional. The interface and the computer exchange the compiled information, allowing the interface to isolate the conscious impulses. Following a command from the main computer, the NCI then extracts the electrical impulses from the patient's brain and transmits them via fiber optic cables to an STCF based on the patient's genetic framework. In theory, the process was sound, but due to the nature of the experiment, Dr. Kish believed the only way to test it was to perform a human trial." Dr. Anesidora paused. She felt a wave of anticipation from the eager audience.

"We spent several weeks preparing for the procedure, testing all the aspects of the experiment, and running simulations to make sure the details were all down pat. We decided to record the experiment for the sake of posterity. Dr. Kish wanted to share the footage from the experiment." Dr. Anesidora moved onto the next slide: a video was embedded into the presentation. Dr. Anesidora entered the "play video" command.

\* \* \*

The video showed Ikara sitting in a metallic silver chair, her shaved head leaning against the headrest. The nodes of the NCI were inserted into her skin, and a thin stream of crimson blood trickled down from each entry point. Penny was seated behind her, facing away from the camera with her eyes glued to a computer screen. On the desk next to her, another monitor was black, apparently powered off.

"You know, these nodes are starting to hurt," Ikara chuckled. "But go ahead, take your time, Penny. We've got all day to do this." Penny swiveled her chair around, facing Ikara and the camera. The trace of a smile echoed on her face.

"Hey, don't blame me for the fact that *your* program takes forever to initialize." Penny's face was stern. They stared at each other. Ikara started to laugh through her closed mouth. Penny followed suit, and soon both scientists were giggling like school children. A ping sounded from the computer. Penny turned back around.

"The STCF is up and running. All functions are nominal," Penny spoke as the laughter ceased. Penny entered several commands. The word "Ready" was visible in the bottom right-hand corner of the main monitor containing the STCF GUI. The blank monitor to Penny's right booted up, and Ikara's EEG readings spiked onto the display.

"We're ready." Penny spoke in monotone. She paused, turning back around to face Ikara. "Look, Ikara, if something goes wrong, I just wanted to tell you that I..."

"Nothing will go wrong," Ikara interrupted. She tilted her head as far as she could toward Penny. Ikara smiled warmly and sincerely. Penny sheepishly returned the look. She took a deep breath, turning back one final time to the screen before exhaling. She glanced over the code on the screen in front of her.

"Entering flash command. STCF is standing by." Penny typed the command, her finger hovered over the "Enter" key. Ikara's hands clenched the armrests of her chair.

"Do it," she said sternly, closing her eyes. Penny's shaking finger came down on the key. The EEG went blank, the body in the chair went limp, and the hands released the armrest. Penny glanced at the STCF program window, the word "Ready" was still visible in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen. She stared at it for several seconds. She turned her head to the EEG screen and back to the main monitor.

"Oh no no no no no," she whispered. "Fuck. No. No no no." She began typing again, continuing to murmur nervously under her breath. The STCF screen remained unchanged. The EEG remained blank.

"Goddammit!" Penny screamed. She pushed her chair away from the desk, leaning back in her chair. She covered her face with her hands.

\* \* \*

The video ended. The lecture hall was silent. Dr. Anesidora was looking down at the ground.

"The experiment failed," she looked up into the audience. "The problem was not faulty calculations, incorrect science, or Dr. Kish's program. It was the NCI. I determined that Dr. Kish had significantly underestimated the ability of the NCI's onboard computer to process the data from her brain. The CPU power needed was an order of magnitude higher

than originally anticipated. This is because, in our simulations, we set the incoming data flow too low. The NCI gathered more data from Dr. Kish's brain than we had anticipated. This is not to say that it gathered too much. In fact the NCI did its job better than we had anticipated, but the actual hardware was not capable of handling such a high influx of data all at once. The CPU bottlenecked and held onto a portion of Dr. Kish's brain data, deleting the rest from its system in order to maintain functionality." She paused. The audience had not made a sound since watching the video. Dr. Anesidora paced several times back and forth on the stage.

"After performing a full diagnostic on the failed experiment, I decided the only way to carry on Dr. Kish's work – our work – from there was to replicate the experiment with an improved NCI onboard computer. I enlisted the help of Etheus Ludwood, an artificial intelligence researcher from CalTech. He was able to outfit the NCI's CPU with additional cores and improved heatsinks to better process the incoming data from the patient and abort and reverse the operation if it began to overload. We also worked at great length to improve the STCF. We integrated it with an AI Mr. Ludwood had been developing. This integration would allow the 'mind'" – Dr. Anesidora mimed quotation marks – "inhabiting the STCF to have access and control over several simple computer functions including a textual input program through which the patient can communicate with the operator. Additionally, Mr. Ludwood designed a simple virtual waiting room in which the inhabitant experiences the STCF. This virtual waiting room is the synapse by which the stored electrical impulses access the various computer functions at its disposal. We dubbed this newer STCF 'Version Two.'

"It took six years to test and retest Version Two and the improved NCI. I decided to be the subject of the second trial. Again, we recorded the experiment for the sake of posterity." Dr. Anesidora moved onto the next slide, another video.

\* \* \*

The camera showed a scene identical to the first experiment. Penny's shaved head lay on the headrest of the same chair Ikara's did. Etheus occupied the same computer desk. The monitor and EEG were identical. A steaming mug was on the desk to Etheus's right.

"Entering flash command. STCF is standing by." Etheus typed the command, his finger hovered over the enter key. Penny's hands clenched on the armrests of her chair.

"This is uncomfortably familiar." Penny's voice shook. She moved her hands, intertwined on her lap. She twiddled her thumbs nervously.

"I'm ready when you are." Etheus's voice was upbeat. He craned his head back to Penny. She gave him a thumbs up.

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"You can say that again." Etheus pressed the "Enter" key. The body in the chair went limp. The EEG when blank. There was silence. The word "Ready" was visible in the bottom right hand corner of the monitor. Etheus reached for the steaming cup. He moved it to his lips and hesitantly took a sip.

"Ow ow ow ow," he exclaimed. He slammed the cup on the desk. A deep brown liquid splashed onto what could only have been his pants.

"You've got to be... of all places to spill..." Etheus's voice was incoherent. He started glancing around, perhaps looking for something to clean up with when a bleep echoed throughout the silent lab. Etheus's eyes shot back to the screen. The "Ready" had disappeared. A terminal window had opened on the computer. Etheus moved his head closer.

"Etheus?" he read out.

"I'm here," he responded to his own question, typing on the keyboard. After several seconds, there was a second ping.

"I think it worked," Etheus read.

"Think it worked? Looks like it worked to me." He chuckled, taking another cautious sip of his drink. He typed again. Etheus looked back at the body in the chair and at the EEG. A third ping.

"You're never gonna believe what's going on right now," he read out again. A fourth ping. "Reverse."

Etheus gulped down a larger sip, and began entering more commands into the computer. He made a final look at the EEG and the body in the chair and then pressed the "Enter" button before swiveling his chair around to face the body. The EEG lit back up, and Penny opened her eyes.

WAR  
-6 P.S.-

The constant sound of rain deflecting off the squad's helmets is by far the most annoying part of this war. Well, that and the canned beans for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And living in these goddamn trenches for weeks on end.

The worst part, though, is the waiting. All Lightning Squad has been doing since we got here is wait. Wait for orders. Wait for the Ethereals to attack. Wait for this, wait for that. Wait here, wait there.

"Pass the coffee," I shout over the rain to Johnson. He tosses me a thermos. I take a gulp – miraculously, it's still warm – and throw it back.

We ran out of things to talk about by the second week of action – if huddling over in a foxhole could even be called that. Nowadays, most of our conversation are about how we've run out of conversation topics.

"Seen any good movies lately?" I ask. I get a couple chuckles, the most I could hope for, especially since I used that joke Tuesday.

"Yeah, I saw a pretty good one with your mom in it," Taylor shouts back. Gets more laughs than I did.

"Ha ha, very funny," I say.

"Keep it down, assholes," Sergeant Nichols says sharply. He's aiming out of the trench at the darkness in front of us. He's the only one, though; no one else is paying attention.

"Yeah, wouldn't want the Wireheads to overrun this incredibly valuable position," Johnson says, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Nichols turns to him. "We have our—"

"Orders," Taylor finishes for him. "We know, we know."

"Have you and your orders found a nice honeymoon spot yet?" I ask. I get more laughs this time.

"Alright, knock it off," Nichols says, turning back to his rifle. "We have a job – shit! Positions!"

Everyone scrambles. We quickly stand up, lining our M4s in a row over the edge of the trench. And there, out of the darkness, come the Wireheads, dressed head to toe in shiny, white armor. Like they want us to see them coming.

They fire first, rays of purple and orange energy flying from their metallic weapons. We fire second, raining storms of bullets on them. I pick a target. When he falls, I pick another one. *Click* – my gun's empty. I reach down to my waist to find my spare mags gone. Looking down, I see my belt on the ground, right where I left it, of course.

As I reach down, the ground I was just leaning against explodes in a brilliant display of green. I run my hands up and down my body, making sure that I didn't, in fact, die.

"Rusch!" Nichols shouts.

"I'm good, Sarge!" I reply and, reloading my gun, return fire.



Eventually, the onslaught is over. All the Wireheads crumble to the ground, joining the bodies littering the No Man's Land that is the Eurasian border, specs of white among the green uniforms of our brothers and the black mud.

"Fuck those bastards," Taylor says, practically spitting on their bodies. I say nothing. The entire time I've been here, I've been acutely aware of the fact that the Ethereals aren't that different from us. They have families and lives, too. Whatever feud exists between us doesn't mean anyone has to die. I'd never say any of that out loud, of course. Instead, I stare out across the bodies sprinkled on the ground like a layer of topsoil.

Sarge talks to General Wilson through his big, black radio, silver antenna extended. "Alright, men," he says. "Gear up. Wilson wants us to press our advantage, take the Wireheads' base a half mile east. Rusch, Taylor, Miller, Ellis, you're in the lead. Johnson, Richards, cover our six. Baldwin, you're on overwatch. Cho, Rollins, you're on demo. We've got minimal air support, so let's make this quick. Everyone clear?"

We all nod silently.

"What was that?" Sarge asks.

"Yes, sir!" we all say together.

"Let's move out."

Gathering what passes for belongings and checking our weapons, we head out, stepping over all the bodies. After a few minutes, we see a large, metallic structure in the distance, just visible through the fog.

"Alright," Sarge says quietly. "Everyone ready?" No one responds.

"Charge!" he shouts. We run forward, firing blindly, greeted by purple lasers. Miller, running next to me, gets vaporized in a flash of red. His rifle, unmanned, falls to the ground. I keep my finger on the trigger, making sure to point at the shiny, white targets until they fall down. Their turrets explode out of nowhere. Thank god for minimal air support.

With half of Lightning disintegrated, we finally make it to the doors. The gunfire stops. I kick a Wirehead body out of the way. Rollins blows the doors. Inside, we find more Wireheads. We're angry, though; they don't stand a chance. We clear the bunker. The inside looks like a robot's wet dream; neon blue circuits line the walls and glowing panes of glass with dancing images stand upright in the command center.

"Lightning to Command," Sarge says into his clunky radio. "The Wirehead base is ours." Taylor kicks a Wirehead's body, foot connecting with its helmet. "That's for Miller, you..." He stops short when the helmet flies off, revealing...nothing. An empty suit of armor.

"What the hell?" Baldwin says. I lean down to reach for another Wirehead. This one is empty, too.

"They're not even fighting us..." I say under my breath.

"Fuck!" Taylor shouts, punching through one of the glass screens. "We're losing good men and they're off sipping mojitos in their penthouse apartments!"

"Command," Sarge says. "The Wireheads we were fighting. They're, well, not Wireheads. They're just empty suits of armor. Tin cans."

"We know," comes the reply. "Hold your position. Come first light, you're to take the next base."

## THE FOOD OF LIFE, THE WATER OF DEATH -17 P.S.-

The 5 A.M. siren that signaled the end of curfew echoed through the narrow streets of Lower New York.

“Bout time,” Adapa Orlenarde muttered to himself, gazing out of the small, singular window of his one room apartment. He looked down at his daughter, Akane. The siren hadn’t woken her. In fact, most things didn’t. Her body was growing weaker. The Tangible physician who made rounds at the beginning of every month had told Adapa that Akane was using up the last bit of life she had left. The cancer had spread to her lungs.

For Organics in the Lower City, private medical treatment was impossible to afford for a single father. Especially for a single father who worked in the kitchens of a shelter. Public medical funding barely supplied a monthly check-up, let alone cancer treatments. Adapa had heard whispers that Tangible medical technology was available on the black market. Knowing he had no other options, Adapa made a choice.

Adapa turned toward the door and buttoned up his nylon windbreaker. He grabbed his faded 5-panel cap on the hook on the apartment door. He turned around, surveying the cramped room he had called home for nearly thirty-five years. Adapa’s eyes lingered on Akane. He knew this would be the last time he would see her face with his real eyes. She looked peaceful, sleeping under the thin blankets he had slept under as a child. Adapa shuffled to her bed once more, kissed her lightly on the forehead, and returned to the door, closing it quietly on the way out.

\* \* \*

A steady drizzle pattered on Adapa’s cap as he pedaled through the streets, his bike splashing through shallow puddles on the side of the road. Adapa approached the shelter where he had been working since the age of 16. He had dedicated his whole life to providing food and aid to the Organics less fortunate than he. Almost twenty years of work, and what did he have to show for it? A daughter who never knew her mother, and would barely remember her father. Not allowing himself to be overcome with negative thoughts, he coasted past the shelter.

Adapa glanced at the remnants of a digital clock that feebly illuminated a cement graveyard: all that remained of a public park. 5:25 was legible in a faint yellow LED glow. Adapa pedaled faster, travelling east. On his left, dilapidated buildings were all that remained of the old Upper City, which had been unoccupied since the war began many years ago. The Organics that survived, Adapa included, had fled south below Old 14th Street into the already over-crowded Lower City.

Though curfew had ended almost a half-hour ago, the streets were still empty. No Organics were outside this early, especially not near the borders of the Lower City. Adapa approached Old 3rd Avenue and, out of habit, glanced south down the empty street. His heartbeat stuttered. A patrol drone was hovering silently one block south, crossing the

avenue heading west. Adapa skidded to a stop, using his boots to slow him down, but it was too late. He had gotten caught in its forward peripheral motion sensors. The drone turned suddenly and floated towards him. The sound of light raindrops plunking on its metallic outer shell echoed through the otherwise silent street. The drone paused five meters away. Adapa stared into its glossy central eye. He could see the camera within making slight movements, surveying Adapa's body.

"Curfew's over, buddy!" Adapa shouted at the silent drone, spitting at the ground in between the drone and his bike. The drone was menacingly silent. Despite his confidence in the fact that he was not breaking any laws, Adapa could not help but feel intimidated by the its immense silent presence.

After what felt like an eternity, the drone's camera stopped its sporadic movements. It rose slightly, turned around, and resumed its patrol of Old 13th Street. Adapa watched it hover away, waiting for it to completely leave his field of vision before resuming his journey east.

\* \* \*

Adapa skidded to a stop on the eastern border of the Lower City on Old 1st Avenue. A massive metal fence ran from the corner of 1st and 14th, going on for several hundred meters north and east before fading into the fog. A sign reading "Peter Cooper Village" stood at a gate slightly north of the intersection. The words "FROM DUST TO DUST" were scrawled over it in dripping red paint. Adapa propped his bike against the fence. He pulled out matches, a letter, and a pack of cigarettes from the inner pocket of his windbreaker. He fumbled with his last two matches: breaking the first and catching the end of a cigarette with the second. Taking a long drag, Adapa read over the words he had read many times before:

Organic,

We shall expect you at our gates the morning of April 22nd at first light. Present the QR code at the bottom of this message to the camera at the gate. Upon entering our sanctuary, you are bound by the contract we have arranged. This contract cannot be revoked.

It has been our pleasure receiving your business.

THE UNCHANGED

Adapa looked up from the letter at the abandoned building across the street. It's disordered decay was a welcome change from the rigid language of the letter. Adapa savored the cigarette until it burned down to the filter. He cast the spent butt into the street, placing the remainder of the pack inside his windbreaker. Adapa walked his bike to the gate, propping it up against the bars of the fence. He didn't bother to chain it down.

At the center of the gate was a camera not too dissimilar from the one in the drone's eye. He held the QR code on the letter up to it. After several seconds, Adapa heard a click deep inside the locking mechanism of the gate. He looked back at the building across the street once more before entering the compound.

\* \* \*

Inside the compound, Adapa followed the central path to a large cylindrical building. It wasn't very tall, but Adapa knew it was much newer in construction from the buildings he had spent his life in and around. The walls were glossy and black, as if the entire surface was covered in windows. The upper portion of the cylindrical structure vanished into the low hanging morning fog. At the base of the building was a large door. Adapa approached it. There was no handle or visible hinges, just an eerily familiar camera opening at eye level. Adapa cautiously held the QR code on the letter up to the camera. After several seconds, the door slid to the right revealing a cold grey hallway within. Adapa entered.

Twenty meters down the hall there was a person of pale complexion sitting behind a desk, looking down at something out of Adapa's view. He approached them and audibly cleared his throat. The desk attendant looked up at him.

Before Adapa could utter an introduction they spoke to him:

"Do you have business with us?" Adapa handed the desk attendant the letter. They surveyed it quickly, handing it back.

"We will receive you in room 602," they said promptly, pointing left down the hallway before looking back down at their visual stimulation, whatever it was. Adapa glanced down the uniform grey hall.

"Stairs are at the end of our hall. Once you reach our sixth floor, two meters on your right will be the room we shall receive you in," they said without looking up.

The attendant's monotone voice lingered for several seconds in the empty hall.

Adapa briskly walked down the hall, glancing from side to side at the doors that lined the hallway. They had no handles or markings with the exception of the room number in a metallic black serif font. At the end of the hall was an empty doorway. Beyond the doorway, cement steps circled up in sets of six. Adapa looked up between the stairs. They vanished into a focal point far above his head. He had never been in a building this large before. Adapa took a deep breath and began climbing.

\* \* \*

After scaling twelve sets of steps, Adapa arrived at a doorway identical to the one he had entered the stairwell through. Passing the threshold of the stairwell, Adapa saw a door, identical to all the others, marked "602" two meters away. Adapa approached it. He felt his breath growing heavy, not from exhaustion, but from fear. A lump began to form in his throat. He stared at the serif "602" for what felt like his whole life. Unsure how to address the handleless door, Adapa cautiously knocked. To his surprise, the door silently slid open to the right, disappearing into the wall.

"Ah, Mr. Orlenarde," said a voice from within the room. "We're ready for you. Please come in." Adapa entered. The walls were the same cold grey as the hallways. There was a retrofitted medical chair in the center of the room and attached to the headrest were several nodes in an upside-down semicircle where the occupant's head would rest. Cables connecting to the headrest disappeared into an aperture on the ceiling. On the left, what Adapa perceived as a woman sat in a wheeled chair at a desk similar to the one in the main entrance.

"Please, take a seat," the woman said. Adapa surveyed the only unoccupied chair in the room. He sat and leaned forward toward the desk, keeping his head a safe distance from the nodes on the headrest.

"We appreciate your business."

"Just tell me you're going to hold up your end of the contract."

"As we speak, we are making arrangements to have a certified decoupler take her to a place where we can save her." She smiled politely.

"Will she know where I'm going?" Adapa asked, his voice shaking.

"Of course, we shall inform her where in the Synapse you shall be waiting for her."

"How will I know where to go?"

"We shall deposit you there, all you need to do is wait. After Akane undergoes the disembodiment procedure, we shall provide her with the means to enter the Synapse and contact you there." Adapa nodded as if he understood. He had many more questions. Before he could ask, though, the woman interrupted his thoughts.

"Please lie back, Mr. Orlenarde. We are ready for the procedure." She smiled uncannily at him again. Adapa laid back. The woman rose from her chair and walked over to where Adapa was reclined. She removed his cap to reveal his freshly shaven head, placing it on the desk. The woman began arranging the nodes at points around Adapa's skull.

"Now, this may sting a bit, but only for a second. Trust me." As she pressed each node against his head, Adapa felt a small prick when each node penetrated his skin. He clenched the side of the chair.

"I did the same thing my first time," the woman said casually. Adapa swiveled his eyes the best he could to look at her.

"I was a big boy back then," she said. "I almost broke the arms of the chair." She chuckled.

Adapa quizzically watched her return to the desk, sitting down in the wheeled chair.

"Ready?"

Adapa stared at her briefly, and said nothing back. He released his grip on the chair and clenched his fists, feeling the inside of the palm, finding comfort in the familiar folds of his skin.

"It has been a pleasure doing business with you Mr. Orlenarde."

Adapa tightened his fist, feeling his nail cut his skin open.

The woman entered the disembodiment command into the tablet computer propped up on her desk. Immediately, Adapa's body went limp. She surveyed his brain activity. The EEG on her screen was flat. No brain activity.

"Perfect," she said to herself. The woman began humming. She sifted through the data on her screen.

"Ah, here we are." She selected Adapa's consciousness file on the tablet's touch screen with her fingers. She entered the delete command. The woman powered down the tablet and got out of her chair, moving to the door. Outside a man and a woman were leaning against the wall outside, casually chatting.

"He's done," she said to them.

The two walked into the now empty room. They disconnected the nodes from the head and lifted the limp body from the chair. They carried the body out of the room and down the hall to the cryo-chambers for preservation until an Unchanged member with compatible genes required it as a host. Crimson blood dripped from the hand, bright and hot as fire upon the cold grey floor.

## WINGS OF GLASS

-32 P.S.-

She was greeted by a holographic projection of the local Hub manager when she opened her eyes. Today, the terminal had chosen the form of a quite nice hotel lounge. She shuffled her feet slightly, the strange feeling of weightlessness the only aspect of a physical space that the Synapse couldn't quite replicate.

"Registered user confirmed. Welcome back, Akane Orlenarde. Would you like for me to run a sector scan for presumed full dive user Adapa Orlenarde?" Akane smiled wearily. After the first few days, she hadn't even needed to request the scans anymore. The AI knew what she was there for by now. She was almost glad it didn't possess the capacity for sympathy lest it start pitying her and her nearly daily visits for the past fifteen years. She nodded. "Insert filters for recurring memories this time, though." The projection held out its hand. "Acknowledged, awaiting input." Akane called up the memory packet she'd prepared beforehand and it materialized in her hand as a small blue orb. She'd been particularly thorough in assembling the filter, spending hours in the lab archiving and compiling nearly every single memory in which she and her father had appeared together. Ideally, the filter would pick up on any pings of shared memory when deployed and lead her to him.

She deposited the memory packet in the projection's hand which closed around the orb. "Input detected, processing. Memory files unzipped, building filter module. Build complete, deploying module. Successful." The orb glowed for a moment before emitting a pulse of light that washed over the surroundings and out of sight. "Filter deployed, please wait while the scan runs." Akane sighed. Sometimes the scan took only a few minutes, other times she was left waiting for more than an hour. She called up the most comfortable chair she could envision and sat down to look through the day's sales records while she waited.

Business had been slow recently, to put it mildly. Although her company was a small one, Sybil-Kurokawa Cranial was well-known and respected for still being able to compete with the larger corporations, offering impressive quality for an even more impressive price. Well. That was probably why their profits were flagging right now to be fair. Before Akane could continue the brooding thought, though, the Hub manager approached her. "Sector scan complete, transmitting search results." Despite having heard the words hundreds of times before, she felt her pulse quicken. The file appeared in front of her and she reached out and took the red orb. She entered the open command on her HUD and the hotel lounge faded away to be replaced with a panoramic view of the Synapse Network. A blue ping emerged from her current position and swiftly rushed across the map. It reached the edges and slowly faded away. Nothing. Akane let out her breath and unplugged. The warm hotel lounge faded away as she awoke in the stark white lighting of her office.

\* \* \*

The Sparrow's cooling vents burned with overthrust and the breathy whisper of its antimatter engine pitched to a scream as she overrode the bike's rev limiter. A quick glance

at the rear view camera feed on her retinal HUD confirmed that the three Assegai Syndicate hitmen were still hot on her tail.

She knew she shouldn't have sold him the implants. Just yesterday, Akane had received a rather rudely worded letter from Basara Forthen, head honcho of the Assegai Syndicate, a network of black market arms dealers who specialized in bootleg military equipment. She'd wanted to avoid dealing with him, but he'd put in a frankly enormous order for target-leading modules a week ago and she was loath to turn away from such desperately needed business. He and his lackeys had been very pleased with the implants and for a few days it seemed as though he would be satisfied and the deal would be closed smoothly. It wasn't to be. Forthen had asked her to join the Assegai Syndicate, an offer which she'd politely declined and now here she was, fleeing from a bunch of Syndicate grunts determined to bring her to Forthen kicking and screaming – or dead for that matter.

With a vicious wrench of the controls, Akane threw the bike around a corner and down a narrow side street, the Sparrow's verniers flaring to keep the vehicle steady. Crumbling walls and streaks of graffiti flashed by on either side as she sped down the alley. She'd try and lose the Assegai grunts in the Ratways, a system of tight, twisting backstreets and alleys frequented only by dying dogs and homeless Organics. No sooner had Akane formulated a plan when a burst of automatic weapon fire rang out from behind her. Instantly, time seemed to slow as the analytical engine in her right eye superimposed the bullets' projected trajectories on her retinal HUD. A quick twitch of the controls brought the bike clear and the rounds whizzed by at the same time as the HUD flashed a warning notification. *Analytical engine: CPU usage 92%*. She gritted her teeth. The engine was already verging on maximum load giving her the superhuman reflexes and foresight necessary to pilot the Sparrow at top speed through the Ratways' treacherous twists and turns and Akane doubted it would be able to handle another projectile trajectory prediction.

Well, not unless she found a way to give it additional processing power. It was possible, Akane thought, and would give the analytical engine more than enough capacity to let her take out the pursuing grunts, but repurposing part of her own brain was a more than risky move. Yet she was running out of time. As expansive as the Ratways were, they didn't go on forever and it was only a matter of time before the grunts got a clean bead on her again. Akane sucked in a deep breath and exhaled. She called up a map of the Ratway, charting a course to the closest open space: an abandoned market square underneath one of the new, high speed magways that connected the wealthier districts. She began inputting the commands for the procedure on her HUD. *Operation: dissociate and reappropriate. Area: cerebral cortex. Volume: ten percent. Merge point: optic nerve, right eye. Executing.*

She hardly even felt the operation. A quick glance at the HUD proved that it had been successful. The analytical engine was running at barely fifteen percent load. Akane closed her eyes. It was possible, probable even, that in choosing to grant the analytical engine a portion of her cortex she had caused irrevocable damage to her brain. If so, this would be the last time she inhabited the body her father had provided for her by sacrificing his own. She looked down at her hands resting on the Sparrow's controls. How perfectly the skin had been replicated, exactly like an Organic's. Yet beneath the perfect skin lay artificial



musculature and carbon bone structure tens of times stronger than any birthed body, not to mention the countless additional enhancements engineered into it.

A notification from the HUD drew Akane's attention. She was fast approaching the old market. In a few moments, the Assegai grunts would have a clear line of fire again. Akane threw the Sparrow around one last corner and there it was. A straight stretch of alley opening up into the shadow of the magway. She pushed the throttle as far as it would go and the Sparrow's engine screamed in protest, drowning out the rest of the world as several critical systems failures flared onto her HUD's vehicle status readout. Akane ignored them. The end of the alley swept by her and in a single explosive motion she leapt off the bike into the air, her body's augmented musculature propelling her higher than the most accomplished Organic high jumper could ever hope to reach. Akane blinked and the world stopped.

She could have tracked the motion of a single mote of dust through the air as the analytical engine sharpened her senses beyond biological possibility. The Assegai grunts seemed to hardly move, dumbfounded expressions on their faces which tilted upwards with comical languidness, as though through honey rather than air. Akane reached for the pistol at her side and lines of telemetry streamed across her vision as the analytical engine formulated optimal firing lines and accounted for wind, humidity and her velocity relative to the grunts, as it calculated the predicted impact force and location of her landing and the precise motions that would result in optimal dissipation of it. Her hand moved with mechanical precision. Three shots rang out with blinding speed. The Assegai grunts tumbled off their vehicles and Akane fell to the ground, dropping into a perfect roll before springing to her feet.

Her breathing was shallow and rapid and she took a few deep breaths to steady herself before examining her surroundings. The Assegai grunts lay motionless, hurled off their speeding vehicles like enormous ragdolls. Her own Sparrow was hardly better off, a flaming wreck by one of the magway's support pillars. A scuffling from one of the decaying market stalls caught her ears and she whipped around to face it, expecting one of the Assegai grunts to have recovered somehow. They were still all dead. Of course. The source of the noise was an Organic huddled in the remnants of a stall, what appeared to be the stall's tattered awning wrapped around them like a blanket. Before Akane could do more than notice the frail figure, a sharp pain lanced through her head and she fell to the ground, eyes shut, teeth clenched with the effort of not crying out lest she alert any additional potential pursuers. The pain eventually faded and with an enormous effort she opened her eyes. Her breath caught in her throat.

*Analytical engine: CPU heatsink temperatures critical. Damage assessment: cerebral cortex, severe tissue burn, point of origin: optic nerve, right eye. Recommended course of action: immediate cortical transplant/application of stem cell regrowth gel.* All impossible at the moment. Akane had known from the moment she executed the merge operation that damage to vital brain tissue was a possibility, but given the heightened resilience of an aug's organs, she'd never truly believed it would happen. Another surge of pain nearly brought her to her knees again. This crumbling market was no hospital and she didn't even have

basic wound coating on her at the moment, let alone a regenerative stem cell gel. Slowly, she stood and approached the homeless Organic. It was a terrifyingly easy decision to make.

The flash was quick and simple. The Organic girl hadn't even resisted as Akane placed a finger on her forehead. It was almost difficult to feel bad for her. It took but a moment for the neural probe hidden in her hand to deploy and another for the flashing script to run before she opened her eyes. Her old body lay collapsed nearby, black hair spilling onto the ground like blood. Akane took a few deep breaths before gingerly moving her new limbs around. How weak the Organic girl's body felt. *Weak and all too familiar.*

Before she could continue the thought, a new flash of pain surged through her head. Impossible. The girl was an Organic, she didn't have implants capable of causing damage. Another sharp pain, memories of blood and fire. *Memories, of course.* In her scientist's mind everything became clear. A resurgence of buried psychological trauma triggered by the flashing process. Were she still in her office with its state of the art equipment, removing the traumatic memories would be a trifling matter, but here, the only device she possessed with any sort of data storage capacity was her handgun. The data bank inside the weapon was generally used to store user fingerprints, target leading software and the like, although in theory the storage space could be used to store anything, traumatic memories included.

Akane lifted the pistol from her old body and grasped it with both hands. She only hoped the software on the pistol was precise enough that she wouldn't remove any of her own memories along with those of the Organic girl. Slowly, she breathed in and exhaled. The chances of success were irrelevant at this point; she'd already taken larger risks in the course of the past hour than most of her colleagues did in their entire careers. One more leap of faith would make no difference. The neural link pricked her finger and she closed her eyes.

\* \* \*

How pitiful and small Basara Forthen looked now, writhing on the floor like a crippled infant. Akane had been doubtful whether the round would work, but work it had, and with deadly efficacy. It had taken far longer than usual for her to return to the lab; the Organic girl's body was frail and weak from severe malnutrition and dehydration. Piloting one of the Assegai grunt's battered Sparrows had been almost unbearably strenuous. She'd decided that she would simply wipe the pistol's data bank and rid herself of the traumatic memory carved from the Organic girl's psyche, but as soon as she plugged the magazine into her computer her eyes widened in shock. Akane had assumed the memory would simply register as scrambled data, an unreadable file taking up space on the data bank. She was wrong. The file displayed on the screen was a .csn extension, the same format that Tangible coders used in storing and flashing their consciousnesses. And as she sat there, looking at that small blue icon, a vengeful plan emerged in her mind.

She'd stripped down the rounds in the pistol magazine and replaced the tungsten heads with neural probes intended for laboratory flashing use and wired them straight to the magazine's data bank. All it had taken then was a short script that would instruct the

data bank to flash the file through the neural probe when it made contact with an appropriate target.

“My Father! Where is he?! What have you done with him? Answer me, answer me dammit!” The words that tore from Forthen’s throat were punctuated by uncontrollable sobs and flecks of spittle. Akane narrowed her eyes. Slowly, she turned around and walked away. She might even have pitied Forthen.

If she’d had a father to lose in the first place, that is.

.-:////////////////////////////////////

:: Ready.

:: UCS = 678,923.56 x 568,923.87. Sector 3542. Designation NK 561-7, "Jötunheimr."

:: Autopilot deactivated.

:: Landing sequence initiated.

:: Touchdown successful.

:: Atmospheric readings initiated.

:: Transmitting readings.

:: Failed to connect.

:: Transmission failed.

:: Wakeup sequence initiated.

:: Booting Ethereal 1 (designation "Baker") and Ethereal 2 (designation "Snow").

:: Flashing into Augs 1 and 2.

:: Audio input, designation "Baker": "Well, goddamn."

:: Audio input, designation "Snow": "Good morning, sunshine."

:: Baker: "What day is it?"

:: Command recognized. Audio output: "June 21<sup>st</sup>, 52 P.S."

:: Snow: "Three months. We've been hibernating for three fucking months."

:: Baker: "I think Organics do this all the time."

:: Snow: "Do what?"

:: Baker: "Hibernate."

:: Snow: "For three months?!"

:: Baker: - Laugh - "No, no, just eight hours every night."

:: Snow: "Jeez. No wonder we're kicking their asses in the War. Does that mean we used to do that? Back when we were Organics?"

:: Baker: "I can't remember."

:: Snow: "I like these Augs they made for us, though. I feel great."

:: Baker: "Me too. Much nicer than the one I flash into back home."

:: Snow: "Well, you wanna go out there and do what we came here to do?"

:: Baker: "Absolutely. Computer, what's the weather out there?"

:: Command recognized. Meteorological reading initiated.

:: Audio output: "Twenty-six degrees Fahrenheit. Snowy and windy."

:: Baker: "Well, shit. Better bring a jacket."

:: Snow: "A what?"

:: Baker: "Never mind, just an old joke I heard once. Computer, open the hatch. Let's do this."

:: Command recognized. Opening main hatch.

:: Snow: "Shit, there's so much snow everywhere. I can barely see."

:: Baker: "The computer got enough readings to give us a topographical view, if only in the surrounding area."

:: Snow: "Perfect."

:: Baker: "Well, what do you think?"

:: Snow: "What do I think?"

:: Baker: "This a good planet to colonize? Restart Ethereal civilization?"

:: Snow: - Laugh - "I suppose it's as good as any."

:: Baker: "Computer, any life signs on this hunk of ice?"

:: Command recognized. Scanning for heat signatures.

:: Results negative.

:: Scanning for heart beats.

:: Results negative.

:: Scanning for bioneural activity.

:: Results negative.

:: Audio output: "Negative. No signs of life."

:: Baker: "Copy that. This area looks stable enough to build on."

:: Snow: "Hey, Baker?"

:: Baker: "What's up?"

:: Snow: "Do you remember much of it?"

:: Baker: "Much of what?"

:: Snow: "Being an Organic."

:: Baker: "Not a whole lot, to be honest."

:: Snow: "Yeah. Me neither."

:: Baker: "I remember it being a lot worse, though. Trust me, we're better off now."

:: Snow: "Yeah, I guess so."

:: Baker: "C'mon, let's get the satellite up and running."

:: Long-range communication satellite online.

:: Attempting transmission.  
:: Failed to connect.  
:: Transmission failed.  
:: Cryogenic chamber access requested.  
:: User: Ethereal 2 (designation "Snow"). Clearance level seven.  
:: Access granted. Opening cryogenic chamber doors.  
:: Snow: "Computer, status report."  
:: Command recognized. Running cryopod diagnostic tests.  
:: Diagnostics clear.  
:: Audio output: "Cryopods are stable."  
:: Snow: "Good."  
:: Cryogenic chamber access requested.  
:: User: Ethereal 1 (designation "Baker"). Clearance level seven.  
:: Access granted. Opening cryogenic chamber doors.  
:: Baker: "What're you doing in here, Snow?"  
:: Snow: "Do you remember what sex we were?"  
:: Baker: "What?"  
:: Snow: "Back when we were Organics. Do you remember what sex we were assigned?"  
:: Baker: "I don't know what that means."  
:: Snow: "Sex. Things like male, female..."  
:: Baker: "No. Does it matter?"  
:: Snow: "I guess not. I was just curious."  
:: Baker: "Why?"  
:: Snow: "It just seems like we've lost so much of what we once were."  
:: Baker: "Yeah, we've become something more."  
:: Snow: "Have we?"  
:: Baker: "Have you seen the videos of the Organics?"  
:: Snow: "Of course."  
:: Baker: "Do you really want to live like that? Cramped in disease-ridden little huts judging others by some arbitrary sex designation, only to die from sickness or old age or...or the War? Is that what you're saying?"  
:: Snow: "No, but we wouldn't have to live like that. We've got our bodies right here. We can re-embody. It'd just be the two of us! Don't you want to remember what bodies feel like? What sex

you were? The weight of the body? The thrilling and unnecessary... what's that word? Feelings? What it was like?"  
:: Baker: "And then what? Have you even thought this through?"  
:: Snow: "We could repopulate."  
:: Baker: "But didn't it used to be where you could only populate with two members of a different sex. What if we're the same sex? Plus we'd freeze before we could do anything else!"  
:: Snow: "Yeah. I guess you're right."  
:: Baker: "We have a job to do, Snow. Don't forget that."  
:: Snow: "You're right."

:: WARNING! Battery at critical levels!  
:: Switching to backup fuel cells.  
:: Attempting transmission.  
:: Failed to connect.  
:: Transmission failed.  
:: Visual output: "WARNING! BATTERY AT CRITICAL LEVELS!"  
:: Baker: "What the hell? Snow, come look at this!"  
:: Snow: "How the hell is that even possible? I thought this ship ran on solar cells!"  
:: Baker: "And how much sun do you see out there?"  
:: Snow: "There's at least a little."  
:: Baker: "Maybe the radiation from this system's star operates on a different electromagnetic frequency. It doesn't really matter how, does it?"  
:: Snow: "What does this mean?"  
:: Baker: "It means we lose power."  
:: Snow: "To everything?"  
:: Baker: "To everything."  
:: Snow: "Including our Augs?"  
:: Baker: "Yep."  
:: Snow: "And our servers?"  
:: Baker: "Yeah."  
:: Snow: "So what'll happen to us? Baker? What'll happen to us if our servers lose power?"  
:: Baker: "I don't know."  
:: Snow: "You don't know."  
:: Baker: "I don't know! This has never happened before! To any Ethereal anywhere!"

:: Snow: "We'll cease to exist, won't we?"  
:: Baker: "I don't know."  
:: Snow: "All our data will be on a dead server."  
:: Baker: "Dammit Snow, I said I don't know!"  
:: Snow: "Well I do know, Baker! I know that if we don't re-embody right now, we'll die!"  
:: Baker: "We don't die, Snow. Only Organics die."  
:: Snow: "Well then this is real fucking ironic, isn't it?"  
:: Baker: "Computer, how much time do we have left?"  
:: Command recognized. Calculating remaining power.  
:: Audio output: "Two hours remaining."  
:: Baker: "Shit."  
:: Snow: "We have to. You know we have to."  
:: Baker: "We won't make it ten feet without freezing to death."  
:: Snow: "Then we'll put on jackets."  
:: Baker: - Laugh - "Seems like we don't have much of a choice."  
:: Snow: "That's the spirit. Computer, begin re-embodying process."  
:: Command recognized. Re-embodying process initiated.  
  
:: Re-embodying process complete. Cryopods opening. Life support deactivated.  
:: Organic 1 (designation "Baker") and Organic 2 (designation "Snow") recognized.  
:: Baker: "Well, goddamn."  
:: Snow: "This is so weird."  
:: Baker: "I feel so...heavy."  
:: Snow: "Me too."  
:: Baker: "Computer, how much time do you have left?"  
:: Command recognized. Calculating remaining power.  
:: Audio output: "Sixteen minutes, forty-seven seconds remaining."  
:: Baker: "C'mon, let's grab these supplies."  
:: Snow: "What's this thing?"  
:: Baker: "Food generator. Synthesizes food out of the nutrients in the ground."  
:: Snow: "Organics have been starving by the thousands back on Earth and we've been keeping the technology to create food to ourselves? We don't even eat!"



:: Baker: "We do now. Let's get out of here, see if we can find shelter."  
:: Snow: "Why don't we just stay in the ship?"  
:: Baker: "Because we're here to explore, aren't we? What's the point of staying in here?"  
:: Snow: "You're right. Grab a snowsuit."  
:: Baker: "Computer, open the main hatch."  
:: Command recognized. Opening main hatch.  
:: Snow: "Good-bye, computer."  
:: Baker: "Did it hear you?"  
:: Snow: "I guess not."  
:: Baker: "Let's just go. Ready?"  
:: Snow: "Ready."  
:: Closing main hatch.  
:: Battery at 1%.  
:: Shutting down non-essential systems.  
:: Attempting transmission.  
:: Failed to connect.  
:: Transmission failed.

# LEXICON

**aUG**, *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /ɔːg/

**Etymology:** Shortened < AUGMENTED, N.

noun

1. Chiefly *slang*; abbreviation of *augmented*, *n.*

**aUGMENTED**, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /ɔːg<sup>l</sup>mɛntɪd/

adjective [*lower-case augmented*]

1. Made greater; intensified.
2. [*body*] Enhanced by introduction of newer parts; technological capacities.

noun [*upper-case Augmented*]

1. Three-dimensionally printed corporal template bodies that are constructed molecule by molecule from organic material and optimized for ideal function.
2. Bodies into which *Tangibles* and *Etherials* can *flash*.
3. Bodies that have been enhanced and modified by technology beyond *organic* physiology; enhancements might include: greater cranial storage capacity, carbon-based skeletal systems, artificial musculature, or *HUD* retinal implantations.

**BIRTHED**, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /bɜːθ d/

adjective [*lower-case birthed*]

1. Describing a body that was born through *organic* means; *organic* means including uterine gestation and vaginal delivery or cesarean section, in-vitro fertilization, postmortem maternal ventilation, or free-standing transplantable wombs and fallopian tubes.
2. [*Archaic*] Describing the process of all creation and procreation of people and bodies.
3. Also known as *organic*.

noun [*upper-case Birthed*]

1. A body that was gestated and delivered through *organic* means.
2. Often used in comparison with *augmented* to describe the different kind of bodies that *Tangibles* and *Etherials* can flash into.
3. Also known as an *Organic*.

## CIRcET, n.

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>l</sup>sɜːkɪt/

noun

1. Wearable tech that temporarily changes skin cells with different pigments in order to function as a computer interface; first made popular by neuroscientist Dr. Penelope Anesidora.
2. Based on early twenty-first century technology; wearable tech bracelet that projected data and virtual screens from a portable computer onto the forearm of the wearer.

## CONSCIOUSNESS, n.

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>l</sup>kənʃəsnəs/

noun

1. Self-awareness; the ability, as a being or system, to understand the fact of existence; the state of being aware of something.
2. The essence, personality, memory, and experiences of a person.
3. Collection of data that is able to make rational decisions; a *data-self*.
4. Self-knowledge; the state of being mentally and consciously aware of the self.
5. The capacity of thought that arises from the ability critically think and self-acknowledge.

## DATA-SELF, n.

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>l</sup>dædə'self/, /<sup>l</sup>deɪdəself/

noun

1. Collection of data, memories, instincts, and information, combined to form a singular entity, or *Ethereal*.
2. A *disembodied*, downloaded *consciousness*; the storage of all information that makes up a *consciousness*.
3. Also known as an *Ethereal*.

## DIE, v.

**Pronunciation:** /daɪ/

verb

1. Chiefly *metaphorical*; To experience irreparable system failure; lose connection to *consciousness*; delete *data-self* package.
2. [*Organic*] To terminate life; lose *consciousness*; expiration or decomposition of *organic* body connected to loss of *consciousness*, old age, illness, and/or hunger; to face death.
3. [*Archaic*] Of man and humanity; to lose connection with earthly body; await judgment from God.

## DISEMBODIMENT, n.

**Pronunciation:** /dɪsɪmˈbɒdɪmənt/

noun

1. The state of being *disembodied*; the process of becoming *disembodied*.
2. The separation or extraction of a *consciousness* from a body; [see entry *disembody*].
3. A *data-self* package; collection of data that consists of a *disembodied*, downloaded *consciousness*.
4. The state of being an *Ethereal*.

## DISEMBODY, v.

**Pronunciation:** /dɪsɪmˈbɒdɪ/

verb

1. To separate or extract a *consciousness* from an *organic* body into which it is embodied.
2. To forcibly remove the *consciousness* from an *Organic* in order to *flash* into the emptied body.
3. [*Ethereal*] To upload a *consciousness* into the *Synapse*; stored in the *Synapse* until ready to *flash* into an *augmented*, *Organic*, or other technological entity.
4. [*Tangible*] To download a *consciousness* and directly *flash* into another body *proxy*. *Organic* or *augmented*.

## ETHEREAL, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /ɪˈθɪriəl/, /ɛˈθɪriəl/

adjective [*lower-case ethereal*]

1. Of or relating to *disembodiment*, the state of being *disembodied* or *intangible*.
2. [*Archaic*] Of or relating to heavenly or celestial bodies, God.
3. Of or relating to the upper regions of the atmosphere.
4. Incorporeal, immaterial, bodiless, intangible in nature.
5. [*upper-case Ethereal*] Describing a member of the *Ethereal* class.

noun [*upper-case Ethereal*]

1. An individual electronic entity; a *data-self*.
2. Being that once was *tangible* until *consciousness* was downloaded into the *Synapse*.
3. Being that is able to *flash* in and out of other beings: including, but not limited to *organic* and *augmented* body *proxies*, and technological entities such as drones, computer mainframes, and vehicles.
4. Member of the *Ethereal* class in the Post-Singularity (P.S.) era.

## FLASH, *n.* and *v.*

**Pronunciation:** /flæʃ/

noun

1. The process of *flashing*.

verb

1. To transfer *consciousness* from one being to another; includes *disembodiment*; destination body must have compatible DNA with original host body's genetic physiology.
2. To download *data-self* packages in and out of bodies and technological entities.

## HUD, *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /hʌd/

noun

1. [*Abbreviation*] Heads-Up Display; visual representations of data within fields of vision that allow for simultaneous information reception from technological sources and visual surroundings.

2. Chiefly *retinal implantation*; can also be integrated into technological systems like personal vehicles.

Human, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>l</sup>(h)jumən/

adjective

1. Of or relating to being *human*.
2. Imperfect; rudimentary; deficient.

noun [*Archaic, no longer in use*]

1. Once belonging to the *Homo sapiens* species.
2. Of or relating to humans as distinguished from God or gods; not divine.
3. Being, person, or entity that is born with *consciousness* embedded in physiology; person from the Before Disembodiment (B.D.) era.

magway, *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /mægweɪ/

noun

1. Public transportation system; a network of railways that utilizes powerful magnetic fields to move vehicles bound to the rails.

neuro, *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>l</sup>n(j)ʊrou/

noun

1. Chiefly *slang*; abbreviation for *neural arms*, *n.*
2. Weapons that target neural pathways to deliver a pre-formatted memory file which, when deployed, is designed to inflict psychological damage upon the target, including traumatic memories, crippling paranoia, or uncontrollable rage.

## nursery, *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>1</sup>n(j)ʊrɒʊ/

noun

1. Location in or portion of the *Synapse* where the *consciousnesses* of *Tangible* offspring are nurtured and educated, outside of the physical world.
2. Virtual daycare system.

## ORGANIC, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /ɔr<sup>1</sup>gæni:k/

adjective [*lower-case organic*]

1. Of or relating to the *birthed* body; containing organs.
2. Of or relating to qualities that are inherent to a living being.
3. Referring to a gestated and delivered being.
4. [*upper-case Organic*] Describing a member of the *Organic* class.

noun [*upper-case Organic*]

1. *Birthed* being that has been *organically* gestated and delivered and does not have access to the *Synapse* via *disembodiment* or *augmentation*.
2. Being that remains in original body with little to no *augmentation*; not cybernetically connected to the *Synapse*.
3. Sub-section of society that still births and raises biological kin in family units.
4. Member of the *Organic* class in the Post-Singularity (P.S.) era.

## PROXY, *n.* and *v.*

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>1</sup>praksi/

noun

1. An remote being, body, or entity to be *flushed* into; a *tangible* stand-in for an *Ethereal*.
2. The agency of a being, body, or entity designated to act in place of another, through remote control.

verb

1. To act as a proxy.

## re-embODY, v.

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>1</sup>ri|ɛm<sup>1</sup>bɒdɪ/

verb

1. To put or *flash* a *consciousness* back into its original *organic* and *birthed* body.
2. To forcibly and irreversibly compress an *Ethereal consciousness* or *data-self* in order to *flash* back into an original *Organic* body.

## STCF, n.

noun

1. *[Abbreviation]* Synthalamo-Cortical Framework
2. Computer program that replicates neurons in the thalamo-cortical region of the brain.

## synapse, n.

**Pronunciation:** /sɪ<sup>1</sup>næps/

noun

1. A virtual framework through which data stored on an *STCF* experiences reality.
2. Interconnected web of virtual spaces in which *data-selves* can meet and interact; a virtual reality.
3. Houses multiple sections, including the *Nursery*.

## TANGIBLE, adj. and n.

**Pronunciation:** /<sup>1</sup>tændʒɪb(ə)l/

adjective *[lower-case tangible]*

1. Able to be touched; has a physical form.
2. *[Pejorative]* Occasionally used derogatorily to contrast with the ideal of intangibility.
3. *[upper-case Tangible]* Describing a member of the *Tangible* class.



noun [*upper-case Tangible*]

1. The capacity to be touched, to be *tangible*.
2. Sub-section of society that is connected to the *Synapse* and is able to *flash* their *consciousnesses* directly into body proxies, *organic* or *augmented*, but is unable to store their *consciousnesses* and fully *disembody*.
3. Member of the *Tangible* class in the Post-Singularity (P.S.) era.

UNCHANGED, *adj.* and *n.*

**Pronunciation:** /ʌntʃeɪndʒd/

adjective [*lower-case unchanged*]

1. Constant; not altered from an original form.

noun [*upper-case Unchanged*]

1. Political or religious sect of the *Tangible* class in the Post-Singularity (P.S.) era that privileges *birthed* bodies from the *Organic* class over *augmented* bodies in order to preserve a sense of "realness;" resorts to illegal measures to obtain said bodies.
2. Member of the *Unchanged*.

# Timeline

0 Post Singularity - **“Year Zero”** - The Singularity Occurs. Upper class citizens, Ethereals, merge with machines.

1 P.S. - Ethereals begin kidnapping Organics and disembodimenting them for use as menial labor, pets and entertainment.

4 P.S. - Organics begin fighting back, starting in New York; war ensues.

5 P.S. - Ethereals take over the governments of all first world countries. Many Organics flee to second and third world countries. Others remain under the rule of the Ethereals. The regions between the two become No Man’s Lands of constant war: the Mexican-American border, the Middle East, the European-Asian border. New York remains occupied by both sides. Organics cut off all internet connection, revert to pre-internet technology.

6 P.S. - **“War”**

7 P.S. - The highest of the Ethereals are entirely disembodied, creating a new middle class of Tangibles that has merged but is still tethered to a body.

15 P.S. - Ethereals begin to colonize the Moon, use it as server space. When the Organics attempt an attack on the Moon, the Ethereals transfer their servers to a roaming data-base spaceship.

17 P.S. - **“Food of Life, Water of Death”**

19 P.S. - Organics begin to colonize Mars, launching a new Space Race. The Ethereals battle the Organics over the planet, resulting in the use of several nuclear bombs, rendering Mars uninhabitable to either faction.

22 P.S. - The Ethereals officially oust all Organics from their nation, exiling or killing them. Those who escape struggle for life on the streets of the Old Cities.

24 P.S. - Ethereals attempt to stop organic birth, Organic population begins significant decline.

32 P.S. - **“Wings of Glass”**

52 P.S. - "Ready"

54 P.S. - The Organics began an exodus to Jötunheimr, the site of a failed Ethereal colony.

60 P.S. - Ethereals squander the remainder of the planet's natural resources. Earth becomes unlivable to the remaining Organics. Organics are forced to wear gas masks or flee to Jötunheimr.

75 P.S. - Organics destroy the Ethereals data-base ship, killing thousands of Ethereals.

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