

Within the Circle of Synaspace

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Morning

Falling asleep in Synaspace is pure pleasure — and waking up there too. No restless thoughts before, no sour mood after. I don't know how it is for you — it depends a lot on the empathic template your Synasync is tuned to — but with fresh patterns I only feel a quiet happiness, a cozy weightlessness, as if I'm a kid again, soaking in a warm bath.

Anyway, you know this already: everyone's plugged into the Sync. Well, almost everyone. Maybe there are exceptions — some medical cases, or whatever... But I've never met such luddites myself, except maybe in the transitional regions. Honestly, I can't imagine how people lived without Sync before, or what kind of cave-dweller you'd have to be to voluntarily cut yourself off in the middle of the 21st century. To give up technologies that open up the whole world of modern possibilities — isn't that madness?

Just idly waiting for the hygiene cycle to end would've been boring, but the half-dream thoughts drifting through Ama Zy felt so pleasant that when the sleep evaluation report finally arrived, the Empa-meter's little smiley couldn't handle the flood of positivity and, in ecstatic overload, burst into a fireworks of diamond sparks.

And when Empa, having recovered, finally presented the results, Ama had every reason to rejoice. Any achievement, even something simple like a preschool NapStar badge for "sleeping without fuss," or DreamSync — the universally recognized marker of growing up — is already a reason to celebrate. But to earn the "Morpheus" label and get a stunning boost in empath-metrics — that's a straight shot to the very top of the Syna-rank! Yes, and now Ru Leiv would definitely look at Ama differently!

At that point Ama had to pause, because the Sync, reacting to a surge of emotion, projected a life-sized image of Ru across the entire field of vision, relaxed and radiant within the bounds of aesthetic openness.

Meanwhile, Empa carried on with the info-digest of the latest Synaspace news:

— "...to combat plastic waste, it's been decided to cut down 12,000 hectares of forest in the northern regions. This will allow us to produce more biodegradable straws. Together — for a green future!"

Sync responded with a matching video stream: water treatment plants drowning in seas of plastic bottles; panoramas of snow-covered cedar forests; eco-straws and laughing children's faces. The clip ended with the green logo of the Eco-Department — a leaf with a smiling Bio-Drop™.

Everything promised not just another successful, but an excellent minor cycle in the career of a junior from Group Theta at the Department of Cognitive Kinetics!

After a couple of energizing eco-tonics and a yawn — logged as a sign of full readiness — Sync gave the signal to begin the active work phase, right at 20:00.

The field of vision dimmed softly, turning into a warm translucent interface mask. Over the familiar objects of the room appeared the outlines of icons, tabs, and work channels — all strictly within the permitted density. Empa darted into the bottom right corner, applied a fitting skin, and presented itself — if anyone still remembers — as an archaic paperclip with eyes and a tie. In a businesslike tone it initiated the input frame:

— Good day, Ama. You've got seven new empathics, one thank-you each from Ver Sin and Ru Leiv, and one urgent calendar notification from Lia Cort — the Theta-group facilitator.

— From Ru?! — the pleasant surprise made Ama's heart skip, pound harder, maybe even try to fly, before plummeting into a pit. Because at the top of the interface, in sharp contrast to the soft palette of the rest, a crimson calendar bar was blinking:

NOTIFICATION

Event: Theta-group Facilitation Session

Location: Inteqra Plaza / Praxis / F3.09.73

Time: tomorrow, 02:00

Tags: [urgent] [confidential]

Accept | Decline | Suggest another time

Cold dread spread inside Ama. All meetings were always held in Synaspace. Invitations from management normally arrived three or four days in advance, never later, and were accompanied by instructions, empathic warm-up, and, if needed, reactive psych support. Nobody ever rejected such invitations, and certainly nobody suggested rescheduling.

But an urgent summons to the physical office, in person? That didn't happen — not even in the worst... or best case.

Could this really be the second time in four reporting cycles that Ama had missed an important notification? Grabbing at the last threads of hope and racing ahead of thought so fast that Empa couldn't keep up, Ama scrolled through the history of notifications, messages, news, even peeked into the Sync's "blind zone" — the spam bin for ambiguous signals. Empty. Everywhere.

Empa finally caught the panic:

— Don't worry, Ama! The notification really did just arrive. Look, there's an explanation: it's a special, unscheduled meeting as part of a new initiative — the "ProWhat™" workshop, officially branded Proactive Whatchlight™. Congratulations: you've been chosen among the first!

— Yes... I'm... thrilled, — the answer didn't sound very convincing, but Empa still counted the smile, though not right away.

The world around looked just as clean, the colors hadn't changed, the eco-aroma "Fir-18" was as refreshing as before, and Sync registered no anomalies. And yet, in the sharp wording "chosen among the first," Ama sensed some elusive roughness. Maybe the problem was simply the necessity of stepping out into a deframe.

Through the overlay of the interface, the window to the outside showed a summer morning. Birds sang (nightingales, supposedly), the sky was clear, and the eyes were dazzled by sunlight carefully rendered in line with local weather and season policies.

Sync's emo-correctors weren't handling it well. Empa, losing its businesslike skin, shrank into a bluish sad-face with drooping corners and darting eyes. In such a mood, surviving a ninety-minute Safetalk on Synaptic Hygiene was torture.

The stern trainer chewed through obvious truths — about “timely updates of cognitive trust signatures,” “verifying the sender before reacting to Synaspace commands,” and so on. The training mode forbade skipping or fast-forwarding, while the so-called “edutainment inserts” only grated more than usual.

But there was no way around it: the physical visit was still four hours away, so Ama had to endure the whole thing, pass the test, and get clearance to work. Without it, the system would simply suspend access.

At least the mandatory session calmed the nerves a bit, helped gather thoughts, and gave Ama the courage to call a colleague. Maybe it would be possible to figure out what was really going on.

A sleepy projection of Ver Sin answered fairly quickly.

— Ver, sorry to bother you — Ama kept the voice almost casual despite the tension — but can I ask? I just got an invitation to a physical visit, right to the office. Urgent. Did you get anything like that?

— Come on, no big deal... — and then, without warning, Ver's voice squealed with excitement — A deframe!? You're going live? To a facilitation? Unbelievable! You're tralling me, right?

— Very funny, — Ama's strained smile slid off. — I honestly don't understand a thing. It says “ProWhat™.” Ever heard of it?

— Hm... something flashed by in the feed. But I've got a filter on corp-snips with quotes. Hold on... I'll check...

— Thanks, that'd help.

— Oh, by the way, another odd thing: I got a message from Ru Leiv — Empa, mimicking Ver's shrug, spread tiny arms and silently mouthed “*pfft*” — but it won't open.

— Hm, you're right! — a tap on the empathy tab brought up a vague notice: “Empathic message is in deferred processing state. Please wait for synchronization with the sender's server. Reference code: W84RU.”

— W84RU? “Wait for Ru”? Seriously? Is this some kind of joke, or a test before the ProWhat™ fisit?

— And is Ru online now?

— No. Status says: “Actor temporarily unavailable. Cognitive channel overload.” No ping, no flux... — Ver's voice dropped lower. — Cut off. Like after... a full offboarding.

A long pause hung in the connection. Empa, unable to tolerate silence, rushed to fill it:

— While you're idling, may I interest you in a curated selection of our corporate news?

At once, a snip popped up: a seasoned man surrounded by server racks, addressing the viewers with rehearsed gestures, both hands from chest to audience. In a friendly-business tone he declared:

“Taking the initiative, as part of ecological and economic restructuring, Inteqra Corporation is pleased to announce the transfer of its final batch of internal data centers to the CoRS Trust under AGIS management. This will reduce capital expenses, increase flexibility, and unlock cognitive synergy through outsourced thinking!”

— Interesting. Is there anything left that our company still owns?

It’s not clear what Empa told Ver Sin, but Ama received the following answer:

— According to the framework declaration on the organic release of resources under the FLUX paradigm (FLUX — Flexible Linear Unified Execution), assets with a zero degree of cognitive reactivity have been reclassified as non-core passive liabilities. That opened the way for their migration into external contours under SMILE-compatible SLAs (SMILE — Systemic Management for Innovation, Loyalty & Efficiency — “Smile” as a corporate standard of behavior and thinking), on the basis of hetero-phased responsibility. (Not to be confused with Service Level Agreement — in this context SLA stands for Synced Liability Architecture.)

The internal stack continues to operate within the adaptive zone of the synchroservice, governed by the iMAP3 protocol (iMAP3 — Intelligent Modular Alignment Protocol, edition 3). Not to be confused with IMAP, one of the obsolete email protocols from the Docognitive era. Cognitive mirroring is performed through cluster cells of the CRF (Cognitive Redundancy Fabric).

Thus, the corporation does not so much possess resources as exist in a state of their contextual orchestration according to the third level of neurokinetic harmonization, as provided for in the PATH-2.9 update (PATH — Productive Adaptive Thought Harmony).

In this context we proudly move to a model of distributed participation, under which each employee will be credited with a fixed package of cnego-shares in a trust fund, reflecting their contribution to the shared cognitive ecosystem. After the end of a five-year cycle, cnego-shares will be subject to long-term conversion into an equivalent amount of R-coins, taking into account personal rating, empathic trace, and the cognitive engagement index. This is the first step so that each of us can feel real dividends from cognitive exchange and become a full partner on the path to a synergistic future.

— Ama, I hope this clarified the picture? — Empa, pleased with himself, lifted his left brow.

It can’t be said Empa succeeded in filling the oppressive pause, since again there came silence during which both human participants of the dialogue tried to process each their own, individually synthesized version of the received answer.

Not even the tempting suggestion to subscribe to a collection of popular Syncasts on personal growth managed to break the silence. And yet it was only 0.35 R-coin per cycle, which would undoubtedly pay off many times over (given correct application guidelines), especially for participants of the Morpheus program.

Strangely, after that, Ama and Ver rather quickly said goodbye and broke the connection.

Day

Some people keep everything under control and are almost never late. Others don’t overthink it at all and still somehow manage to be on time. But Ama Zy was something else entirely. Afraid of being late always and everywhere, Ama would, just in case, prepare for meetings far in advance,

connect much earlier than required, and then spend all the remaining time obsessively checking how much time was left, whether the connection was stable, and whether the projection looked acceptable. Hanging around in a meeting lobby while waiting for others was a uniquely miserable experience, but not connecting and trying to stay relaxed with that Damoclean blade hovering overhead was simply impossible.

Naturally, this level of anxiety triggered the emo-correctors, which invariably upset Empa. A sudden dip in Syna-rank meant Empa had to book Ama for an unscheduled session with an empathologist. Yes, this is where the circle closes and the whole story repeats itself again. Desyncrastia is not as easy as it sounds. And on top of that, there was this fisisit, damn it all.

Either way, there was no escape. Despite the entire spectrum of conflicting, often unauthorized thoughts and feelings, Ama still had to issue the deframe command. Fortunately, the process itself was far from unpleasant. If anything, it was the opposite.

Like waking from a long sleep, the return of the physical body and the gradual restoration of sensation began with tingling and prickling in the limbs, as the brain attempted to reestablish lost connections. A soft rustle, barely perceptible, like dry silk, preceded the disengagement of the capsule contours. A chill ran across the skin as the silvery padding of semi-transparent pseudoderm slowly collapsed, settling along the walls of the cradle. The external integrated biosupport system shut down, and the syncapsule seemed, somewhat reluctantly, to release Ama into the world.

Even in semi-autonomous mode, the world felt overwhelming in those first moments. Too tangible. Excessively real. Brutally physical. The unexpected coolness of the air, the contrast of colors, the sheer volume of sound all pierced through the filters of the Synasync without asking permission, threatening the very boundaries of personal freedom.

Squinting at the toxic strip of the route indicator between rows of syncapsules and following Empa's prompts, Ama eventually managed to shuffle toward the wall of clothing lockers. Getting dressed was difficult. Fingers refused to cooperate, the jumpsuit resisted. Everything took far too long and far too much effort. Until the stimulators kicked in, Empa recommended waiting. Conveniently, there were benches right there by the wall.

Finally, when the skins finished loading, the dim hall of the main dormitory segment acquired depth and a corporately cheerful color palette, while Ama's suit resolved into the unmistakable form of an Inteqra employee uniform.

— Target identified. Route calculated, — Empa announced, doing a surprisingly convincing navigator impression. — Move straight to the door. In the corridor, turn right...

Navigation markers activated in sync. Arrows appeared on the floor, a soft pulsating glow framed the doorway, subvisual cues outlined the optimal path through the floors of this perpetually drowsy syn-anthill.

The climate dictated maximum pace, and the city, trying to keep up, transformed just as rapidly. Inteqra was like a home, like a family. Probably more than that. Living and working inside a syncapsule, one quickly forgets even the appearance of their native hub. Distinguishing the outlines of entire clusters becomes unthinkable. Sealed conglomerates grew ever more tightly interwoven with transport corridors and arterial routes. Inside hermetic clusters, megatowers rose, continuously accreting new tiers. Above the historical center loomed the unfinished platform of the Upper City, like the cap of a bitten mushroom, while the old streets below were sealed under matte plastic and

converted into climate-controlled galleries. The open industrial and residential districts of the twentieth century on the outskirts slowly emptied, decayed, and slid into marginality.

Today, for the first time in a long while, Ama was about to see the city as it actually existed now.

Inteqra's residential sector, reserved for employees below positional band L8, sat on the edge of the Eastern Cluster, right at the boundary with the open retro-districts. By day, with light filters disabled, it offered a view of peeling housing blocks, rusting factory frames, and dry grass trembling in the haze all the way to the horizon. By night, without the urban glow of earlier eras, the sky opened into a bottomless expanse of space, scattered with billions of stars. In both cases the sight was majestic and utterly devoid of people. In syncapsule blocks, few actors wandered corridors without reason. The first human appeared closer to the center of the tier, at a flexway junction. Likely infrastructure staff. The shuttle arrived quickly after detecting a queue, so conversation was unnecessary. Thankfully, the second passenger was absorbed in snips and showed no interest in physical contact.

When the flex doors closed, Synasync responded with a warm pulse near Ama's left temple. Transport system integration complete. Notifications ignited one after another in the field of vision:

“Today's Inteqra trend: Care for the ecology of border zones!”
“Choose your challenge: Energy, Productivity, or Happiness.”
“Top actors of the week receive reward upgrades!”

An aeroflex advertisement followed, and beneath it a reminder surfaced:

“Upper City Platform open today for visits from the Lower City. Don't miss the VR show ‘The Future Happened Yesterday!’”

The system synchronized routes, flagged nodes with minimal queues, then dissolved back into the familiar background of synoise. The flex carried on through upward tunnels, while Ama's consciousness drifted into a pleasant haze of semi-forgetfulness. Somewhere at the edge of sleep came the familiar tickle. Synasync was clearing cache, unloading unnecessary memories, embedding fresh cognitive patterns, reclaiming unused resources. Empa happily logged the state as sleep and awarded points.

When the flex exited the Eastern Cluster, Synasync blinked. For a brief moment the field of vision was stripped of constructs and augmented decor, and the deframe appeared in its plain, unadorned form. Shining facades vanished. Advertising projections disappeared. Navigation markers, skins, neon illumination went dark. The ocean of light above the Upper City extinguished, as if swallowed by darkness. Outside the shuttle window flashed gray rectangular structures, raw concrete, indistinct rust on the lower levels.

No one paid attention. Routine. Synaspace was loading a new visualization package.

A second later everything flooded back in clean filtered colors: “Diode Energy” and the season's fashionable warm “Lamp Aura.” The flex sped confidently toward the Business Cluster.

The fellow passenger wasn't close to Ama by band, but at least they were understandable. An Inteqra colleague. Once beyond the Eastern Cluster, however, the shuttle began stopping constantly. People entered and exited, and the closer they got to the Upper City, the more passengers squeezed inside. Even in a half-dream state, Ama felt uneasy amid the abundance of unfamiliar actors in other corporations' uniforms and people in free, unregulated clothing. And that's without even mentioning

individuals in provocative skins and confrontational avatars. Many spoke loudly and laughed in physical space.

— At Inteqra, we don't phrase it that way, — Empa reminded gently but firmly. — Instead of "in real life," please use "in physical space."

Ama immediately felt ashamed of the thought-slip. Empa, magnanimously, refrained from recalculating empath-metrics accumulated during the trip, also because something unpleasant occurred in the shuttle.

At one of the stops, a subject of toxically gendered appearance forced their way through the doors. Hard to call them a loyal actor. Tall, gaunt, in a torn coat over bare skin⁶. A stench assaulted the olfactory filters. Alcohol, cheap food, something rotten. Their eyes darted restlessly, their mouth spewed an aggressive slurry of incoherent abuse. Pushing deeper into the cabin, they bumped into Ama and spat something contemptuous on the move. Something like "synablue-trash."

At last, Synasync flared red at the hooligan's temple and applied "Depression." The person jerked and went pale. Panic flickered where rage had been, then despair consumed them entirely. The unfortunate managed a drawn-out, miserable "fu-uuck" before collapsing to the floor. Tears streamed endlessly down their cheeks as empath-metric rating visibly drained from alarming orange to dangerous crimson.

Salvation arrived in the form of a velvet-toned standard empathologist voice:

— Breathe steadily. Everything is fine. You matter, and so does your condition. We will now cleanse your cognitive patterns...

A few minutes later, the refreshed passenger stood up, smiling broadly and somewhat naively. After thanking everyone "for understanding," they exited at the next stop.

— ...And besides that, — with the incident resolved, Ama's thoughts gradually returned to familiar paths, — many people remained attached to the rea... deframe. They still lived outside dormitories, in their own hubs. They had families, pets, or AI companions. The poorest layers of actors continued to inhabit retro-houses and apartments in open districts.

Thus, the shuttle reached the central clusters. Skirting the gleaming shell of the Upper City in a wide arc, it dipped beneath the platform and headed west, toward the summit of the Business Cluster. There it dropped off Ama and several other actors near the Inteqra sector, then vanished into the tunnel.

— Empath-metric level increased by 0.4 points, — Empa reported.

Here, on the central square, high beneath the sector roof, vintage diode letters burned orange-red: "Inteqra." They were followed by an ambitious slogan:

"We don't reinvent the wheel. We engineer the future!"

Below flashed: "The chaos of art under cognitive process control."

One urban legend claimed that long ago, in the pre-cognitive era⁷, when the banner was first installed, only three words supposedly lit up: "Inteqra," "chaos," and "processes." Naturally, this was nonsense. Empa frowned appropriately. One should not believe foolish rumors.

Meanwhile, the city navigation system guided Ama to a point at the center of the square, and Empa, switching from stern to benevolent, announced:

— Destination reached. Uploading internal Inteqra routes.

At the heart of Inteqra Plaza pulsed Tessa's holographic fountain. A shimmering vortex of light and meaning. An attached AR tag read:

“Dedicated to the legendary Tessa M. Henley, cogno-architect who first launched a perception model inside the flow of Synaspace’s cognitive reality.”

Along the perimeter of the square, dazzling with advertising and motivational snips and fountain spray, stood the corporation’s most important ceremonial and representative modules. Nearby clustered cafes, shops, demonstration halls. Further along radial tunnels and corridors, receding ever deeper into the sector, stretched regular office hubs, service areas, even operational storage spaces whose appearance inexplicably summoned a long-forgotten word from memory: “warehouses.”

The square was crowded. Corporate employees, city residents, tourists moved between hubs, lingering at cafes or diving into shops. A hum of voices filled the air, music drifted in, distant laughter and coughing echoed. Around the fountain loitered a police patrol. Moving slowly clockwise, they pretended to scrutinize passersby rating bars and happily posed for tourist snips.

At roughly the point where an imaginary clock face would mark 13:00, they suddenly stopped, turned, and studied Ama intently for several seconds. Before anxiety could fully take hold, the officers shifted their attention to other actors and moved on. A service robo-dog trudged after them.

Ama’s path led toward the massive glossy module “Praxis,” one of the recently reconstructed central hubs. As always, employees clustered at the entrance. Some smoked healthy eco-sticks. Some hurried to fisits. Some merely farmed social presence points. Entry was easy. Security recognized the employee Synasync without issue and, flashing green, granted access.

Still, despite Empa’s active assistance and all the advantages of a mobile Sync, the deframe, with its archaic corporeality, felt like an ill-fitting neuro-suit. Or worse, someone else’s syncapsule. Throughout the walk, Ama felt awkward. Stray glances. Voices breaking through the virtual overlay. The potential necessity of touching surfaces. No wonder everything crudely physical is called tacting.

Inside the hub, however, all these unnatural irritations vanished at once, the way excess emotional and memory weight disappears after a Synasync cache purge. There were fewer actors, fewer external stimuli, and the entire atmosphere aligned perfectly with corporate ethical and cultural policy.

According to dynamic navigation, room F3.09.73 was nearby. A quick route check made it easy to find the elevator, reach the third floor, turn right, and arrive at block nine.

Room seventy-three, however, posed a problem.

Behind Ama stood a clearly marked door labeled 72. Ahead lay room 74. Where the entrance to conference room #73 should have been, there was only a smooth wall, adorned with an AR tag calmly announcing, in twenty-four languages including Braille encoding:
“Aligned. Engaged. Beyond.”

As any respectable AR tag should, the inscription shimmered in brand colors at a rhythm calibrated for cognitive calming. It sounded almost like a promise. Or a warning. Unfortunately, it said nothing about room #73.

Notably, the navigation arrow continued, without hesitation, to point directly into the wall. Meanwhile, the counter of joined facilitation session participants kept rising steadily. The meeting was about to begin any second.

And that was slightly... Who was Ama trying to fool. Honestly, the discomfort had grown so intense that a paling Empa began quietly leaking rating.

A tight knot formed in Ama's throat. Breathing hitched. Synasync responded instantly. A "breathing practice" animation flared on the display. It only made things worse.

Employees passed by, but even thinking about addressing one of these briskly moving, Sync-absorbed actors felt unbearable.

The AI info-assistant at the reception desk, however, tried its best. It oriented quickly, understood the request, refreshed maps and floor plans, then produced exactly the same route as before:

1. Proceed to the third floor
2. In the lobby, turn left
3. Pass security scan of block #9
4. Continue straight down the corridor to room 73

Finally, quite pleased with itself, the info-assistant asked without the slightest hesitation:

— How likely are you to recommend our service to friends and colleagues? Please rate from 0 to 10.

Something was wrong. And not the rating request. Something else. A sense that something important was hidden here, invisible at first glance. A problem whose root needed to be extracted and eliminated. It was right there, close, just beneath the surface. And then, looking closely at the route, Ama realized the truth. And felt ashamed at the same time. At least no colleagues noticed.

Empa did.

[ALERT AFM-1074]

Your thought contained the lexeme "root," classified as a flora-aggressive metaphor.

Recommended replacement: "root cause" or "primary cause."

Context of usage is irrelevant.

Your ethical compliance profile has been adjusted.

Empa didn't stay angry for long. Almost immediately, its frown melted into a smile, and it delivered a piece of corporate wisdom perfectly suited to the moment:

"Any layer of soil holds seeds for team growth."

Evening

Room #73 turned out to be a spacious conference hall with modular ergonomic furniture, a high ceiling, and walls completely covered in interactive panels. Nearly all major meetings of the local Inteqra office were held here. From this room people were sent off to feats, victories were announced, and awards were handed out.

There was even a real podium. A relic from the corporation's founding days. Jarringly archaic against the surrounding neo-functional design, it stood alone in a corner. Naturally, no one ever tried to spread papers across it the way ancient speakers once had. Instead, almost everyone who entered the room felt an urge to approach it and, indulging some pre-cognitive instinct, touch it. Many actors had received rating penalties for doing so, but for some reason this never stopped anyone.

The holographic projector in the opposite corner was old as well, yet for reasons unknown it attracted nowhere near the same attention.

The hall was already nearly full, but Ama managed to find a seat roughly equidistant from the nearest neighbors. Other late arrivals, awkwardly glancing through the Synasync interface, did much the same. In deframe, the room filled with a half-stifled rustle reminiscent of public libraries long gone. In Sync, however, the meeting lobby greeted Ama with the familiar hum of voices belonging to people who had worked together for years.

Onto the low platform between the podium and the holo-projector stepped the group facilitator and several visibly content actors wearing the solid skins of Inteqra's senior leadership. They kept chatting and laughing amiably among themselves as they took their places.

"Welcome to this special Theta Group session!"

Radiating a convincing happiness, Margarita Walden began. She was the local branch's NEX, a tall actor with the avatar of a smiling blonde woman.

"At Inteqra, we read not words, but thoughts. Follow the signals, read the nuances, and remember that CC2 patternization is not an art. It is a process. Today, with the latest updates on the Morpheus project, we are joined by Harold Brace!"

She glanced toward the high-ranking guest.

"Yes, yes. The very same, the famous CHO of the HARD department. But first, a few important words from our Theta Group facilitator. Lia, please."

From Lia Cort's freshly rendered avatar it was obvious she had prepared carefully for the meeting. Her voice rang with ceremony, though it trembled slightly, whether from the importance of the moment or from the pressure of having leaders from band three and two-plus present. After a brief hesitation, Lia Cort stepped half a pace forward and began.

"Thank you, Margo..."

Then, unsure of the acceptable limits of familiarity, she seemed to blush, throwing an embarrassed smile toward the NEX.

"...Rita! Yes! On the one hand, I have sad news, because a very valuable colleague and a wonderful actor has left our team. On the other, we have reason to celebrate, because our work on the Morpheus project has been noticed and recognized. Congratulations to the entire team. Ru Leiv has well deserved their promotion and is being transferred to Inte—"

Her final words were swallowed by an avalanche of enthusiasm-charged corporate music. At the same moment, behind the speakers, a wall-sized snip unfolded. Surrounded by welcoming headquarters staff, Ru Leiv, already wearing a leadership skin, beamed an official smile while shaking hands with the wise, obviously strict yet clearly fair CEO of the company.

The snip was duplicated in Sync. A voice declaimed something inspirational. An archaic subtitle line crawled along the bottom. Empa nodded approvingly. Lia waited.

When the ninety-second clip ended, Lia Cort was finally able to continue.

“We are confident,” she said, quickly glancing at the other managers, “that everyone here will be pleased to congratulate Ru Leiv on their promotion. All attention to Synatalk!”

In deframe, Lia Cort clapped her hands. Someone in the hall joined in. In Sync, a stream of likes trickled past. A Synatalk window appeared in Ama’s field of vision, accompanied by the melodic chime of an outgoing call.

Naturally, there was a short wait before Ru Leiv answered. But Lia did not even have time to grow nervous before Ru’s avatar appeared full-screen in the Synatalk window. The initially official, businesslike expression instantly spread into a broad smile. Only an actor like Ama, who knew Ru well, might have suspected traces of facial correction in that image.

“Hi, Ru!”

Lia Cort waved at the wall projecting the image from a spacious office.

“How’s the new place?”

“Hi, Lia! Hi, everyone! It’s so won—”

“And yet, looking at her face, there’s not much happiness to be found,”— Ver Sin suddenly burst into Ama’s private channel, with a not entirely appropriate paraphrase of a long-forgotten line by a once-brilliant-in-youth but dreadful-in-old-age poet from the twilight of the pre-cognitive era.

“Yeah... well... indeed...”

For some reason it hurt Ama to watch and unpleasant to listen to Ru Leiv’s corporate speech. Talking to Ver Sin felt much better.

“You’re here, by the way? How did you even—”

“Well, even if I’m not a big shot like you and didn’t contribute to Morpheus development, I am technically part of the Theta Group. So I got invited too. Just without any elite physical visits. The invite came right after your call.”

“Haha, if only it were ‘development.’ We’re in the same Theta boat. Why would they trust testers with development? That’s not why we’re here. Besides, your favorite saying: the less management sees you, the better you sleep.”

“Exactly! I sleep just fine without Morpheus.”

It was clear Ver liked Ama’s comment.

“Though it’s also possible they simply forgot to include me on the ‘distinguished actors’ list. That happens too.”

Now it was Ama’s turn to smile. And unlike the radiant Ru filling the wall, this smile seemed real, even if a sad one.

Meanwhile, Ru Leiv’s call ended. Applause rose again in deframe, mirrored by likes in Sync.

“And now!”

Lia stepped back, gratefully yielding the stage to the head of HARD.

“We welcome Harold Brace!”

“Dear colleagues, actors, friends!”

Brace’s voice rang slightly louder than necessary, with the deliberate energy usually reserved for opening sports shows.

“It is a tremendous honor to be here today in deframe, in your wonderful office in the city of m-m-m... city!”

He theatrically stumbled, “forgetting” the name of the next stop on his touring schedule. Sync immediately filled with emoji hints: 🌸🌀 and “AmsterNova” from the most attentive viewers. Brace did not falter in the slightest. On the contrary, he joked himself.

“You see? I was born in an era when not everyone was fluent in the emoji alphabet. For us, they were something like punctuation marks. Punctuation marks, colleagues!”

Behind him, the panels came alive with ancient chat logs featuring ASCII art and SMS windows with tiny yellow smiley faces. Next to them, a block flashed a meme-like cascade of brackets: :)))). The hall burst into laughter, and Sync flooded with old-fashioned, classic smiley blobs.

“But look how far progress has taken us. Today we transmit not only meaning, but feelings and emotions. We create and modify patterns of perception and behavior alike. Through Synasync, we speak to the world directly, and the world answers us... in the voice of AI. And that is the true miracle generations of our ancestors dreamed of!”

He paused theatrically, sighed, and continued with a sad smile.

“Just think. There was a time when success was measured by the volume of individual knowledge. The more a person remembered, the more valuable they were considered. In the eighteenth century, French encyclopedists took pride in their volumes. Universities accumulated mountains of books that still had to be read. But that is all in the past.”

On the holo-panels appeared an engraving of an old salon. Wigged ladies debated beside bookshelves heavy with encyclopedias. Then the books dissolved one by one into a cloud of pixelated smoke, transforming into a neural network diagram.

He leaned slightly forward, as if sharing a personal secret.

“Education consumes your time and only occasionally reveals theoretical possibilities. Skills, however, cultivate diligence and turn talent into direct action. Knowledge lies dead weight on shelves. Skills live in every moment of practice.”

Two memes flickered on screen. On one side, a tiny sprout above ground and a massive carrot underground: skills. On the other, a lush green bush with a barely visible root: education.

Brace’s voice rose again.

“And here we enter a new stage. We learn from artificial intelligence, and AI learns from us. We give it data from our actions, our patterns, and it returns them to us refined, accelerated, improved. This is symbiosis. Mutual growth. Together, we move toward our goal. Toward the future!”

The panels spun an endless spiral of mirrors: human, android, human, android, until the rows of faces merged into a single luminous anthropomorphic figure.

He spread his arms, as if embracing the hall and the world itself.

“Today I want to speak of what truly matters. Morpheus is not just another product. Not merely a useful program. It is a step toward a new cognitive culture. From now on, we no longer divide sleep and work. Every moment of life is returned to society as energy, as progress. On behalf of Inteqra’s entire leadership, I thank you for your outstanding work!”

He waved his hands as though sending waves or streams of magical energy toward the audience, then froze in comically strained anticipation. The response was a scatter of indistinct applause.

“Oh? You already received your Morpheus badges? Well then, the trick didn’t work,”

He waved it off playfully and continued.

“At an early stage of development, the Morpheus badge was conceived as a symbol of elitism. But exclusivity is always just a transitional phase, isn’t it? True recognition comes when innovation becomes accessible to everyone. Today, as we launched Morpheus online, millions of subscribers have joined the program. And to emphasize our openness and accessibility, we are happy to simplify the conditions for obtaining the Morpheus badge. From this day forward, every actor on the planet can stand with us as an equal!”

Brace inhaled, raised his palms upward as if gathering applause from the entire deframe, and said:

“Morpheus is not about sleep. It is about the awakening of society. Together with Inteqra, we believe we are building a future where every dream is a contribution to the common cause, where every night is a source of strength for the day to come.”

Behind him, millions of emerald dots, empametric statuses, merged on a dark world map into a single glowing outline of the globe. At its center unfolded a giant Inteqra logo.

“Thank you for being with us. Thank you for being together.”

At that moment, the deframe hall erupted in applause. Emoji fireworks filled Sync, and the empametric column spiked into a cheerful green peak.

The snip ended. The music faded. The deframe lighting warmed slightly, signaling the close of the official portion. With a gesture perfected over years in the NEX role, Margarita Walden spread her arms toward the hall.

“We thank all actors for their engagement and inspiration!”

Final likes and confetti emojis scattered through Sync. It felt as though one could finally exhale freely. But then Lia Cort stepped forward again, holding a virtual tablet. Her voice became unnaturally even, even for a facilitator.

“As part of the ‘ProPro’ practice, some of you have received personalized feedback. Please treat it as an opportunity for personal growth. This session may be logged as one hour of educational activity.”

The wall panels instantly displayed a banner:

From Team-Building to Proactive Transparency. Build the Team of Your Dreams.

A couple of actors, clearly not invited or simply unaware, allowed themselves a joke.

“A ProPro workshop. Pro... what?”

Everyone else fell silent. Without lifting her eyes, Lia began to read.

“Tess Wang. Yuli Orr. Ama Zi...”

The names in the fairly long list flowed at a steady, familiar pace. Only after a brief pause at the end, as if after an additional check, did Lia add:

“And also... Ver... non Singh.”

“Who?”

Some actors exchanged surprised glances. Vernon Singh?

A message immediately popped up in Ama’s Sync from his avatar:

Well, there we go. Dug up the dinosaur. Yes, yes. That’s me. Ver Sin.

A few people smirked at the unexpected revelation, but the amusement quickly faded when only those required remained in the room. Soon after, maintaining routine small talk, all three managers left as well. Closing the door behind them, they seemed to dissolve into deframe. In their place materialized an unremarkable actor with no personal profile, but wearing a HARD badge and displaying the mannerisms of a rodent.

He shifted awkwardly, coughed into his palm, coughed again.

“Khe-khe.” Then, rubbing his little hands with exaggerated enthusiasm, he said:

“So-o-o. We have a full roster here, khe-khe, except for V. P. Singh. You,” — the HARD officer scanned the hall, — “will be invited one by one. And your... Singh, the interview will be conducted remotely, within an active security perimeter, khe-khe. Yes, yes, please take a seat, take a seat.”

He waved kindly toward the stunned actors.

“No point standing. I’ll start a snip so we’re not bored, khe-khe.”

A flat, two-dimensional educational video unfolded on one of the walls. A narrator droned corporate incantations about culture, team synergy, horizontal connections, and mandatory respect for AI. At the same time, Sync populated with usernames HRSEC0507, HRSEC0907, and HRSEC0805, all with default avatars and empty profiles.

The nameless HARD officer settled near the exit and buried himself in his virtual tablet. It seemed he had completely lost interest in the Theta Group employees, who had no choice but to sink back into their seats.

Suddenly, the connection to Synaspace cut out. Sync went fully offline, leaving the conference hall stripped down to default gray walls and the skeletal navigation lines on the floor. In the vast rectangular space, rounded ergonomic furniture jutted out in awkward islands, behind which motionless, confused people sat.

It was as if someone had switched off the scenery. User avatars vanished. Cozy interfaces were erased. Along with them, the living pulse of empametrics froze. None of the actors protested. They no longer looked at one another, did not speak, did not joke. Aside from the muted sounds of an ancient corporate snip, a graveyard silence settled over the room.

“Yuli Orr. Straight down the corridor. They are waiting.”

When the HARD officer suddenly called the name, everyone flinched at once. After watching Yuli Orr’s figure depart with sad gazes, they gradually sank back into the same tense paralysis experienced by a rabbit staring into the eyes of a boa, just a moment before beginning its journey inside the serpent’s body.

The names were not called in the order Lia Cort had read them. Ama had to flinch several more times before finally being summoned “straight down the corridor.”

The interview was conducted by a HARD quasi-employee just as gray as his profile. Not the one who had stayed in the conference hall, but another, almost identical. This one stared at Ama with transparent eyes, unblinking. At least he did not khe-khe.

With Sync disabled, nothing was recorded. Empa offered no comfort. Search was unavailable. The memory archive was inaccessible. Whether because of that or because of frayed nerves, everything that followed remained poorly remembered, fragmentary.

At the very beginning, the pseudo-HARD agent leaned forward slightly and pronounced, with deliberate stereotype:

“You intend to cooperate, correct?”

In response, Ama nodded vigorously, just as mechanically confirming readiness.

Then came the tedious, repetitive questions about Ru.

“When did you meet with Leiv in deframe? And in Synaspace? What do you know about Leiv’s work? Specifically, about the Morpheus project?”

The pale fake-HARD agent was particularly interested in the details of Morpheus development and, especially, in testing results. But he also asked personal questions.

“What kind of relationship did you have with Leiv? How would you evaluate Leiv? Professionally. And as a person?”

Ama felt uncomfortable speaking about personal matters. And surely, all the hesitation, the hurried answers, the futile attempts not to blush were seen, recorded, analyzed, and compared to polygraph indicators by the security officer.

Ama also remembered questions about Ver Sin. It turned out he had a mysterious, never-before-mentioned patronymic: “P.”

“Ah, hm... Vernon P. Singh?”

The gray employee checked the name against his virtual tablet.

“What do you know about his involvement in Morpheus?”

“Ver Sin? He’s on a different project. I don’t know what he’s doing. We test completely different products.”

“When was the last time they communicated, and about what?”

“Ver and Ru? Uh... I have no idea. Through... Synatalk? Probably work-related...”

Then it all started again. The same questions in new formulations. Again about Morpheus tests, about Ru Leiv, and sometimes about Ver Sin.

This continued over and over until, finally, the functionary relented and asked one last question.

“Is there anything important you would like to tell us? Anything we should know?”

“No. Nothing. I really don’t know anything like that. I’m sorry.”

“I remind you that you have been notified and agreed that the ProPro session contains private information and is not subject to disclosure. You are aware of the sanctions. Goodbye.”

Night

The return journey always felt shorter. Not because the flexway capsule moved faster or the routes were altered, but because the events of the day dissolved into a half-sleep, while Synasync diligently wiped away unpleasant details, preserving only the meditative glide of the shuttle and the familiar flicker beyond the window.

Tonight, the ride home left behind that vague sensation sometimes experienced while dozing, when neither its beginning nor its end can be grasped. This time, however, the feeling was sticky and unpleasant. Ama could not shake it. Perhaps it was the white light above the table in the cramped room. Perhaps the questions still echoing in their head. Or perhaps it was that second gray employee, with his elusive appearance and glassy eyes. In any case, Synasync was doing its job.

Meanwhile, the shuttle slid along its familiar route, and across the transparent surface of the windows flowed the news, indifferent and steady. In a level, slightly muted voice, an AI announcer reported that “another wave of escalation has been recorded in the transitional regions. New hotspots of tension have emerged in the Middle East, Siberia, and the integrated western districts of the PRC,” and that “the ATS1 Council confirms the situation remains fully under control.”

Immediately, the screen shifted to another image. An ocean in the light of dawn. A smiling woman dressed in white. A soft voice that seemed to sound from inside the skull itself.

“Morpheus™. Restful sleep. Guaranteed cognitive reboot + positive eometrics.”

The music dripped, flowed, enveloped. Ama felt as though even the hum of the shuttle’s ventilation merged with it, until it became impossible to tell where the advertisement ended and reality began.

At home, the capsule greeted Ama with familiar warmth, gentle bodily fixation, and the even glow of the interface. Life-support systems calmly adjusted to their breathing. Empa beamed with delight, assuring that everything was fine and proudly displaying a green empametric bar.

The thought of Ru surfaced as suddenly as it vanished. What had been so special about Ru Leiv, beyond what corporate snips formulated as “an outstanding employee and brilliant team lead”? Nothing came to mind. Not a voice, not a smile, not a gesture.

Food was unnecessary. The body received everything automatically from the life-support system. Still, the interface persistently projected the image of a proper dinner. A salad with perfect symmetry. A glass of clear liquid without bubbles. A slice of white protein bread.

The news switched on again. This time, about the future.

“To accelerate the phase-out of internal combustion engines and hydrocarbons, new rare-earth deposits have been opened within the territories of former national reserves. As a result, additional lines of electric trains and next-generation flexway and aeroway shuttles will enter service by the end of the quarter.”

A green leaf appeared in the corner of Ama’s vision. A smiling droplet fell onto it. It trembled, glowed under studio lighting, and in slow motion rolled downward, dissolving into a white background.

“Clean energy — a clean future!” the slogan flashed.

Empa was happy. Ama was happy with it. Tomorrow promised to be wonderful once again.

Only the new tag, received for completing Stage I of the ProPro workshop — an eye watching a beam of light split into components — evoked mixed feelings. On the one hand, well-earned pride in personal achievement. On the other, a vague unease.

And Ver Sin had gone missing, not responding to calls.

Perhaps he had been promoted too.

Conclusion

At first, it seemed strange to study such a short and nearly forgotten fragment of history. But the deeper I dug, the clearer it became: for my ancestors, this had been an entire life, with its own habits, words, and rules. In the chronicles, I encountered names similar to those in our family records. Ama. Ru. Perhaps it is just coincidence, but I want to believe they truly lived in that time.

The events described, which our ancestors called the Cognitive Era, took place in the mid-twenty-first century, between the Third and Fourth World Wars. Unlike the archaic pre-cognitive age, with its internet and external screens, this period already had neural interfaces and the early foundations of Synaspace. Few sources survived. Much was destroyed by wars. Much was distorted. As a result, we no longer fully understand the meaning of certain terms, and the customs of that era appear strange to us.

The central idea of society at the time was the Skills–Rules–Knowledge (SRK) model. Originally developed by engineer Jens Rasmussen as a cognitive model of operator behavior, it gradually transformed within management practices into a social hierarchy. Rank-and-file employees were expected to practice skills. Managers were to follow and write rules. Scientific strategists were to possess knowledge. Instead of fostering thinking, this reinforced divisions between people and hindered growth.

People interacted closely with artificial intelligence. They learned from AI, and AI learned from them and from its own previous versions. This formed a closed loop later known as model collapse, or the “data ouroboros.” The system fed on its own outputs, becoming increasingly impoverished and uniform. This left society vulnerable.

The catastrophe of the Fourth World War interrupted this process. After it, humanity was forced to abandon primitive schemes such as the “ideal factory” with its SRK logic. Today, the Cognitive Era is studied not only as a period of technological advancement, but also as an example of how a society can destroy itself.

— Ruma Ley,
first-year student,
College of Universal Memory

Glossary

FLUX (Flexible Linear Unified Execution)

A methodology of flexible, linear, and unified execution. Described as a universal system of decision-making and self-control.

SMILE (Systemic Management for Innovation, Loyalty & Efficiency)

“Smile” as a corporate standard of behavior and thinking.

SLA (Synced Liability Architecture)

A concept for distributing cognitive, legal, and operational responsibility between corporate and external state actors within externalization procedures. SLA supports the smooth transfer of assets, decisions, and risks without loss of trust-based transparency and with preservation of meta-alignment of interests within the cognitive field.

PATH (Productive Adaptive Thought Harmony)

A state–corporate methodology for shaping stable, predictable, and ethically synchronized models of thinking, implemented from early childhood. Supported through regular mentor sessions, curated chat agendas, neural tracking systems, and individual cognitive vector adjusters. Its goal is to ensure cognitive compatibility between individuals and the demands of the digital economy, reduce deviations from productive thinking, and strengthen empathic integration with collective synoreality.

Actor

A term denoting an active participant in social or digital processes within Synaspace. Used in formal contexts or to emphasize role and responsibility within the world.

Upper City

A platform constructed above the historical center and old districts, serving as the core of modern urban life by connecting elevated clusters.

Desynchrastia

An anxiety disorder caused by an obsessive fear of falling out of the synoreal flow, connection delays, projection failures, or drops in Syna-top rating. May manifest as compulsive connection checks, excessive preparation for synchronization, and pre-sync panic. More common among users with low emotional flexibility filters or heightened empathic sensitivity.

Deframe (deframing)

From *de-frame*, “to step out of the frame.” A process of partial exit from Synaspace with activation of the physical body and external sensory channels. Synasync continues to function in the background.

Pre-Cognitive Era

An archaic historical period preceding the Cognitive Era. Characterized by primitive interaction with devices via physical interfaces (keyboards, screens), uncontrolled data dissemination (the internet), and outdated modes of thinking: logical, creative, philosophical.

Cluster

A large urban structure combining multiple megatowers, platforms, residential, and industrial zones under unified management. Includes sealed clusters (hermoclusters) fully isolated from the external environment, and open clusters or free zones consisting of older residential and industrial areas with higher exposure and weaker control.

Cognitive Kinetics

A scientific and applied field studying the dynamics of perception, processing, and transformation of human cognitive states in real time. Includes methods for measuring, analyzing, and managing consciousness, attention, and emotional background to enhance interaction with neural interfaces, augmented reality, and AI systems.

Cognitive Era

A period of recent history beginning with the deployment of the Synasync neural interface and the construction of Synospace. Marked the transition from information handling to management of attention, thought, and perception.

Megatower

A primary vertical structure within a cluster. A massive multifunctional building gradually expanded with additional tiers and levels.

Transitional Regions

Unstable territories located at the boundaries between major political and economic zones.

Ping

A short system diagnostic message used to check connection status.

Ratecoin (R-coin)

A reputation-based digital currency grounded in social ratings and cognitive and empathic interaction assessments via Synasync, replacing traditional money in most areas of life.

Safetalk

A general term for a cluster of mandatory corporate security workshops.

Synaptic Hygiene

A foundational safety course for working within synoreality.

Synasync (Sync)

A next-generation neural interface enabling connection to digital environments. Uses visual, auditory, and cognitive channels for synchronous exchange of information, emotions, and actions with devices, services, and other people. Serves as the core for all subsequent digital layers: Synospace, Synandscape, and synoreality.

Synandscape

The official architecture integrating all components of Synospace at the level of state, corporations, and users. Defines standards for data synchronization, ethical filtering, security, and shared empathy.

Synospace

From *Synasync + space*. The collective digital environment of cognitive interaction between humans and systems. Encompassing, adaptive, and interactive, arising from the fusion of the Synasync interface with computational power, network nodes, and sensor data.

SynCast

A transmission of visual, auditory, or cognitive content directly into Synasync. Can include official streams, corporate messages, entertainment, or underground and personal broadcasts.

Snips

Short fragments or pieces of information in any format. Fast, easily consumable content.

Tacting

From *tactile*, with a derogatory distortion. Slang for physical, often sexual contact between people. In a culture where intimacy has largely shifted to cognitive and neurosensory planes, the term carries a negative, near-taboo connotation.

To Trall

To tease, mock, or simulate sarcasm or irony within CR or verbally. An adaptation of old-style trolling to neural realities.

Physit

From *visit*, distorted toward “physical.” Refers to physical presence or offline visitation, used exclusively to emphasize bodily presence in contrast to ubiquitous virtual participation via Synaspace.

Flexway

A modular transportation system based on autonomous shuttle capsules capable of dynamically forming convoys and changing routes in real time. Used for passenger transport within and between megatowers and clusters.

Flux

A brief interaction between an actor and Synaspace, such as posting a snip.

Hub

A compact residential or working space, ranging from an individual synocapsule to an office module.

Empameter

An embedded Synasync interface module visualizing the user’s current psycho-emotional state.

Empametrics

A system of indicators that records and analyzes an actor’s cognitive patterns in real time. Used to assess loyalty, engagement, and alignment with social values.

Empathic Template

Personalized settings for perception and emotional synchronization via Synasync, shaping an individual’s emotional response and comfort.