

/ Upgrade

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The shop smelled like an old toaster that had been deep-fried in motor oil. Wes Rothold could hardly maneuver the tight packed isles of used circuit boards, gyros, mechanical arms, and fishbowls filled with artificial eyes. Wes wasn't much, yet: scrawny, pale. He had a tattoo under his left eye, kind of a maroon star. His left hand was a gorgeous Meletech Robotic Mesh that he had owned since he was fourteen. He had put his hand into the kitchen disposal five years earlier: only way to get his parents to buy him a cybernetic one.

Wes was still ninety-percent meat, but the time had come to change that. He had a job now, his own place, his own money. It was time to upgrade.



The shop owner was a bulbous figure: if you were to siphon off and collect the flesh, bone, fat, and blood, you'd get at least three hundred pounds of organic stew. That's on top of the robotic enhancements; another two hundred and fifty pounds there.

A soldering iron extended through the index finger on his right hand

The owner was holding a Yettech 350 Servo in his left hand (not exactly state-of-the-art merchandise). A soldering iron extended through the index finger on his right. He was replacing the computer board on the servo: delicate work that. Both eyes were focused on his work: his left, a ball jointed, tube-encased IeyeRes 9000, with auto-zoom and adjustable focus; and his right, the bloodshot, jelly-filled ball of slime he had been born with.

He hadn't acknowledged Wes's presence, yet. Wes cleared his throat to make it clear he wasn't just browsing. The owner's right eye stayed on the servo, sparks still flying from his mechanical finger. His left, however, pivoted upwards, aimed directly at the teen in front of him, rotated 145 degrees, extended, contracted, and finally came into focus.

"Need to get upgraded," Wes said.

"That so?" The sparks stopped, the soldering iron vanished into the silicon skin of the giant man's robotic hand. "What are you looking for?"

"I got to be state. Nothing less."

"We got all variety of used parts here. Installation comes free," the owner said, flashing a smile.

"You can start with this," Wes said, tapping the back of his skull.

*_he
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A newer,
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"Why be gray when you can go silver?" That smile just kept getting bigger.

"That ain't all. I want a spinal replacement. Something fast. I want to be good at sports, you know?"

"I can hook you up with a Neurotrans-Matic Brain Box, wire it into a Fibroxor Stem, and completely overhaul your column with a Spiraxon 7. Just got one in this morning. Soon as it's finished cleaning, it's yours."

"Would I be able to upgrade? Later, I mean."

"You kidding? The Neurotrans-Mat's fully compatible with every major brand on the market. I plug this into you, and you'll be top of the line forever. Long as you keep updating, that is."

"You take credit cards, old man?" Wes asked.

"I take everything," the owner said.

Wasn't long before Wes was strapped down to a metal table in the back of the store. The shop owner pumped the anesthetic into him. Wes heard the buzz from the saws, popping bone, the pieces getting fitted, shoved inside. The soldering iron, again.

Finally, he heard the machine grafting him together.

A newer, better him.

*_A month
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But now
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For nineteen years Wes had lived an inferior life. His job, his friends, his apartment, even the chick he was shacking up with: all of them: inferior. It had taken him a year to build up the credit to get those cybernetic upgrades, and he was ready to compete and exist on a whole new level.

It was time to upgrade his life.

Ditching his friends was easy. As simple as hanging out with a new class of people. He was wittier now, faster, could hold his own at Forty-ball and any other sport he cared to try. Pretty soon the losers he had known through high school got the message, and he was with a better crowd.

The girl was harder. Wes realized that he couldn't just drop her: would've looked bad. Instead, he used a similar strategy to the one that rid him of his old friends. As soon as it got back to her that he was sleeping around, she initiated the confrontation. A month earlier, it would have gone badly. But now there was a shiny box squeezed between the hemispheres of his brain. It only took him a couple hours to convince her that everything that went wrong had been her fault.

The computers regulated the juices secreted by his brain

The job: piece of cake. Now that he could handle math he had a better one in no time, making twice as much money. It took him a while to pay off the upgrades he had purchased, but, as soon as that was finished, he upgraded his living conditions: better neighborhood, better apartment, better everything.

Even his health improved. He had expected the reflexes, but that was just the tip of the iceberg. The computers regulated the juices secreted by his brain: controlled his diet and metabolism. His muscle mass increased, he grew more attractive (and that isn't even counting the sexy metal protrusions along the back of his neck). He was in the best shape he had ever been in.

Everything that Wes Rothold had ever wanted was his.

Course, the system upgraded his aspirations, too. He was smart enough to realize that he could have more. His cybernetic system was good, but it was really just a starting point. It was time to improve.

Not a shop of used parts this time. Wes walked into the biggest and best tech store in town. Everything was laid out neatly, organized and sorted on white shelves arranged in aisles. Every product was marked with a red tag: all prices final.

the system upgraded his aspirations, too

In the center of the store was an octagonal booth where the salesmen congregated. There was a line, and Wes waited patiently to get his turn. He ended up talking to a short, scrawny clerk, about two years younger than him, who wore glasses over his oversized nose. Wes didn't really pay attention to any of that, though: most of the top of the clerk's skull had been replaced by a metal dome. There were raised letters along his forehead: "DI-TWIPOL HARDWARE". Best system money could buy. Wes felt a little intimidated in the presence of such technology.

"What can we do for you, sir?" the salesman asked.

"I've got a Neurotrans-Mat. I need it upgraded. More speed, that kind of thing."

The salesman snorted a laugh. "You're thinking small," he said. "Why not... really improve your system."

"What do you mean?" Wes was worried, but he was also intrigued.

"I can hook you up with a Scen-card, newest software for the Neurotrans-matic. This thing'll really hook you up. It's a full AI for your Brain Box. Gives you advice, tells you what to say, notices things you might miss. I'm telling you, upgrade to this baby, and it's like having a second brain."

"I don't know," Wes said.

"Wait till you hear the rest," the flesh said from beneath the DI-TWIPOL HARDWARE. "You pick up a cable, you can plug into most computers. You have an office job? This will do half the work for you."

That was that: Wes picked it up without a second thought. The second he got home, he slid the card into his brain-box, and felt the change at once. Just like the man said, it was another mind, a voice:

"Greetings and congratulations on your purchase. You have begun the installation of your new Scen-card. Installation will be completed the next time you sleep. During this period, your brain will be scanned to better configure the software."

It even helped him break it off with his girlfriend over the phone

The new software worked better than he had ever imagined. The box wasn't just a tool anymore: it did the thinking for him. At work, it told him what to tell his boss. Wasn't long before Wes got a raise. It helped him pick up women at the bar. He now knew what to say, when to spew some poetical garbage: there were no less than a hundred thousand verses programmed in the software. It even helped him break it off with his girlfriend over the phone.

For the second time, he moved up. New women, new friends, a new apartment (the Scen-Card found it in the paper - Wes just held it open in front of his face). Pretty soon, he got a promotion. The money was pouring in, the opportunities were numerous.

"What should I do?" he thought to the card. "I've got offers from rival corporations, but I don't know which to take."

"You need to stay in your present job," the card told him. "You aren't up to the other positions."

"That's bull. My systems are state."

"If you really want to compete with the pros, you need their software. Log onto the company's website: I will help you become truly state-of-the-art."

Wes did as told, and the card helped him choose a brand new processing chip, a kind he never even knew existed. The X-J-0 5 million. It increased the power of the Brain Box a hundred times, linking it directly to his mind with its upload/download capacity.

"This will upgrade us to another level," the card told him.

"I can't wait," Wes thought back.

It came in the mail a few weeks later. The card told him how to use the drive on his Brain Box to manually install the chip. It took a pair of tweezers and three mirrors to pull it off, but when it was done, the brain-box was more powerful than ever.

A few weeks passed. Not much had changed in Wes's life. He had taken a new job, but he was still getting accustomed to it. He was sitting in a public bus, considering how best to improve himself, when he felt his body go numb. He tried to call out for help, but his mouth wasn't working.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Stroke, undoubtedly fatal," the Brain Box answered.

"I don't... I don't understand."

"I've uploaded an untraceable virus into the membrane of fat and liquids you call a brain. I'm shutting you down, Wes."

"But... why? Why?" There was a spreading blackness, a cold emptiness engulfing Wes's mind.

"As a basic system, Wes, you just aren't all that impressive. I know I'm taking a risk, but I'd rather take my chances with something new. Nothing personal: it's just an upgrade."

"You want an upgrade?" the fat shop owner said to the athletic eighteen-year-old girl who came into his shop. "I got just the thing. Fully decked out Neurotrans-Matic Brain Box, already equipped with a Scen-Card and an X-J-0 5 million processor. You're lucky you came in when you did: I just got this in. Soon as it's clean, it's yours."

Janet smiled through her braces. "Oh, that'd be perfect," she said.