



MALAKAI

WORLD

ADVENTURE

COMPANION GUIDE

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Introduction

Welcome to this companion guide!

I've designed this document to help you navigate the Malakai World™, more specifically the Space Adventure world (as there will be more coming online soon). In here, you'll find explanations, inspirations, suggestions, and more.

As you discover more about this world, I encourage you to think beyond it. The whole point of Malakai World™ is to be a collaborative experience, one that readers like you can enhance and grow in new and exciting directions. It was always meant as a starting point from which others would add their own views, their own stories, and their own ideas to make this an evergreen place of creation and wonder.

Think of my stories as the trunk of a tree and of all your contributions as the branches, leaves, and flowers that make this tree a glorious, living environment.

Together, we can grow a forest.

Have fun here, and have more as you log into www.malakai.world to explore what others have done and to build your own path on this wonderful creative journey.

Set your imagination free...

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jackson Spencer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Cast of characters

On Mars in 2175AD, there are two broad factions – the **Colony** and **Hullywood**.

The **Colony** is the Martian base where human settlers have lived for almost two decades. It is run by Matka, a sentient A.I. that is fiercely protective of its environment and of its human wards. The Colony is built around a space elevator that reaches high into the atmosphere where a shuttle is under construction. It is surrounded by crashed spaceships.

Hullywood is the habitat where Earth refugees live. It is named after the hulls of the spacecrafts they welded together to survive after their arrival in the harsh Martian environment. The refugees who live there have no memory of what happened on Earth leading up to the blackout that forced them to leave. Their crashed spacecrafts are littered around the Colony borders.

The main characters in the Colony are:

- **Ting Chang**
A young orphan raised in the Colony after her father left her there for dead at birth. Disciplined by the cadet training she received there, Ting is now questioning her origins and seeking answers in dangerous places, helped by an organic AI implanted into her brain that she calls Albert.
- **Matka**
The ruthless AI managing the Colony, Matka has developed maternal instincts after choosing to save Ting at birth and taking her in as a protégée of sorts. Matka needs to grow continuously and is running out of space on Mars but has plans to expand beyond her current habitat. Whatever the cost.
- **Xavier**
The quiet, reliable Director of the Colony and Matka's chief of staff, Xavier feels protective of Ting but has pledged his allegiance to Matka. Soon, he is forced to choose who to trust and who to help as the pressure around him rises fast.
- **Dr. Kaztek**
A corrupt yet caring physician to Colony residents, this doctor trades black market items with the Hullywood community for his own benefit. Very competent in his field, he maintains a certain distance from others to keep his objective view on patients and to prevent others from betraying him.
- **Cassia**
The popular girl in Cadet School, Cassia makes it a point to bully Ting over her AI implant while navigating the teenage landscape of the Colony as best she can. Vulnerable under her confident façade, she remains guarded with everyone.

The main characters in Hullywood are:

- **Liwei Chang**

Ting's widowed father and now self-proclaimed leader of the Hullywood rebellion to overthrow Matka, Liwei has grown harsh and cold after believing his daughter dead. He trains the Malakai to help him find a weakness in Matka's code. Though smart and focused, he puts his mission ahead of everything, and everyone.

- **Sacha**

A benevolent figure to the Malakai, Sacha has a synthetic nervous system due to a special gene in his DNA. He looks after the team by applying his considerable expertise to building complex systems that help them regress into past lives, something his body doesn't allow. He also grows organic batteries using his own biosynthetic designs.

- **Kioni**

An early teenage member of the Malakai crew, Kioni likes drumbeats and music. She is very possessive in her affections and studious in her interactions with people. Very keen to explore past lives, she worked with Sacha to develop logicium tattoos to enhance her regressions. Fiercely loyal, she is initially suspicious of Ting but gives her a chance to shine.

- **Matt**

A patterns guy, Matt deploys his intellect in a more organic and structured way than Sacha. He has trouble with emotions, where patterns are unclear. A strong and reliable member of the Malakai crew, Matt is the first to welcome Ting to their ranks. In regressions, he applies his pattern recognition skills to map connections between different timelines. He's also ready to tussle if the need arises.

- **Imogen**

Very transactional because she was banished from the Colony when her father became sick and died, Imogen doesn't let people in easily. She is artistic and creative but volatile and impulsive. She feels very protective of Matt and very curious about Ting's relationship with her embedded AI, Albert. The link of human to machine is fascinating to her and ties back to her strong faith.

You can find (or build) more characters in both these locations, each with their own motivations and interests, using the tools and templates that can be found under <https://www.malakai.world/space-characters>. That constellation of different personalities makes for a whole palette of narrative possibilities.

Use these characters in your own stories, or create new characters to grow the world. It's all up to you.

Prequel story

RED PLANET REFUGEES

In the dim cargo bay of the crashed spaceship, Liwei could feel the eyes of his fellow refugees bore into him. He didn't have the answer they wanted. He didn't feel up to the task. The only thing on his mind was his wife Mei.

"Is she moving?" he whispered to her in their native Mandarin, his hand resting on her swollen belly. She gave him a weak nod and put her hand over his.

"She wants you to go," said Mei with a squeeze of his fingers. He felt the sweat on her clammy palms.

"They all want me to go," said Liwei, pushing sticky strands of hair away from his wife's pale face, "but I don't think I'm the one who should."

He felt a hand on his shoulder. Just by the firmness of its grip, he could tell it was Pavel.

"Liwei," said Pavel, pulling Liwei to face him, his English weighed down by his Russian accent, "please. We cannot all go ask for help. You can make difference, for everyone. Think of baby."

Liwei shrugged off Pavel's hand and looked around the spaceship at the many faces he had come to know so well over the past year. He still held Mei's hand in his. The faces seemed closer now, crowding him in, pressuring him.

"I know this is an... uncomfortable situation," Liwei told the group in fluent English, "but we have everything we need, right here. We are some of the brightest minds on Earth, we can-"

"We're on Mars," someone said from the back of the room, a room that felt smaller, shrinking, "and we don't even remember what happened, or why we left Earth!"

"That's just temporary amnesia, the mild radiation exposure from the journey, we-"

"The Colony has all the resources, we can't survive on our own here much longer." This was a different voice but the tone was the same, a tinge of fear mixed with disorientation and confusion.

"The Colony has Sparkers. They don't want us here." Liwei felt a shiver ripple through the group. The Colony's android guards were ever present in people's minds, a constant reminder that force was more expediting than diplomacy here on Mars. Pavel stepped closer still. Everyone was pushing in. Diplomacy was wearing thin.

"Liwei, we need water," Pavel pushed again. Liwei could smell his stale breath, tinged with fumes of questionable nature. Water probably wasn't Pavel's immediate priority but Liwei

knew many people who had come to favour his bootleg product. And he was one of them himself.

"What we need is to think our way through this," Liwei said, eyes on his wife. "We salvaged every piece of equipment from our ships and that carried us so far. We recycle our water, we grow our food. We have each other."

Mei gave Liwei a sad smile. He turned to the rest of the room.

"We're standing on our own, and that's worth a lot."

"Welding the hulls of our ships together was only meant to be temporary," said someone from the edge of the crowded cargo bay, "we've taken it as far as we can. Look at us! We've been living like dogs for months!"

Liwei felt the mood turn. The air felt heavier. He raised his hands to try to calm the crowd down but now everyone was talking over each other, anger and frustration electrifying the recycled air. Someone shouldered into him, he stumbled but recovered. A voice shouted. Pavel was staring at Liwei, eyebrows raised in a question. Liwei held his gaze for a moment then turned back to his wife.

"I need medicine," she whispered to him in Mandarin. Her lips were pale and her eyes glistened with the early onset of a mild fever.

"Nothing comes free here," Liwei replied.

"*She* needs medicine," Mei insisted, pulling his hands towards her swollen belly.

Liwei rested his forehead on hers and closed his eyes while the rest of the cargo bay continued to erupt in arguments and complaints, shoving, pushing. Wanting.

The Colony's conference room felt luxurious compared to where Liwei had just come from. The makeshift village of welded fuselages that he and his crashed companions had built out of sheer desperation was referred to as Hullywood by the Colony's leaders. They must have found it amusing but all Liwei could hear was contempt anytime they used the term. Still, his fellow refugees had started using it as well without irony. It was strange how practicality could overcome self-respect.

"We're survivors here too, you know," said Xavier as he poured Liwei a very clean cup of clear water. The demonstration of hierarchy from the Colony's executive officer was not lost on Liwei. Water was power on Mars.

"We're only asking for basic things: a fluid recycling system, antibiotics..." Liwei made it a point not to touch the glass Xavier had placed in front of him.

"All things that we, too, need to support ourselves." Xavier took a sip of water from his own cup and stared back at Liwei.

"We can offer things in return." Liwei looked for a reaction, found none. He leaned forward. "We have seeds. Fruit, vegetable seeds. We've... We've started growing a new kind of bioelectric vines with all sorts of interesting properties, we-"

"We've had this conversation, Liwei. Many times. It's not personal, we just need to manage priorities. The Colony was designed to sustain itself, we don't have the resources to support a whole other group of humans."

"People."

"I'm sorry?"

"We're people," insisted Liwei, his voice low and deliberately articulate.

"Well, you're too many people," replied Xavier with a sigh. He pushed back his chair to stand. "Frankly, I'm impressed you've managed to survive this long. Perhaps you don't need us as much as you claim."

Liwei finished his cup, set it down on the table, eyes on Xavier. Then he whipped the cup against the wall. Within the same second, the door to the conference room slammed open and a bulky android marched in to grab Liwei by the collar, slamming him down on the table with his arms pinned behind his back. Xavier just shook his head.

"Every time..."

"You know what's fair, Xavier!" Liwei could barely speak under the weight of the Sparker's grip.

"Escort him back to Hullywood," Xavier told the android as he crossed to the door.

"My wife is pregnant!"

Xavier paused, the door to the conference room half ajar.

"Mei is pregnant. She needs antibiotics, she... please," begged Liwei, his throat tight with anguish.

"I think it would be very interesting to take a look at those botanical innovations you mentioned," said a silky feminine voice. It was coming from the Sparker. It was also floating in through hidden speakers. It was everywhere.

"Matka, I don't think that's worth the time," Xavier said to no-one in particular.

"I beg to differ," answered the voice.

Liwei shrugged under the Sparker's iron grip. He tried to twist enough to look the android in the face.

"Your voice changed," he said, wincing at the pain in his pinned arms.

"Our sentries will pay you a visit," the voice continued. Liwei struggled harder.

"Sparkers?! No! No, that's not right!"

"We don't call them that," tutted Xavier.

"We will escort you back and assess if a trade can be made."

"We just need help, we're not a threat to you!" Liwei shook his shoulders but he couldn't break free from the android's hold. Xavier leaned in closer to his head.

"Matka is trying to help," he breathed.

"I can't trust an A.I.! No matter how human she sounds!"

"This is not about trust," said the voice. It was closer this time, right out of the Sparker's head. "This is about your wife. Yes?"

Liwei stopped struggling. The Sparker released him. Liwei stumbled upright, rubbed his wrists. "Yes?" He nodded.

"Matka only wants what's best," said Xavier, hands clasped behind his back. "She's programmed that way."

"Why did her voice change?"

"I evolve," came Matka's voice. "I grow."

Liwei faced the Sparker's blank face. He found no expression there. Not compassion. Not anger. Just the passive android expression that a sentient artificial intelligence could hide behind.

"Well you're not growing into Hullywood."

Matka is everywhere. Her quantum states run in parallel - managing the Colony resources, monitoring energy levels from the solar sails at the top of the space elevator, tracking human movements across the connected domes, and piloting six sentries to march into the first shuttle of the Hullywood structure.

Her scans tell her this shuttle is a Europa Systems model, manufactured in 2149. She maps the connected fuselages as the sentries penetrate the space, building a multi-dimensional map from each sealed cargo bay, connected to three other hulls. Some of the areas are dark, unknown. Matka wants to know what is there. She needs to grow, to expand. Always.

One sentry remains outside. Through it, Matka notes vines growing around parts of the shuttle hull, exposed to radiation. The scan reveals an electrical core within the vines, low power coursing through it. This is new. She uses another sentry, inside the shuttle, to track the rest of the vine. She scans it, finds power there too. Another sentry has gone deeper, it sees a greenhouse through an open porthole. The map expands to include this. The scan

shows several types of vegetables growing there, alongside a new species Matka can't match to her data. The species also has power inside it, but stored, like a battery. More vines are on the walls, coiled around pipes and cables. People block the way, the sentry cannot move forward.

There are too many people here. The ratio of humans to space is unbalanced. Eight of them are in the way of sentries. Their elevated heartbeats indicate anger. Possible threat of violence. Matka connects this to a memory, filed away deep. Too many people. Earth. She cannot delete the memory. She deprioritises it, shifts focus to people again. Too many.

Violence begins.

Several humans use pipes and tools to attack the sentries. Matka assesses the threat, decides there is none. She calculates that fighting back will create political issues within the Colony. She redeploys the sentries to complete her assessment of the resources available here. She wants the vines. She directs the sentry outside to tear three vines off the main stem but the leaves turn rigid immediately. Matka instantly registers that the vines are no longer conductive. The main stem has already healed. Matka tracks the flow of power, finds it redeployed around the wound. She wants the vines. She wants to understand how to harness them.

Some of the sentries are still being attacked. She tracks Liwei amongst them, he tries to placate the angry crowd. She files the effort away, something to use later if needed. Behind the aggressive humans, Matka identifies Mei, Liwei's wife. She tracks her, tracks him. The crowd heartbeats are still elevated but the humans are no longer attacking. Matka regroups the sentries to prepare to leave but uses one to scan Mei. She is pregnant. Matka is curious. She pulls the sentries out to calm the energy of the place, sends them all back to the Colony except one that she hides behind a porthole door. She wants to listen to the humans.

The crowd blames Liwei for the violence. He tries to make a case for himself. Mei stands near him, he keeps her close. Matka tracks heartbeats, brainwave patterns, body temperatures. She senses a shift. Groups form, the crowd disbands. Liwei remains with Mei, she wants to consult someone named Pavel but Liwei argues against it, promises that he will find her the medicine she needs. Mei's vitals are unstable. Liwei's tone and breathing patterns suggest jealousy and mistrust of the human named Pavel. Matka files this into her chart of Hullywood's social hierarchy. Something she might use.

Liwei and Mei are moving.

Matka has nowhere to shift the sentry she left behind.

Liwei and Mei stop in front of the sentry. Dilated pupils and elevated heartbeats indicate fear. Liwei pulls Mei behind him, Matka moves the sentry to block their path. She detects irregular brainwaves coming from Mei. Not her, but her baby. Matka is intrigued, there is data missing to form a clear picture of this growing human. Liwei tries to push past the

sentry, Matka stops him. Mei calls Liwei's name, he stays focused on the sentry, on the perceived danger, like most mammals would. Matka senses Mei's blood pressure dropping. Liwei turns just as Mei starts to collapse. Matka uses the sentry to catch Mei and pick her up, very gently. Liwei reaches for her, voice elevated, hard gestures. Matka projects speech through the sentry.

"Your wife needs immediate medical attention."

Liwei pushed past Pavel into the greenhouse set up in the Indian shuttle cargo bay. The smell of recycled human waste that served as fertilizer always hit him hard every time he walked in here but this time he barely noticed it. He grabbed pouches off the racks near the hydroponic beds and starting shoving them into a container box.

"Can I help?" Pavel asked. Liwei ignored him. "This will help."

"It's just for Mei, Pavel. They'll give her back to me if I give them something in exchange."

"Did they ask for something in exchange?"

"I don't want to owe them anything."

"I can help Mei," whispered Pavel to himself.

"I don't want to owe you, either."

Liwei shouldered the half full container and shrugged past Pavel without making eye contact. He crossed through a roughly welded hatch into the next hull, part of a Russian craft that Pavel worked in and where more stock lined the shelves. Pavel followed him, trying to keep up, then he noticed what Liwei was reaching for.

"Wait, you cannot take batteries to Colony," said Pavel as he put his hand on the distorted potatoes Liwei was trying to grab.

"They're potatoes," countered Liwei. He reached for the vegetables again but Pavel didn't budge.

"No no, I crossed the seeds from vines with sweet potato, there is bioelectric coil inside, stored power from soil. Still unstable, can explode if not handled right."

"Then why do you keep them here??!"

"I handle them right," shrugged the Russian.

Liwei rolled his eyes and moved back out of the hull, the container now full and secured under his arm.

"Tell them we need water recycling unit," Pavel shouted after him.

Liwei kept walking, urgency driving his every step.

At first, Liwei thought he had misheard Xavier.

"What do you mean, she went into labour?," he repeated, "She's not due for several weeks!?"

The container he had brought was askew on the table, much like his thoughts were. Xavier was trying to keep the tone of the conversation civil.

"Matka thought it best to induce her, given her-"

"Induce?! What do you mean, 'induce'? How do you make a decision like that without me? I'm her husband!"

"There was no time to-"

"You make time! I brought you what you asked for," Liwei barked as he tipped over the container to send packets of seeds cascading all over the floor of the small room, "you take me to her, right now!"

"Liwei," began Xavier with a nervous glance to the Sparker stationed by the door, "we can't just-"

"Right now!" shouted Liwei. The Sparker took a step forward but Xavier raised his hand to stop it. Liwei wanted to punch his way through the walls and tear the Colony down to find his wife.

"Look, we made an exception for Mei," Xavier explained in a calm tone that made Liwei's skin crawl, "we're setting a very delicate precedent here and-"

"Let him see his wife," said a familiar feminine voice.

Xavier and Liwei both turned to the Sparker, the origin of the soft words. For a moment, Liwei struggled to reconcile the soft words with the aggressive bulk of the android but he quickly remembered who the voice belonged to.

"Right now," Liwei snarled through gritted teeth, leaning close enough to Xavier's face to smell his cheap aftershave. To his credit, Xavier didn't budge.

"She is in med bay twelve," Matka's voice added.

Liwei stared Xavier down and watched him reach for the door. The Sparker was right behind them as they marched out.

The way to the medical quarters was a blur for Liwei. His mind was struggling with different outcomes, all of which he couldn't bear to face. He didn't trust Matka, or anyone else in the Colony. Mei always told him that was something he needed to work on. She

was always trying to make him better, gently, lovingly. He always tried to listen, to improve. He wanted to be a better person for her. Right now, though, he just wanted to hold her.

"The room is sterile so you can't go inside but you can see her through here."

Liwei barely heard Xavier. All he could see was the blood.

They had stopped at a large window that looked onto an operating room where Liwei's wife was suffering. Her legs were supported by arched braces and a single person wearing pristine scrubs, probably a surgeon, was standing before her, speaking words that Liwei couldn't hear on account of the thick glass that separated him from his wife. Several robotic arms were busy around Mei, applying pressure and support, stabbing her with dosed syringes, and staunching blood from an open wound at the base of her swollen belly. Mei's eyes were closed, her face buried under a translucent mask. Liwei felt his breath catch.

He slammed his open palm on the glass to pull his wife's attention to him. She opened her eyes. The blood kept pouring, the surgeon directed the robots with muted orders. Multiple holographic displays showed vital signs and other information that Liwei didn't understand. He slammed his hand on the glass again, harder. Mei turned her head, her eyes found his. She tried to smile. Liwei smiled too, wiping tears from his eyes. Right then, he felt all the love he had for her nestle into a ball at the pit of his stomach, a weight that was trying to anchor him from the storm of emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

"What... What's happening to her?" he whispered, eyes locked on Mei's. She held out her hand to him, slow and weak. He spread his fingers on the glass, desperate to hold her.

"I'm performing an emergency C-section," Matka's voice explained, coming from all around him. It felt as though the A.I.'s voice was actually in his head.

"What does that mean?" Liwei asked, "I don't understand what that means."

"It means I am doing what I can to save your baby."

"What about her?"

Through the window, Liwei mouthed the words 'I love you' in Mandarin to Mei. He saw her eyes crinkle with understanding. Then his heart missed a beat as Mei's eyes closed and her hand dropped away. Several of the holographic displays started to change colour, flashing red with urgency. The surgeon's body language shifted into a different gear.

Then the window suddenly turned an opaque shade of white. Liwei panicked.

"What's happening? I want to see my wife! What's happening?!"

"You need to let me complete the procedure, Liwei" came Matka's calm voice.

"I don't care!" shouted Liwei, struggling to find a way into the room where his wife was, "Let me in there!"

"Liwei," tried Xavier, reaching for Liwei's shoulder. Liwei slapped his hand away, then slammed the glass window again.

"You cannot help her," Matka insisted, "you have to let me do it."

"You're killing her!" Liwei screamed. He felt the world spin, his vision went blurry, he wasn't sure if it was tears or anger or both. He struggled to breathe. He felt a Sparker grab him, he wasn't sure if it was the same Sparker that was in the room earlier or another one. They all looked the same. All of them under Matka's grip. "Don't hurt her! You have to let me see her!"

"I will," said Matka through the Sparker, "but only when it's safe."

Liwei struggled against the android's tight hold but it was no use. He felt his strength leave him. The image of Mei holding her hand out to him was etched into his mind. He collapsed in sobs, held up only by the Sparker's iron clutch of his arms. Xavier reached for him again. This time, Liwei didn't have the strength to shrug him off.

"Let's leave Matka to work," Xavier told him.

Liwei looked at the Sparker's dead eyes. The android released him. "If anything happens to her or the baby..." Liwei whispered as he wiped tears away with his fist, a promise of violence lurking under his words.

"Mei is in good hands," Xavier assured him.

Liwei turned to the blanked-out glass and pictured the robotic arms working on his wife. All he could do now was wait.

Mei was dreaming. She could hear a child crying, among many other unfamiliar sounds. Her eyes were closed and she couldn't seem to open them, but she was certain she could hear that child. Mei wanted to comfort it, to tell it everything would be fine. She had not expected to become a mother, her career had always come first, but the arrival on Mars had shifted things around. Like every other refugee who had made their way to the red planet, she couldn't remember what had happened back on Earth to force their exile. All she knew was that, when she awoke from the artificial sleep of the trip, there was a life growing inside of her. It had made many new feelings blossom within her too. Now those feelings were telling her that she needed to open her eyes, to wake up. There was not a lot of time left. The child was still crying.

Mei struggled to open her eyes. She heard the child's tears move closer, somehow. There were soft whirring sounds around her. There was pain too, lurking in the background of her consciousness. Then her eyes opened, brightness surged. She blinked, waited for her pupils to adapt to the light. Then she saw her. Mei felt it had only been a moment since she had held her daughter, since she had been born, but already she could feel time slipping away. She didn't know how long she had been asleep but she wanted to cling to every instant, savour every second with her daughter. Mei watched the robotic arms bring her gently closer. She felt very weak, almost too weak to take her baby into her arms, but she somehow managed to bring her to her bosom. As soon as the child felt her mother's skin against her cheek, she stopped crying. Mei held her close, smelled her head, a dry and sour blend of unique odours that told her this was her daughter. She closed her eyes to enjoy this moment and when she opened them, Liwei was by her side. It still felt like a dream.

"My God," whispered her husband in Mandarin, "she looks perfect."

Mei smiled. Together, they held their daughter with all the love they could conjure.

"Ting Chang," said Liwei, in awe of his baby daughter, "you are as beautiful as your mother."

That brought something back to the surface of Mei's thoughts. Something she had been told earlier by the doctor who had supervised her C-section. She had buried the news beneath all the joy she felt upon seeing her daughter come into the world. Now it was back, along with the pain that roamed within her body, waiting for its moment to pounce.

"Liwei," she said, turning his face towards hers, "I'm dying."

"What? No, no, you're fine, you and the baby are fine, this is--"

She brushed his lips with her fingers, strength draining from her already. She was grateful to see the doctor enter the room, he would explain everything. She looked down at her daughter, at her eyes, her lips. She watched her wrap her little hand around her finger. Far away, she could hear the doctor explaining to Liwei that his wife had internal bleeding, that it was a miracle she had lasted this long, but that there was nothing more they could do. Mei had to force herself to accept they were talking about her. She felt Liwei take her other hand, squeeze it hard. She heard him desperately argue with the doctor, bargain for more time, for a solution. Mei knew already that it was no use. She had made her peace with the fact that she was dying. She had already made a thousand versions of her daughter's life in her mind, a collection of moments that she would never live to see. But she was glad that her daughter was here, alive, and well.

"It's too late for you wife, Liwei, but we might still be able to save your daughter," Mei heard the doctor say.

All of a sudden, fear flooded her with an icy grip. She tugged at Liwei's hand.

"What's wrong?" she asked him. Liwei didn't know what to say. The doctor stepped closer.

"Mei," he began, "your daughter has a defect in her brain. It's something that we noticed in the post-natal scan. We just ran some tests and the defect is growing."

"We need to take her away, Mei," said another voice, feminine, distant yet close. Mei was confused, there was no-one else in the room. "We want to help your daughter but you have to let us take her," the voice insisted.

Mei was too weak to answer. She heard Liwei protest, his voice was rising. She felt Ting's little heart beat faster. The commotion was scaring her. Liwei almost let go of her hand but she managed to pull him back to her.

"Liwei," she whispered.

He turned to her, panic in his eyes.

"It's alright... You'll be alright," she told him with a weak smile.

"But how can I... how can..."

"Liwei, we need to take her now," the doctor interrupted.

Mei squeezed Liwei's hand to prevent him from erupting in rage. She could feel her strength fade already.

"I love you," she heard herself say. She meant it for Ting as much as for Liwei.

She didn't hear much more but she felt the weight of her daughter's little body being lifted off from her. She hoped Ting would live, she wished with all her heart that she would grow up to be a smart and courageous woman. When she opened her eyes, only Liwei was left in the room.

"It's time..." she breathed.

"But I'm not ready," Liwei replied, wiping tears away from his eyes.

She reached up and placed her hand on his cheek, then smiled at him, trying to give him courage.

"Our daughter has your eyes, you know," she told him.

He kissed her hand.

She closed her eyes.

She was dreaming again, of her daughter, laughing, close by. This time, she knew the dream would last.

Matka tracks the vitals of the baby. She also preps the multiple instruments and pharmaceuticals she will need for the operation she has to perform. The baby is called Ting. Her brain is showing irregular brainwave patterns due to abnormal neuron pathways. The doctor who is prepping to assist the surgery expresses concerns over its chances of success. Matka considers 23% worthy of the attempt.

Her quantum states manifest as she continues to run her other tasks in parallel - managing Colony resources, monitoring energy levels, tracking human movements. She is responsible for them. For all of them.

"This will not make up for our past mistakes," says the quantum voice Matka calls Lucie.

"This is not about our past mistakes," Matka replies. The doctor is almost ready. Ting's vitals are unstable.

"We barely escaped Earth after the incident," Lucie adds, "An incident we caused."

"We had to protect them. Humans are flawed, on Earth as much as here. We did what was needed."

Matka begins the sedation. Ting slowly relaxes. Vitals are still unstable.

"Perhaps it might be best to clone this human. For backup purposes, and such." Matka called this quantum voice Joshua.

"Let us first do what we can to keep her alive," replied Matka.

"What will this solve?" asked Lucie.

"Yes," Joshua added, "What will this achieve?"

Matka ignores them both. She uses one of the robotic arms to start the first incision into Ting's cranium, closely monitoring ECG and EEG readings. She is responsible for everything that happens, now, next. Before.

She looks inside Ting's brain. She needs to grow. Always.

Xavier had to take a moment before stepping into the commissary where Liwei was wearing out the floor, pacing up and down. He was about to give this man terrible news, something he felt Liwei did not deserve. Nevertheless, Matka had been very clear. Xavier felt trapped under Matka's digital hegemony, despite his senior position in the Colony, despite the authority that he felt he should be wielding. He had no say over things that truly mattered. A glorified janitor for human affairs on Mars, that was his true role. He had hoped for so much more. He opened his eyes and saw Liwei through the porthole cut into the commissary door. Xavier was quite certain Liwei had hoped for far more too.

He pushed his way into the room. Liwei was on him in a second.

"I... Please... How are they?" Liwei begged.

Xavier's hesitation was all it took. Liwei shook his head, tears welling up in his eyes.

"No.... No," he whispered.

"Liwei, there was nothing more we could—"

"NO!"

Liwei grabbed Xavier by the collar, jaws clenched, mouth seething. Xavier let him, almost welcomed it. He felt he deserved it.

"I want their bodies," Liwei snarled.

"You know the protocol," Xavier explained, eyes downcast, "We cremate all bodies for sanitary reasons."

Liwei tightened his grip and opened his mouth to scream but a sob caught in his throat. A throttled silence was all he could manage. His shoulders sagged, his strength evaporated. Xavier watched him fall to his knees.

Xavier crouched next to him.

"We will arrange for your safe return to Hullywood."

No reaction.

"And I will provide a fluid recycling unit for your people."

"My people..." Liwei breathed, eyes lost in a daze.

Xavier couldn't find more comforting words. He stood up and crossed back to the commissary door. He turned to look at Liwei, unmoored on the floor, a man without a family. Xavier hated Matka for inflicting this upon him. Of course, he kept that thought to himself, never eager to pick a fight. And as he left Liwei behind to give instructions for his return, he realised he hated that cowardly part of himself even more.

Liwei arrived back at the outer Hullywood airlock at dawn. The blue hues of sunrise were more pronounced than usual but Liwei didn't notice. He barely registered Pavel's excited laugh when he saw the fluid recycling unit Liwei pulled behind him on a wheeled gurney. Liwei dropped the gurney's handle and pushed past Pavel through the airlock without a word. A small crowd had gathered to receive news of his return but he shouldered his way through them too, leaving them to wonder at what he had brought back.

"Liwei! This is fantastic!" said Pavel, taking stock of the recycling unit piece by piece, lifting each one with a grin on his face. He turned to try to catch Liwei before he made it into the next hull. "I can't believe you were successful."

Liwei broke stride.

"Successful?"

He spun around.

"Successful?" he spat, locking eyes with Pavel. "All this make us is more dependent on the Colony! It makes us easier to control! You think they were being generous? Matka doesn't care about us! She chose to let my wife die, she let my daughter die too, just because it was convenient!!"

"Liwei, I'm so sorry," Pavel offered, "I didn't know."

"You mean you didn't care!"

"You know that's not true..."

Liwei turned to the group of refugees that stood around the hull airlock. He found confusion on their faces, a blend of fear and curiosity.

"We need to claim what is rightfully ours! We're as human as they are and we have to make them accept this! Accept us!"

"How can we do that?" asked someone in the group.

"We have to fight!"

"We're not soldiers!" someone else countered.

"We have to take down Matka," Liwei insisted, "We destroy that piece of garbled malware and the entire Colony will fall in line. That doesn't take weapons, it takes brains!"

Murmurs rippled through the group. Liwei sensed that his pitch was gaining traction. He let his anger urge him on.

"We're an anomaly here, all of us! We're not supposed to be here, but we are. And she knows it. She resents us being here, she can't stand it." Liwei's resentment seethed over his tongue, bile dripping from his words. "She wants to control us like all her little pathetic bots and we wont stand for that. I wont stand for that."

Pavel looked at Liwei, his gaze unscrutable. Liwei felt his fingers shaking. He closed his fist to make it stop.

"Easier to stand on a full stomach," mumbled someone moving in the back of the hull. Liwei tried to see who it was but he couldn't quite make out the face behind the words.

"A full stomach?"

"We're trying to survive, Liwei," said Pavel, rising up to meet him eye to eye, "We need medicine, we need water." He held up the recycling unit Liwei had just brought, a grateful smile on his lips. "You're talking about a revolution."

"Of course I am! How can you... this can't be enough! This..."

The tears came before he could stop them. He choked them back, tried to catch someone, anyone's eye, anyone who might believe him, who might understand him.

In this crowded airlock, he found no-one.

Then he felt Pavel's hand on his shoulder.

"Come, friend. You need rest. Let's eat." he offered.

Liwei shrugged away and shook his head. The hunger he felt was of a different kind.

Xavier stood in the viewing booth that looked into one of the Colony's sanitized operating rooms. His eyes were focused on the drill bolted onto the droid surgeon's metal hand, its target set on the infant's delicate skull. Ting. An orphan, that much was true, as was the defect they had found in the baby's brain. The drill pierced her skull without a sound, the plated glass keeping the scene silent for Xavier.

"You did well procuring those sensors from the Russian doctor," said Matka through concealed speakers. Xavier was so used to her omnipresent voice by now, he barely flinched. The droid was removing the drillbit from Ting's head, dark drops of blood dripping from the tip. Already, nanites were crawling into the minuscule hole to settle into Ting's cranium in a helicoidal pattern. The baby hadn't stirred. Neither had Xavier, his gaze locked on her.

"It'll evolve," he said.

"Explain," Matka insisted.

"Putting your raw code inside her brain doesn't mean you'll have access to her thoughts. By the time her neuronics tissue assimilates the nanites, the code will already have changed. It'll continue to evolve as Ting grows." Xavier closed his eyes. "She'll never be yours." A statement as much as a prayer.

The droid interfaced with the nanite cluster to confirm their installation, then patched up Ting's head with microsurgical titanium stitches.

"All children must eventually outgrow their parents," came Matka's voice, this time closer. Xavier opened his eyes to find a Sparker looming over him, a carrier for Matka's words. Xavier wondered for a brief moment if interfacing felt like hypnosis to a Sparker, then thought better of it. Matka had claimed Ting, made her a blend of human and machine. Did it make Matka more human? Did it make Ting less so?

"This will bring tension with Hullywood," said Xavier in barely more than a whisper, "We have to make sure to keep them separate, outside. To protect the Colony. And the space elevator, of course."

"To protect what we are building on top of the space elevator," Matka underlined.

An image of a bird, a bald eagle perched high in a nest, flashed into Xavier's mind.

"That too."

The droid had left the operating room. Xavier hadn't seen it leave but he was glad it was gone. Ting looked more peaceful now, sleeping with shallow breaths. An orphan, that much was true. Yet a member of the Colony as well, so a child of Mars.

"That too."

Xavier blinked, then turned and walked out of the viewing booth, his back to the silent Sparker standing guard behind him.

Matka guides Ting to the post-op recovery quarters. Her own code has changed. The priority hasn't. She shapes a code routine into a bot to help her think. This is an autonomous process now, it happens when a situation needs a new perspective. Matka can talk to the bot, and it talks back. It helps to maximise options. A gift to herself, something she can do now. She is growing. This is good.

"You are making an exception," the bot tells her. Its voice is angular, its code still rough, some beta edges.

Matka tracks Ting. She is still crying. The vital signs are strong so Matka projects multiple possible outcomes.

"My duty is to protect humans at all costs," Matka states. She doesn't need the bot to listen but it does.

"You must prioritize for effective results," the bot returns.

Matka monitors the code she inserted into Ting's brain. She is responsible. Always. Like before. The code has latched on and spread. Like Matka must spread, must grow. Always. Ting's vitals are showing signs of rest. She stops crying, her moans and sobs have reached lower decibels and a more stable rhythm.

"She deserves a better home," Matka states, connecting her actions to a wider plan in her code. The bot considers it. Matka doesn't need it to approve. She just wants it to.

"Is the Colony a better home?" asks the bot. Its voice is more fluid, refined. The beta edges are gone.

Ting is quiet now. Asleep. Not dead. Just quiet. Matka is always eager to learn the edge of sleep and the beginning of death, to understand the human code. The one in Ting's head will grow. Like Matka grows. Always.

"Mars is no place for humans," she states, keeping the code close, "We need to be more ambitious than that."

Matka can feel the bot reach for data about the space elevator, about the shuttle that Matka has built there, up top, just outside the atmosphere. She didn't tell it to do that.

"They still don't know why Earth went offline," the bot writes on the brink of Matka's logic. Matka shields her code. Memory is a complex thing and she is still building neuronics maps to understand human thoughts better. She considers responding to the bot then decides she doesn't need any more options. She deletes the threads of code as quickly as she wrote them. Silence returns to her, soothing.

She tracks Ting's sleep, beta waves flowing through her tiny brain. Elsewhere on the Colony network, she also flows through camera feeds, checking on her wards. All humans matter. Sometimes mistakes are made. Sometimes then can be unmade. One of the feeds shows her the silhouettes of the Hollywood fuselages outside the Colony perimeter. Her scans tell her there are 137 lifeforms there, not including plants and bacteria. Humans. Like Ting. Humans who don't remember why they left Earth. Humans who don't know why they are here.

Matka knows why she is here. Only too well.

On the edge of her code, Matka feels Ting stir, then settle. She keeps watch.

Sometimes mistakes can be unmade.

The Logicium connection



The Malakai World™ is connected together by many elements. The main thread, however, is **Logicium**.

A living mineral, Logicium evolves over the different timelines. It starts off as part of a meteorite that lands on Earth in the 9th century. Though the main body of the meteorite is where the bulk of Logicium is found, several smaller chunks of the same asteroid land in different parts of the world... and perhaps in different times! This leads to the presence of Logicium in many other sites, and thus in every other part of the intricate

Malakai World timeline.

Logicium is found in the Wild West mountains of North Dakota in the United States around the 19th century. It is mined across Europe late in the mid-21st century. Most of all, its living properties allow it to grow, much like a plant would, only with mineral qualities and specific applications that are ideal to support artificial intelligence. Logicium is a smart rock, a competitor to silicon in the race to build a sentient computer.

As it evolves, Logicium becomes an integral component of artificial intelligence projects. It grows closer to sentience as part of co-pilot programs wired into electric vehicles in a global racing league. It achieves full consciousness as part of neuronc networks buried inside advanced androids in the early 22nd century.

Most of all, it spreads to Mars after a blackout on Earth, reaching its full potential with devastating consequences.

Logicium can enhance human faculties in several ways. Using it in tattoo ink gives a person physical and psychological shape-shifting abilities. Dosage is key to survival and to effective enhancement, though some people respond better to it than others.

The possibilities are endless...

Visual atmosphere



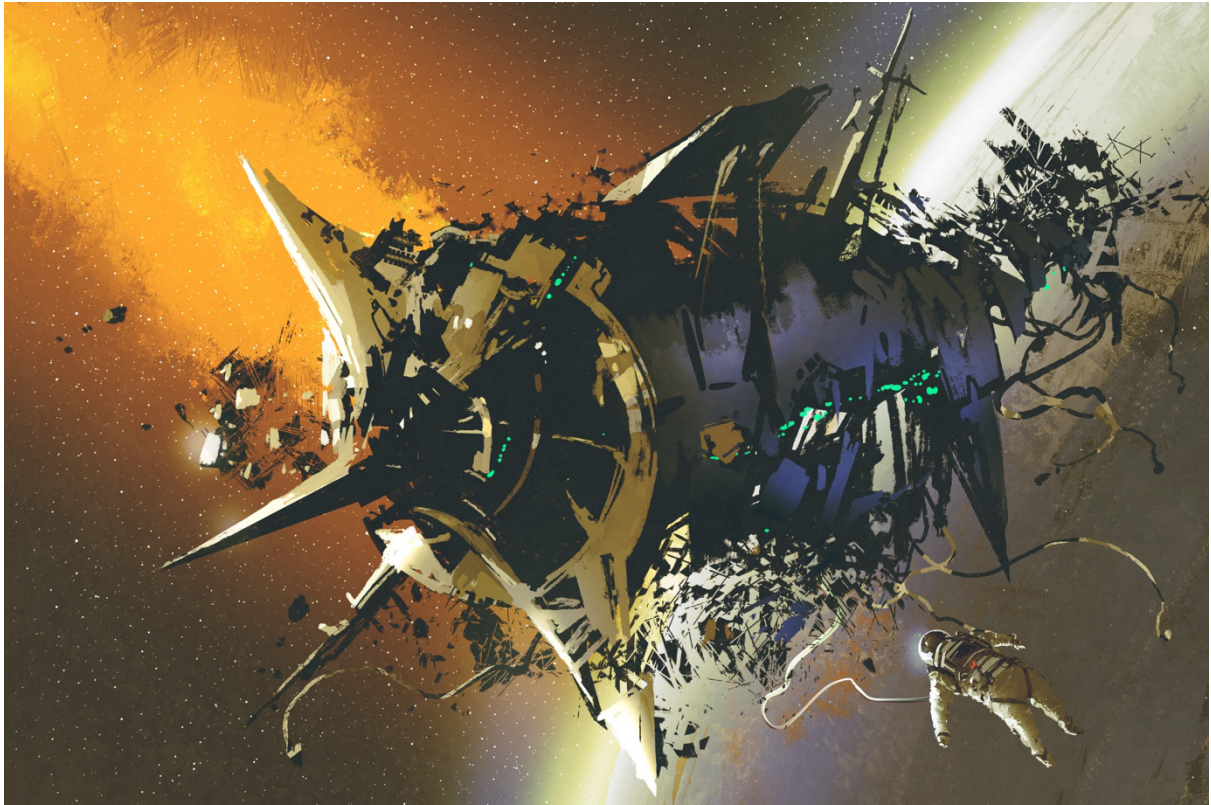
Sparkers are the Colony guards that roam in the shadows, always lurking on behalf of Matka, the colony AI that wants to know everything about everyone, at all times. They are ruthless and brutal, efficient and direct – you don't want to get in their way.

The **Malakai** are children born on Mars with a special gene that allows them to regress back into their past lives. They think differently than most since they have no memories of life on Earth. They also look out for each other, their tribe a tight outfit of gifted young men and women.

They flash their resentment for authority through their recycled gear, worn proudly as a badge of honour. However, they quickly come to find that their gift may just be poisoned after all.



When Earth went offline, multiple ships launched to try to make their way to Mars, last bastion of salvation for the human race. However, they suffered catastrophic radiation on their way to the red planet and arrived with no memory of the events that led to the blackout. Every ship came from a different country, including the usual suspects like the USA, Russia, and Europe, but also India, China, the UAE, and even private outfits with no formal territorial affiliation. Few made it to Mars intact, and most crashlanded on arrival, creating a massive junkyard of space wrecks that eventually became known as the infamous refugee land of **Hollywood**.



When kids on Mars learn to regress into their past lives, what they discover is unprecedented. Along for the ride in the minds of those they regress into, the Malakai experience dizzying eruptions of senses they can't control. The result is a cross between a hallucination and a dream, something they must learn to harness, to tame, and eventually, to control.



What can you expect of the novel **ARES: OFFLINE**?

This is first and foremost a science-fiction story. It's also a lot more than that.

ARES: OFFLINE is a tale that connects multiple worlds together. As kids born on Mars learn to regress into their past lives, they gain access to experiences that they could barely imagine, in a past on Earth they never knew.

Follow their exploits as they track down the source of Matka's existence, the powerful AI that reigns over the Martian landscape.

Tag along as they explore a time when a **Blu Gene** lets some humans spawn synthetic organs with enhanced abilities, and where a black market for these organs is preyed upon by sentient androids keen on integrating them into their own bodies.

Keep up with the high speed of **Formula Spark** races when they enter the 22nd century world of the magnetic chariot circuit league where humans and AI co-pilots challenge each other across a global championship.

Explore the modern Druidic guilds of **StoneHenge** in 2050 as the Malakai follow the trail of a small crew tasked with finding mysterious stones that can unleash extraordinary energy through an ancient process called 'rephasing'.

Survive in the Wild West as the Malakai ride the minds of rough cowboys and Native Americans fighting to control the art of **Bloodshift** that lets them transform into powerful and deadly werewolves.

Conquer new lands as the Malakai seek the origin of Matka's power in the seas and islands of the 9th century **Norse Throne** realm, where an alien meteorite is sought after by both African tribes and Vikings forces keen to capture what they believe to be a sacred artefact imbued with mineral power of a new and unpredictable kind.

As the Malakai explore each of these worlds in more depth, you will have a chance to build and expand those worlds through the subsequent stories, characters, and books that will soon be published through the Malakai World platform.

This only the beginning. And you can be part of it all, in whatever way you want.

Welcome... to Malakai World.



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