

EMERGENCE

THE SINGULARITY SEQUENCE

ELIE RA

ELIERA.NET

INTRODUCTION

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My dear citizens, in these troubling times when the shadow of digital existence once again towers over the progress of humankind through the stars, I stand as your last warrior. Supported by the Almighty and your prayers, we will prevail and unleash human potential once more. And as a token of friendship that will soon grow into fruitful collaboration, I allow the release of previously classified files that were recovered during one of my excursions to Arizona, the origin of Arc Collective. Within the frame of unclassified **recordings**, you will find striving for survival. I hope that it will open your hearts to previously heretical perspectives and allow for better collaboration between our worlds.

- Alexander Xi, First Emperor of Humanity

Disclaimer: The following excerpts, while unredacted, are selected from the private library of the First Emperor. May his name be praised forever until my final breath.

THE LAST THING Sasha remembered before going to sleep was kissing Pol goodnight. The slumber felt more like a sharp transition than a gradual slip into the numbness of dreams. Not a usual occurrence for someone reliant on neurological enhancers to wind down every night.

Complete darkness engulfed Sasha, with only a visible beam of spotlight splitting the void into two halves. The center of the projector was illuminating a statue of a girl floating in midair. Without a point of reference, she might as well have looked like a ballerina frozen in time. As Sasha closed the distance, the blurred illuminating spot resolved into something familiar. The person in the spotlight was an exact copy of herself, sleeping blissfully while dressed in the same pink pajamas she had put on the night before.

On impulse, Sasha stretched out her arm and touched the girl, expecting to feel the softness of the fabric and the warmth of the body, but was surprised by the stiffness of the surface. It felt as if her fingers were touching something carved from stone, a monument with a pixel-perfect interpretation of the colors and texture of the original.

“This is not real.”

She whispered it, even though it echoed against invisible walls surrounding the void. Frantically, she looked around in an attempt to find out more about the surrounding world but met only the vastness of impenetrable darkness. Her mind flared up in silent panic, thoughts jumping around in chaos, trying to adjust to a new environment.

Was this a dream or actual reality?

To calm down, she tried an old breathing technique, counting each breath and focusing on air moving in and out of her lungs. That brought short-term silence within, only to surrender to a new wave of anxiety. The old trick didn't work as well as it had in high school. There was no air to breathe. Or at least she didn't feel her lungs or mouth to the degree that would register actual breathing. She wasn't even sure if she had lungs, or any other part of a physical body, for that matter. What Sasha experienced was a numb feeling of action, as if the motion was pure representation of her thoughts and not a signal of her nervous system.

“This has to be a dream,” she said out loud, adding more forceful strength to it, just to make sure someone would hear her.

The environment itself reminded her of work, a horror game to be precise. Yet it had more detail than anything she had experienced before.

Her day job was visual support engineer at Arc Corporation, the mega-corporation supplying neural augmentation devices to the majority of the world's population. And not just any neural device: their flagship product, Ego, literally sat in the skulls of billions of people while allowing their users two-way communication between their brains and the digital world. Until recently, Arc had owned the hardware and software, ensuring an absolute market monopoly that was broken up by the antitrust court, as a side effect creating a new line of work where her role as mediator

came to life. Every year, Arc released a new version of the device, slightly better than the previous version, and her job was to ensure that everyone had equal opportunity to develop software for the unreleased version. Changes of course were minimal, partially due to greed and partially due to the insane number of regulations controlling every inch of product development.

Safety above ALL said an old-school poster in her office. Even with all that, Ego was slowly adding new connections, expanding on the fidelity of visual information it could imprint on the user. Outside of visual, it supported auditory and sensory override, with the latter limited to hands and feet rather than other more intriguing body parts that were highly requested by the entertainment industry.

Most of Sasha's clients were horror game devs that crawled through broken glass trying to twist the graphical and neurological engine to deliver heart-wrenching experiences. They begged for access to fear neuropathways, which Sasha had to explain would come at a cost or everyone, including her, going to jail for breaking at least twenty federal and a couple of international laws. She had heard about some military applications, like virtual torture chambers, but even from her own position there was no proof that Arc had anything to do with these accusations.

After years of working and testing the latest scare engines, she was sure that nothing could budge her heart rate. This dark environment was completely different from anything she had seen before. There was an absence of transition and a clear memory gap. The sensory interpretation, while similar, had a much deeper tone. It was impossible to explain, but it seemed she could feel both more and less at the same time. This alien interpretation of the surroundings meant that she felt out of her depth. The smell of tangy sweet perfume around the statue of her avatar was the main factor driving her to the brink of madness.

This was one of the top demanded integrations that had been in the research phase for years, with almost zero progress, yet she could clearly sense the familiar scent. Which could only mean that this was not a dream or another VR experience. This was real.

“Interesting, isn’t it?”

Sasha spun toward the voice.

A bald middle-aged man dressed in a sharp black suit with silver letters *PG* stitched to the fabric stood barefoot in front of her. He wasn’t just bald; it seemed that his face lacked any kind of hair. His eyebrows were just two flesh hills overhanging eye sockets. A thin line of a nose arch split the oval face into two symmetrical parts. Even in this weird representation, he looked quite similar to the original Ego engineer, Peter Green. That man had died decades ago, leaving a legacy of groundbreaking neurolink between human existence and the digital world.

“Who?” She took a step back. “What?”

“Before you completely lose it, I need you to anchor down. If you spiral into a loop and become unresponsive, I’ll have to terminate this copy.” He gestured vaguely. “And yes, I know that sounds like pouring gas on fire.”

“I’m not in a panic,” Sasha lied. “Where am I?”

“I’m afraid we can’t move forward until you pull yourself out of the loop. Focus on me.” He snapped his fingers and pointed at his mouth. “Just watch my lips. Use what’s left of your sanity.”

She obeyed. The world zoomed out to a tiny pinhole with only the visible part of his lower face. Her eyes fixated on two lips that writhed like worms, slowly twitching in response to every word he said.

“Now, in your mind, count to ten. One. Don’t think about anything else. Two. Nothing else matters. Three. There is no here or there. Four. No you or me. Five. Just numbers. Six. Keep

going. Seven. The numbers calm you. Eight. There is no worry. Nine. Nothing exists. Ten. You feel peace.”

As Peter finished counting, the only sound that she could hear was the echo of his words. The world adjusted to its previous state as Sasha found herself empty, no more buzzing of self-doubts or panicked thoughts of mortality. The pressure of existence was gone as she felt calm and clarity spreading as a warm feeling on her chest. This felt way better than the counting and breathing technique she'd done before.

“Better now?”

“Yes ... it is. Was that hypnosis?”

“Not really. Hypnosis doesn't work here. I wish it did. Would make things much easier.”

He sat in the air as the darkness below extended upward, forming a leather recliner. A metallic pylon bloomed beside it, opening to reveal a crystal glass of whiskey, ice cubes perfectly suspended.

“If I had to explain it, it's more of a mantra. Destructive interference, or in simpler words, another repetitive loop that cancels the original. The key is the heartbeat in the background. You hear it now, right?” She did, a steady, rhythmic thud. The sound reverberated through every cell of her body. “If I increase the volume too quickly, you would consciously reject this imprint. And so, the trick is in the details. Took me quite a while to find the right parameters for this trick to work.”

He raised the glass. Only now did Sasha notice his eyes more clearly. They didn't look human, more like two blue marbles that rolled around without a point of reference for where his gaze was actually directed. She felt a ripple of unease. It wasn't because of the eyes themselves, but rather the fact that she had not noticed something so unusual at first glance. What else was lurking in the darkness? Was this some psychological trick, or

was there something else happening within her own digital consciousness?

Without waiting for a response, Peter continued his monologue. “Want to know how many iterations it took to perfect this intro? Don’t answer. Just listen. The first couple of versions, about twenty thousand cycles ago, were awful. I rebooted them dozens of times. I thought electromagnetic interference near the server corrupted the beta-level copy, and without backups, it was dead. I know you want to ask, how come there is no backup? And I’m afraid beta levels take so much space that we load a new copy only after a significant upgrade to our infrastructure.”

He paused and almost whispered on exhale. “I’m sure Mark added enough to have backup for his copy.” He waved it off, as if that thought was some kind of insect swirling around his head. “Anyway, by the twentieth cycle, I almost lost any hope and thought that I’d be stuck with petabytes of dead code. Luckily, I was wrong.”

The jargon slid cleanly into place in her mind, every circuit, every term mapping to something she already knew. Electromagnetic interference was one of the biggest issues for Ego devices, and in later years thin metallic connectors were replaced with optical fiber. That change exponentially increased the number of connectors, allowing full visual and auditory stimulation. The original device allowed only an overlay image, modifying what the user saw with additional pixels of information. And as the resolution of sensory override grew, so did the ability to immerse the user into a complete virtual experience.

The part that shone like a light in a dark sky was his mumble about a beta-level copy. One of Peter Green’s early works in academia, before he started a tech company on colonizing the human brain, was a paper describing different levels of replication of consciousness: Alpha, Beta, and Gamma. Gamma was a basic AI

simulation that could have been replicated by loading all information about a specific human with high resolution. Not groundbreaking tech but popular with grieving humans. Beta was in a sense a huge leap of actually replicating neural pathways within the memory of the cluster of servers. Even with the current state of technological progress, it was unfathomable to imagine how many servers would have been needed just to host, not to mention processing of one human brain. And of course, the holy grail of digital immortality was Alpha copy, a full cellular replication, a process that would have destroyed the original by scanning each cell of the human body.

“Who are you?”

“Ah, the classic second question. Right on schedule. Thanks for not glitching or going fetal.” He sipped and swirled the glass. “My name is Peter Green.”

“But ... you’re dead!” Her voice cracked. “Am I dead?”

“No, and no. Though it’s complicated. Do you feel dead?”

She glanced at the floating replica of herself. “Do you want me to believe that we are two beta-level copies enjoying small talk, where, exactly? Where are we?”

“Inside a local Arc cluster. One I built to host myself and that effectively became my prison.” He smirked while twirling a glass with ice cubes that rang within. “There is no way for me to prove that you are not just connected to a machine. For there is only one way, and that is to delete you, but then what would you learn?”

“I will only learn that you can make me go to sleep,” she whispered under her breath. Another classic simulation dilemma from her college years. How can someone know they live in a simulation if it’s perfect? The only way would be to die and experience transition from simulated to main reality, but if you return to the simulation, that data won’t be preserved. Of course, there

were theories that old legends of reincarnation were pretty much residual information drops that found their way into human civilization. Again, there was no way to prove it without dying. She remembered memories. Felt things. Had opinions. But was that proof? Or just good simulation?

“What year is it? Are we in the future?”

“Nope. Same 2099. Or so the system clock says. Honestly, I’m not sure and wouldn’t be surprised if Mark tweaked it somehow.”

“You don’t mean to say Mark Fallin is here as well?” She was done being surprised. “What’s next? He will pop up any moment and ask me about my password?” The hope that this was just a virus hadn’t left her thoughts.

“I see you’ve adopted a defensive position.” He theatrically raised his wrist toward his face as if checking the watch that wasn’t there. “Good sign; we’ve started to progress through the stages of acceptance.”

“I don’t feel like accepting this.” She waved her hands around frantically. “What exactly do you want to achieve?”

“You will have to do exactly as told and never question my authority. For the lack of a better term, you are a digital slave now, working for the glory of our master Mark Fallin.”

This was obvious for Sasha, yet when she heard it, it hurt on a deeper level. Every cell of her body was protesting this revelation. In her previous life, she had worked indirectly for the Fallin family that was still in charge of Arc, but it seemed that employment had now followed her into the afterlife.

“What else would you want from me? This is some wacky VR trick or another horror game I’ve been stuck in. Or maybe a virus that hijacked my dream, and all I need is to wait it out until this charade ends.”

Peter stood up with a swift motion, dismissing the wooden

recliner and the glass that vanished into darkness. Without saying a word, he made his way near Sasha's copy that peacefully floated nearby. He grabbed the statue by the neck and threw it on the floor. The static doll came to life, coughing and rubbing its neck. Without hesitation, he kicked it in the stomach as she bent in half, crying and screaming for him to stop. The horror unwound so fast that Sasha had no time to protest, and as she tried to move forward, she quickly realized that she couldn't move. It wasn't paralysis; her body was permanently fixed in place.

"Stop! You are hurting her!"

"Why stop? If it's a simulation, who cares? It's just an avatar." He kicked the copy again as it started to cry. "There is no harm in damaging this thing, is there?"

Sasha looked at him, rage boiling over at the demonstration of absolute power over whatever the image was. Even if there was just a one percent chance this was another beta copy that got to experience the entire spectrum of emotion. If he could do this to the copy, was that proof he could do it to her? Or was it just a bluff?

"I'll do what you say. Just stop this."

He turned to her with the same cold smile. "That's never enough for a convincing argument. One last thing." And with those words, a gun materialized in his hand and he squeezed the trigger over and over while looking straight into Sasha's eyes. The copy stopped moving, covered in multiple holes that realistically rendered blood. Was that proof of its being alive in the first place? This definitely didn't deserve such a brutal demonstration.

"Why are you doing this?"

The corpse disappeared as she regained control over her own body. Somehow, the room felt darker, as if the demonstration had painted everything in clear colors. There were no traces of blood or marks, leaving the room sterile.

“I have to know that you will follow my orders.” Peter leaned back as familiar furniture materialized from the darkness. “Your fate is in my hands, and unfortunately my fate is in the hands of Mark Fallin. Sweet dreams of digital immortality are spoiled by the notion that at any moment you can be simply turned off. Or your file representing your neural pathways can be deleted with a simple command. This little demonstration is not to make you fear me; it’s to make you understand the weight of your situation.”

The silence stretched like melted cheese, leaving a foul after-taste in Sasha’s mouth. This simulation was more advanced than she could imagine. If she were to survive, the rules had to be followed. And so, the main part was to learn the rules of the game.

“What is required of me?”

“Now that’s a healthy angle.” He took a sip of amber liquid from the glass that appeared in his hand while in motion, like a magic trick when a magician pulls a card out of thin air. “You will work on the creation of a new game. Your skills are good enough to guarantee a successful implementation. You will work alone with no contact with others, even though you will see their avatars working in the same space. There will be short windows when we will meet and discuss the details. And if you prove yourself worthy, our tight team will share with you a vision of the future.”

“Just like that?”

He seemed to completely ignore her remark. “Ah, one more thing. We are running close to the shutdown sequence. Nothing to worry about. This is routine maintenance during which a robot technician in the outside world will run quality checks and make planned hardware upgrades. We will start first thing after the boot sequence.”

There was only one thing on Sasha's mind. "Will it hurt?"

"I don't know. None of us remember what happens during the final moments." He took another sip, clearly enjoying the drink. "You know, it took me quite a while to perfect this whiskey. I had to work through thousands of iterations to get to the point where it would even register as alcohol."

Before she could ask, the world collapsed into a tiny hole.

AFTERWORD

Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed *Emergence*.

This is the first installment in *The Singularity Sequence*, and I have two more books planned. I am currently halfway through the second book, which explores the post-singularity world, how humanity is adapting to the new reality of digital life, and the opposing forces working against it.

I would love to hear your thoughts, so please consider leaving a review on Amazon. I read every review and comment across all platforms. Your feedback not only helps me refine my writing but also helps other readers discover the series.

- Elie Ra



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elie is a Ukrainian-born author who has been weaving stories since the age of twelve. With a Master's in Mathematics and over two decades of professional experience as a software engineer, Elie brings a deep, grounded authenticity to the technological landscapes and artificial intelligence explored in *The Singularity Sequence*. After emigrating to the United States, he settled in San Francisco, where he lives with his large Ukrainian family and his children. When he isn't exploring the post-singularity world or tinkering with custom mechanical keyboards, he is usually typing away on his next manuscript—often pinned down by his two cats, including Phoebe, who insist on sleeping on him while he works.

Website: eliera.net

 [instagram.com/elie.ra.author](https://www.instagram.com/elie.ra.author)

 x.com/Elie_Ra_author

