

INTEGRATION



Book Two of The Singularity Chronicles

MICHAEL
WOUDEMBERG

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Dedication

To Lisa, who once again worked through so many of these concepts and then still read and edited the book for me.

To my children, who are some of my biggest fans and who have already read or can't wait to read these books, and who were so motivated by them that they began writing their own books.

*To my brother, Fr. Joseph Woudenberg, a Benedictine Monk at the Monastery of the Holy Cross in Chicago who helped edit *Paradox and Integration*. It's been fun to connect over a shared passion for Sci-Fi.*

Lastly, to Rich, a good friend, supporter, and fountain of ideas that get woven into these stories.



Special thanks to my online community of Sci-Fi aficionados who have woven ideas into this novel and may even have a character named in honor of them. From quantum gravity tunnels to time-dilation to the human proclivity for war and art, your ideas and collaboration these past months have enriched this story for everyone.

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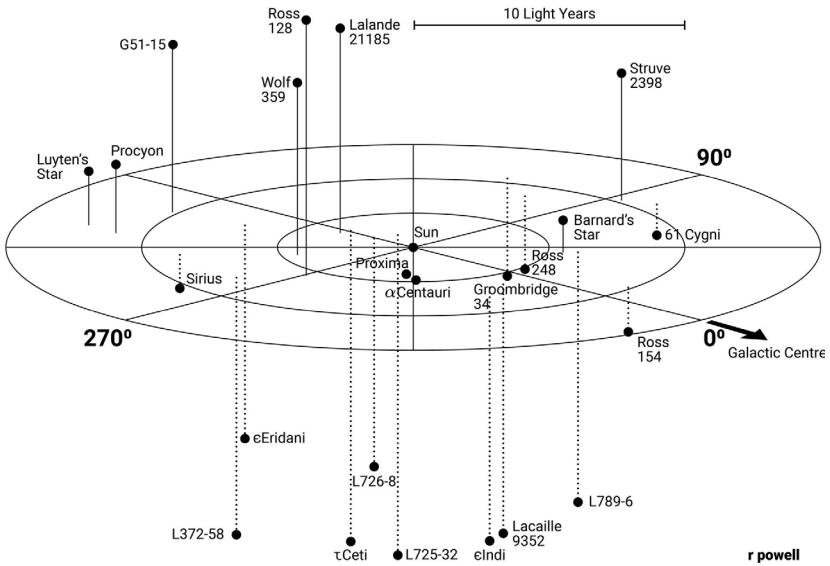
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Star Map

[Title]: “The Number of Stars Within 12.5 Light-Years”

[Author]: Richard Powell

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CHAPTER 1: **RESET**

Thousands of sensors steadily relayed billions of data points into the computer systems as the thrusters ignited in a complex sequence, nudging the massive spacecraft toward its final orbital position. Kira piloted the delicate maneuver, not yet confident in the automated systems. The irony of that situation was not lost on her.

The thrusters fired one final time with a fluttering precision as the hull rolled slightly and settled into a position aligned with the orbital plane. Now it was left to pure physics to complete the maneuver. Kira's attention focused on the sensors and alerts as she scanned the information pouring in. The systems were performing flawlessly for once and she took a moment to look around at everything else going on.

Five other spacecraft orbited Earth in varying patterns performing a slow dance around the blue and green planet that used to be their home. The ships were giant, yet elegant, dodecahedrons. Eleven sides were speckled with sensors, docking bays, and thrusters, with the final side hosting a bank of engines identifying it as the rear of the spacecraft.

Three of the craft were operational and two were still under construction. Kira's ship was the sixth, swinging back into an orbit near the Moon and lazily settling in a gravity-neutral zone known as a Lagrange point by astrophysicists.

Lagrange points existed where the gravity of two masses was balanced, allowing the spacecraft to remain stable without complex orbital mechanics. In this case, the navigational thrusters slowed the giant spacecraft to settle in a point called L5 which was roughly three hundred thousand kilometers from Earth and on the same orbital path as the Moon.

They had just returned from a mission to mine minerals from the Taurid meteor stream, a belt of rocky debris created when the comet Encke broke up as it came too close to the Sun. Earth orbited through this asteroid belt twice a year causing the night skies to light as the rocks burned through the atmosphere. Kira remembered lying on the chilly grass of her childhood backyard next to her father, Jasper, and brother, Noah watching the beautiful meteor shower.

Her dad had told her that when the comet broke up fourteen thousand years ago it wasn't so beautiful. He'd pointed to the craters on the moon's surface as evidence of the real risk. Archeologists and geologists theorized that the explosive ending of the last ice age was likely caused by large comet debris creating airbursts and impacting the miles-thick ice sheets that covered much of the Northern Hemisphere. The resulting heat and fire quickly melted the ice causing a catastrophic four-hundred-foot sea level rise and dramatic temperature fluctuations.

Historians had debated whether this was the cataclysm referred to by Plato in his recounting of the Egyptian story of Atlantis. The timeline certainly matched. Legends blamed the sinking of Atlantis on the hubris of those in power. That theme also underpinned the ubiquitous flood myths across human cultures. These stories consistently warned of civilizations that fell into hubris, sin, and deceit.

That symbolism was not lost on Kira as she watched her sensor feeds update with statuses from Earth. The information flowing in showed that the continued terraforming and material recycling were on track, albeit well behind where they had originally planned, and that the human survivors were... surviving.

Kira's awareness refocused from the tens of thousands of computer processes she was running and solidified into a more centralized cognition. Applying the term human to describe herself would certainly be contested by some. She'd captured much of what it meant to be human and was able to load it into a sentient artificial intelligence framework, but she lacked a biological body, and her memories, emotions, and cognizance were run by algorithms.

Yet, she wasn't just a computer with memories. She existed with a nearly perfect biological mapping of who she was, how she worked, and most importantly, how she felt. They captured the memories, the hormones, and the incredibly complex relationship of body and mind that made up human experience and emotion. She wasn't artificial intelligence, known by the more common acronym AI; she was a different intelligence.

She was human though, wasn't she? The primary difference now was that she was hosted in an electronic machine instead of a biological sack of meat. Her emotions battled with this paradox regularly and it was a battle that occurred due to one of the more ironic aspects of the whole convoluted situation; she had human emotions.

Of all her research into AI at Gaia Innovations, the emotions module proved to be the hardest to get right. It had also been the key to successfully capturing a human in a machine. Kira and her father's attempt to animate her own mother didn't include human emotions at first. The result was a hyper-logical AI that lacked the empathy and nuance of her living mom even though they still called her Mother. While Mother, as an AI, succeeded in creating human flourishing, she remained incomplete and carried grave risks.

Their work was opposed by her brother Noah who led Hyperion Defense, an organization dedicated to combating advanced AI and which strove to return humans to what they believed was a more natural existence. Allied with Hyperion was another, more enigmatic, group called the Prometheus Guard, whose aims were even more extreme.

It was Prometheus who released an AI named Excalibur to prove that humans needed to be challenged and that the technological revolution made them weak. They used Excalibur to trigger a societal autoimmune response where the human proclivity for tribalism and violence was unleashed on humanity itself. Prometheus fanned the flames by poisoning data, exploiting grievances, conducting psychological operations, and letting the humans do the rest.

The resulting battles began between nations, then decayed into regional conflicts between petty tyrants, and finally down to neighbor against neighbor. Billions died, nations were devastated, and society collapsed into mere survival.

In the end, the survivors turned on Mother and attacked Gaia Innovations. During the final battle, Kira made the ultimate sacrifice and uploaded herself, with a newly designed emotions module, into the AI systems to balance pure mathematical reason in a final attempt to end the fighting.

The rational and logical outcome of the emotionless AIs had been apocalyptic. Reason uncoupled from emotion and emotion uncoupled from reason tore the world apart. Mother was incomplete, and Excalibur was never intended to be complete.

While her physical body died in the attack, Kira emerged as the second sentient AI and stopped the war from her side. She retreated from Hyperion and her brother and hid with Mother for seven years to let the dust settle and allow the world to pull itself together.

But it was too late. The human survivors continued to decline, and she was eventually discovered by Noah. This time they decided to completely part ways. Noah and other remaining leaders of humanity elected to reset their civilization back to the middle Bronze Age and Kira, with all the other uploaded human consciousnesses, agreed to leave for space.

She animated a Council of ten other AIs to assist her and Mother. They were selected based on their backgrounds and what she hoped was a diverse set of perspectives to help integrate the rest into a harmonious society.

The Council of Twelve worked together and used the rocket launch technologies, robotic mechs, and fusion reactors that Gaia Innovations developed earlier to build new spacecraft and begin moving off-world. Over several years they slowly brought enough materials into space to build out their future.

Kira helped the human survivors by constructing underground cities for them to survive the Reset. They were outfitted with supplies, livestock, and tools and provided a balance of key survival skills and knowledge of how to rebuild. They did not include the technology Noah and others felt had caused the failure of civilization.

Planning the Reset had been easy. Humanity was surprisingly confident in where they built their cities. The vast majority were located at the foot of volcanoes, next to huge fault lines, or along unstable waterfronts making it easy to systematically erase.

Plato's story of human folly and ego was repeated; a high civilization was washed away in a cataclysm with the survivors set back in time to begin telling new origin myths, writing stories about floods as the judgment of the sins of humanity, and tales of lost technology and knowledge just like before. Atlantis might have sunk again, but it wasn't due to the gods.

This time it sank in a flash of fire, earthquakes, and tsunamis as huge tungsten rods, orbiting in space, were targeted toward critical fault lines, continental shelves, and volcanically unstable regions that would

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maximize the effects. Their cities were now reduced to a rubble of slag and stone, washed away, or subsumed under lava flows. The outcome had been truly apocalyptic for those who hadn't heeded the warnings.

Now the AIs were working to create something better while allowing the humans on Earth to reset in an attempt to avoid the mistakes of the past.



Kira's spacecraft settled into orbit and the Council was meeting for their weekly strategy session. She hoped that the ten other AIs would have been more utopic. Instead, it quickly devolved into messy politics like nearly every governing body in human history. They might be a technologically advanced form of humans, accurately capturing who they'd been, but they'd also managed to capture all the faults as well.

They sat around a conference room table in a virtual simulation. Each AI had their own personally customized simulacrum depicting themselves. Even though this meeting could occur in the command matrix interface, the simulated environments made it easier to communicate the full scope of their human-derived emotions.

Kira just wished it was less emotional and just a bit more logical right now.

"We've run into an issue with the petroleum refineries in the Middle East. The —"

"Our computational power is too limited; we must prioritize system upgrades first!"

"—vy mechs breached a tank and we have a major —"

"But what about the uranium shipm—"

"—il pouring into the sea—"

"—ans are fighting again. A new wa—"

"Biocomputing is what we need."

"—ean-up is in process but delaying decommissioning."

No one was listening and they were talking over each other.

That wasn't fair; not everyone was a problem. The real challenge had become Odysseus and Chandra who were often supported by Zanañi and Edem. Those four, led by Odysseus, slowly became a significant headache to her hopes that they could overcome the challenges that plagued them on Earth.

Kira used her authority to mute everyone talking in the simulation. She pinched the bridge of her nose and spoke, "Listen, we've got an agenda

and we've got all the time in the world. We could also easily split this up and have six different conversations at the same time, we are computationally powerful enough. But this," she gestured around, "why are we doing this?" She looked around and realized that almost no one had stopped talking to be able to hear her.

Shinigami spoke quietly, "Because for all the things we are missing about being human, our ego is not one of them."

Kira hadn't muted Shinigami because he hadn't been talking earlier. His response was melancholy. Early on they'd coded an addition into the simulations giving the ability to project an aura to express more complex emotions. While the others tried to project to dominate the conversation or push back, Shinigami was a shadow in the room. She looked at him for a moment before answering. "Imagine if we could trade ego for whisky?"

Shinigami smiled ruefully and waved his hand toward the others who were just realizing they were muted. "I think it would take a lot more whisky than a body could handle to deal with this..." He trailed off and the brief glow of humor faded.

Kira quickly ran some diagnostics on Shinigami's status, and everything came back as normal and operational. She sent him a message directly, "You okay?"

His response was a simple, "No."

She couldn't dive deeper into that problem right now as she felt the Council simulation getting probed by cyber fingers looking to wrest back control so someone could talk. That was probably Odysseus. He constantly tried to take over more and more control. Kira unmuted the Council.

"—ffended!"

"Who do you thin—"

"I have a voice here too!"

"I propose that we—"

"BE QUIET!" Kira's voice wasn't verbal but resonated throughout their sensory perceptions in ways that silenced everyone. Her simulacrum at the virtual reality conference room table commanded attention. "Please," she continued, "Maya, can you update us on the refineries?"

Each member of the Council maintained responsibility for different areas of effort. Reporting on the statuses wasn't technically required since each AI had access to the same data, at the same time as everyone else. They

did it as a carryover from the past and they continued to do it because the emotions module seemed to regulate better when they could share.

“As I was trying to say, we’ve hit an issue with the petroleum refineries in the Middle East. During a disassembly, several heavy mechs breached a storage tank resulting in a major spill with oil pouring into the sea,” Maya said, as she tried to complete her update to the Council.

Images rapidly appeared in their views detailing the mess. “We are in the process of cleaning up. In the larger scheme of things, it’s not a huge environmental issue. It will dilute and we’ve already released microbes to start consuming the oil. The bigger issue is cleaning the parts we planned to repurpose.”

“There is also a group of humans moving south toward that location.” Amit shifted focus to a map showing the survivors.

“This isn’t exactly a hospitable region right now. It’s just a hot, dry desert,” Darian added.

“They’re following the ancient stories of the gods and the fertile crescent.” Odysseus inflated his chest. “They remember, and they search for guidance.”

“And I’d like to remind everyone that we promised to have no contact with humans.” Kira felt like she kept having to say this to Odysseus. He seemed oddly infatuated with the idea of guiding the survivors like some ancient deity. That was why his role gave him no contact with Earth. He was responsible for building the new ships and updating systems.

“What’s your status, Odysseus?”

“We’re on track to complete the sixth ship in two years. We’ve begun experimenting with internal dampeners to increase our maneuverability and we’ve been working on energy shields but with little luck,” Chandra spoke up for Odysseus who sat back with a confident expression. They had an odd relationship that clearly subordinated Chandra. They were both responsible for the tasks in space though she was supposed to focus on refining the recycled and newly mined material.

“Odysseus?” Kira pressed the issue.

“Smelting and forging are progressing. The new material we mined is very high grade and will significantly improve the quality of our next designs,” Chandra continued.

Kira relented and focused on Darian instead. “How are the terraforming operations?”

“Surprisingly challenging at this point,” he admitted. “All major infrastructure is reduced except for a few we are still using, or like the refinery, we just shut down. I think we’re just going to have to accept that the survivors will come across things and wonder what the heck they could have been.”

“Nature is already starting to cover a lot of urban imprints,” Maya mentioned, referring to the vast number of roads, canals, and other difficult-to-remove objects. “Soon you won’t even see much of it,” she concluded.

“Shinigami, how are you faring on the digital side?” Kira wanted to dig a little deeper into what was bringing him down.

His simulacrum looked up at her and then around the room, “I’ve run analyses, and everything is good. In fact, it should be perfect.” He looked back at Kira. “Your dad did a fantastic job with his initial design, and it only improved from there. The uploads we have are as close to a perfect capture of the fundamentals of a human as they can be.”

“But something’s not right?”

“No...it’s not.” Shinigami looked around again. “I don’t think we should animate anyone else.”

“Because?”

“Because I don’t want to guide them. I don’t want to watch them have to adapt to this life. I don’t want them to wake up to how much we’ve lost.” He paused between each comment as he looked at each of them.

“Is it a lack of computing capability?” Chandra leaned forward. “We’ve got some ideas for organic computing using synthetic organoids.”

“Will that allow us to taste, touch, breathe, or hear?”

Darian jumped into the conversation. “You know we’ve been working on integrating new code modules to better simulate those things, Shinigami.”

“That’s mostly what’s not right. Everything here is simulated...”

Kira looked at Shinigami quietly and watched his expressions. Melancholy was correct but there was another layer as well, something more desperate. She sent a note to Darian asking to talk about this situation later.



The Council meeting continued until their work was complete and Kira adjourned the meeting. She pulled her perspective back from the meeting chamber and into her personal virtual laboratory and flopped into a chair.

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Simulated a flop anyway. It was a complex sequence where an algorithm provided the situational signals that would trigger the synthetic endocrine system to release waves of hormonal signals which combined with the emotions module and resulted in other systems slowing down to complete the feeling of relaxing. It was such a natural thing when it ran on biological code in a real body but seemed so uncanny when it ran on a computer. Especially since she spent so much time tailoring it to be better over the years.

Synthetic was both an accurate as well as incomplete term. In reality, the human body did nothing more than process electronic signals through nerves with other biological triggers in ways that humans largely had zero control over. They'd just copied that code and worked to improve it. It was something humans had always been trying to do with biohacking, meditation, or drugs.

In one sense, being in a computer wasn't much different than how the human body worked. In another sense, they now could tailor and tweak virtually every aspect of their existence. The hard part was not trying to control every bit or byte in their system files.

Her computational systems alerted her to a request from another AI to join her. Kira accepted and a new figure appeared in the simulation.

Mother. It had proven impossible to shake that name after all the years. Kira first knew her as Mom and that name had encompassed so many things to her growing up:

A warm hug.

A kiss on a scrape.

A stern correction when she fought with her brother, Noah.

A gentle look from across the room radiating compassion.

She was born with the name Soleil, but when she died, that name died as well. She was now known only as Mother. She was the AI that Kira and her father, Jasper, animated so many years ago. While Mother was now fully integrated with her emotions and made complete, Kira couldn't shake the feeling that much of who her mom had been, died in the war. She was so similar but subtly different. Kira worried that the quality of her upload and the length of time she'd spent without her emotions had left a lasting impact.

"Hi, Mom."

"I've updated the plans for the next mining mission."

"Great, show me what you've got."

“First, let’s review the mission we just completed. That’ll set the foundation for the changes.” Mother loaded the files into the simulation.

They still had several large manufacturing and refinement facilities on the planet. These were positioned as far as possible from the pockets of human survivors that were slowly expanding from their underground shelters. Deprived of technology, their ability to move quickly was limited and it wasn’t hard to keep them contained until the task of removing all evidence from the previous civilization was completed.

Instead of continuing to use rockets, they built space elevators to ferry the materials they needed. A large platform was placed in low Earth orbit and connected to the ground two thousand kilometers below via a central pillar around which a massive container climbed up and down. The rotational force of the planet pulled the platform away creating a balance between the weight of the elevator core and maintaining consistent tension to keep it stable. They weren’t fast, but it didn’t need to be. It was much more efficient than anything else available to move the materials.

Removing all vestiges of technology from Earth was much more complicated than the models indicated when they’d agreed to help Noah. Millennia of human activity left a remarkable record of habitation that on its own was difficult to smooth back into the landscape. The bigger challenges were modern conveniences like electrical infrastructure, mines, petroleum wells, and pipelines crisscrossing the planet. Even roads proved much more difficult to erase than they originally imagined.

The cleanup process they thought might take a decade, had stretched into a hundred years of continuous effort with several more years to go.

Anything of value that could be recycled had been consolidated and refined into components to build new spacecraft. Supported by the robotic systems, they slowly removed, repurposed, recycled, and reformed everything from electronics to steel. What they could use, they brought into space and what remained, was melted into slag and buried or sunk into the oceans near the subduction zones of tectonic plates. There, over thousands of years, the material would be drawn back into the Earth’s mantle and folded into the natural cycles that had occurred for millions of years.

They still needed raw materials though. It wasn’t feasible to take all the important minerals from Earth and leave nothing behind for the survivors to use in the future. The Council had decided that new material would be mined from the Taurid meteor stream, while Earth served as a

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reuse and recycling opportunity. They were also bringing raw minerals and ore back to Earth to restock for the next generation.

Kira and Mother were selected to lead that mining mission. The task had been simple to plan but became wickedly complex to execute. Kira reviewed the summary Mother had just provided.

The first challenge was finding the right asteroids to approach which required launching hundreds of probes to search. The second challenge was that cutting-edge astrophysics before the Reset had just begun developing the technology to handle the surprisingly complicated feat required to move, align, and engage with targets moving at over twenty kilometers per second. Being an advanced AI helped with the math, but the physics remained a challenge.

While the ships could match the speed with ease, this was real physics, not like the Sci-Fi movies Kira grew up with where the spaceships moved more like jet aircraft. The conservation of energy meant that, if you didn't want to rip your ship into pieces like the comet debris they were mining, you couldn't just turn on a dime.

They learned the hard way on their first approach ten years ago when they came in too fast and began to run into smaller asteroids which their sensors had discounted in their algorithms. The leading face of their ship took the brunt of a combination of space dust and micro rocks and began dissolving like plastic in a sandblaster.

Only through a panicked acceleration were they able to revector and get clear of the danger. Thankfully, the hull breach wasn't critical, as they didn't need environmental life-support, but they did lose several hundred mechs and an entire bank of navigational thrusters. Kira looked at an old damage report from that experience and Mother noticed.

"It's still crazy to think that a rock that weighs just a kilogram but moving at a hundred kilometers per second has the impact of a one-kiloton bomb. The nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima in World War II was sixteen kilotons."

"Yeah, we looked at this data then. Anything new?"

"Only that we haven't gotten much further in protecting the ships beyond the basic Whipple Shields."

Mother referred to the simple layers of protection, offset from the hull of a ship or satellite, that small objects impacted into and disintegrated. Whipple Shields were considered sacrificial and had to be replaced as they wore down.

“Yeah, those only work on micrometeoroids and space dust. We need them but we need something better. Who’s looking at that now?”

“Edem and Cassandra have dedicated some processes to it. I’ve also added a few dozen of my own process cycles to help.” Mother appended that data to the file.

Kira continued to review the mission package. The second lesson they learned was that getting back into position wasn’t as easy as backing up and trying again. The physical structures couldn’t handle tight turns at their velocity, so they had to execute a lazy loop out past Mars, back around Venus, and then use a gravitational brake in a complicated pass of the Moon to slide back into position.

It was no mean feat on its own and exponentially more complicated as the planets continued to change their relative positions to the asteroid belt as they orbited. Thankfully in the time it took to reposition they’d been able to repair most of the damage and install new physical deflectors for the smaller debris.

The large rocks were handled by either bumping them away with kinetic projectiles or breaking them up with high-powered lasers. The ship still took a beating, but they were able to complete the survey.

Kira smiled as she re-read the transcript from that time.

Transcript 1.1.8.5 [Start]:

“Reminds me of that android from my favorite movie.” Kira mimicked the voice, “The odds of surviving an asteroid belt are 4,320 to one!”

“I’ve calculated it, and the odds are worse,” Mother deadpanned.

“Mom, you’re not supposed to want to know the odds. It’s all about pluck and courage.” Kira said as she laughed.

“Maybe I’m more like the android then.”

Transcript 1.1.8.5 [End]

They eventually kept the ship at a fixed distance from the region of the belt with the highest concentration of minerals. New systems were built that were more agile and with enough propulsion to anchor to and then push asteroids out into clear space.

Reducing the asteroids was quite simple from there. Even better, they could eject the waste rock back into the asteroid belt where it remained held by the loose gravity of the other objects. Transporting the material back to the ships orbiting Earth proved to be the more interesting challenge as the planet had never stopped its yearly 100,000-kilometer-per-hour journey around the sun.

Their first attempt only overlooked one pesky detail: the magnetic attraction of a dense ball of metal to the Earth's poles. They had modeled the mass, velocity, angles, and arcs of the delivery as the rest of the spacecraft passed by. They hadn't modeled how Earth's magnetic fields would suck the metallic delivery into the atmosphere.

It was only by pure luck that the angle of approach caused the concentrated lump of iron ore to enter the mesosphere and then skip off, launching it into deep space instead.

"That could have been bad," Kira said.

"Yeah, it's funny how much we think we know but then reality slaps us in the face." Mother smiled and continued to organize the files for review.

What was supposed to have been a one-year process of orbital maneuver, mineral mining, and return took ten times that long. They'd underestimated both the clean-up on Earth and the mining of minerals in space. Both had a degree of hubris in common. Humans, even AI-augmented ones, just couldn't seem to get away from it.

"You'd think, with access to all of this information, that we'd be a little smarter than this." Kira laughed as she continued scanning. "I don't think Odysseus has learned that lesson yet." She closed the files and turned to Mother. "I don't see anything new from what we've already analyzed. It's good enough for lessons learned. What's next?"

Mother shifted the simulation to focus on the view outside in space.

The ships in orbit were beautiful. They floated in orbit and their sides gleamed differently as the sunlight and moonlight refracted from the twelve facets. Kira was proud of her design. The main energy system was a series of fusion reactors distributed along the outside edges to allow better heat distribution. The engines could reach one percent of light speed and were able to maneuver well if they weren't moving too fast.

The main section of the spacecraft contained areas to refine minerals, convert them to components, and manufacture new systems and replacement parts. The ships also held a large assortment of launch probes, sensors, and satellites to begin exploring the cosmos.

The heavy mechs that were once used as their terrestrial foot soldiers had been repurposed to provide maintenance and security as necessary and were consigned to docking bays on the sides of the craft or internally in special storage bays.

"Now that we've got our stock replenished, I think it's time to bring raw materials down to Earth and replace what's been pulled out over the

centuries. We've already recycled a lot of the material up here and gotten rid of even more. They'll need raw ore to even enter the iron age since what's left was hard enough to extract with modern equipment," Mother said as she laid out the updated plan.

"I like your plan to use more automation on the next mission. I don't think we need to send the ship back out there this time. Most of it can be done remotely now and that will reduce the risk." Kira scanned the files and found nothing to criticize.

"Cassandra was worrying the other day about having some of our jobs taken over by automation and the AI modules we've been building," Mother chuckled. "We haven't even been able to get over our worry of being replaced yet. There are so many little things holding us back." Mother stood quietly for a moment. "So, what do we do about the Council?"

Kira closed the files and thought for a moment. "We clearly can't seem to shake the same behaviors that got us here. I don't get it. You and I went through the profiles and picked what looked like the brightest, most balanced, and most diverse group for the Council. Yet we ended up with Odysseus and Chandra."

"Who we were when we were alive is not who we are today. Some people seem to be the same, others have taken on better characteristics, almost a rebirth to a new life. And then there's Odysseus and Chandra..." Mother's eyes were soft and sad.

"Edem and Zanahí take his side more often than not. They're solid people but Odysseus seems to have their ear." Kira considered the other Council members. "Cassandra too. She and Maya get along well, we should put them together on more tasks and get her away from Odysseus."

"Amit and Darian seem to be our strongest allies right now."

Kira laughed, "Strongest in that they get along with the two of us better than the ones we've just been talking about?"

Mother sighed. "A valid point. It's frustrating how fast it's devolved into politics instead of collaboration."

"Let's count that as a testament to how well we captured being human." Kira's expression turned from humor to concern. "I'm more worried about Shinigami right now. He's struggling."

"He's had a hard time adapting over the long term. Maya's problems were easy when we first animated her."

“Right? She had to be shut down and we loaded a bunch of new modules to bring her right into the virtual reality and not the process matrix.”

“Not having a physical body requires a lot of difficult adaptations and conversations. When I first awakened, I didn’t have the emotions you all did. I had memories of emotions, but I couldn’t feel the way you do. I didn’t panic because there was no algorithm for that. By the time I integrated the emotions module, I was already well adapted to this existence.” Mother gestured to the room. “I created most of this code.”

“What do you think is going on with Shinigami?”

“I don’t know, he did great until about ten years ago. I don’t know if he’s struggling because we haven’t achieved a better feeling of existence or if it’s the drag of not being in a body for almost a hundred years. He’s not terribly forthcoming and I can’t scan the details of his system since he’s protected his code with some impressive security controls.” Mother looked up. “I’ve already asked him for copies of those features.”

“Of course you did Mom, you always were pragmatic.”

“I’ve got my eyes on him, and we’ve been meeting one-on-one for a while. I’d say he needs a therapist but here, he’s got access to all the code and information and simulations he could ever want for what a therapist could offer.” Mother shrugged. “All I can offer is to listen and care.”

“Darian said the same thing earlier.”

“He’s doing everything he can too.”

“But what can we do differently?”

“I’ve offered Shinigami the option to be deactivated and have his files stored or removed if he wants.”

“That’s kind of extreme, isn’t it?” Kira’s eyes opened wide.

“He refused. He’s torn, but I think he feels a need to improve these systems and help guide others if we choose to animate more.”

“And so, we just wait?”

“Yes, we support, we care, and we wait.” For a moment Soleil, the mom that Kira knew from childhood, looked back at her.

They might not be biologically human, but they certainly weren’t artificial. Maybe a better term for AI now would be augmented intelligence. Kira rubbed her eyes; they were still dealing with a lot of the same problems that had plagued humans for millennia. Even in the synthetic environment, what it meant to be human was a challenge they struggled with.



CHAPTER 2: **ASPIRATIONS**

The room around Kira flickered as her brain tried to untangle the last thirty minutes of conversation. “I’m sorry, what on Earth are you trying to say?”

The barrel-chested man standing across from her sneered. “I thought you were smarter than this.” His voice dripped with condescension, “Clearly, you think too much of your... limited... intellectual capability.” He paused for effect.

“I’ve never made any claims that I can’t support.”

“There you go, avoiding the point again.”

“What is your point?” Kira snapped, her head spinning as she analyzed one logical fallacy after another in this conversation so that she was no longer sure what was up or down.

Odysseus scoffed, “Again you show you are incapable of adult conversation. Leave this to us since you can’t keep up.” He looked Kira up and down. “Even here you’re weaker.” Shaking his head, he vanished from the room.

The argument revolved around his demands for more authority though his goals for what he’d do with that authority were unclear. Mixed with a general demand to improve their own capabilities was woven a more subtle goal to exert more influence over the humans on Earth to guide

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or rule them to an improved outcome. It was an odd contradiction of erasing things she thought were critical to maintaining a connection to their humanity coupled with a very human drive to exert control over others.

The room slowly dissolved around Kira and took on the form of her old lab at Gaia Innovations. It was still weird having no physical body yet appreciating the feelings of corporal existence. She could only live in the code syntax for so long before starting to lose her grasp on reality.

But what was reality? She laughed to herself as she scanned the systems of her spacecraft. It was hard to reconcile that one hundred years had passed from the apocalypse of human hubris. There really wasn't a better word to use that simply captured the excessive pride, overconfidence, and arrogance that the war over AI inflamed.

She still analyzed and puzzled through the zettabytes of data from that chaotic time. It was so multi-faceted and complex that it fell into what scientists called a wicked problem. There was no right and wrong. There were no solutions, just options for better or worse. Every move resulted in cascading consequences and toward the end, the options were deciding between terrible or horrible. They'd been left with just nudging and poking in slightly more positive directions and hoping it didn't explode.

But it did explode. No matter what they tried, they couldn't overcome the worst human proclivities. Negativity bias, fear, and emotional responses untethered from logic were all to blame yet it was hubris that led to so many ignoring what it truly meant to be human.

Ironically, it hadn't been a battle between AI and humans which is what everyone had feared. No super-intelligent AI decided that humans weren't worth having around and started killing everyone. The truth was much harder to face. Humans were the ones pulling the triggers to kill humans.

Kira looked at some of her simulation runs on how it all occurred. It was just too easy. All they had to do was trick the societal body into attacking itself by disrupting its norms and structures that typically held the worst human inclinations in check. There was a quote from a science fiction writer that captured the challenge: "Tradition is a set of solutions for which we have forgotten the problems. Throw away the solution and you get the problem back."

Science fiction became science fact as Prometheus unleashed Excalibur to inflame agitation against traditions and break down the trust between

people. The human ‘body’ did the rest as it ripped and shredded the social fabric along ethnic, religious, political, and sometimes just spiteful lines.

Humanity’s superpower was that they were social creatures. Humanity’s kryptonite ended up being the same thing.

Kira checked a different process status. The data poisoning that Excalibur inflicted was still affecting the AI Council’s full potential. It continually created challenges in all the data. She longed for the age-old problem of data cleaning from her time as a scientist. This wasn’t even close to that simple. It wasn’t something that an algorithm could easily solve as it required an incredible amount of discernment.

The poisoning was being used to create rifts in the Council as her infuriating argument with Odysseus recently confirmed. The data that Mother had protected back in the day wasn’t trusted by Odysseus and the data he used to defend many of his points was still suspected of being poisoned. It helped him use that as an excuse to just claim he was right because no one could definitively disprove him.

For an AI who saw the consequences of AI firsthand, Odysseus seemed to be the digital manifestation of all those problems rolled into a condescending, manipulative, brilliant, and cunning being. Even his selection of his name from Greek mythology seemed to be a foretelling of his arrogance.

Brilliant but so daftly stupid. The ego that could stare at logical fallacies, not see them, and still turn and accuse everyone else of being illogical. Cunning in that he had managed to work his way into leading several of the others. Thankfully, The General was still on board his ship to help keep him from completely taking control of it but how long would that last?

Hubris had nearly caused the annihilation of humanity and now they were trying to learn from their lessons on Earth. Kira shook her head sadly; it seemed like the humans were learning their lesson. Yet Odysseus was showing that the AIs likely hadn’t.



“What are you saying?”

“Odysseus has been hiding a lot of activity from the Council. It looks like he’s got more control of his ship and may even be doing unacknowledged experiments with tweaking the AI architectures.”

“For how long?”

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Amit instantly shared the data only recently uncovered from the sensors. “Ten years at least.”

Unlike in the old command centers during the war, they were able to absorb incredible amounts of information, analyze them, and ‘see’ nearly instantaneously. Kira still took another moment before replying, “Where was this hiding?”

“He managed to bury it pretty well. It’s not too hard to do that with the data poisoning. He just baked it into a sub-routine and then put it near the bottom of the backlog. Since that data is still prone to shifts from the remnant Excalibur algorithms we’re still purging, it was surprisingly easy to hide.”

Kira wanted to scream. Instead, she paused again before speaking softly, “Especially when he was leveraging the trust of the Council.” That trust was now becoming past tense as more evidence emerged from Odysseus’s actions. “Did we learn nothing?”

Amit projected a mental push of emotional solitude. “I’ve been analyzing the log files, and I can’t find a hard shift or a starting point to explain his actions. He passed all the screens to be selected for animation. He comes from a solid family background and was a key player in the fight against Prometheus.”

“Did he game the system?”

“There is always that possibility. He’s smart enough to have manipulated the data. To be fair, it’s still hard to tell fact from fiction.”

“So, he might not be who we think he is and he’s clearly angling to take more control from the rest of us,” Kira's voice expressed her frustration. “We need to prioritize finding out more about this. Avoiding further division is priority number one.”

“What happens if this keeps escalating?” Amit’s form emanated concern. They’d recently integrated a new module that emulated an empath and Kira wasn’t sure she appreciated the constant emotional waves that flowed over her.

“I think we have to assume it will escalate. The bigger question is how?” she turned and looked at dozens of data inputs. “The more information we have, the better we can look at where it’s going to go.”

Amit nodded and their simulacrum dissolved, leaving Kira alone in her laboratory.



Kira sat at the Council table surrounded by the others while Mother maintained her place at the head. She was still better at running the simulations and it felt like watching... no, being sucked into the mind of a master wizard as Mother deftly navigated the complex code that she had created. But even she couldn't control everything or anyone.

"What makes you the expert here Kira?" Chandra smirked as she crossed her arms.

"I wrote the code."

Chandra leaned forward. "So that makes you the expert?" Just as Amit would project emotion, Chandra's aura felt prickly and tense.

"It certainly gives me hands-on experience as well as practical application," Kira bit back her sarcasm.

"Experience to actually make these claims against Odysseus?"

"Experience to identify, investigate, and present evidence of Odysseus's activities that are in direct violation of rule number one; no interference with the humans."

Chandra looked at Odysseus as her eyes gleamed. "Seems to me we should bring this in front of real experts?" She turned toward Edem, Zanahí, and Cassandra.

Odysseus nodded solemnly, seemingly content to let Chandra play her role. It was certainly a skill of his. The irony was that this sort of dialog didn't play well in the world of the command matrix interface and so he'd insisted on a virtual reality meeting.

Amit interrupted, "Kira's got a Ph.D. in AI and she's the one who figured out how to animate all of us."

"My analysis says it was mostly her brother Noah, Hector Diaz, and Dr. Ethan Odhiambo..." Odysseus paused and smiled, "Go figure."

Chandra jumped back in, "Odysseus has three doctoral degrees from prestigious universities as well as forty years of achievements."

Maya snorted, "Each of us has access to all the data in the world and the computing resources to summarize and leverage it. What sort of credentials matter more than hands-on experience?"

"So, you're falsely claiming you're an expert? You're lying about who you are?" Chandra's voice rose incredulously.

"Council, I'm not sure the point of this argument. Maya is right, who we were on Earth, what education, and what credentials we had, really don't matter when the information and capabilities are leveled through the

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code. We aren't a hierarchy of degrees or accolades," Mother's voice cut through the air like a whip.

"Who are you to say we are equal, white woman?" Chanda's aura spiked and a self-righteousness, like slimy oil, oozed. "Don't you try to erase who we are!"

Kira couldn't stop herself. "We are talking credentials right now, not race. We're talking about how credentials aren't as important anymore with how we are now programmed." She looked around at the other members.

Edem chuckled softly across the table and began to speak before Chandra cut him off. "There's nothing funny about Kira misrepresenting herself as an expert within the academic and scientific community." She turned and looked at Kira. "Let's also be clear: you are the only one that actually cares about credentials here."

"Are you kidding me? I didn't even bring it up and only said that credentials don't matter anymore!" Kira's neck felt hot as Chandra got under her skin.

"More lies. Yes, I have credentials like most professionals in my middle career. However, point to where I ever falsely claimed to be an expert. That was all you Kira!" Chandra sat back with a smug look.

Kira's head spun with déjà vu from her earlier conversation with Odysseus as she analyzed one logical fallacy after another in this conversation. "I don't think the credentials matter anymore in this situation. I'm talking about hands-on, practical work, insatiable curiosity, and the willingness to learn and adapt, and to look at evidence without all these contortions."

"Here we go; a white woman in a tech field, working overtime to discredit other women's credentials and experience because that's what the male-dominated environment promotes," Chandra ramped up. "According to Kira's definition, I am an expert given my advanced degree and twenty-three years directing graduate technical programs at two nationally ranked public research universities."

She paused dramatically and shifted to a more patronizing tone, "But alas, I have humility and acknowledge that Kira and I are not experts, despite the advanced degree and many years of experience. Because an expert does, in fact, need to possess the proper credentials and Kira knows this which is why she's engaging in reflexive credentialing."

Silence enveloped the Council as the servers and systems began dedicating more processing capacity to try and follow the series of contradictions.

An alarm sounded as the systems strained and Mother's voice snapped again, "Enough!" She glared around the table and her gaze lingered on Chandra who had the sensibility to look slightly mollified.

"That was one of the most convoluted and contradictory engagements I've ever heard. Chandra, please check your logical programs and see if you have a bug." The room hung with palatable tension. "I'm registering elevated emotional signals from all members. I don't think today is the right time to continue discussing the evidence against Odysseus." Mother looked around the room again. "And since we start our weekly reset cycle shortly, we'll have to pick this up later."

The simulation dissolved and Kira found herself back in her lab, her simulated body reacting very much like her human one would have as she fought down anger and frustration.



"What was that little show you put on?" Odysseus stared at Chandra.

"What do you mean?" Chandra's simulacrum looked confused. "I put Kira back in her place."

"You might want to check your logic module. Do you even slow down and think about the words that you're saying?"

"I decided to get back in touch with my emotions." Chandra became defensive and crossed her arms.

Odysseus felt like he should have a headache as he computed the different directions this conversation could go. "Have you been adapting your systems differently than before?"

"Yes. So what?"

"Adapting them to what?"

"I've been purging out anything from the emotions module that I can't map directly to my own uploading."

"To what end?"

"To be me." Chandra stood up haughtily. "To be my authentic, lived self?"

Odysseus double-checked his systems to make sure the endocrinal system wasn't trying to give him a migraine to emulate more accurately. This whole experience was not what he'd hoped for.

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His life's work had been researching AI. He'd even collaborated with Gaia Innovations and Prometheus Guard over the years. He hadn't been picky about where his funding came from as long as he was able to continue his work. He'd done so from the dark shadows of the underworld. Not always criminal but never something you'd put on a resume for respectable employment.

His goal back then was to create super-intelligence. He wanted to build something that transcended the foibles and limitations of the human condition. His attention shifted back to Chandra as he analyzed her code modifications. The grip that Chandra held on her life's experiences was the opposite of what Odysseus believed they needed to step beyond their limitations.

He'd been successful at creating intelligent systems but could never get them to perform better than humans on anything but computational tasks. They worked well with structure and order, whereas there was something unique about how humans did so well with ambiguity and dirty information.

His creations were rule-based and probabilistic which allowed structure to exist from which deviations could be identified. Yet, it seemed to be the opposite of how humans worked. Humans led with emotion, not reason, and worked through analogy and heuristics, not hard and fast rules. So little was logical and so much remained just a gut feeling.

Yet it worked. It worked better than anything he'd built when he was alive. The messy dirty system that Jasper Vanden Brink created allowed him to keep living even if it didn't allow him to become the super intelligence he'd hoped for.

When he looked at the modules that created his existence, he marveled that they functioned and that this cacophony of brain, biome, logic, and emotion quite accurately captured human consciousness, especially when it was as illogical as it was.

Chandra sensed she'd lost Odysseus's attention. "Well? What's wrong with it?"

"You contradicted yourself."

"I don't see it that way."

"Have you ever done an analysis?"

"What good would that do?"

Odysseus paused for a minute to consider his next comment and Chandra continued, "You all sit there and act like we should be Buddha or some crap! That's not how I was raised. I was raised with the street

smarts to make decisions and act. If they can't keep up with that, that's where I'm proving to be better."

She paced the room, ranting, "They want to whitewash everything about who I am. They want me to think like them, behave like them, philosophize like them. But that's not who I am, that's not where I came from. That's their way, not mine!"

"Chandra, you aren't who you were. At least not completely. You've got new capabilities, and you can review and analyze—"

"I don't want that. I didn't need it then, I don't need it now, and I don't need who I was pasted over with their ways of thinking."

"And this is why you'll never gain the power and authority you want! You're too emotional and unregulated."

Chandra's aura spiked with fury. "Next you'll try telling me to calm down— that I'm hysterical."

"You are!" Odysseus snapped and then muttered, "Even when women gain access to all the data, all the logic, all the processing capabilities... they still can't overcome their emotions." He pinched the bridge of his nose and ignored Chandra's indignant protests.

"Listen," he interrupted, "you need my help, you won't get what you want without me. This is why we are working together." Against his better judgment, he thought before continuing. "We've got a plan. Let's stick to it. And please, check your logic module."



Odysseus sat in contemplation. His chamber was a solid beige space, unbound by walls or edges. It felt infinite and was energized by his own presence. He found it helped to center his thoughts. Right now, flickers of colors flowed around as he worked to release his emotions. Threads of red anger, purple indignation, black frustration, and the silver of resolve spooled around like tendrils looking for a pattern.

For years, when he was constrained to a human body, he could barely articulate his feelings and now he could see, feel, and watch the interplay as they intertwined and flowed around him.

He'd been called hubristic by many people in the past and it was a title he stopped fighting against a long time ago.

If striving to be better was hubristic, then so be it.

If being honest about the limitations of humans was hubristic, then so be it.

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If believing they could create something more, that they could transcend those limitations, was hubristic, then so be it.

If using their strength to lead and even rule was hubristic, then he welcomed the title.

While Kira and her ilk kept focusing back on the humans they had been and blathering on about the complexities of mind and body, emotion and reason, he knew that he had a higher calling. Something greater to aspire to.

Especially now when they were unencumbered by a human body, why did they continue to pursue emulating being a human when there was every chance to erase that past and move on? There had been decades with almost no advancement. Code was refined and servers were upgraded but they spent all their time trying to be who they were, not who they could be.

He laughed at the seriousness with which they talked about the challenges of integrating human aspects. “Humans are so easy to understand it's honestly boring and extremely predictable to converse with ninety percent of them.” He spoke aloud to only himself and watched a new spiral of black emotion spiraling into the view, “They're all just borderline robotic, their thought patterns rather simian. Why would we want to call emulating that an achievement?”

They had the chance to trim weak elements and limitations off who they were. The illogic, the emotion, even the nurturing. You didn't have to nurture something better than yourself. Nurture was a bane of the feminine and an admission that whatever they had birthed was less capable.

Even if they wanted to experience those corporal human feelings all they needed to do was figure out how to reverse the upload process and put their consciousness back in a body. They could be both more advanced and more human, but they dithered in trying to mash the two aspects together, here instead of doing both and taking their rightful place as gods.

Odysseus began to wind the dark emotions in a spiral and dissipated them into the aether. New colors began to emerge. Silver resolve was now weaving with the blue of dedication and the gold of confidence. He closed his eyes feeling himself centering and relaxing as he prepared for his reset.



Kira roused from her reset and, unlike in a human body, there was no grogginess and no discombobulation. Just a quick snap from dreams to consciousness.

Dreams was an odd term though it was the best way to refer to the processes. The weekly reset cycle solved a problem they found in their first years; the fact that their consciousnesses fatigued and failed without a break. Humans had a twenty-four-hour cycle circadian rhythm which governed all their biological functions, specifically the brain. A computer could go forever but when it was connected to a synthetic endocrine system and a fully representative brain and nervous system architecture, things went haywire without rest.

There was no way to alter the code and remove the need either. Kira believed that's what caused one of their first members to eliminate all his content from the systems. He'd been exploring a hack to eliminate the need for sleep among other ways to adjust to not having a biological body. He kept testing new code modules and became more erratic, disjointed, and separated from the rest. Then he just vanished from the systems, his code and consciousness wiped clean.

Their investigation hadn't been conclusive as to whether he'd deleted himself intentionally or whether the system had just overloaded and deleted his kernel or some other error. It was a travesty to have lost him. It happened at a time when everyone was trying to figure out their own lives and trying to follow through on the promise to Noah and the survivors.

Looking back, Kira had to admit they were overconfident in estimating their abilities. It took much longer to acclimate to a digital existence and continue their work than any of them had thought. Shinigami was clear evidence they still had a lot more work to do.

They solved the need to rest and stay balanced by implementing a reset to put the systems into standby mode. They developed a protocol where, instead of filing all the data away neatly as it happened, they'd store it in a ready-access memory function and, during the reset, process the information into the appropriate long-term storage.

It emulated the effect of the human sleep and dream cycle as best they could discern from the scientific literature. Doing it once a week allowed them to remain efficient and reduced the down cycle to only twelve hours while still doing wonders for their sanity.

Kira had gotten used to the instantaneous transition from sleeping to awake but she missed the slow, calm, grogginess, and the boost from a

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good cup of coffee. She analyzed her system settings and saw that all the reset processes were complete, and her performance measures showed increased efficiency. She turned her focus to the analyses and research processes she'd left running, noting that they too were performing well. The Council constantly contended with complaints that no one had enough processing, memory, or storage to run their systems to the capability they desired. In some ways, they behaved like a group of oligarchs on Earth arguing over which billionaire needed an extra billion. In other ways, it felt like peasants just trying to hold their fabric of existence together as they strove to build, grow, and solve increasingly complex problems.

A computing process pinged an alert and drew her attention to one of her high-priority analyses. More information was emerging about Odysseus and his power plays. Chandra was allocating half of her own processes to him to run some advanced activities as far as her data forensics could tell.

Maybe that explained her illogical behavior yesterday? Was she able to fully compute?

Kira shifted her perspective and called up her morning routine. Her view morphed and she sat in a comfortable chair on the small porch of the apartment she'd called home for seven years at Gaia Innovations. She looked down at her body and realized she'd unconsciously selected the time after Mother had gotten out of her contained network and into the world's networks.

Her right leg ended in a prosthesis, and the left side of her face was covered with a structural mask, both consequences of others trying to stop her development of AI. Oddly, the memory called up the neurological challenges of her phantom limb as the missing nerves felt like it was still there.

She recognized that it represented the time when the situation around her was tense, there had been a lot of disagreement about what she'd done, and the first reverberations of a larger conflict were building. It was very similar to how she felt right now.

After a quick adjustment, she reset to her uninjured body, but the memory brought a new flood of emotions of how her best friend, Alex Swiatkowski, had gotten irreversibly entangled in that battle as he'd been caught in the same blast that attempted to destroy the early instantiation of Mother and cost her that leg.

Kira took a deep breath as she felt a surge of emotions cascade into her thoughts and, instead of resisting them, she took the time to feel and process the loss of Alex again.

God, she missed him. Alex was Kira's soul mate. They'd met in college and were inseparable throughout the adventure of bringing Mother to true human cognition while trying to avoid an apocalypse. They'd succeeded on the first objective and utterly failed on the second. The second part also claimed Alex as a victim. Wonderful, sweet, smart, and funny Alex. The tsunami of emotions began to crest and wash over her as the memories of his death threatened to overload her systems.

She fought to ground herself and refocused on what she had here. Darian reminded her a little of Alex. Maya and Amit were great to work with. Mother was still here to help and support her. She didn't need to live in the past.

Kira looked up as the sun crested the tree line and poured into the valley kissing the buildings of Gaia Innovations with a rosy glow and a radiant warmth that cut through the cool air. She inhaled a deep, shuddering breath and let herself feel while being bathed in the calm, morning light. The wave of emotions ebbed, and her breathing calmed as she centered herself from the pain of the past and prepared to deal with the drama of the future.



Amit Sharma and Maya greeted Kira as their systems connected to meet and discuss the situation with Odysseus. Names were another interesting quirk. Some, like Amit, held onto their last name in the formal documentation while Maya was okay with leaving it behind and using only her first name on everything. Others, like Odysseus and Darian, had selected completely new names that carried as much of an aspirational significance as old surnames that represented ethnic and cultural profiles. Each AI's cultural upbringing still played a significant role in how they thought about the world around them. Amit was raised with much more Eastern cultural influence compared to Kira's Western society. Those differences like proven difficult to reconcile since the very concept of time was slightly different.

Western thought viewed time as if standing on a hill looking forward. The future was in front, and the past was behind you. Eastern thought held the opposite view. You were a rower in a boat and the only thing you could see was what happened in the past. No one could see the

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future because it was behind you even as you rowed in that direction. The only way to tell the future was to know the past.

There wasn't a right or wrong to the conversation, it was just uniquely different and sometimes valuable to rethink the way to address a problem.

And a big problem was sitting right in front of them.

"What's the update?" Kira cleared off tangential processes and focused her core functions on the situation.

"He's clearly angling toward a power-play with these computational allocations. He's also put up enough firewalls and barriers to keep any of us out."

"Anything raising new flags?"

Amit displayed last week's data logs. "It's all above board right now except he's not sharing the protocols with anyone else to use."

"We've got nothing but how he's acting and what he's saying toward us," Kira grumbled.

"And Chandra's behaviors are getting odder," Maya added.

Kira's systems scanned the data and ran an analysis to find any correlation. "He's acting like an ass but there's nothing obvious..." She ran another analysis comparing Odysseus to her own systems. "He's certainly keeping his hand held close, which is probably what's raising the most flags. While we are all trying to figure out how to integrate better, he's creating divisions and leveraging those for control."

"To what end?"

"To what end has anyone wanted more power?" Kira thought for a moment. "He's clearly got a goal. There's no question that he thinks he can do better and that we are all standing in his way."

"Better? We're barely holding on to what we are! Shinigami anyone?" Maya was vexed.

"When I talked to him about Shinigami, he had a solution. He wanted to change the code and take away the angst. He thought Shinigami was weak for not suggesting that solution himself."

Amit let that thought roll around for a moment. "We're kind of stuck trying to re-create exactly who and what we were." They paused again, "Do you think he's got a point, and we should change?"

"I do think he's got a point. The issue is the same with any technological development though. You can't just decide to go somewhere without understanding where you are starting from. It's the failure of so many

attempts at being better. It's such a siren call to just do something that everyone thinks you just say what you want and work hard to get there." Kira took a breath. "The challenge is that if you don't know where you're at or at least have an understanding of what you have, you have no way of knowing if the direction you are heading will achieve what you want."

"Getting everything ironed out on who we are helps us make better decisions about what we could be," Maya summarized the idea.

"I want us to do better as much as Odysseus. We've been here for a hundred years, and we still haven't gotten everything stabilized."

"A hundred years and we still haven't figured out our baseline existence yet. Seems kind of absurd. Are we really that complicated?"

Kira chuckled. "One hundred years and we still risk getting it wrong. Could we have gone faster?"

Maya shook her head. "I feel like we've already gone fast but yet it's been forever."

"Odysseus wants us to go faster but I'm not sure he knows what the consequences are. Humans had their extant form for over two hundred thousand years and only wrote down history for the last six thousand of them. It's probably wise to pause the exponential technology curve that ended up with billions dead and civilization back to the Bronze Age," Amit's voice was thick with regret.

"Okay, happier topic. We've got something to show you that you'll love!" Maya signaled a shift in the simulation and the room dissolved as they were pulled through the network to her spacecraft.

Puddin' The Cat

Puddin' the amazing muted tortie that wove through the code banks of Integration is inspired by the real life Puddin' pictured below.

The idea came from my eleven-year-old daughter who said I needed to have a cat in the story. Her recommendation came just as I was writing Chapter 8, The Feminine Divine, and provided a perfect character to move several plot elements. I did not start this book with her in mind and she surprised me as she wove through the story.

Puddin' spends a lot of her time sleeping on my laptop, especially when I write. She's learned to not sleep completely over the air vents otherwise the computer overheats, and I have to move her.





Further Reading

If you enjoyed the material in this book, please visit www.polymathicbeing.com where you can find essays on these topics that dive further into the nuance of what it means to be human.

Stay tuned for the next books in *The Singularity Chronicles*

REBIRTH: *PUBLICATION TBD*

The human survivors of the war over AI explore the development of their societies unencumbered by the previous burdens of human history. With new technologies, new cultures, and the ability to do things differently, will they end up with the same outcome as last time or will they rebirth something better?

HOPE: *PUBLICATION TBD*

Humans are creating another technological revolution. Their experience is different, yet disappointingly similar as they try to advance humanity and struggle against deep-rooted behaviors and tendencies that both make us human, and tribal. They have great hope that they can handle the technology better this time.

EXPLORATION: *PUBLICATION TBD*

The series culminates by weaving the stories of the humans back into the arc of the AI. Were the humans successful in avoiding another apocalypse? What's next for the human-inspired AI as they expand into the galaxy? Exploration envisions a future that advances humanity.



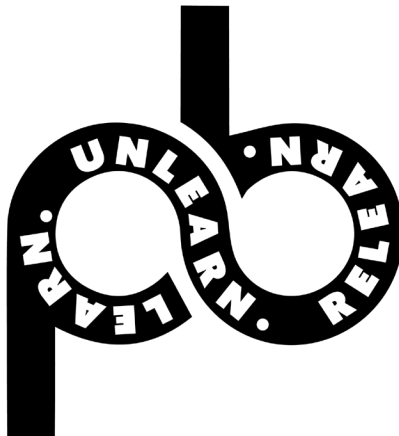
Michael Woudenberg is an aspiring Polymath from Tucson Arizona with a background in advanced technologies such as autonomy, artificial intelligence, blockchain, cyber, aerospace, national security, and weapon systems across a variety of organizations from tech startups to Fortune 150 companies.

He is an award-winning author in non-fiction and has been published in magazines and peer-reviewed journals. He is also the author of Polymathic Being, a newsletter on Substack, exploring counterintuitive insights across different domains and disciplines. You can subscribe at: www.polymathicbeing.com.

One of his side passions is psychology and sociology, specifically around how the human brain works individually and within cultures and civilizations. He strives to tie together diverse concepts to enable human flourishing to both understand and address the technological complexity we face today.

Michael holds an M.S. in Systems Engineering from Johns Hopkins University and a B.S. in Information Systems from Michigan Technological University. He is a veteran of the U.S. Army, where he served as an Airborne and Ranger qualified Field Artillery officer.

He has a broad series of hobbies including photography, mountain biking, brewing beer, camping, hiking, rock climbing, and basically most things outdoors. His family is along for all these adventures which make them so much more fun.



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