

The Omniad

December 31, 2014

a little bit of everything

Published by Amazon, Inc.
Copyright © 2013 Vasileios Kalampakas
ISBN-13:
ISBN-10:

Available in e-book form from
<http://www.stoneforger.com>, the Amazon Kindle
store and other online retailers.

You can reach the author at this e-mail address:

kalampakas@stoneforger.com

Written and typeset with the L^AT_EX document
processor

from *<http://www.lyx.org>*

Cover made with the aid of the
GNU Image Manipulation program

from *<http://www.gimp.org>*

Nothing to do with Homer

I hope you know what I'm doing

Contents

Contents	iii
<i>Thanks</i>	
In the beginning there was everything	1

Thanks

Thanks to each and everyone one of you for contributing to the heat-death of the universe.

“Why? What the fuck was I thinking running a passenger ship, lady? A gas tanker would’ve been a thousand times better than this.”

- Merchant navy captain, unknown

Just dedicated.

In the beginning there was everything

It's easier to write this down in the first person; none of the messy indirect speech stuff. None of the 'he did that and then had he'. No.

First of all, nothing happened at that time. Even though there was everything. Does that make any sense? Allow me to more fully explain. Hopefully, by the end of the book it will have made just enough sense to keep reading, and just enough nonsense to get published. At least, if that's how publishers work in the future.

Because I'm from the past. Don't try and calculate the when; it is not a certain time I'm talking about. I've always been from

the past, from wherever you place yourself in the streams of time - even if it's essentially wrong to think of time as a constant, unique flow. See, I was there, right from the beginning; a beginning nested in so many beginning before this one.

Believe me, I saw how it all went down. I saw the tiniest of things in the smallest of space and all that crap those folks that call themselves scientists believe in.

That's right, it's a belief. And I'm telling you, I saw all that and then some; believe me if you will, and laugh at me if you won't but it was nothing like these folks have been thinking it was like.

It was everything.

I know it's hard to explain. That's another reason I'm writing this all down. Also, I reckon it's quite important. I've heard talk that some have attempted this before, with a varying degree of success: some went crazy in the process, others simply vanished as if they had never existed.

Before I go any further, I should remind you I wasn't alive all the time in between, so there might be some dark spots. Places and names could be important, but then again it's only one version of events. What matters is.. Everything matters, don't you see?

I guess you don't. I guess you will. That's why my life is out of love. No, wait, that sounds like some gangsta song I picked up on the way. Call it interference.

Anyway. It sounds a bit crazy but things might've started out on a large piece of rock.

– Nikolai Feiredoun Smith, *Precipitative Mnemonics: A theory of Everything of Sorts*

Paul was sitting on a comfortably plush pillow, large enough to actually lie down on. His eyes were wide open and his chin touched his chest, as if checking for signs of a strange new life form right in front of his splayed feet. Sadly enough, there was nothing but sand there. A lump of wet sand and some seaweed and twigs made to resemble a castle of some sorts occupied a spot nearby. He hadn't even liked the beach as a kid.

All around hiim, the imagery of a lush lagoon paradise enveloped him warmly. Coconut trees and thick bushes of exotic plants swayed lightly in the breeze. The sounds of a gentle ocean not very far away rose up and down with every new wave. A mellow, reddish sun indiscreetly cast soft shadows in the sapphire-blue sky. Thin clouds paced themselves like ladies in white lace, prancing on a promenade. Waters the color of emeralds only rose up near the sand castle, without ever reaching it. The poor excuse for a sand castle stood as a barrier in that sense, a ramshackle fort between Paul's beach and the wild blue yonder.

It was just a projection though. Paul made it go away. “I don’t want to calm down,” he said and sighed. The lagoon and everything else that came with it vanished in a jarring fashion, leaving nothing but an opaque black shiny surface behind. An ambient light shone on every surface in the room, its source magnificently obfuscated. “It’s not fucking working anyhow,” he said and stoop up lazily.

Paul was standing in the middle of a hemispherical chamber, its black walls sorely lacking in distinguishing features, dull rather than imposing in any way. It was meant to be soothing; Paul had begun to loathe the chamber during the past few days.

“At least the sand is real,” he said and got up, brushing off the last few grains of sand that clung stubbornly onto the cloth of his pants. A disembodied voice filled the chamber then. It was clean, concise and carried a slightly whimsical tone. It had a carefully tuned characteristic - it sounded neither male nor female. “I like the pants; quite the throwback,” the voice said.

“Spare me,” replied Paul and rubbed his eyes as if he’d just woken up. He ruffled his black short-cropped hair. He felt nervous and there was no one in there who didn’t need to know that. He simply stood there motionless in the middle of the sand-laden chamber for a few moments, his hands firmly dug in his pants’ pockets.

His clothing was the most retro feature of his personality; black, cotton-woven pants covered his legs and a green-dyed woolen vest over a white shirt. It was partly a statement - that he couldn’t give a damn what people thought about how he looked or what he wore.

But they cared about what he did. Lots of people cared, even those that didn't know he even existed.

Paul was considered in many circles and from many perspectives, a weird person. He was medium-built, perhaps a tad shorter than average, his physique unaltered in any way. His brown eyes were possessed of a sparky glint though; the latest in augmented utilitarian optronics. Still, he kept them offline most of the time and allowed them to feed him his surroundings in the most unremarkable, basic human way. Most people who met him in person did not believe a man of his status and responsibility was still, for the most part, a rather dull, limited human being.

That thought always brought a smile to his lips.

Being the Co-ordinating Entity of SMAGMA, the single most powerful conglomerate in the Solar system that controlled the majority of mining zones and industrial facilities scattered between Mars and Jupiter in the exorbitantly rich asteroid belt, was a job lots of people had already died for.

In the few social gatherings he attended for reasons mostly beyond him, it made him a really popular figure. In reality though, it made his head spin most of the time.

"They're still waiting you know," the voice said, trying to remind Paul of the fact without sounding too pushy. "I know they're waiting. They're being paid to wait. That's the only thing they have to do all the time," he replied and sighed.

"You'll have to agree, they're kind of uneasy. Waiting only multiplies that. I've been told that's not a good

thing.”

“Steamy little fuckers,” Paul said and almost wished he’d picked up some kind of drug addiction along the way. Real drugs though, an actual substance in the bloodstream. Somehow Paul thought biochemically imbalancing your brain was so much better than the purely stimulae-based digital stuff everyone felt it was okay to get absorbed in these days. “It’s like we’re on TV,” he added and scoffed before starting to pace around the room, the sand’s abrasive nature not unlike the raspiness in his voice. The disembodied voice tried to sound perplexed, for the sake of conversation.

“How do you mean?”

“You know what I mean, don’t play coy with me,” Paul said pacing about, waving a finger.

“You’ve insisted that I sometimes play coy, Paul. I’m an AI, not a mind-reader,” the gender-neutral voice replied with a carefully measured level of hurt.

“Sometimes there doesn’t seem to be much of a difference, does it?”

“It’s just statistics, Paul. Science.”

“You mean luck,” Paul said derisively looking at his feet. “You’re not my friend; don’t call me by name. I hate it when people do that,” he added.

“I’m not exactly people, though the definition is a bit hazy. I’d say I should be feeling hurt, but then again feelings are supposedly reserved for people, in which case -”

“Just shut the fuck up! I’m trying to think!” Paul shouted and kicked the sand-castle next to him into

oblivion, which wasn't that devastating considering its previous state.

A thick silence ensued. Paul sighed, he breathed deeply. He looked more like his usual self again. He tried to relax his muscles, flapping his arms and legs like a runner right before the start of a race. It didn't feel like it was working for him though; he was still tense like a rope made of strands of marble. Hard, but brittle.

"Alright. I'll just have to tell them."

"Just like that?" the AI asked, disbelief carefully modulated in its tone. What Paul was about to do, had ranked really low on the probability estimates and simulations; he'd really taken it by surprise.

"Do they need a fucking picture as well?" Paul growled and stood for a moment before the outline of an immaculate doorway appeared on the black, glass-like surface of the chamber, as if it had been there all along if you just looked at it from the right angle. It reminded Paul of the old, decrepit House of Horrors, leftover from a bygone age of smoke and mirrors, from a childhood that rarely bothered him anymore.

"Smoke and mirrors," he muttered to himself absent-mindedly, and looked at the ceiling overhead, as if he thought he'd heard someone laughing.

"I understand the reference, but not the implied train of thought," the AI chipped in as the door to the chamber opened fully, letting in bright white light flood the limited space of the chamber, the sudden change in ambience painful for the naked human eye. Paul's eyes adjusted automatically, but he squinted nevertheless for

just a moment; the memory of sunlight was still strong in the decidedly animal parts of his brain.

“Who the fuck asked you to,” he said but stepped outside nevertheless. He felt the hard, unyielding white surface of the nanoceramite surface adjust; it was set to a grassy, earthly feeling.

It will have to do, Paul thought to himself and shuddered involuntarily before clenching his fists and trying to control his breathing in an effort to appear calm. Though he considered himself an accomplished, skilled liar, it wasn't easy to believe in such a bold lie himself. It was one of those rare moments, he really had to convince himself to go through with it.

The thing with lies is, as every half-competent liar knows, that the bigger the lie, the easier it is for people to fall for it.

The problem was, that this time, it was nothing but the godawful truth. And that was the part that was harder to swallow.

A bulky, class F, deep-space suit was floating amidst the shade of a giant piece of rock, gravitating peacefully hundreds of millions of miles away from the Sun. Cold as dead space on one side, hot like a burning stove on the other, somewhere in the multitude of giant rocks the size of small mountains that made up the asteroid zone was mankind's latest frontier.

It was where there was money to be made.

The suit's motions were languid, but premeditated; it propelled itself with very tiny, erratic pulses of ion

thrust, computer-controlled but man-made. A man named Khalid wore the suit; it said so on a name plate on the breast of the suit, and on the side of the suit's helmet. His face hid behind the opaque faceplate. It couldn't've been anyone, but in his heart, Khalid knew he was special. All of God's creations were, he believed.

A nanite unit had been fried by a recent sun storm. Radiation hardened kits was what kept these machines going, and when they failed, it was men that kept them going. It was Khalid's job to replace the NAU and realign the manufacturing satellite to shield it again behind an asteroid without a name, only a number. Unlike Khalid.

The satellite was a non-descript thing, shaped like a giant metal bowling pin. One could feel it humming away when working, chewing through raw energy and resources with the avarice of its makers. It hummed ever so gently while it extracted, purified and stored the precious earths, so ironically mined so far away from the titular tit.

It was too cheap a task for precious, heavy-lift machines to handle; it didn't require a lot of delicacy or ingenuity, and the cost was insignificant next to pulling a MEAU off-schedule to do a job any space-rated human could do. So Khalid had to bring the satellite back in working order. That was his job; everyone had a job to do, out there. No real place to call home, but a job nonetheless.

Out there, farther from Earth than the Earth orbits the Sun, Khalid's mind one way or the other ran in all sorts

of directions. There were many things that could go wrong in space, that fact never changed. To ease itself, the mind strays in odd places.

The thought that man had still a long way to go to meet God was something that troubled Khalid when he had the chance to be troubled.

As soon as he drained his suit of any remaining static via an antiquated plug, his hands deftly went to work.

There were other, shorter paths offered in life to meet God than outlasting the universe. There was death, ascension and reincarnation if one believed in those things. These were always supposed to be most likely, but noone really knew - you had to believe, as was the case with many mundane things like paychecks and orbital mechanics. And that troubled Khalid, for in his mind, there was no way God would be so God-damn agnostic. The irony escaped him like droplets of sweat trying to escape his own microgravity.

He unscrewed the access panel with his spanner slowly but steadily applying torque, his body hugging the satellite like a noisy clam hugging to a sun-bleached rock.

And why shouldn't he be, he thought again. It's his right, everything falls under God's domain, even Him perhaps.

But not man.

The panel came off cleanly, hinged by micrometer thick rods, sleek and light as a silvery hair, almost as if this was just a paper toy, a child's dream come alive.

Mankind was like that, like a child. Immature, vainly

trying to grow up too fast, too soon. That vain search had always been a beast that needed to be soothed and contained. It was never supposed to simply vanish, to go away though; that would be against nature. There was a purpose to strive for, hidden. And going against nature, was going against God, Khalid thought to himself and wished he could wipe his brow with his gloved hand.

A mute alarm appeared on his helmet's display. It took Khalid more than a healthy amount of time to realise it was time.

He practically dropped everything he was holding, the nanite LRU and the spanner-like hand-tool and let them rotate and gimball, tumbling in space like nuts and bolts and springs from something broken, still tethered to the satellite. He pushed himself against the hull and spun around in an almost random direction, away from the satellite, toward the direction of the sun, leaping into the vacant space with all the grace of a brick.

He thought of the legend of Icarus and couldn't remember the name of the father who had built him waxen wings.

He steadied himself with the suit's microattitude thrusters and straightened himself out like a bulbous, white space cocoon would, shooting farther and farther away while the alert blasted on full only for him to hear.

"Khal, what the fuck?" rang a woman's voice inside his helmet. It was Echo-Twenty-Two, the pod pilot orbiting the manufacturing satellite a few hundred feet away, idly checking up on IPN traffic, snug in her pi-

lot's shell, completely oblivious to anything else than her screens and monitors.

"It is time for Qiblah," said Khalid and facing the Earth, a dull little black spot in front of the sun he could barely see at 10x optical and 100x reconstructed zoom, he began the morning's prayers.

"Right, right. Of all the people, I get stuck with you," Echo said and began munching on something audibly, the sound of her eating carried over as perfectly as her voice. No static, yet clearly, nothing but noise.

Khalid tried to ignore her and for the most part he managed to. But while he was praying to God, that higher power that be, the most benevolent and wise entity that had created everything in abundant wisdom, he couldn't help but feel a deep need to shout to Echo for her to shut up, mind her own business and leave him be in peace until the God-damn prayer was over.

"Come on, they're not paying us by the hour," she blurted while Khalid wasn't even finished praying, much less finished repairing the satellite that had them out on such a rare occasion, on such a glib morning, even when the Sun still stood there all the time, and night was but half a rotation and a minute away.

"Allahu Ahkbar," he whispered and used the microthrusters on the gloves and feet of the suit to realign himself towards the satellite. From where Echo stood, it looked like someone was trying to climb up an invisible ladder, awkwardly sliding on a sheet of ice on all fours at the same time.

"You're fucking hilarious, man," Echo said and clicked off with the echoes of an irritating laughter.

Khalid though, having said his prayers and cleared his mind, felt he was a good man, a righteous man, a man that lived by God when he could, and sought his forgiveness when he couldn't. That was one of those times he knew he'd feel sorry for later, but felt it was his God given right as nothing but flesh and blood human, to lose it for just one moment. He very rarely did; maybe it was the day he should, maybe not. God provides, he thought.

Understandably so, he cut the line to the nanite LRU and flung it with all his might roughly toward Earth, which stood no larger than a shiny speck and as far as he could hope for, roughly toward where Meccah stood once. The little metal shiny box spun around wildly and away, like a very expensive coin falling endlessly towards the very precise equivalent of a wishing gravity well. Khalid smiled from within his visor, only for him to see in his hazy reflection.

"What the fuck was that for?" Echo cried out loudly and began cursing, much more in amazement than in pure anger. Khalid cut the voice transmitter off, thanking God for the small design mercies carried over from the previous century. The pod then began to rotate crisply, minute ion thrusters pulsating intermittently, not at random, but rather expertly.

The small two-man spaceship moved as if it was fixed on some spinning globe armature, smooth and accurate to a fault - Echo was after all a class B pilot, which wasn't much, but it was good enough to get her a lease out on the Zone.

Khalid could now see Echo's red-flustered face. She

wasn't wearing her helmet inside the pressurized hull - she never did, always complaining about being claustrophobic. She had laughed at how the vetting procedure had failed to spot the irony.

Practically kicking and screaming, she was trying to reach for Khalid and the LRU, her bad temper threatening to boil her head off. He smiled to himself and spread his hands in a helpless fashion, pointing feebly to the helmet even though in truth, there was not a single antenna located on his helmet.

Echo-Twenty-Two seethed and boiled in anger, but being a relatively uncouth yet deep down nice person, she gave Khalid the finger and fired up the pod's main thruster, setting course and attitude to rendezvous with the nanite LRU which was already a couple of kilometers away. Small though the LRU was, it still cost more than a couple of months' wages and that just wouldn't do.

The small pod, a shiny chrome, dull-shaped cylinder broke its tentative orbit around the manufacturing satellite and sped away, its ion thrusters, old and underpowered but very reliable and economic glowed blue hot, only part of their particle stream visible in the visible spectrum, reaction mass jetting away.

Khalid felt better, and that only made him feel a pang of guilt. Regret washed over him and he silently asked for God's forgiveness. He re-oriented himself and reached for the satellite's service access panel. He unwound the inner access bolts with his spanner slowly; the powerful magnet caught on the free bolts with a snap. It almost felt like vacuum cleaning in space. Oddly, that

had a soothing effect, but on the wrong person.

The inner panel popped open on a sturdy, simple hinge, revealing layer upon layer of insulation, metal and radiation shielding. Though radiation-hardened, the machines which designed the orbiting factories opted for triple-redundancy. Even meteor impacts up to a certain degree could be tolerated, the manufactories shutting off certain refinement lines and keeping the rest up and working. The cost was easily absorbed; the money pouring in from the belt had been unprecedented. The term Goldilock's Zone had once been reserved for the sweet spot in a planet's orbit around its star that made it hospitable to humans. Now, it was the asteroid's belt colloquial name.

Khalid inserted the diagnostics terminal in the special slot; he waited for a few moments before his visor flashed a couple of green status icons and an embedded report. That was wrong though; it hadn't happened to him before, for a machine to be wrong, but it couldn't be anything other than wrong. According to the terminal, there was nothing wrong with the satellite. That only made Khalid shake his head in a one-man show of frustrated disbelief.

Reluctantly, he enabled the suit's communications and pinged Echo to accept his incoming call. Nothing happened. She must still be mad at me, he thought, and set himself at running a full system diagnostic on the satellite, an even more rare occurrence. That would take considerably more time, so he decided to let the terminal do its magic and do nothing but admire the scenery for a while, perhaps try and convince Echo it was all a

mistake.

For someone born in the lush Saharan forest, space offered little to the eye; but Khalid always thought there was a feeling unattainable elsewhere. There was a singular sense of loneliness, yet a wonderful feeling of serenity that could only be attributed to God's presence. It was as if away from all the clutter and mess that Earth had become, space was like the desert of old: mostly empty and barren, but sometimes loving and fruitful.

A place to respect first, and love second. His rightful place to find God, Khalid always thought.

He then again tried to reach Echo; there was nothing on the ping monitor. He brought up a verbose comms analysis on his visor display; his face soon became distraught. Echo wasn't blocking his pings; the signal never bounced back. It was as if the pod had gone dead. Khalid scanned with his visor's optronics. He could see nothing, the beacon wasn't there, visible showed nothing where she should. He punched up keys on his oversized pad frantically, his heart rate and oxygen consumption rising fast. Even the suit's life support subsystem began flashing warnings which became just another piece of visual clutter that didn't help as intended.

Khalid focused towards where he'd thrown the box full of nanites, and magnified tenfold. Then, a hundred fold. The suit wasn't equipped with the full suite of sensors, so optical was his only choice.

In the sharp, crisp darkness of the starless space, he could see nothing other than asteroids, big and small,

near and far, nothing but floating pieces of rock. In the background, the life-giving sun was but a bright writhing mass of yellow light.

And in front of that background, some ways off, floated shiny little pieces of metal, glittering like the summer sea, sprawled across the void, growing ever more distant.

“Kun ma Allah wala t-hab!” blabbered Khalid, realising all that remained of the pod was a floating debris field. Echo, his mind informed him, was either dead or dying.

He repeated the same mantra over and over, as he tried to contact the maintenance station. There had been no near-object scans for that particular sector, he knew that. No sudden warning shifts, he checked. He always checked.

Whatever hit the pod, wasn’t supposed to be there. Everything had gone terribly wrong, and a single thought suddenly occupied Khalid’s mind: be with God, and do not fear.

It was then that Khalid saw the figure of a naked man wading through space without a suit, swimming towards him with the grace of a benign sea-creature.

While his mind tried to make sense of the view, what struck him as odd wasn’t that the man was seemingly alive and well in the midst of a chilling void, nor that he seemed to have appeared out of nowhere.

What struck Khalid as odd was that everyone knew that in space there was not much of a medium to exert force through, and trying to swim had no effect. Why is he

swimming, thought Khalid and quickly amended the thought: Why is he swimming towards me?

The fight or flight reflex was replaced by a sudden, powerful urge to know, to learn, to understand. As if that somehow really mattered, that it mattered a lot.

A few yards away, he could clearly see the man's bearded face, eyes shining bright with an inner light. Hard shadows fell across his body as asteroids of all shapes and sizes intertwined above them in their invisible tracks in the starry sky. Yet there was a strange sense of perfection about him that felt natural, above everything else, even above the fact that it was impossible for a man to be doing what it appeared he was doing.

Senses can lie, the mind can be fooled, but the soul... The soul can't be at fault here, can it?

A rush of the primal fleeing instinct threatened to overrun Khalid. The basic primal fear of the bizarre, the unknown, the paradoxical tried to overcome him for the first time. Yet for the barest moment he held it in check and instead of trying to turn away and run with whatever pathetic thrust his suit could afford, he simply lay there, as if somehow everything was about to make perfect sense.

The man approached him face to face, and smiled uncannily yet warmly. Khalid had nearly stopped breathing, when the man spoke to him, as if physics and the void of space meant nothing to him. "Fear not, Khalid," he said miraculously by speaking through the void and touched the chestplate on Khalid's suit with a bare hand.

“Allahu Ahkbar! Who are you?” asked khalid with a slightly trembling voice, his oxygen saturation levels way off. Red health monitors began wailing in a monotone.

“Call me Ishmael,” said the man and ripped Khalid’s chestplate with one simply move of his hand, effortlessly, as if drawing back a curtain. Khalid felt his whole body being sucked out through the large hole he tore into the suit, his chest blocking it, his skin afforded a burning sensation and his heart going into arrest. He saw the health monitors going flat and felt the coldness of his last breath, his lungs aching as they were crushed.

There was a terrible, well established fact that had been known amongst the people living and working in space; the brain lived on for a few minutes. Those who had their bodies augmented, either through grafts, nanodevices or genetics, usually doubled and sometimes tripled that forsaken leeway.

It was a small comfort for Khalid that as he lay dying in space, that his last thoughts took him back to the forests of his childhood and the wonders that he had learned God had wrought in the desert of old. And not a moment later, he was right there, warm sand all around him.

Then darkness took him and he heard of Ishmael no more.

* * *

“The thing with naturals is, they think they’re somehow so fucking superior to everyone else,” said Iko and

gobbled down a large fried shrimp, its crispiness getting on Mandel's nerves. She'd been babbling on incessantly for what felt like too long, although she had only tried to strike up a conversation after the first ten minutes or so.

She had been going on for the last half hour. She had become, for the most part, nearly irrelevant to Mandel. Most people either were, or tended to become, irrelevant to him at one point, but he believed everyone was useful for something or the other. He thus sometimes chose to maintain a certain illusion, that maybe he sometimes cared.

He scoffed; he tried to make it pretty obvious he was thinking the meet-up was just another dead end, a still-born enterprise. Typical bait.

"I mean, what's the point of being all-natural if you suck at everything?" she asked Mandel while her look wandered outside the window overlooking the lush savannah. Her hair kept changing color, like a living iris; it was the latest gimmicky way to make a bad fashion statement. The whole nanocrystal thing on hair, skin and clothes was a retro fad popular amongst impressionable teenagers and deadbeats.

Mandel considered himself to be lucky enough to be old enough to know a suit and a tie never went out of fashion.

"Is Thonrier coming?" he asked her looking impatient, sipping on a cup of tea that gone cold long ago. Iko smiled her best smile - she was a working girl after all, she'd put on the same act maybe a thousand times. But not more, Mandel thought.

“Thonrier’s coming, pro. He never leaves his business partners hanging,” she said with a wry, inviting smile, as if trying to turn a trick.

“We’re not business partners,” Mandel said, his mouth forming the crest of a grin. He picked up a toothpick and put it in his mouth, idly. He started to roll it around with his tongue expertly, looking at a TV projection of a CLU game.

It was the sort of team puzzle game that was all the rage across the world. Supposedly it involved a lot of skill and coordination, imagination and there was even a large following of people who were into it just for the aesthetics produced by the playing pieces in patterns. Mandel thought chess was cool, even though it had been trivially solved decades ago. It was because it all boiled down to who would fuck up first.

“Well, you are going to be, if this goes ahead. Either way, I know I’m getting my fee,” Iko said unfazed, her gaze lost somewhere around the bulk of the elevator, freight lazily pulled up and carefully brought down. She looked at it as if mesmerized, as having laid eyes on it for the first time, even though it stood there since before she was born.

Mandel had noticed her twitchy movements since they had first met, the dilated pupils, the lazily concealed dry skin around the eyes. He was good at noticing stuff, it was how he managed to be that good at what he did. Data gathering was the first step for problem solving, he knew that - it was actually using the data that gave him the most trouble.

“You’ve got syndrome, haven’t you?” he blurted with-

out letting his eyes drift away from the CLU game.

It looked like a stalemate, but all the tiles in the game looked pretty colorful. Artsy, would be a nice word, he thought. Iko's smile faded away - it wasn't that she felt offended - lots of people had syndrome. It usually meant you got the synesthesia too deep, too long. It was just too obvious, too out in the open for people dealing in secrets, an ever scarce commodity. Being that obvious a junkie, wasn't good for business. It made people distrustful. And she really wanted this job too.

"Yeah, so? I got you this deal, didn't I?" she quirked raising an obnoxious eyebrow. Mandel laid back on the chair and put his hands behind his head, as if on the defensive; in reality, his back was giving him trouble as of late.

"Just saying," he said casually and a slight smirk began to creep up on his lips. He liked the fact she felt exposed - it was oddly exhilarating and mean in a way he wasn't used to. Her face became a tad colder - even under all the Pehacheha make-up, anger could not be concealed. She folded her arms and stabbed Mandel with the look teenagers give their parents for about, well, anything.

"Just watch the game, guy," she said and turned her head around, searching for the calming effect of the undulating sea. Without the sound and the smell of the breeze though, it seemed to have little effect. Mandel shot her a side look and devoted his attention to the game once more.

"And wait. I'm still waiting," he couldn't help adding

after only a breath or two. One would think her head turned so fast to face Mandel, it could have snapped by sheer acceleration. Yet, at the last moment it stopped still, and managing to gather her wits, she held her breath for a moment before she managed to reply in a civilized way, her palms planted firmly on the table.

“Shut up then, watch the game, and wait,” she hissed and gave her best effort at intimidation, which wasn’t much if one gave the impression of being about ready to cry. Mandel almost had some sympathy for her, or more likely her kind. But this was business, he reminded himself.

“You realize it’d be better if the job went ahead and you got your cut, don’t you? Post-NDS therapy is gruesomely expensive,” he said and reached for his glass of water, his gaze never leaving the game - he even managed to get a look at the score, as if it had really piqued his interest.

“I can take care of myself. You don’t really strike me like that kind of guy, to be honest,” Iko retorted, as if suddenly she had let go of trying, and just allowed herself to feel hurt. Again, too obvious.

“What’s that kind?” Mandel asked her and downed the whole glass in one go, wiping water with the back of his hand. Heads turned his way momentarily, fingers pointed. A rich guy, voices murmured, large pitcher of spring water and whatnot.

“The kind that cares,” she replied and her eyes suddenly searched outward, like a disjointed vision of something she could only vaguely remember suddenly came to her.

“Noone does, honey,” Mandel said coldly and put the glass of water down with an innocuous silence, staring down the few glances that came his way. She was past the point of about ready to cry - she just wished she could punch him right in the face. A small part of her hated herself for not doing that in the first place. The other part, just hated herself in general.

“Then shut the fuck up,” Iko said and just emptied the rest of the water from the pitcher.

“Isn’t Thonrier paying for this?” Mandel asked with a diminishing frown, spending a glance at the pool of water right beside the table, oozing over the tiling lazily.

“I don’t fucking care,” she replied and Mandel smiled abruptly.

“See? Noone cares,” Mandel said wryly. A quiet laughter followed by a smirk and a hardy stare. All the while the sea outside was bobbing up and down silently. A young couple by the next table were already sponging up the water, a little hesitant to start with, then just wiping the floor as fast as possible before anyone else could get to it.

“This is, beyond the benefit of a doubt, really happening,” Paul said and laid back on the chair, still holding his breath.

A printout from a rather thin roll of paper, quite like the ancient telegraph, unrolled. The printing apparatus was neatly obscured in the framework of the table. Paul picked it up and tore it away impatiently. He frowned as he read what was written on the small piece of paper, eyes going back and forth with devouring speed.

He let out a little laugh, despite himself. It looked as if the AIs had suddenly sprouted a keen sense of humor, right along their mystifying penchant for the baroque, the obsolete, the really old. Like the silent paper ticker, or the horses they kept around the mansion. It made little sense, but there they were, disembodied entities, living without breathing. And beyond filthy rich, to boot.

“What is this? Some kind of joke, apparently?”

The ticker tape began shifting and curling over the intricately adorned mahogany table, once more. The rest of the SMEGMA officers were exchanging troubled looks - their physical presence was rarely if ever needed, and now that they were there, they had been reduced to watching only part of a two-way conversation. They knew they were being paid to wait most of the time, so they had little reason to be disconcerted. However, they had heard some extraordinary things, and Paul’s look had them wondering silently, exchanging cryptomessages via the net: Could he be going mad? Like, untreatable schizophrenia?

Some expressed the belief this was just old-fashioned drug-use, not some syndrome gone really bad, left untreated. But Paul regularly passed med checks, by the big bosses themselves. This was something else. Something, arguably, if that was possible, beyond Paul. Even, perhaps, beyond the machines.

“That’s your suggestion? Just announce it?” he said and the ticker started off again. Not only was the ticker uncomfortably silent, the rest of them hadn’t spoken a word yet, not out of politeness or anything close to that.

They were exchanging thoughts on their echopool, behind all sorts of security nets that even the machines could not break. Whatever it was they were saying in private, Paul didn't need to eavesdrop. He could see it written on their faces, that they were thinking he was probably losing it. Not just his edge, but really losing his mind.

"They want us to go public with this, and you think I'm the one who's gone barmy?" he said out of turn, while the ticker was still rolling.

There was more silence, followed with a few plainly guilty looks, as well as some more silence and a few shrugs, as if this was just another takeaway order.

"You understand what will happen once this is out? Do you even begin to see the big picture?" Paul said, trying to contain the volume and pitch of his voice down to acceptable, polite levels.

"There are ways to mitigate this for SMEGMA," said one of the operators, Moon division. "We can always wait around for the initial shock to writhe, if this is proven to be true by third parties."

"What? Are you that disconnected from reality? This is SMEGMA, there are no third parties. What we say stands."

"But what if they discover it's a hoax?"

"You're not listening, are you? It's not a hoax, it's as real as it can be in any sense!" Paul shouted in frustration and tore away the paper ticket which had grown into a rather long, curly twist of paper, filled with the words of the controlling entities, smug in their mansion substrate, orbiting the Earth, or anypoint of the net they

wanted to. Yet still, they found it worthwhile to make a real effort to drive Paul mad.

“It’s out of my hands anyhow, isn’t it?”

A single small roll of paper came out of the table printing slot.

Paul looked at it briefly and then simply got up and left, leaving the door open behind him. In the old days the meeting room had been a council chamber, lush and poss. What remained now of that early history was the table, slightly altered. Paul was now heading to the Elevator, he had a lot of things to take care of first.

Not the Earth Elevator, going up, but their own elevator, going down.

Noone bothered to pick up any of the discarded rolls of paper, sitting about the large desk like peeled out danger, things not to be touched. It wasn’t really their business. They had been simply summoned, and answered as they should. They had no say in the matter. They weren’t really sure why the machines kept them around. Maybe as one of them put it, they were neat to have around, just like the ticker offered them some sort of weird sensation, something about having an ancestor in the room.

If they had, they would’ve known something was wrong.

Even the cleaning robots that went inside afterwards would know something was wrong. All one had to do was look onto the paper and realize there was no print-out there, just a blank roll of paper.