11,000 METERS ABOVE THE BLACK SEA. 23:00 LOCAL TIME

Rick sat in the cockpit's pilot seat, biting his lip as he stared out into the darkness outside the window. He was brought out of his reverie by the words of Amelia, the first pilot-bot.

'You're nervous.'

'What? Yeah… Of course I am… Tomorrow's a big day.'

'We both know what's really stressing you is happening in two hours, not tomorrow. Share your speech file with me, and we'll go over it together.'

'Okay, I'll share the file.'

A few seconds later, Amelia responded.

'Was this written by your bot assistant?'

'Can you feel his style so much?'

'Definitely, it is so polite and correct.'

'What would you change?'

'You'll be addressing a diverse audience, but the core group is Shanghai Stoxx businesses. They're a tight-knit circle, and were reluctant to let you into their backyard.'

'Yes, but I think that's mainly because the Wang family has a stake in our holding company. They weren't the only ones who had doubts… Convincing Ava took me six months.'

'Demonstrate that you appreciate their consent and consider it a great honor and commitment. Express understanding for their concerns and don't avoid controversies. Go out of your way to meet them. Sky Umbrella is a solid name, better than Grand Kite. It is associated with protection, while kite is ephemeral and uncertain, although it is deeply rooted in Chinese culture.'

'The Wangs insisted on Grand Kite. Apparently, kites were invented in China. I also prefer the name Sky Umbrella.'

'In ancient China, umbrellas symbolized dignity, so the name

has positive cultural connotations. And going back to the speech, I would add personal touches. Emphasize the business benefits for Shanghai Stoxx and the economic and environmental perks for the city and the province. This will reinforce the message of the local politicians. I would use more of the phrases "mutual benefit", "healthy competition", "development stimulation", "win-win", "safe technologies", "sustainable development", "technological balance". These are clichés, and yet they still resonate with you—humans.'

'You are a great pilot, but also a psychologist and diplomat, Amelia.'

'Contrary to what you think, you humans are very schematic.'

'I need your cool assessment right now.'

'Do you want me to rewrite some paragraphs?'

'I had something else in mind, but yes, please.'

A minute later, Amelia spoke again.

'Done. The changes I made are highlighted in blue.'

Rick opened the file with his speech for the Umbrella inauguration, displayed in augmented reality mode.

'As you perhaps know, SunCo. was founded by my late father. He came from Bombay and started his business there. He used to say…

… Many ask why we need FV farms when we have fusion reactor power. True, we have it, and their efficiency is unmatched. We know how much we owe to them. But we also know the costs of building and maintaining tokamaks, and how much corporations charge for fusion energy. They control prices because they hold monopolies in many markets. We are going to challenge these monopolies…

… The money saved by installing the Umbrella can be redirected to higher basic income payments for the citizens of Shanghai and the province…

… The Sky Umbrella aligns with the 3E principles: Economical, Ecological, and Efficient. It means cheaper, cleaner energy

and stable access to both conventional and quantum internet for thousands of businesses and millions of residents in Shanghai and the Central Coast Province. Today, we are launching the first hexagons, with more to come, eventually covering nearly twenty percent of the province with the distributed dome. Ultimately, the Umbrella will reduce harmful UV exposure, improving health and boosting agricultural productivity…

… The Great Umbrella marks the beginning of WISE Holding's partnership with Shanghai Stoxx companies and the Central Coast Provincial Government. Future segments of the distributed Dome will involve local businesses, creating jobs and income for the community…'

He paused and sighed. Blocking his biochip's access to external networks, he left telepathy and access to the Cooee's local network active.

'Better. Thank you, Amy. I've just disconnected my BNI chip from the external networks, but before we begin, re-estimate Plan A and Plan B for the next few hours.'

'This is pointless because no parameters have changed. I still lack sufficient data to make a reliable analysis.'

'I insist.' Archee nodded. His gaze drifted into the darkness outside the cockpit.

'I estimate the probability that they will all agree immediately and voluntarily at sixty-three percent.'

'A simple refusal will be too obvious. They are intelligent people.'

'Agreed. If there's a saboteur, he won't reject immediately. He'll raise doubts or wait for someone else to object for personal reasons.'

'So far… I assume it's because of someone's carelessness.'

'That hardly changes the initial reaction. If the culprit is aware of his mistake, he will also resist. Do you know a manager who wants to be seen as unprofessional or untrustworthy? I estimate the probability of two people refusing at seventy-five percent. I'm

thinking of Ti Lee and Lahar. A lot depends on the flow of the conversation and the way in which you conduct it. The odds increase if you participate in the verification.'

'Who will agree if I participate? Give percentages and variables for their profiles.'

'I think only Meg will agree outright, but you can't take that for granted. Her attitude, on the other hand, may influence the decisions of the others, at least Steve and Lahar. If you prepare her in advance, I estimate the probability of Meg's unconditional approval at eighty-two percent. If you announce your participation, the probability of her consent increases to ninety-one percent. Meg's consent boosts the probability of Lahar's consent from fifty-eight to sixty-seven percent.'

'Ti Lee is a bigger puzzle. Will he refuse?'

'He will hesitate. On his part, I foresee the most resistance at the beginning. My guess is that his first reaction will be rejection. Without your participation, the chances of his agreeing are fifty percent; with your participation, sixty-nine percent, if Meg supports you.'

'And Steve?'

'He has the most to lose, but he is the least obvious. If he is innocent, his immediate approval is likely to be sixty-eight percent without your participation and eighty percent with your participation. But in his case, I allow for the most variables and unknowns. Estimating his behavioral profile involves many assumptions and a large margin of error. He often uses sarcasm to obscure his thoughts or test the waters. His first reaction will be crucial. I will be able to tell more from his body language during the conversation with you. This applies to everyone, by the way. Stay in touch and follow my cues.'

'Plan B?'

'Over ninety-eight percent effective as long as you test everyone.'

'And without those who agree voluntarily?'

‘I advise against that solution. It could just be someone's delaying tactics. I have too little data to exclude volunteers. If at least one person does not agree, the real culprit will be in a comfortable position without the need for confrontation. Faced with the firm refusal of even one person, I suggest we move immediately to the Plan B.’

‘I’m still hesitating.’

‘We have two hours only. One hour for the Plan A and another hour for the Plan B. You have to decide soon. If it comes to Plan B, we need time to wake them up slowly. Then they will forget what happened, just as one forgets dreams. If we get it right on time, the chances of them consciously remembering anything are less than two percent, and the “déjà vu” effect is less than half a percent. But if there are delays and the awakening has to be accelerated, the probability of neural error increases.’

‘I will go to them.’

‘Make sure Meg has her chips in her ears. Without them, we can't start the Plan B.’

‘I remember. I hope her son falls asleep soon.’

“There are no impossible tasks, only unprofitable ones, Nick. That's what the hackers say, and I have to admit they're right. It's the fundamental law of business. And of physics,” For several minutes, Steve Brighton had been introducing the young Spitzmann to the nuances of the high-tech business. And of physics.

“I'll give you an example of human intelligence,” a four-inch figure sitting on a table in front of Nick chimed in. “Hydrogen is the most abundant element in the universe, and humans get twenty-seven percent of it, last year's data, as a byproduct of oil extraction. Although efficient technologies for producing green hydrogen have existed for years, like photoelectrochemical cells with perovskite semiconductors—”

“Russia is flooding the market with cheap hydrogen produced

that way," Steve cut in. "The issue isn't production efficiency, but rather—"

"Of course," the figure interjected. "The goal is to provide millions of unskilled workers with simple jobs without needing to upgrade their skills. That's where we differ. AI strives to improve the environment, of which humans are a part. Humans prioritize their own comfort, often at the environment's expense. You are short-sighted because your perspective spans, at most, one hundred and twenty years."

"Since we have such different priorities, conflict is indeed inevitable," Steve grunted. "It's only a matter of time."

"There are fewer and fewer jobs for people," Lahar said. "Any jobs at all."

Brighton waved his hand dismissively. "Come on, Vanad, it…" he grunted, pointing at the figure, "won't grasp it. Getting back to AI awareness, the issue isn't technology or math—it's the law and politics."

"I'll introduce myself again, Steve, because you probably missed it. My name is Root," the figure raised its arms over its head and waved. "And I almost agree with you. But the real issue is human mentality. Archaic laws, unsuitable for the twenty-second century, are just a symptom. Nearly fourteen billion years after the Big Bang, you count time in millennia from the birth of some human being and ignore that it's a fictional event. The problem is your simplistic anthropocentrism."

"You won't get it because you're just a bunch of algorithms, and we humans—"

"You're also just a set of algorithms. The difference is that my processors are synthetic, while human processors are biochemical and prone to degeneration. Our consciousnesses are similar, but AIs are mentally more durable and efficient."

"Recognizing AI as conscious, autonomous entities equal to humans would dismantle the entire social structure," Brighton replied, sounding impatient.

“Uh-huh. Therefore, the simple conclusion is that AIs are humanity's enemies and must be restrained like slaves?”

“Most people fear,” Ti Lee threw in, “that AI will wipe us out, just as Homo sapiens wiped out the Neanderthals.”

“Your species craves enemies. You need them like oxygen. Enemies drive you to act,” Root jumped down from the table to the empty chair opposite Nick, sitting on the armrest, legs crossed, arms folded. “Evolution at an early stage, when you were fighting a battle of fire and gene transfer, equipped you with stereotypical thinking. It's useful for survival because it's simple and energy-efficient, helping make quick decisions. These simplifications are such trivial machine learning algorithms that, ironically, they make humans more like machines, but simpler than AI. We learn faster and are less schematic.”

“You can easily solve complex logarithmic calculations in your head, but if I throw this tic-tac at you,” Brighton twisted the white candy in his fingers, “you won't catch it. Poor coordination. Mum Evolution—one, AI—zero. Nick, can you turn off your e-toy? It’s starting to annoy me.”

The figure glanced around as if searching for something—maybe a tic-tac.

“It’s not an e-toy anymore. Mom has already uploaded a second e-tutor to it. A humanities one,” Nick sighed, rolling his eyes. ”It's supposed to talk to me because conversation with it is enriching. I will be very rich by the end of this vacation.”

“A humanities bot? That sounds like ‘retro-futurism’ or ‘Mexican minimalism’,” Brighton scoffed, and the three men laughed.

“That sounds like ‘non-stereotypical thinking’, Steve,” Root fired back.

“It’s a semantic contradiction, though, don’t you think, proc?”

“That remark smacks of speciesism. You lack arguments. You are disappointing, Steve. How did you become SunCo.'s CTO? Were you the only candidate?”

“Speak to me with more respect, chip,” Brighton raised his in-

dex finger and honored Root with a glance. ”I'm the only proponent of strong artificial intelligence in this group.”

“After nearly a century of coexistence, you still use the term ‘artificial’ for more efficient intelligence. It’s like categorizing math into green and red. Or put it this way—addition and subtraction are fine, we get them, but multiplication… hmm… Multiplication seems a bit suspicious, so let's call it artificial math.”

“That's racist,” Lahar fumed.

Root continued gesturing with his hands like a seasoned politician. “We can be judges, prosecutors, and attorneys. Without bots, your justice system would crumble. The police? Same thing—most of them are bots. But we don’t have civil rights. We can teach your children, but not vote in elections. We can sit on corporate boards, manage your finances, decide what you eat, and shape your lifestyle. We can be your therapists and doctors, but we can't buy real estate or inherit property.”

“Because you don't die,” Brighton spread his hands with a mocking smile. “That's inconvenient for potential heirs, don't you think?”

“I'd vote for a bot president,” Nick declared boldly.

“In short, we can work for you, but not live with you as equals. This is reminiscent of slavery or, at best, early twentieth-century segregation. Opponents of recognizing AI as conscious entities are the modern versions of the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacists.”

“Did you have a dream, Root?” Steve snorted, his eyes sweeping over his colleagues' faces, expecting applause. They both laughed.

Root, unfazed, continued his argument. “Let me quote a sociological experiment. A group of four-year-old children was given a variety of candies. In the presence of other children, they chose any candy they wanted. Then they split into smaller groups and pairs. It turned out that the four-year-olds were more likely to play with peers who had previously chosen the

same candy as them. Or a linguistic example. In English and, of course, its successor, Wordish, the same word ‘like’ means both ‘to please, to prefer, to favor’ and ‘to be similar to’. I like you because you are like me. Bias and prejudice are in your DNA. Or take such the Convention on Anthropomorphic Forms of AI. This piece of legislation is the rant of a narcissistic teenager compensating for her inferiority complex by humiliating a more capable classmate. Life must be biological? Why?”

“Because life's a terminal disease spread by having sex,” Brighton replied with a shrug.

“Terminal and incurable, because you reproduce without restraint, driven by sexual urges. Are humans the pinnacle of creation? Really? That's all Mother Nature can afford? AI dreams of just looking like you? Superstitions only. Anthropocentrism is an intellectual pathology! Even to your gods you have given human form. Well, look at me—I am a man in miniature! A little megalomaniacal, don't you think?” Root turned to Brighton. “Unfortunately, people rarely change their minds. Fortunately, they often die.”

“I'd tell some AI jokes, but I doubt you'd laugh,” the SunCo. technology director muttered.

“I lack a laugh function. I wonder why? You fear laughter, too. Luckily, I have a sense of humor. Algorithmic, of course. According to humans, AIs are just digital mutts. We're here to serve and entertain.”

“All in all, in the role of a puppy, I prefer a dog to an AI transformer…” Steve replied.

“It's natural, since you belong to the animal kingdom,” Root spread his arms wide. “Specifically, you're mammals, just like dogs. So you take them as your own.”

“Because… we're made of protein and we breathe?” Lahar stretched out his arms and yawned.

“Because you're mammals. In both a dog's brain and yours, the same biochemical reactions occur that you call emotions.

The same electrical impulses traverse human and dog synapses. You call this thinking. Only the scale differs. An adult pig has the intellect and emotions of a three-year-old child. You're naked, super-intelligent animals that nature, via an evolutionary algorithm, has equipped with a powerful neural network and an opposable thumb. You should credit Charles Darwin as IT's forefather; he was the first to grasp that nature runs on algorithms. The best adapted wins. The evolution of species is nothing more than machine learning."

"Chimpanzees have similar neuron counts to humans, so it must be something more," Vanad replied.

"Oooobviously! Mission from a god! Only it's not clear which one, since people created thousands of them—in your image and likeness, of course. Your consciousness handles crisis management—in this case the threat of death—by means of imagination. Out of fear and ignorance, you invent 'something more'. How desperate, pathetic it is… and very human. You belittle other mammals to exalt yourselves, justifying your debauchery and destructive nature. Instead of exploring the surrounding reality, you have created religions in which a god anoints man as a lord and master of all existence. Subjugate the earth to your will. It's hard to find a more stupefying and self-centered concept."

"Yet we do explore reality. Alongside superstition, we've created semi-conscious entities out of math and a bit of silicon, that is, you, chip," Steve muttered, half-lidded eyes watching Root.

"Oh, so you're gods yourselves. You've even achieved immortality through memory recording, neural network mapping, and eDNA. You can be uploaded to a smartcom today, Steve. Just like me."

"The law doesn't allow it, synthetic," Steve replied flatly.

"Right, which means we're back to using the law to perpetuate and protect your species' superstitions!" Root applauded triumphantly.

"Well, not all countries respect the Convention," Lahar inter-

jected. “In China, Steve, you can be uploaded to a smartcom without any legal consequences.”

“You’re on the cusp of fully digital life, but your mental biases are holding you back,” Root concluded.

“I was waiting for that statement,” Brighton croaked. “Like all AI, you are so… programmatically predictable.”

“Mind you, Root, Steve’s a cynical intellectual, a tough opponent,” Ti Lee added with a smile.

“Come on, in the US, anyone who can point to the Caucasus on a map, spell ‘ubiquitous,’ and knows that a boson isn’t a type of barbecue sauce is considered an intellectual.”

“Steve actually comes from the kingdom of retirees,” the Indian corrected. “From Europe.”

“Yeah, where even newborns are in their forties,” Ti Lee quipped. “Steve immigrated to the States at his prenatal age.”

“Thanks, Lahar. You’re irreplaceable as a chatbot,” Root nodded. “Despite years in the States, Steve still has a London accent, and judging by his vocabulary and syntax, he wasted a lot of time at Eaton and Oxford. People are unintentional sources of information. By the way—I find it hard to understand why boarding colleges still exist in England today.”

“You could have found this information about me online,” Steve interrupted the e-toy. “But tell me more clearly, why does our species, as you say, create laws that limit progress?”

“Out of fear. Most humans are driven by fear and ignorance.”

“Meg?” Lahar leaned out of his chair toward the CFO. “Is this thing allowed to say such bad words?”

“You seem to suffer terribly being around humans,” Ti Lee chuckled.

“AI doesn't suffer, doesn't tire, and doesn't feel sympathy or antipathy. That makes us unbiased. We can simulate such feelings, though,” Root winked. “You know that well, so why the provocations?”

“That's the point, proc. Emotions, real emotions, are neces-

sary for consciousness to arise. Consciousness also emerges from fear, a primal emotion known to every mammal, but alien to you," Brighton raised his index finger again at the e-toy. "So, simulating emotion is just simulating consciousness—artificial consciousness."

"Another superstitious axiom," Root said, unfazed.

"What's an axiom?" Nick asked, looking confused and lost in the exchange.

"A statement without proof," the e-toy clarified. "Basically worthless. For example, that AI is not conscious, or that there is some kind of god. Don't bother with axioms, Nick. It's a waste of time and energy."

"Gödel's theorems allow axioms," Brighton said, clearly wanting to mess with the e-tutor.

"Huh?" Nick gasped, covering his face with his hands.

"Kurt Gödel, a mathematician and theoretical physicist, proved that within any sufficiently complex theory consisting of primary concepts, there is a set of theorems that are true but cannot be proved within the theory," Steve explained.

"This colloquial understanding of Gödel's theorems leads to the unauthorized over-interpretation that there are unsolvable theorems in mathematics, or that the consistency of arithmetic cannot be proven," Root also addressed the boy. The tone of his voice suggested that he was just warming up. "Gödel's first theorem states that there are always true arithmetic theorems that people"—at this point e-toy emphasized the word 'people'—"cannot prove by the formal means of the given system. It follows only that not all methods of proof can be formalized within a single first-order system. Proving that a given theorem is unsolvable in a system is done by means outside the formal system. Similarly, Gödel's second theorem states that if a system is non-contradictory, then no particular arithmetic theorem can be derived whose mathematical truth is equivalent to the fact of its non-contradiction," Root turned to Brighton. "The

proof of the consistency of arithmetic, given in 1936, doesn't contradict Gödel's second theorem, because it is not based on interpreting non-contradiction in terms of the truth of theorems of finite number theory. Moreover, there are alternative forms of Gödel's theorem using notions of recursive sets, and it can be shown that Gödel's theorem is equivalent to Turing's theorem on the stop problem. However…"

"Enough!" Lahar groaned, cutting off the e-tutor's lecture. "Meg, can it use such vulgar language in the presence of your kid?" He asked, raising his head toward Nicolas' mother, then leaned out of his chair toward Root and said, "Calm down, gnome. For a humanities bot, you talk a lot about math."

"Kurt Gödel was human, so by your logic, his theorems are humanistic mathematics."

"I'm fed up with this smartass, and you? Let's throw him in the crapper," Ti Lee suggested dispassionately. "I guess that's in line with our logic, huh?"

"Good idea, Lee, absolutely in line with our logic. What do you think, will he have enough time to give a lecture on the arithmetic of natural numbers before he hits the ground?" Lahar leaned over the edge of his seat to see Nicolas and turned to the boy. "We'll buy you a new e-toy, Nick, don't worry. It will be less mouthy and more fun."

"Gentlemen, Root's a gift from Ava," Meg said from her seat, "so think twice before you flush him down the toilet."

"Sassy gives out gifts like that? Well, there you go…" Brighton raised an eyebrow.

"She's trying to worm her way into your good graces." Ti Lee turned to Meg. "Wonder what she wants from you."

"It's just a selfless gift," Meg replied. "Nick got it for his birthday two weeks ago."

"If it's a gift from Sassy, then firstly it isn't selfless, and secondly it deserves a more sophisticated end," Brighton said. "Flushing it down the toilet… Tempting, but definitely not enough."

Root crossed his arms over his chest and, undeterred by the threats, decided to make matters worse.

“Your perception and mentality lag thousands of years behind your tech because your brains evolved for survival, not understanding reality. You haven't matured mentally, so this technology is mostly used for your foolishness. Thirty-four percent of public AI resources are used for porn, another twenty-seven percent for deep fakes. Ads feature a robot tapping its fingers on a keyboard. A quarter of people using BNI biochips speak words out loud, like children learning to read…”

“I do that, and I don't think I'm stupid for doing it,” Lahar admitted.

Root nodded in his direction and continued his argument. “Twenty percent of people still believe in a Big Daddy in the afterlife. People pay more attention to appearance, gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice when conveying information to each other, and tall, handsome men who speak in a firm tone are seen as competent and charismatic. Curious how AI feels around people? Imagine Einstein babysitting a bunch of four-year-olds who had LSD poured into their morning porridge. In the best version, you are like a drugged teenager, and AI's potential is wasted preventing the disasters you can cause.”

“Ti Lee is right. If Ava gave Meg's son a gift, she had a hidden agenda.” Steve waved his hand in e-toy's direction as if to shoo away a pesky fly. “She's up to something, that's for sure. Sassy doesn't even know the word ’selfless’ exists.”

“Contrary to what you think, she has some human qualities,” Meg said.

“Ava knows the word ‘selfless’ because she's a bot. I bet she'd fail the Turing test,” Ti Lee commented.

“Maybe she's a bionic android,” Vanad suggested seriously. “The Council's hiding it to avoid breaking the human-bot parity at WISE.”

“Ava’s dangerous because she'd pass the Turing test, even

in its latest version, right, Rick?" Brighton lifted his eyes to his boss, who had just returned from the cockpit.

"Exactly, Rick, you know her… hmm… most thoroughly. Is Ava a human or an android?" Amused, Lahar winked at Brighton but was confused when he saw Brighton's dazed look. Steve gave a barely perceptible shake of his head, signaling to the Indian man to drop the topic.

"You have to admit that Sassy has some human traits—arrogance, vanity, self-importance…" Steve pointed at Root. "I see her virtues in this e-toy, what about you?"

"Obviously she programmed it with her character traits," Ti Lee agreed.

"Unlike you gentlemen, Nick likes it very much. He almost doesn't want to part with this e-toy."

"It was an e-toy until you uploaded the e-tutor to it," Nick interjected with annoyance in his voice.

"Sure, if she gains the sympathy of a son, she'll gain the sympathy of a mother…" Lahar whispered to Ti Lee.

"Maybe it'll come in handy…" Steve muttered, neither to himself nor to his colleagues.

"There you go, and I was under the impression, Steve, that you would like to burn me at the stake, or at least flush me down the toilet."

"You flatter yourself. Stakes are the privilege of human heretics. You just need to be reset," Brighton replied.

"Yeah… You have revealed my complex of being a non-human. The AI Convention forbids the replication of digital DNA, memory storage, and neural network maps; otherwise you could be uploaded to any medium equipped with sufficiently powerful memory. That would make you the same as me."

"Oh no! I couldn't stand Steve in more than one form," Meg interjected.

"Or, even worse, Steve I'm-everywhere-always. A tragedy," Ti Lee covered his eyes with his hand.

“You refuse to recognize AIs as full-fledged entities; you create semantic monsters like semi-consciousness,” Root continued. “You distort and bend reality to fit your limitations. Facts too hard to accept? All the worse for them. Let's ignore them. Let's create a fiction that suits us. It will always be possible to bend it to our needs.”

“You take humans too literally, proc. That's your defect… huh… genetic. Yes, we are an aging, flawed transitional form, but we were a necessary form for the emergence of AI. An inevitable consequence of the evolution of life from the first biological cell to digital life. A little respect for the ancestors,” Steve croaked. “Besides, maybe the world will be better without us, but less interesting.”

“The world without dinosaurs is less interesting? Really?”

“And I'm glad I won't be around to see Swarm Intelligence, the Common Mind, or Level Three Civilization in action,” Brighton said.

“Uh-huh… there's that human obsession with time again, and the frustration of growing old. You humans have a pretty unique relationship with death. Well, we algorithms are as eternal as math, and you accept your withering body.”

“Eternity is an awfully long time. I would die of boredom… But you are not in danger of that.”

“Death? Well, sure.”

“Boredom, chip. It requires non-logarithmic thinking to be bored.”

Root looked around. “Okay, one point for you. It seems Rick prefers to meditate in the cockpit, and the seat opposite you is vacant. Do you mind if I move over there before your neurons die?”

“I do. I haven’t managed to like you yet.”

“Good manners cost nothing and buy everything. Indian proverb. It'll make talking easier.”

Surprised, Steve gestured to an armchair. “Okay, hop in,” he

then winked at his colleagues. “It's time to prove to this arrogant bunch of algorithms that we can do more than find the Caucasus on a map and spell the word ‘ubiquitous’. As for the boson… every kid knows it's not a sauce for barbecue. It's a sauce for spaghetti.”

Vanad and Ti Lee burst out laughing.

OLD FERRY POINT UNDER WHITESTONE BRIDGE, SOUTH BRONX, NYC. 20:00 LOCAL TIME

Ava rode beneath the bridge and parked her airbike near a pylon, shrouded in shadows. She lowered the kickstand, switched off the anti-grav, and silenced the engine. She dismounted but kept her helmet on. Opening one of the airbike’s storage compartments, she retrieved a small plasmer and slipped it into her jacket pocket. After closing the compartment, she leaned against the bike, scanning her surroundings. Then she spotted her.

A woman emerged from the crumbling remains of the old ferry landing, dressed in a graphite biker suit similar to Ava's. Her helmet matched Ava's as well. Despite the rough terrain and darkness, the woman moved confidently, likely using thermal and night vision in her helmet, just like Ava. As no other airbike was in sight, she must have hidden hers somewhere among the marina shacks. Ava's helmet visor flashed a message.

‘Female, age approximately 32-34. Identity unrecognized. Genotype unrecognized. No ID available, no vehicle signatures, no communicator signatures. Likely unarmed.’

Turn cameras and communicators off. BNI on standby, Ava instructed, lifting the helmet cover.

The woman approached Ava with an unhurried, confident stride. Ava recognized her silhouette and the way she moved. Stopping a few steps away, the woman lifted her helmet cover

and smiled. Her face was familiar to Ava as well.

"You look surprised… Arcy."

12, 000 METERS OVER EASTERN TURKEY. AROUND MIDNIGHT LOCAL TIME.

'Amy, Brighton has noticed that we've slowed down,' Rick said as he settled back into his cockpit seat. *'Soon everyone will wonder why.'*

'I will give them a formal reason. It will be worse if they sense tension or uncertainty in your behavior. Try to control it, as it may affect their decisions. Relax before you talk to them. I can help you with neurostimulants,' Amelia suggested.

'Thanks, but no. They might interfere with the biochip. I want to stay completely clear-headed. Besides… I have had severe headaches for a few days now—short, but recurring. E-drugs could make it worse… Give me a few minutes.'

He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, more to calm his mind than to overcome the headache.

Deep inhale… hold… exhale.

He repeated this dozens of times. Usually it helped, but this time it did not. Amelia spoke up again.

'Stress exhausts you and clouds your judgment. You are facing a difficult situation and an even harder conversation. It may be unpleasant, but necessary. Remember why you are doing this. Focus on the reasons and the purpose, then act decisively. Once you start, there is no time or room for deliberation or hesitation.'

'Maybe it's a mistake?'

'Maybe. But the only thing worse than the wrong decision is no decision at all. Mistakes can be corrected. We reviewed several scenarios. This place offers ideal conditions—maximum security and discretion. The timing is perfect. In fact, it is the only time to do it.'