

ARTIFICIAL WISDOM

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*To all those stricken by nature's fury,
and to the young souls inheriting our storm-tossed world:
may hope always light your path.*

ARTIFICIAL WISDOM

KUWAIT CITY

She held her swollen belly and rolled over, the hot tarmac sticking to her face. “Oh, my child.” She looked up, and the sun blinded her last moments. “Oh, my love.”

1

LONDON, JULY 1, 2050

Marcus Tully pitched the tumbler as hard as he could at the screen. It slipped through the floating image and shattered against his study wall in a burst of golden rum. He glowered at the undamaged display, still hovering in his vision six feet away. Afternoon sun from the dusty floor-to-ceiling windows glinted off the crystal shards now scattered across the carpet tiles.

“Well,” a pundit sneered at the newscast host, “I just don’t accept the premise of your question. Ten years since this so-called *tabkhir* hit the Persian Gulf, and I see no credible evidence the heat wave really killed anyone. It was a coup, nothing more.”

Damn all *tabkhir*-deniers to a humid hell. Ten years since Zainab, his wife, had died. Ten years of holding tight to every memory in case they slipped away when his back was turned.

Shit, he was drunk.

The faint whirr of cleaning bots sounded across the room. He staggered over to the window, placing his palms against the cool glass, then his forehead. Far below, the poor and desperate of London scurried around in the baking summer heat.

Ten years. Ten years today, but it still felt so fresh. Move on, they said. Get over her. But what if he didn't want to? What if the day he forgot her voice was when she was truly gone?

Play call recording, he told his neuro-assistant. *Marcus Tully and Zainab Tully, July first, 2040.*

There was a beep—the sound of the old phone systems.

“My love?” Zainab said.

He squeezed his eyes shut at the sound of her voice, so alive, so real, as if he could reach out and touch her.

“Hey, I’m here, Zee,” he said—a man with no idea his world was about to change. *“You okay?”*

“I’ve been better. Didn’t sleep well. None of us did. It’s too hot, and we’re having brownouts.”

“Pretty warm here too today, though it’s early. Must be eight A.M. in Kuwait?”

There was a pause. *“Marcus, it’s really, really humid here this morning, and the heat . . . I can barely move.”* Another pause. *“It can’t be good for the baby.”*

He could still remember the feeling of that first flickering moment of worry, that sudden sharpening of his attention. He opened his eyes again and stared at the skyline.

“But your father has good A/C, right?” Tully said.

“The brownouts, Marcus.” There was a crackle and she cut out for a moment. *“—A/C isn’t working. Nothing’s working apart from the phones.”*

“Maybe you should come home early? I know your mother wanted to spend time with you before the birth, but—”

“I’ll come,” she said, too fast. *“Let me know when you’ve booked the ticket, I can’t do it from here. The connection is as bad as the air—”*

There was another crackle, then nothing more.

“Zee?” he said. *“Zainab? Can you hear me?”*

But she was gone. It burned him up, not to know what really happened to her in the hours after that call, like a fathomless acid in his belly.

He lurched over to the desk and grabbed the rum bottle. Where the hell was the glass?

He felt a pang—the physical sensation of an incoming notification, like an artificial tingle deep within his forehead. A second later he could see the message teasing at the upper right periphery of his vision. Red-

edged, for an unknown contact. He ignored it and pulled the cork stopper, then took a gulp of the rum.

There was another pang, its message also red. He shook his head now and took another sip. A third pang made him groan, but he looked up.

TULLY, read the first message. GOT A STORY YOU NEED TO HEAR. CAN WE MEET? HAS TO BE RIGHT NOW.

He glanced at the second message. It read, GOVERNMENT SECRETS, OKAY? NOT SAFE.

The third followed. YOU GOT TWO MINS, BIG SHOT, OR I'M GOING TO YOUR COMPETITORS. BRADLEE MAYBE. OH, THIS ALSO CONCERNS YOUR WIFE.

The bottle slipped from his hands and smashed on the edge of the desk, releasing a sickly stench. The cleaning bots bleeped disapprovingly. Tully blinked at the last message, reread the first two, then stared again at the third.

She'd been dead for ten years. What the hell would a whistleblower know about it?

2

Adrenaline began to clear the boozy fog from Tully's head, but nowhere near fast enough. *One moment*, he managed to reply.

He jerked open a desk drawer and rifled through the mess inside before slamming it shut again and yanking open a second one. He grabbed a pack of disposable jet injectors and pulled one free. He hesitated only a moment. He'd rather have faced the hangover, but he jammed it to his forearm and pressed the release, grunting at the jolt of chems blasting through his skin, spreading a cold sensation up his arm. He sucked in air as pain hit his chest, his lungs, his liver, racking his muscles in a spasm, but within seconds it'd decelerated his drunkenness with a kick like a parachute ripping out of a backpack at five thousand feet.

He steadied himself, blood alcohol level painfully back to normal, and looked again at the messages. He subspoke the follow-up, lips barely moving. *Neuro-reality?*

YEAH, NR. WHAT THE FUCK ELSE? came the reply.

Tully took a deep breath and pulled up his chair, sniffing and surveying the study, hoping his team hadn't heard the noise. There was a price to pay for having them live and work onsite: a complete and utter abdication of privacy.

The cleaning bots were working their magic on the wall and carpet stains, and one was heading for the bottle. He left them to it, took off his earset, and grabbed the bigger, heavier neuro-reality headset. He pulled it on and powered it up, then pulled a pill dispenser out of his pocket and pressed a button. It spat a tiny bubble of gelatinous liquid into his hand which he let dissolve beneath his tongue. Billions of neurograins would swarm his brain in seconds. The idea of the nanobots crawling around his skull for the next few hours like microscopic spiders made him shiver, but it was better than getting a permanent chip surgically implanted. The sights, sounds, and smells of his study faded to a black void for the briefest moment as the headset jacked straight into his consciousness. A Mindscape logo appeared in white and vanished again.

His personal neural home—or “egospace,” to use the jargon—faded in. The sweet and sharp tang of rum in the air mellowed into a light musk of orange blossom. The sensation of soft carpet beneath his bare feet hardened to a stone mosaic under leather shoes. The hum and chill of A/C had gone too, and now there was a warm peacefulness, a comfortable absence of other life around him. He didn’t take a moment to appreciate the beautiful space, however, and certainly didn’t look around—there were some things he didn’t want to see, not today—but just loaded the meeting app.

His egospace melted into a marble-floored hotel lobby, columned and triple-height. The nostalgic scent of a log fire—now illegal outside of NR—filled the air. He sat on a comfortable cuboid sofa chair with high arms, facing a matching empty seat over a low marble table. Three tall aquarium tanks acted as dividers from other meeting spaces—not that they were actually there.

A lean, wiry, androgynous individual flickered into existence in the second chair. Head shaved, face hairless, no sign of stubble. Casually dressed in an army-green hoodie and black baggy trousers. Amused eyes, mouth working at some chewing gum.

This one would have an attitude, Tully was sure of it. “I’m Tully.” He held out his hand; it was ignored.

“No shit. Not gonna tell you my real name, though you can call me Whistle. Not gonna tell you where I’m from, who I work for, my sexual preferences or how I identify, the name of my first pet, or any other pi-

geon shit that'd help you figure out who I am. And you're not gonna try and find out, right?" The genderless accent was like a cheap cocktail that had lost all hint of its individual flavors.

Tully shook his head. "Whistle, huh? Well, no, I don't work like that. I need to know who my sources are, so my readers can trust I've done my due diligence."

"Maybe you're gonna wanna make an exception this time," Whistle said.

Maybe this was going to be a complete waste of time. Tully sat back in his chair and steeped his fingers. "So you're whistleblowing? May I ask on whom?"

Whistle grinned. "On every shithead in power doing things they shouldn't be."

"You're after justice, then? Or perhaps you just want to see the world burn."

"The world is already burning. Seems you're one of the only journo actually trying to expose the bastards holding the flamethrowers."

A compliment? Not generously delivered, but he'd take it. He wouldn't let it soften him up, though. Tully leaned forward and put on the hardest, iciest stare he could summon, the kind of stare that says *The chitchat is over*. The kind of stare that says *It's time for business*. The kind of stare that says *Get to the fucking point, or I'll get back to getting drunk*. "What's this got to do with my wife?"

Whistle pulled a white data cube from a hoodie pocket and placed it carefully in the center of the table, then gestured at it with one hand and sat back. "Go for it."

Tully picked up the cube and his neuro-assistant automatically initiated a scan. *No virus, contents include one neuro-reality video file, file size of two hundred zettabytes, file creation date of July second, 2040.*

He froze.

Whistle winked. "Got your attention, right? Go on, take a look. I'll wait."

"What—" Tully's voice was gruff, and he cleared his throat. "What is it?"

"You know what it is—what it has to be, with a date like that."

"How did you get it?"

"You don't wanna know. Get on with it, or I'm taking it back."

Tully grimaced and ran his fingers over the smooth cube. Just an imaginary object, in an imaginary reality, that someone had decided should feel like porcelain. Would it break if he threw it in neuro-reality? Did he really want to see what was on it? What kind of investigative journalist would ever turn down information? *Open it*, he subspoke.

The hotel melted into sharp sunlight that made him cover his eyes. When he took his hands away, he was standing in front of seven bodies strewn across a scorched street.

Tully stared at the bodies and didn't move. His legs went weak. He needed to lean against something, or sit, but there was nothing there to take his weight. Still, there was no mistaking it. He'd been here, several times. Not this street, perhaps, but he'd seen this skyline, with Zainab by his side.

Kuwait City.

This was a mistake. He shouldn't be here; he would get no peace and closure in this sterile snapshot of the past, with no sense of heat, no scent of dust and decay, no sound of wind whistling through empty streets, only the sound of his own ragged breathing.

But was Zainab here too? Somewhere in these savage streets?

The road beyond was littered with hundreds of corpses, like discarded rags cast down on the street from the rooftops. They'd died wherever they'd fallen, packed beneath a desiccated tree, stretched out on the pavement or in the gutter, curled against the sides of the buildings, twisted in a clump of splayed arms and legs in the dust of the road.

So many bodies.

He approached the first one, fell to his knees, and looked at the face. A woman—not *her*, but it was a gut punch nonetheless. He choked up and staggered to his feet. He turned, and saw more bodies packing the road all the way to the horizon. He took a few steps forward and halted.

Could he find her? How long would it take? He'd need a system. He'd need to be efficient. Check each street off against a map. Avoid jumping around at random, with the risk he was just checking the same bodies over and over again. No, it was impossible. He could spend his life looking. Six million had lived in Kuwait City before the *tabkhir*, before the whole Persian Gulf went dark.

Exit, he told his neuro-assistant. Get him the fuck out of there. A blink later, he was back in the NR hotel lobby.

Whistle didn't flinch at his sudden reappearance, just snapped their fingers. "Got some real goods there, no? You got any idea how hard it is to get shit out of the Caliphate?"

"How did you get it?" Tully said. "And why give it to me? What can I possibly do with it? There's no story here. Ten years ago, maybe . . ."

Whistle winked again and chewed gum, mouth wide. "Do whatever you want with it. Shove it up the ass of every *tabkhir*-denier talking shit on the newscasts. The footage is just for creds."

"Creds?"

"And maybe, just maybe, you'll find out what happened to your wife."

"What the fuck would you know about my wife?" Tully snapped.

"She was there, yeah? When it happened. Didn't stand a chance. A hundred and sixty million dead, right? Two-thirds of the Gulf's population."

Tully needed a drink. The Mindscape tech had the capacity to simulate it, though they didn't cater to his taste in artisan Scottish dark rum. It tasted realistic, but they'd never really built in the calming effect of alcohol beyond the mildest buzz, so what was the point?

He ordered anyway. A tumbler of rum appeared in front of him. He picked it up and knocked it back. "No one knows how many people died," Tully said, looking into his empty glass. "The Caliphate suppressed everything after the borders shut."

"The Caliphate knows, so I know. It's not easy for anyone to plug leaky holes, and a new state that big? Don't get me wrong, the Caliphate works hard at it. They censor, they shut down the internet, they block satellites, do all the shit from the authoritarian-state playbook. It's never enough, though. But look. The real deal with the *tabkhir* is much, much bigger, and definitely not what it seems." Seriousness swept away the mocking face. "Real big. Fucking big. Maybe the biggest story out there in the history of news, and I wish I was exaggerating. I'm not safe even knowing about it. You won't be either, if you take this on."

"Not safe from the Caliphate? They have no reach."

Whistle snorted. "From someone with far more clout. But I'm not gonna tell you who or why until you prove you have the chops."

Tully frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Whistle pulled out a second data cube, this one blue, and tossed it at him.

He caught it. *No virus, contents include one neuro-reality video file, file size of fifty-three exabytes, file creation date of June fifteenth, 2050.*

“I mean, show me you can write a story that will piss a lot of powerful people off.”

“All my stories piss powerful people off.”

Whistle shrugged, as if to say, *Then this one shouldn't be a problem, should it?*

“What's on the cube?”

“A video of the mayor of Houston, a shithead in power, doing things he shouldn't be to a bunch of climate refugees.”

“I write this Houston story and you give me a story on the *tabkhir*?”

Whistle just winked again, then vanished, leaving him looking at the smooth blue cube in his hand. He leaned forward and placed it next to the white one.

He'd get both downloaded to his own system, but one thing was for sure: he wasn't looking at that footage of Kuwait City again. Not now.

Not ever.

3

Three days of searching the footage with no real sleep was eating at Tully's soul. He should never have picked up the white data cube again. Was she out there? On these streets? He sat at the desk in his study and squinted at the face of a dead woman wearing a hijab, displayed on a virtual screen that stretched the length of his desk. It wasn't as immersive as experiencing it in NR, but that made it marginally more palatable.

How many faces had he looked at now? Enough, at least, to partly numb the horror of it all. You couldn't look at that many dead men and women without becoming desensitized, like when a stench fades from too long spent in its presence.

But the children . . .

He tried to move on from them fast. He ignored the men too, trying to cut down the amount of time he looked at each face. There was only one face he was looking for.

A voice came from behind him. "What the fuck is that, Marcus?"

He flinched but stopped himself from making the virtual screens private. It was Bolivar, just Bolivar, and he had nothing to hide from his friend, from his business partner, from his lawyer. Still, it took him a moment to answer, and they both stared at the body of a woman on the

street, arm outstretched in the dirt of a gutter like she was reaching for a lifeline beyond her grasp.

“Footage,” Tully said at last. “Kuwait City, the day after the *tabkhir*.”

“Footage of Kuwait?” Juan Bolivar shook his head. “Old friend, old buddy, you do realize the publishing deadline for this Houston story is in just over ten minutes?”

Tully’s eyes flicked up to the clock projected in his display. *Shit*. He’d lost track of time and should’ve been with his team in the hub, not off on his own in his study. The second data cube held evidence of the mayor of Houston ordering his chief of police to use illegal microwave tech to quell a mass protest of climate-unhoused. Local journalists had reported that thousands were left dizzy, fatigued, and, in some cases, with mild brain damage. Some pundits diagnosed mass psychosis, but the evidence said differently, and Tully had the evidence. “Yeah,” he said. “They’re ready to publish?”

Bolivar nodded. “Yeah. They’re ready. You look like shit, you know,” he said.

Tully rubbed his unshaven cheeks. “Hmm.” He took one more look at the screen, at the street beyond the body of the woman. Was she there, waiting for him in that next street? Bile rose in his throat and he closed down the main screen, swinging around on his chair to face Bolivar. “Do you ever worry about it happening again? Sudden, insane rise in humidity and heat, like the *tabkhir*—one day high, the next morning deadly? It could happen here in London—across Europe.”

“That’s why we’re electing a protector, isn’t it?”

Tully looked across at a muted newscast displayed on a second floating screen to the left of the first. A reporter was speaking to the camera. Below her, a rolling newsfeed proclaimed PROTECTORSHIP DEADLOCK EXPECTED TO CONTINUE INTO SEVENTH ROUND . . .

Nine years since the first suggestion that the world should select one person as protector, a global position with a mandate to fix the climate crisis—and the absolute authority and resources to do so—then dissolve the office and hand power back to the nations. Nearly a decade later, they were whittling down a bluster of political wannabes to a short list of candidates before holding a worldwide vote.

Tully rubbed his eyes. “Decades too late,” he said.

“Yeah.” Bolivar sighed. “The Houston story. We need this one, Marcus.”

“How’s our financial situation looking?” Tully said, standing.

Bolivar looked away. “We have about a month’s runway before we crash.”

“This should give us another month or two at least.”

They passed from the peace of his suite into the bustle of the hub, the stale whiff of various lunches still hanging in the air from hours before. It wasn’t his idea of a great workspace, but it was what they could afford. Every other floor in the grimy, dated Baker House skyscraper on Pudding Lane contained mostly empty commercial office space. Bolivar hadn’t wanted to pay for both an office and a living space, so they’d fitted out this floor as a mix of workspace and apartment. It was more than a bit cold and soulless, but, hey, it had the advantage of good A/C. Forty-eight stories down at street level, it was 111 degrees.

The open-plan hub combined a workspace with a kitchen and some sofas. At the center was a large office table big enough for six people to work around. Livia Chandra, Tully’s researcher, and Randall Morrow, his tech guru, were seated there, looking at him with expectant expressions. He nodded at them and walked over to his sub-editor’s station. Lottie Shock pretended to be oblivious to him, fingers dancing over a keyboard visible only to her, but she was just putting him in his place. She was wiry and lean, with cropped and bleached hair, and was wearing a white tank top. An ivy tattoo wound its way around her right arm from her muscular bare shoulder to her wrist.

“Done?” he asked, but she ignored him and continued bashing away, glaring at a private screen.

He eyed Bolivar, who shrugged and said, “Nearly ready.”

Tully turned to his tech engineer. “You uploaded the recording too?”

Randall grinned. “You got it, yessir, Mr. Tully—”

“The influencers are ready to share?”

“I contacted the giga-influencers personally,” Randall said. “And they snowballed out to contact the megas, so I reckon we’ve got about a thousand people sitting there just waiting to push this directly out to about five hundred million followers. I mean, we could even—”

Livia stood up in a hurry, her chair screeching back. “Tully,” she said, “I’ve got the mayor of Houston’s chief of staff for you.”

It wasn't a new playbook, exactly: leave it to the last minute, try to make Tully's team miss the influencer window. Denials would follow, maybe even a bribe.

"You want to take it in NR?" Livia said.

He didn't. Neuro-reality was great for meeting people. Made you feel physically present, as good as walking into a room and shaking a hand with none of the inconvenience of getting there first. But he had no desire for such a personal interaction. "No. Just share the screen."

Livia shared a virtual screen over the workspace, and launched a small camera drone to hover silently just above it. A few seconds later, William Cavanagh appeared. They'd never met, but Tully knew him from the newscasts. He'd been in a previous White House administration a while back, maybe fifteen years ago in the mid-2030s. Before everything turned to shit.

Cavanagh was the kind of heavyset man in his early sixties who suited his weight, and combined with the charming glint in his eye, he'd cultivated an image more like a president of a newscast network than a political hatchet man. He was tieless, with two buttons undone, and his thinning hair had a surprising amount of dark left in it, possibly dyed, slicked back. But he wore a designer suit over a multipack white shirt. He had the air of a man who drank cheap bourbon from a lead-crystal glass.

"It's Cavanagh, right?" Tully said.

Cavanagh gestured with his hands as if to say *Does it really matter?* "I understand you plan to push your story soon," he said, "so I'll keep this short. The mayor of Houston is asking you to kill this story, the governor of Texas is asking you to kill this story, the White House is backing them both, and your own English government will do whatever the White House tells them to do, just as it always has."

"Would any of them like to comment on the record?"

"Let me be very clear," Cavanagh said. "You've got your facts wrong. Someone is playing you. Take this one out with the trash, we forget the whole thing, and your reputation stays intact. As a gesture of goodwill, we'll sponsor a different story for you. And we'll be generous. I understand things are tight. Let us loosen them for you."

"Let me play that back to make sure I have it right," Tully said. "You're denying the story is correct and are willing to bribe me to forget the whole thing and write a story about someone else?"

“Don’t fucking twist my words. By the way, anonymous sources? That can’t be credible for this type of allegation.”

“Sure it can,” Tully said.

“How many?”

“How many what?”

“Sources.”

“One.”

“Just the one?” Cavanagh’s mouth hung open and he looked around as if seeking validation. “You can’t base all this off one source. There’s that—what?—journalistic code. You’re required to corroborate with a second source at least.”

Tully nodded. “More of a guideline, actually, but in any case, we have the recording to corroborate.”

“We watched the video. Deepfaked.”

“It was in NR, and the experts say you can’t deepfake neuro-reality.” Tully checked the clock. “Plus we have a doctor’s account of the injuries, and he’s convinced you used microwaves. Now, if there’s nothing else—”

“No, no, wait,” Cavanagh said, his tone now reasonable, eyes all understanding, mouth in a we’re-really-on-the-same-side smile. “Listen. Maybe you’re wrong and maybe you’re right. But you can’t put this out there. You send this article out, you make it seem like climate hobos are being fucked, and the city will explode. Then cities all over the U.S. and beyond will follow—the world is a fucking tinderbox right now with this election for protector going on.”

Tully could practically hear the air quotes around “protector.” Most people—the Americans in particular, who disliked submitting to any authority save their own—saw this as little more than a sanctioned dictatorship. Most people also saw they had little choice at this point, both environmentally and politically. Still— *Climate hobos*? “Not my problem.”

Cavanagh’s smile slipped. “You stupid fucking motherfucker! If this goes south and they riot, it’ll all be your fucking fault. You really want that?”

“I just want to tell my readers the truth.”

“You can’t put this kind of shit out there. Take some responsibility!”

That was the thing about the truth. Sometimes you were judged more harshly for revealing it than for concealing it. Some bastard running

for president hired a hooker, and they called the reporter “salacious” for writing about it. “The responsibility lies with those who did the deed and those who prop them up, not the ones exposing it.”

“You finished?”

“Yeah, I’m finished. Appreciate your time, Mr. Cavanagh,” Tully said, and nodded at Livia. She tapped the air and Cavanagh disappeared. Tully leaned on the table next to Lottie, who was still typing away, tidying up his original draft using an AI assistant. “So help me, Lottie, you’d better have something ready to go out—”

“It’s done,” she said. “And perfect, if you ask me.”

“Thank you.”

“After I had a chance to fix your shitty writing, that is.” She made her screen public.

He scanned the text. “Not bad.” Behind him, Bolivar swore. Tully swung around. “What is it?”

“They’re about to announce some breaking news from Athens.”

“The round six results? Already?”

“Looks like they reached a decision quicker than they expected.” Bolivar created a public screen showing a newscast and turned up the sound.

A commentator was talking to the camera. “—let’s turn live to the election congress chair here in Athens, former UN Secretary-General Amare Abara, to hear which of the twenty candidates are through to round seven.”

Amare Abara walked out onto the stage of a huge auditorium in Athens. His hair had silvered since his time in the UN. He looked wiser—a serious guy for serious times.

“Thank you,” Abara said. “We’ve unexpectedly narrowed the pool of candidates from twenty to a final two, either of which could win a majority against any of the other candidates. They’ll progress to the global popular vote on the eighteenth of August.”

Every country in the world had submitted a candidate in round one, nearly six months before. No one had expected to reach a final two this quickly, let alone that the election itself would now be in a little over six weeks’ time.

Abara paused and looked up and around the congress venue, thousands of quiet delegations from governments around the world watching

him. This was a moment that would be replayed in the history reels, and in that pause, he seemed almost overwhelmed by it. The camera zoomed in, and he swallowed, taking a sip of water and a deep breath.

“The first candidate for protector, nominated by Japan: former two-term President of the United States Lawrence G. Lockwood,” he said.

Applause from the delegations in Athens, but the office in London was silent.

“I thought the pollsters said there was no way an American would get this far,” Lottie said.

She was right. Maybe once upon a time, America would have clearly led the pack. But it had squandered that leadership over many decades. The rest of the world had munched popcorn while the country became irretrievably polarized. They’d elected ever more extreme leaders on both sides, until the electorate had fortified itself in two circles that almost never overlapped.

Bolivar snorted. “Pollsters. They say all that, and the nomination drops on Independence Day.”

The applause in Athens had died down, and the delegations were waiting expectantly to hear which candidate would face Lockwood in the final round.

Abara stared at the paper in his hands as if he couldn’t bring himself to read what was on it. The auditorium was now silent, bar a couple of coughs. The silence stretched on well past the point of comfort. Tully wondered if Abara was unwell. Surely he’d known who the final candidates would be before he went onstage? What was going on?

Abara seemed to pull himself together, with a little shake of his head like he had some kind of internal argument going on. He looked up, and the paper dropped out of his fingers and drifted out of camera shot. “Excuse me. The second and final candidate,” he said, much slower and fully enunciated this time, as if he wanted to make sure everyone caught his words with no chance for misunderstanding, “nominated by the Swedish delegation: the artificial intellect, head of state of the Floating States, Governor Solomon.”

There was uproar from the moment he’d named the Swedish delegation—their nomination of Solomon had been huge news and the source of many online memes—and the volume of his last words had gone up and up in order to be heard, until he’d practically shouted Solo-

mon's name. Audience members were swearing, gasping, and certainly not applauding. It was chaos.

A new headline appeared on the feed: GLOBAL PROTECTORSHIP ELECTION: ARTIFICIAL INTELLECT SOLOMON IN FINAL TWO.

The breath had stopped in Tully's throat. Solomon. The first AI—or “artilect,” as pundits had dubbed it—to hold political office. The technology had been unveiled nine years ago to manage the six new sea-cities known collectively as the Floating States. Solomon could appear in neuro-reality like a real person, to millions of people individually, at once. It could make complex decisions from billions of data points in nanoseconds. It'd been designed by a woman regarded as a genius, Martha Chandra. Tully knew Martha. He'd interviewed her several times, early in both their careers. They weren't friends, not exactly, but they liked each other.

Moreover, Martha owed Tully a favor. He employed Martha's sister, Livia.